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DELIBERATION IN PRACTICE:

DELIBERATIVE THEORY, NEWS MEDIA, AND POLITICAL CONVERSATION

Paul Waldman

A DISSERTATION

in

Communication

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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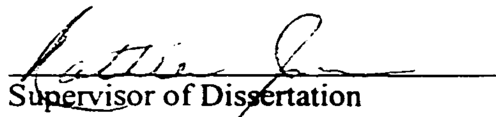

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Finally, I would like to thank my wife Jennifer for her heroic patience and support.

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ABSTRACT

DELIBERATION IN PRACTICE:
DELIBERATIVE THEORY, NEWS MEDIA, AND POLITICAL CONVERSATION

Paul Waldman
Kathleen Hall Jamieson

While much scholarly attention has been paid to deliberation as a set of procedures used to achieve democratic goals of individual autonomy and mutually beneficial policy outcomes, few studies have asked to what extent contemporary American society resembles a deliberative democracy. In order to assess the prospects for deliberative democracy, everyday political conversation, its influences and its consequences are examined. The dissertation establishes a "reasonable ideal" of deliberation by which a democracy may be judged. The reasonable ideal has five elements: conversation, disagreement, information, the common interest, and the accommodation of uncertainty. Results show that American democracy is deliberative in some ways but not in others. Political conversation is disproportionately the pastime of the elite, and discussion across lines of difference, an essential element of deliberation, is extremely rare. Contrary to the assumptions of deliberative theory, conversation produces an increase in the belief that citizens are motivated by self-interest. However, the discussions that occur do succeed in producing learning and reducing uncertainty about political issues. While media use serves deliberative ends by spurring some to discuss politics and providing information, it also increases the likelihood that others will view political discussion as unpleasantly argumentative. News media thus encourage deliberation for some and discourage it for others.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

We shall never know and can never imagine to what degree newspapers have transformed, both enriched and leveled, unified in space *and* diversified in time, *the conversations of individuals, even those who do not read papers but who, talking to those who do, are forced to follow the groove of their borrowed thoughts. One pen suffices to set off a thousand tongues.*

Gabriel Tarde, Opinion and Conversation (1898)

In most circles it is hard work to sustain conversation on a political theme; and once initiated, it is quickly dismissed with a yawn. Let there be introduced the topic of the mechanism and accomplishment of various makes of motor cars or the respective merits of actresses, and the dialogue goes on at a lively pace.

John Dewey, The Public and Its Problems (1927)

Dewey's lament rings true today. While public and private spaces vibrate with conversations about celebrities and sensational crime stories, political matters capture universal attention only sporadically. Politics, it seems, is not something we discuss in polite company. To the newspapers of Tarde's nineteenth-century France we have added television, radio, and the internet, but pens, along with transmitters and keyboards, appear limited in their ability to set off tongues when it comes to politics.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of scholarship on the idea of public deliberation. Political decision-making, it is argued, is best carried out through a discursive process where participants explore issues, offer arguments, and advance toward decisions together. In a deliberative system, politics occurs through talk. While many discussions of deliberation concentrate on small groups with decision-making authority, the notion that deliberation could or should occur on a mass scale is often implied and occasionally stated.

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The purpose of this study is to offer a theoretical model of citizen deliberation, then assess the degree to which the everyday political conversation that takes place lives up to that deliberative standard. It is easy to establish an impossible ideal, then dismiss the American citizenry as woefully inadequate to the task. Political theory is rich with unrealistic expectations; my intention is not to measure reality against perfection, but instead to determine whether political conversation, in both its causes and effects, meets a more practical set of goals to which a contemporary democracy might aspire.

In order to do so, I will specify a "reasonable ideal" of deliberation. Theorists often describe an "ideal" as a device to establish the specific characteristics of democratic practice. Unfortunately, theory often gets bogged down in the particulars of the ideal and ignores the actual conditions that determine what is possible. In the end, reality falls short of the ideal. Consequently, I propose the reasonable ideal as a more practical evaluative tool, one that asks whether deliberation is achievable within current institutional structures, whether current practice advances (as opposed to realizes) democratic goals, and whether deliberation is compatible with pre-existing capabilities and dispositions. The issue is not whether our democracy can satisfy all the various requirements of true deliberation, because plainly, it cannot. Instead, the issue is to what extent the political life of the American citizenry can be considered deliberative at all.

In a large society, the functioning of deliberation will be determined in significant part by the discourse delivered to the citizenry through the news media. If media nurture deliberation, it may flourish; if they act to discourage it, it will be absent. As Craig Calhoun (1992) writes, "A public sphere adequate to a democratic polity depends upon both quality of discourse and quantity of participation." I will analyze the quality of

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mediated discourse in order to determine whether it offers citizens the kinds of information they need in order to deliberate. I will also examine the quantity of participation in the particular form of political discussion, for without a citizenry actively engaged in political conversation, democracy is hollow. The extent to which that conversation lives up to a deliberative standard provides a good measure of whether it is "just talk," or rather functions as a crucial element of democratic practice.

Throughout this dissertation I will use the terms "political conversation" and "political discussion" interchangeably to refer to any and all occasions when two or more people talk about political matters. While there may be a variety of dynamics that occur in conversation – for instance, political discussions between two people may differ in systematic ways from discussions involving three or more – for the present study we will consider all political conversations together.

I will argue that while there are ways in which everyday conversation resembles deliberation, in other critical respects it does not. Furthermore, conversation may in some cases not only fail to be deliberative but actually undermine deliberative goals. Likewise, the news media, which have a central role in enabling deliberation to occur, can serve to inhibit some citizens from engaging with one another in the search for solutions to political problems.

What is deliberation?

Although this question has been answered in a number of ways, common elements emerge from the body of literature on deliberation. To begin, let us define

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deliberation as *reasoned discussion* among *equals* about *public issues* with the goal of ascertaining the best *course of action* to pursue in order to optimize the *common good.*

The idea of reasoned discourse amounts to a first principle of deliberation. As Joshua Cohen (1989) put it, "Deliberation is *reasoned* in that the parties to it are required to state their reasons for advancing proposals, supporting or criticizing them. They give reasons with the expectation that those reasons (and not, for example, power) will settle the fate of the proposal." Each argument must be supported by some evidence or justification. The presentation and critique of these reasons will constitute the bulk of the discussion. The second principle is that all participants in the discussion will be equal. No member, by virtue of social position or any other criterion, will be afforded more opportunity to speak than any other. Nor will any member be exempt from any of the other requirements. While there may be inequalities among people that have consequences for the discussion (for instance, differences in knowledge or eloquence), all will have identical privileges and responsibilities within the deliberation. Next, the discussion will concern public issues, and the best course of action to be pursued. Only those issues in which the state, or citizens acting collectively, have some role will be at issue. Furthermore, the discussion takes place with the understanding that some action will be taken (or not taken). The ultimate purpose of the discussion is to arrive at a decision, whether that decision results in action by the participants themselves or their representatives. As a consequence, a central feature of deliberation will be attempts by the participants to persuade one another (Bessette, 1994). Finally, the discussion concerns the common good. The quality of potential outcomes is judged not by their effects on the individual participants, but on the larger collectivity.

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Why deliberate?

There are three general benefits of public deliberation, none of which is beyond question, but each of which offers a compelling argument in favor of a deliberative democracy. Although some authors (e.g. Christiano, 1997) have offered slightly different justifications, there is a great deal of overlap among deliberative theories. Citizen deliberation, as opposed to the formal deliberative procedures operating within an institution such as a legislature, presents a unique but related set of problems. In the abstract, however, the benefits of deliberation are common to both, although their prospects for realization differ.

The first benefit of deliberation as a core element of democratic practice is that it incorporates fundamental democratic ideals, and thus makes good on the democratic promise. Among these are citizen participation (if the people are to rule, then they must be involved in the decision-making process in some way) and equality (just as each citizen has an equal vote, each has an equal opportunity to participate in debate). The degree to which citizen deliberation actually displays these ideals is perhaps the thorniest question confronting the advocate of deliberative democracy.

The second benefit is that the process of civic deliberation transforms the participants. In the simplest terms, the citizen should be 1) reasonably well-informed; 2) able and willing to participate in the democratic discussion; and 3) motivated at least in part by a desire to advance the common good. The process of deliberation has the potential to transform individuals into citizens on each count. First, all political conversation, even that which is not strictly deliberative, has the potential to enhance political knowledge as facts and arguments are shared. Second, like any participatory

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process, each positive episode of participation enables and encourages the following one. Third, participation in a discussion about the common good exposes one to facts and arguments about the interests of others and the larger polity to which one might not have had access previously, and requires the person who would persuade to frame her arguments in common terms and build from shared assumptions. Thus the citizen must find public reasons for her private views. In the process, those views may change, or at the very least expand to include the interests of others. As a consequence, deliberation not only produces (as opposed to merely articulating) the common will (Warren, 1992), but cultivates within each citizen a will based on the common good.

Like other forms of participation, deliberation builds political efficacy, "the belief that one can be self-governing, and confidence in one's ability to participate responsibly and effectively" (Pateman, 1970). The process is, of course, a reciprocal one; efficacy encourages participation, which in turn strengthens efficacy (Almond & Verba, 1965). Ultimately, deliberation enables one to achieve autonomy, the necessary characteristic of the self-governing citizen. As Mark Warren (1992) describes it, "individuals are autonomous if their preferences, goals, and life plans are not the result of manipulation, brainwashing, unthinking obedience, or reflexive acceptance of ascribed roles but, rather, a result of their examining and evaluating wants, needs, desires, values, roles, and commitments." While we may leave to others the work of gathering information and arguments, we can develop autonomy only through our own participation (Barber, 1984). Further, the advocate of expansive democracy argues that autonomy is itself social; only through the process of deliberating with others can we identify the myriad ways in which our well-being is entwined with that of our fellow citizens.

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A final transformative justification for deliberation is that citizenship, i.e. engagement with the other members of the polity in determining and bringing about the progress and improvement of society, is not merely a way of safeguarding our interests or of contributing to the betterment of society, but an essential element of the good life. Politics, and one's engagement in it, is not only a means to an end but an end in itself. According to Hannah Arendt (1959), we do not merely pursue our private goals in the public realm, but take on an entirely different set of goals. John Stuart Mill (1966) too argued that citizenship forces one to consider the welfare of others, whereby one learns and grows. As Rousseau wrote in *The Social Contract* (1987), when a man becomes a citizen, "His faculties are exercised and developed, his ideas are broadened, his feelings are ennobled, his entire soul is elevated."

The final potential benefit of deliberation is that it produces better results than policy-making that occurs in its absence. The "quality" of results is, of course, difficult to assess. Many theorists have argued that good results are simply those that arise from a good process (e.g. Christiano, 1997; Fishkin, 1991). If the process incorporates democratic principles, then the outcome is morally justifiable and legitimate in the sense that the participants will abide by the results even if their favored proposal is not adopted. No external means of evaluating outcomes is necessary. Others argue that public debate produces the best reasons for any action, improving the quality of decision-making (Bohman, 1996). Argumentation is not simply a means of persuasion or justification for positions, but the process through which truth is discovered and knowledge created (Rowland, 1987).

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The requirements of deliberation do not necessarily guarantee that citizens will choose wisely, but they do insist that certain specific distortions and biases will be absent. Arguments based on prejudice or the will of the powerful, for instance, will be insufficient to carry the day. Nonetheless, there is always the possibility that deliberators will either not have adequate information to make the best decision, or that the information they do have will be deceptive and thus lead to suboptimal outcomes. But the question is less whether deliberation will necessarily produce the best answer to a given question than whether in the long run deliberation will tend to produce more outcomes that enhance the common good. While it may be impossible to answer this question empirically, what works in favor of deliberation is that the democratic goals one wishes policy to enhance are themselves incorporated into the deliberative process. Other processes - relying on the wisdom of the philosopher king, for instance - certainly may produce beneficial results, but the normal operating of such a process does not preclude anti-democratic outcomes.

This is not to say, of course, that formally deliberative bodies do not often produce outcomes inconsistent with democratic ideals. However, those outcomes are not natural products of the deliberative process, but are instead caused by distortions such as deception or the individual exercise of power. In fact, in American politics it is often the case that the ability of officials to ignore the common interest and act to advance narrow interests varies inversely with the amount of public discussion around a particular decision (Schattschneider, 1960). For example, according to William Greider (1992) polluting industries are able to receive far better treatment during the regulatory process, which takes place largely outside public view, than in the legislative process. And we are

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all familiar with narrowly beneficial tax breaks secretly inserted into a large bill in the eleventh hour. Quasi-corrupt influence-buying is thus more likely to occur when public deliberation is absent.

Other theorists have added additional items to the list of deliberation's benefits. For example, Joshua Cohen (1989) cites consensus as the end of the ideal deliberative process. Similarly, Benjamin Barber (1984) contends that democratic talk has the ability not simply to mediate conflict but to transform it into agreement. These perspectives may be somewhat optimistic; when we extend deliberation to an entire society, true consensus appears impossible, and may not be desirable. There are always dissenters to any policy, whether among the public or in a legislature, and their presence gives some assurance that any proposal will be critiqued and its weaknesses exposed.[1] It is far more important that all participants feel bound by the decision whether their side carries the day or not (Bohman, 1996). While deliberation may encourage agreement, it by no means guarantees it; ultimately, questions will need to be put to a vote (Knight & Johnson, 1994).

Objections to deliberation

While the volume of scholarly writing advocating some form of deliberative democracy is substantial and growing, there have been a number of objections raised to deliberation. Lynn Sanders (1997) contends that one of the core premises of deliberation, that of equality and its corollary of equal respect, is extremely difficult to achieve.

---

[1] Congress does frequently pass measures without dissent, but these are usually on the order of declarations of National Cottage Cheese Awareness Week.

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Citizens arrive at a discussion with unequal faculties, resources, and rhetorical skills; debate is likely to favor those who can frame their arguments in accord with the deliberative model. Thus, "taking deliberation as a signal of democratic practice paradoxically works undemocratically, discrediting on seemingly democratic grounds the views of those who are less likely to present their arguments in ways that we recognize as characteristically deliberative." One imagines a debate between two people, both of whom are actually seeking to advance their own interests, in which one cleverly cloaks his argument in the language of the common good, while the other is unable to do so and thus loses out. Sanders concludes further that those who are already underrepresented – women, racial minorities, and the poor - are most likely to be silenced by deliberative requirements. Nonetheless, inequalities in rhetorical skill are far more easily overcome than inequalities of power; the latter is more likely to marginalize certain groups than the former (Guttman & Thompson, 1996).

In practice, a prohibition on self-interested claims might lead to a norm in which one would be allowed to offer evidence about a proposal's effects on a small group, as long as one were not a member of that group. Apart from being somewhat ridiculous, such a norm would result in a degradation of the available body of evidence in a debate. Often, individuals are the only ones who can offer the most complete articulation of their interests. If they are forbidden to do so, their interests will not be known or taken into account.

It is true that societal inequality may be manifest in deliberation, just as it is in other political processes and institutions. In order to address that inequality, those who

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suffer from it must make special claims to the majority. If the deliberative process is strict in its insistence that all arguments revolve around the common good, such claims may be ruled out of bounds, or at the very least require substantial logical and rhetorical acrobatics in order to be presented "properly." Thus, I argue that the appropriate place of the common good is as the guide and end of deliberation, not as a requirement of every utterance within the process. An open deliberation allows an individual claim to be presented, but treats it as a datum to be compared with others in determining the nature of the common good. Personal testimony (Sanders, 1997) would not only be permissible but encouraged as necessary information deliberators need to arrive at a decision. Participants may assume one of a number of roles when speaking: witness, expert, advocate, etc. When one *listens*, however, one's role shifts (Bickford, 1996b). It is in this role that consideration of the common good becomes central.

The second response to the inequality objection is that ongoing deliberation is itself the cure for the ill of communicative inequality. The more one participates in debate, the greater one's ability to make persuasive arguments and win support for one's positions. While the advantaged may already be well-informed and possess autonomy before debate begins, the deliberative process enhances these qualities among the disadvantaged who engage in it.

Sanders also observes that often, there is no "common good" at issue. She offers the claims of Japanese-Americans for compensation for internment during World War II as a case where "democratic assemblies should do nothing like pursue the common good but instead should just listen and respond to particular complaints." I agree, but argue further that such cases are not merely occasional but in fact comprise a great portion,

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perhaps even the majority of questions before the public. True, the allocations of funds in this case have a negligible effect on the federal budget or the economy, whereas, for instance, increases in student loans extend a greater web of economic effects. But in both cases, the task of the deliberator is to determine what is best for a finite number of others. It will be exceedingly difficult for her to locate any self-interest in the question at hand. As a consequence, it will not be necessary to rely on her altruism, good will, or commitment to the polity in order to spur her to consider the common good; she will have little choice.

Some have raised the possibility that deliberation will, by bringing multiple arguments and information to light, actually increase conflict. Deliberators could discover that the grounds for disagreement are deeper than they had originally imagined. "A participant may conclude that 'if *this* is what is at stake, then I really disagree!'" (Knight & Johnson, 1994). This scenario is only problematic, however, if we believe that agreement itself is the end of deliberation, regardless of what that agreement produces or on what it is based. An agreement brought about by incomplete knowledge or deception is no more desirable than one resulting from coercion. The advantage of deliberation is not simply that it is more likely to result in agreement, but that that agreement will rest on shared understandings and values.

Another objection to deliberation is that it imposes too many obligations on the citizenry. People should be able to ignore politics if they so choose. The role of citizen is and should be able to be freely rejected. People have too many other concerns – their jobs, their families, their hobbies – to take on politics as an ongoing task. In addition, speaking publicly about politics is something many find downright unpleasant

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(Schudson, 1997). However, whether or not the individual chooses to act as a citizen, political decisions will continue to be made. The fact that he ignores them does not mean they will cease to affect him. One may choose to be a citizen or a subject; to abdicate the choice is to choose the latter.

Some have also argued that the premise that deliberation leads to "better" outcomes is questionable. Experiments have shown that on certain subjects, "gut" reactions are more likely to result in accurate assessments than deliberate thinking (Kuklinski et al, 1993). However, the nature of laboratory or field experiments usually means that in the created dilemma there will in fact be a "correct" answer. This is plainly not the case when citizens make political judgments. Furthermore, political deliberations are carried out over an extended period; the question is not whether one will make one's decision by thinking or feeling, but how thoughts and feelings will combine into judgment.

A related issue is the role of emotion in deliberation. Some have maintained that "reasoned" argument precludes emotional appeals or considerations. I argue that, to the contrary, emotion is a necessary element of political debate. First, politics concerns crucial questions; we can not expect ourselves to always maintain a critical distance from issues when we care deeply about the outcome. Emotion does not necessarily drive out reason; in fact, it can often encourage us to serve the values on which we base our politics, highlighting considerations of, for instance, justice or fairness. Emotional appeals can encourage listeners to act in the interests of others. A dynamic deliberation would allow emotional appeals with the condition that they are then followed by deliberative reflection. As Schudson (1997) put it, "Democracy may sometimes require

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that your interlocutor does not wait politely for you to finish but grabs you by the collar and cries 'Listen! Listen for God's sake!'" If emotion heightens one's willingness to listen, it will enhance deliberation. There is evidence from both experimental and survey-based research that heightened emotion leads individuals to attend more closely to information (Neuman, Marcus, & MacKuen, 1996; Theiss-Morse, Marcus, & Sullivan, 1993). If this is true, emotion does not distort reason but instead enhances it. No less an authority than Aristotle (1991) advised speakers to direct their listeners' passions toward wise decisions.

Finally, a debate without emotion is, quite simply, boring. One of the key challenges to advocates of an engaged democracy is sustaining the interests of the citizenry. While to the high-minded theorist this may seem a trivial consideration, in practice maintaining citizen interest in public affairs is critical to the health of any democracy. The challenge of deliberation is to expand political discussion and debate beyond the narrow group of "political junkies" into the larger citizenry.

Deliberation in the real world

When we move from discussions of ideal civic deliberation to an examination of actual citizen deliberation, a critical question presents itself. How does citizen deliberation stand in relation to the ideal? Are people discussing public affairs? When such conversations occur, do they incorporate deliberative norms? As I noted earlier, one is tempted by some deliberative theories to describe ideal political discourse, and then cast all other political talk aside as irrelevant to the operation of deliberation. However, to do so is to ignore the bulk of citizens' political life. Political talk takes place in diverse

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settings where norms and patterns of discourse vary. In order to build a theory of deliberation based on actual conversation, we must understand each of these and its relation to deliberative goals.

The lengthy discussions one finds in theoretical texts of the proper procedures necessary to institute deliberative democracy betray a Newtonian impulse. We may decide exactly what we want our democracy to look like, then draft rules to ensure that it operates according to plan. When things deviate from the plan, the rules will sanction the transgressors and restore the democracy to proper operation. We will then be able, post hoc, to determine which decisions were deliberative and which were not.

In real life, thing are much more untidy and uncertain. While procedures may be necessary and proper in the context of a small institution such as a legislature, there is little purpose in discussing procedures that the public will be required to follow in its political discussions. In ordinary conversation, rules will necessarily be informal and sporadically enforced. Even if we were to imagine that the "ideal speech situation" (Habermas, 1989) could be created, it would necessarily comprise only a part of the citizenry's political life. Imagine two co-workers eating their lunch together. One says, "Did you see the State of the Union speech last night?" and the other replies, "I would be happy to discuss it, but we should wait until we go to the salon where the rules of deliberation may be enforced." Democratic discussion takes place in many varied settings where such rules have little applicability.

Furthermore, most theorizing is silent on the question of how, specifically, public deliberation is supposed to translate into policy. One possibility is that public deliberation could be incorporated into local political institutions with decision-making

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power, as in the town meeting (Mansbridge, 1980). The knowledge and commitment acquired by citizens might then translate into engagement on larger issues. Currently, this form of government exists only in a few places, and often falls short of ideals of attendance and participation (Bryan, 1999). A second possibility, which also involves the citizenry in direct policy-making, is occasional public decision-making in referenda, in which deliberation ought to but not necessarily does precede the moment of decision. A third possibility would be the institutionalization of something like Fishkin's (1991) "deliberative poll," in which a representative group of citizens engages in formal deliberation, the results of which become binding in some way on a government body, be it local or national. A fourth would be a non-binding deliberative poll system, where the results were held to be a true measure of "public opinion," thus exposing legislatures to public sanction if they were ignored. The final possibility is a maintenance of current institutional structures, but with improved public deliberation that makes public opinion more considered and less capricious. The more stable and considered opinion is, the less likely it will be ignored or contradicted by policy-makers.

Local politics is the logical starting point for deliberative democracy for a number of reasons. First, within a neighborhood or town individuals are more likely to have the interpersonal ties that can enable conversation to begin and encourage participants to adopt each other's perspectives. Second, pre-existing feelings of community lay the foundation for common-interest thinking. Issues can acquire a salience based on proximity that operates apart from self-interest. For citizens to care about issues that affect a larger community, they have to care about the community itself. Even if I have no children of my own, I may be more aroused by the fate of the schools in my town than

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those in my state because the children of my neighbors and acquaintances are involved. I have no greater self-interest in the children who live on my street than those who live fifty miles away, but their proximity and concreteness elicit a higher degree of caring. In addition, local issues tend to be less characterized by knowledge gaps between those of higher and lower socio-economic status (Gaziano, 1983).

Finally, the nature of local issues is such that they tend not to break along the strictly defined ideological lines that often hamper communication. Citizens who vote for different parties in federal elections find themselves agreeing on whether the town should buy a new snowplow. This is not to say, of course, that local issues are not often divisive and hard-fought. But except in those cases where one issue comes to so dominate a locality's politics that personal relationships become determined by agreement or disagreement on that issue, overlapping alliances mean that each member of the community may see potential agreement with every other member on at least some issue.

Politics in small, homogeneous communities may in fact be less conflictual and less often based on intergroup differences than that in larger cities. The larger and more heterogeneous the community, the more likely that interest groups are organized and that institutional structures are established to manage and coordinate conflict (Olien, Donohue, & Tichenor, 1995). Conover, Leonard and Searing (1993) report that "The citizens in our study seem most 'liberal' with regard to their citizenship in the nation. When they focus on the local community context, by contrast, they begin to behave and speak like 'communitarians' and articulate an expanded sense of responsibility."

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Generally, the smaller any group is, the more likely each member is to feel obligated to the other members (Mansbridge, 1980).

Obviously, this presents a challenge to any theory of citizen deliberation. Could citizens think about national and local issues in the same way? To do so, the factors that combine to produce concern for others in the local arena, such as affinity for community members, understanding of the consequences of proposals, and interpersonal discussion, would need to be duplicated. Although there would be some impediments, this is by no means impossible. There is little doubt that in contemporary rhetoric, local community is celebrated, despite the fact that relatively few Americans live in the small towns for which we profess such admiration.[2]

The initiative process is offered by some as part or all of the solution to a disconnected citizenry (Barber, 1984; Slaton, 1992). Used to the greatest degree in California but present in a number of states, initiatives can offer the best and worst of rule by the people (Broder, 2000). The relatively simple requirements for getting a question on the ballot can empower citizens to set agendas for policy decisions, but allow narrow well-funded interests to place undemocratic propositions there as well. Many recent successful initiatives in California have been built not on creative proposals for change, but on anger at state assistance directed toward minorities: Propositions 187, 209, and 226, which all passed, sought to eliminate affirmative action, forbid immigrants from receiving government services, and ban bilingual education. In these cases, the

[2]As Ronald Lee (1994) has observed, "Ironically, at a time when urban living has made neighbors strangers and mobility has extinguished the extended family, our politics celebrates the nurturing local community. At an earlier time, when most people lived in small towns and large families, our politics celebrated grand visions of national community."

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referendum process became a tool for the majority to restrict benefits available to a minority. Unfortunately, there is simply no system that would preserve the ability of citizens to initiate policy and simultaneously prevent narrow interests from doing the same. One could argue that the success of these propositions and the failure of more complex proposals on topics such as health care and campaign finance reform indicate a lack of public deliberation. Decision-making structures in and of themselves do not guarantee that deliberation will take place.

One proposal that has received a great deal of attention in recent years is James Fishkin's "deliberative poll." In this exercise (detailed in Fishkin, 1991), which has been carried out in England and the United States, a randomly selected group of citizens is brought together to deliberate on public issues. They hear and question experts, review informative material, and have extensive discussions with one another. At the end of a few days, they are surveyed for their views on the issues raised. Fishkin sees deliberative polling as a third way between direct democracy and representative democracy, one that keeps representative forms in place while allowing access to what is essentially "better" public opinion data. He takes pains to point out that the results of the deliberative poll should not be binding on legislatures, but instead should serve as a guide to the (considered) will of the people.

However, Fishkin is somewhat vague as to precisely how he envisions the results of deliberative polling being used. Would they simply be reported, in the hopes that the more fundamental "truths" about public opinion revealed by the polls would point us in the direction of particular policies? If so, we may presume that the adherents of deliberative polls would argue that their implementation could result in better policy

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outcomes, as the picture painted by unconsidered opinions is replaced by a richer, more stable one created by deliberative opinions. With the exception of the few hundred citizens who are chosen to serve in the deliberative poll, however, nothing has changed. The citizenry itself is no more deliberative than it was before. The institutionalization of deliberative polling would actually only provide legislators with more information, which they would be free to use or discard at their discretion. Of course, if the results of deliberative polls were widely reported in the press, the public might use them as a resource, or a proxy for decision-making. Some might also watch the deliberations on television were they broadcast. On the whole, though, citizens would be no more politically engaged or aware than they are at present.

Furthermore, deliberative polling results would be far easier for policy-makers to dismiss than actual opinions. It is important to keep in mind that legislators are responsive to what they perceive the opinions of their constituents to be. When the public is inattentive, ill informed, and in possession of no stable opinions on policy matters, legislators are free to ignore their constituents.

The first attempts at deliberative polling have produced mixed results, with some (but not overwhelming) opinion change (Merkle, 1996); of course, the degree of change tells little about whether opinions are of higher quality (Price & Neijens, 1998). While such polls are certainly an interesting idea, their high cost in time and expense makes it unlikely that they will become a permanent component of American political life. To date in the United States, deliberative polls have not attracted a sufficiently large television audience to posit a significant impact on opinion through this channel. The question of what the public would think under conditions of perfect deliberation is less

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critical than whether the benefits of those conditions could be approximated on a mass scale. I argue that they can, if a limited set of requirements for political discussion are met.

A reasonable ideal of deliberation

The reasonable ideal of a deliberative democracy for which I argue has five elements, each of which will be the subject of a subsequent chapter. While there are undoubtedly other requirements readers might devise, I contend that these constitute the core minimum required for deliberative democracy to operate.

1. *Conversation.* In order for a democracy to be considered deliberative, citizens must engage one another in discussion about matters of public concern. These discussions, furthermore, must take place not only among the elite but among members of all social strata. While it is often objected that many people are simply not interested in politics, or may rationally choose to leave political decision-making in the hands of others, the question is not simply what proportion of the public regularly discusses politics, but which of its members do and which don't.

2. *Disagreement.* Citizens in a deliberative democracy must be willing to engage one another across lines of disagreement. The individual benefits of deliberation will not be fully realized unless opinions and arguments are tested in debate, where assumptions may be challenged, alternative facts and perspectives brought to bear, and attempts at persuasion made.

3. *Self-interest.* One element shared by most theories of deliberation is that participants argue not on the basis of their self-interest but on appeals to the common

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good. The requirement that arguments be framed in collective terms not only increases the likelihood that the common interest will be served, but engenders a transformation among the participants, increasing their own regard for others.

4. *Information.* Participants must bring information to deliberation in order to construct relevant and persuasive arguments. Nonetheless, deliberation should not be restricted to those with higher knowledge. Information gain will be an individual outcome of deliberation, as partners learn from one another.

5. *Uncertainty.* Because uncertainty is an inevitable feature of politics, citizens must be willing to accommodate it, participating in deliberation even when they are not precisely sure where they stand on a given issue or what the consequences of a policy might be. The process of deliberation should in turn increase certainty.

A properly operating deliberative system will thus be marked by the following characteristics, which can be translated into a set of hypotheses to be tested empirically:

1. *Political conversation will be a common feature of everyday life, not only for members of the elite but across all social strata.*
2. *Citizens will regularly engage in political discussion with those whose views differ from their own.*
3. *Political conversation will enhance both the participants' own concern for the common good, and concomitantly the perception that others are similarly motivated.*
4. *While lack of political knowledge should not hinder participation in political conversation, conversation should subsequently increase knowledge.*
5. *While uncertainty should not hinder participation in political conversation, conversation should subsequently increase the certainty of opinions.*

By testing these hypotheses, we will be able to render a judgment as to how closely contemporary American political life approximates the ideal of a deliberative democracy that I have outlined. The reasonable ideal of deliberation does not require "omnicompetent" citizens (Lippman, 1922), nor does it require that politics consume the

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attentions of all of society's members at all times. It does, however, demand that the collective conversation in which public opinion is continually made and remade be free of certain specific distortions in its membership, its content, and its results.

The role of the press

In the political world there are three distinct but related arenas of deliberation. The first is the elite sphere, where power resides and decisions are made. Only part of the deliberation that takes place in this sphere is visible to public view. The second is the citizen sphere, constituted in the conversations among individuals. The final arena is the mediated sphere, which represents and influences the other two.

This representation shapes and is shaped by the contours of deliberation in both the elite and citizen arenas in a reciprocal process. Like other dramatic presentations, news uses conflict to engage its audience. While this may be a constant of politics, the conflict structure is manifested in various ways that determine the character of news and the discourse received by citizens. Specifically, political news casts political actors not as individuals of good will characterized by philosophical differences seeking alternative means of accomplishing shared goals, but as implacable enemies with mutually exclusive goals for whom compromise and agreement are all but impossible.

Mediated discourse serves as a model for citizen discourse. In form, lines of argument and language, citizens use mediated discourse to inform their own decisions and conduct in the public sphere. Unfortunately, many see participation in political discussion as a risky endeavor and thus avoid it. Political talk is "unsafe" for citizens in part because mediated political discourse shows us that it is. When political actors tell us

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that those who oppose them on issues that seemingly do not involve fundamental values are enemies of all that is right and good, we fear that our neighbors will reveal themselves to be similar enemies to us. When political disagreements seem to be resolved only through heated conflict, we hesitate to bring politics into our lives. Although in fact political talk has the potential to bind us together with other citizens, we avoid it because we fear it will do exactly the opposite.

The citizen's assessment of the risks and rewards of engaging in political conversation are a function of what she understands the nature of "politics" to be.[3] If she sees politics as an arena of vituperative conflict, her natural response may be withdrawal; while she may continue to observe the political world through the media (even being entertained by the conflict), she will not be a participant, particularly if participation could provoke discord with those with whom she enjoys friendly or intimate relationships. Although there are some who thrive on rhetorical conflict, many more find in it a reason to avoid discussion. Political conversation is the lifeblood of any democracy, particularly a deliberative democracy. Without conversation, there is no public and thus no public opinion. As Gabriel Tarde (1969) wrote, without conversation, the press "would exercise no profound influence on any minds. They would be like a string vibrating without a sounding board."

Data and theses

In addressing these questions, this study will present data from three sources. Chapter 2 will discuss results from the Campaign Discourse Mapping Project, a content

[3] Throughout this dissertation, I will refer often to a hypothetical citizen whose gender will vary at random.

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analysis of presidential campaign discourse, including news, from 1952 to 1996. Secondly, data from a series of surveys conducted from 1996 through 2000 at the Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Pennsylvania will be analyzed in detail in Chapters 3 through 7. The primary focus will be on a national survey of registered voters around the 1996 presidential campaign and a survey of California voters prior to the 1998 gubernatorial election in that state. In addition, some data from a rolling cross-sectional survey of the American electorate in 2000 will be used. The final source of data is the National Election Studies, which have included questions on political discussion in their surveys since 1984.

Admittedly, there is something awkward about advocating a discursive notion of the public, then measuring it via sample surveys. I agree with Dewey and Habermas that the public is constituted in the interactions between people; answers given on a survey are not public, but spoken anonymously to an individual whose role is not that of fellow citizen but of (ostensibly) disinterested researcher. Truly public opinions, on the other hand, are those which are offered publicly. Nonetheless, survey data can offer clues to the individual faculties, resources, and beliefs that shape the content of those interactions. Like any research method, surveys have inherent limitations; there are also limitations of the specific data sets on which I base my conclusions. I will acknowledge and discuss these whenever relevant.

My study will use these data to make two principle claims. The first is that contemporary news media do as much to hamper deliberation as to enable it. The second and more equivocal claim is that, partly as a consequence of news but due to other factors as well, political discussion in the United States largely fails to be deliberative. While

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there are some ways in which everyday conversation satisfies deliberative requirements, the overall picture is one of a public that falls far short of the standards of deliberative democracy.

While this conclusion may not be particularly startling, it is one at which I arrived somewhat reluctantly. Academic analyses of public opinion often reach pessimistic conclusions when comparing the theoretical democratic citizen to the actual one (e.g. (Berelson et al, 1954; Campbell et al, 1960; Converse, 1964). The failure of contemporary citizens to display perfect knowledge, wisdom and judgment is alternately described as tragic or inevitable. My particular version of deliberative democracy attempts to set a more attainable standard, but even here the American public seems to be somewhat lacking. Nonetheless, the picture is far from unequivocal; despite its weaknesses, everyday political discussion does provide benefits to those who engage in it and to our democracy as a whole.

The development of deliberative theory was in part a response to the elitist model of democracy espoused by Schumpeter (1950) and Downs' (1957) economic model (Bohman & Rehg, 1997). While the elitist model is concerned with system-level outcomes and the economic model with maximization of individual interest, both reject substantial participation because it exceeds the citizen's capacity in the former case and is irrational in the latter. In this view, representative democracy operates well precisely because it demands so little of people. In a similar vein, Berelson et al (1954) held that universal participation was undesirable; widespread indifference to politics allowed for a

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smoothly operating government.[4]

In contrast, contemporary deliberative theory shares with Rousseau and John Stuart Mill the belief that the development of individuals is not simply a mechanism to ensure the proper functioning of institutions but one of the core purposes of politics.[5] As Mill argued, political arrangements serve not only to conduct a nation's business but to educate its citizenry, imbuing them with desirable traits of character. It is in this function, and not in efficiency or the protection of interests, that the strongest argument in favor of democracy is to be found.

Because deliberation helps to create citizens, it may be considered an end in itself apart from the policy decisions that emerge from it. While some hold that democratic discussion is not about who we are but about what to do (Elster, 1997), one can conceive of even discussion that results in no decision as, if nothing else, an investment in subsequent decisions. If the transformative effects of deliberation occur, those who benefit will be more likely to render wise judgments in the future. Deliberation may thus be defended both as a decision-making procedure and as a form of civic engagement from which policies flow only indirectly.

Just as in Aristotle's vision of the *polis* "the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other" (Arendt, 1959), in a large representative democracy, participation in the production of opinion through conversation is the primary task of citizenship. A *polis* in which discussion is less than deliberative is itself less than democratic.

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[4] Nonetheless, Berelson et al argued that "If there is one characteristic for a democratic system (besides the ballot itself) that is theoretically required, it is the capacity for and the practice of discussion."
[5] It should be noted that Rousseau was not an advocate of discussion. His "general will" was, as Habermas (Habermas, 1989) observed, "more a consensus of hearts than of arguments."

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Chapter 2
Discourse in the Mediated Public Sphere

Theoretical work on public deliberation is notably silent on the content of elite discourse, as though the political world seen by citizens had no influence on their conduct and conversations. But it is that world, delivered through the filter of news, which in large part sets the terms of citizen deliberation. News helps set a conversational agenda and provides us with the language and arguments we use to discuss political issues. It shows us what typical political debate is, which forces are allied and opposed, and who believes what and why. As such, news has the power to enable deliberation or to discourage it.

The model of deliberation I espouse has five elements: conversation, disagreement, self-interest, information, and uncertainty. Before I turn to survey data to explore the effects of media exposure on each, I will first examine the content of political discourse in both its unmediated and mediated forms to ascertain whether the political world visible to the citizenry is likely to enhance its willingness and ability to engage in deliberation. Such an examination indicates not only that news filters distort political discourse, but that the particular ways in which they do so form a picture of political debate which is inimical to deliberation.

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Unmediated discourse

After nearly every election season, a wave of articles appears in the press decrying the "negativity" of modern campaigns. Candidates, it is said, spend their time ducking important issues as they cynically manipulate voters through harsh attack ads vilifying their opponents. Negative campaigns are one of the prime suspects in low voter turnout and widespread disaffection with politics (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995).

Despite the common perception that campaigns are increasingly "negative," the majority of what candidates say to voters in speeches, debates, and even ads is actually positive. Candidates spend most of their time arguing for their own positions, not criticizing their opponents. The Campaign Discourse Mapping Project coded speeches, ads, and debates from presidential candidates from 1952 through 1996 for the amount of advocacy (advancing one's own position), attack (criticizing one's opponent), and contrast (advocating and criticizing on the same issue).[6] As Figures 2-1 through 2-4 indicate, not only is attack a smaller proportion of candidate discourse than advocacy and in most cases contrast, but presidential campaigns have not been getting dramatically "more negative," as many have argued (Kaid & Johnston, 1991). While there is a slight upward trend in the amount of attack in advertisements since 1960, 1996 showed a decline, in large part because Bill Clinton's ads used a great deal of contrast, criticizing his opponent while advocating his own position on the same issue (Jamieson, Waldman,

[6] Of course, a coding scheme measuring advocacy, attack and contrast does not capture every element of the "negativity" of a campaign. All attacks are not created equal; some are fair, reasonable, and relevant, while others are not. Not every important evaluative standard is amenable to content analysis. It is interesting to note, however, that the election most often singled out for its poor quality, that of 1988, generates the poorest scores on most of the measures here, including those tracking the performance of both candidates and media outlets.

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& Sherr, 2000). In debates and speeches, furthermore, attack has not been on the rise. The level of attack has never risen above 22% in either speeches or debates.

Figure 2-1:
Discourse Breakdown: Speeches

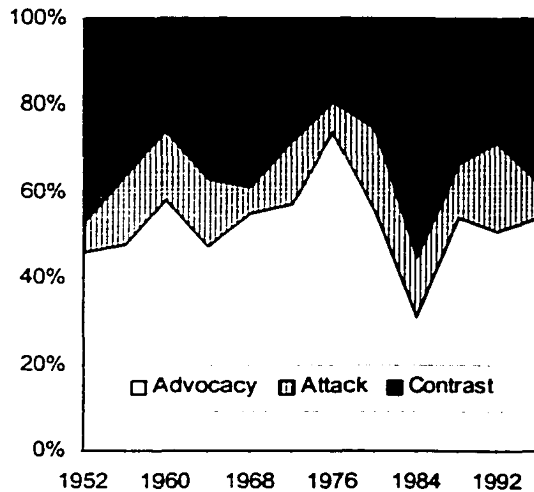


Figure 2-2:
Discourse Breakdown: Debates

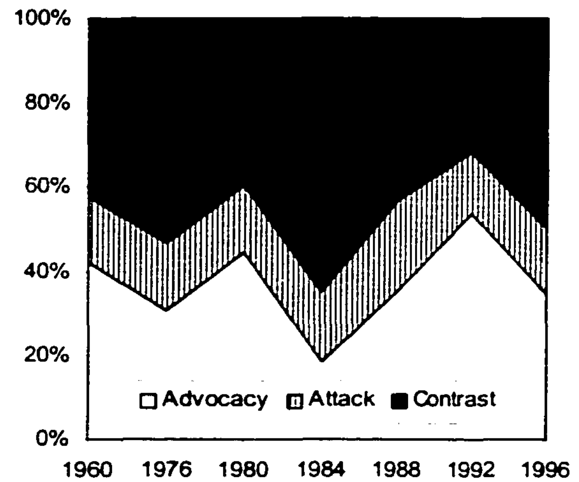


Figure 2-3:
Discourse Breakdown: Ads

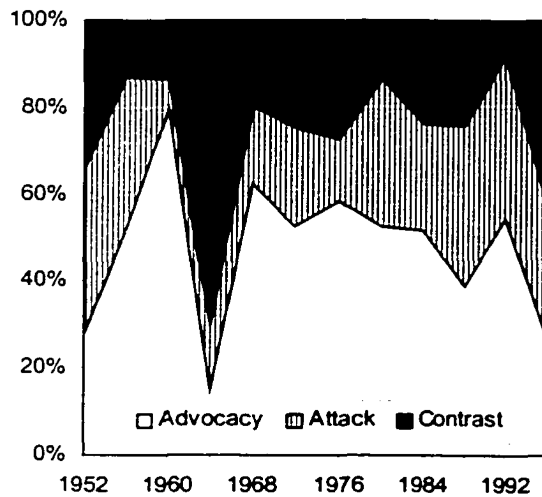
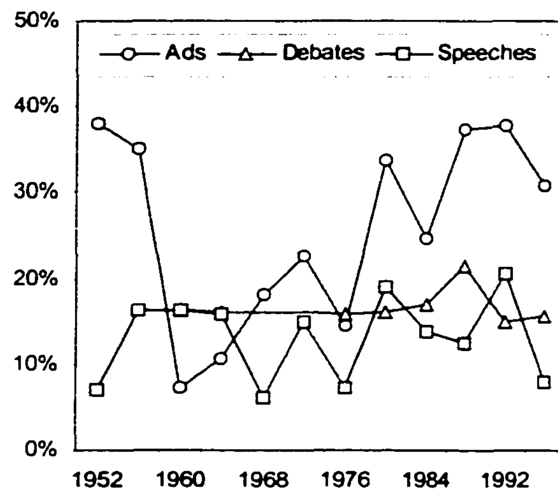


Figure 2-4: Attack in Campaign Discourse



The CDMP data indicate that when candidates engage in the more traditional forms of discourse – speeches and debates – they attack less often and nearly always

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provide evidence for their claims. Whether they do so grudgingly is beside the point. Despite the attention usually paid to the strategies candidates employ in their advertising, voters and reporters expect and demand that candidates present themselves in these traditional contexts. Although many candidates have made television advertising central to their strategies, running a campaign solely through ads is considered by the press to be out of bounds.[7] However cynically reporters interpret speeches and debates, they nonetheless demand that candidates undertake them. Within these rituals lies the most issue-oriented, information-rich content available during a campaign. When candidate discourse passes through the news filter, however, it emerges in a very different form.

Frames and narratives in the news

The notion of framing as a way of organizing information was originally developed by Erving Goffman (1974), then later applied to news narratives by Todd Gitlin (1980), who defined news frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation; of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether visual or verbal." A number of researchers, most notably Kahneman and Tversky (1984), have shown that framing functionally identical information in different ways can influence interpretation and decision-making.

[7] Consider the example of Mel Levine. A longtime Congressman from California, Levine seemed like a strong contender for an open Senate seat in 1992. When he acknowledged publicly that he would make no campaign appearances and appear at no debates, choosing instead to campaign almost exclusively through television ads, the California press responded by dubbing Levine a "stealth candidate" and giving him scornful coverage (Stall, 1992).

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In campaign news, most stories employ a strategic frame, also known as "horse-race" coverage (Patterson, 1993; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983). The strategic frame determines the focus of stories, the selection of quotes, and the interpretation of actions. In its persistence, this frame has the power to structure understanding not just of a particular campaign or legislative debate but of politics itself. As described by Cappella and Jamieson (1997), the strategic frame "is an organized set of assumptions that implies and often explicitly states that leaders are self-interested to the exclusion of the public good, that their votes can be swayed by monied or special interests that do not serve their constituents' ends, and that they are dishonest about what they are trying to accomplish and driven privately by a desire to stay in power."

The reliance of the press on strategic interpretations of political arguments and events has been well established (Patterson, 1993). The strategic frame is characterized by features that include: winning and losing as the central concern; metaphors of war and sports; mention of performers (politicians), critics (journalists) and audience (citizens); emphasis on candidate style and perceptions; and a reliance on polls (Jamieson, 1992). Various researchers have measured the extent of strategy coverage in different ways; for instance, Thomas Patterson (1993) coded the focus of front-page stories, while Daniel Hallin (1992) measured the seconds devoted to the horse-race in television news. Depending on the content analytic measure and sample employed, estimates of the proportion of election news utilizing the strategic frame run from 50% up to 80% (Patterson, 1993). In recent years, the strategy frame has migrated from campaign news to coverage of policy debates as well (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996).

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Strategy framing serves a number of purposes for journalists. First, it allows them to engage in substantial interpretation, offering opinions beyond what would otherwise be considered appropriate under the norm of objectivity. Second, it enhances their privileged position by focusing on "inside" information to which only they have access. Third, it fulfills dramatic requirements by structuring stories as battles between antagonists, eventually resulting in a "winner" and a "loser" (Jamieson, Waldman, & Devitt, 1998).

To a certain extent, strategy coverage is simply one more example of media organizations catering to a widespread fascination with "behind-the-scenes" information. Just as "Entertainment Tonight" takes viewers to the sets where movies and television shows are filmed, the news brings viewers into the backstage world of campaigns. Some trace the rise of the strategic frame to Theodore White's seminal book, *The Making of the President 1960* (White, 1961), which told a gripping behind-the-scenes tale featuring John Kennedy as its protagonist. Its lineage actually extends back even farther: the first major U.S. election study found that what we would call strategy coverage comprised the greatest portion of news about the 1940 election. "The most talked-about subject matter [in news] during the campaign," Lazarsfeld and his colleagues wrote, "was the campaign itself. Over a third of all discussion centered on the progress of the campaign, on the campaign methods of the two parties, and particularly on speculations about the candidate's chances." (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944)

The fact that the strategic frame is not merely one element of campaign coverage but its primary structuring narrative betrays a fundamentally cynical stance on the part of reporters: political truth, they argue, is to be found in machinations and hidden tactics.

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This bias is revealed not only in the words reporters speak but in other ways as well. For example, television correspondents on the campaign trail often tape "stand-ups" using a candidate giving a speech as a backdrop (Sam Donaldson of ABC News is particularly fond of this tableau). As the reporter talks to the viewers from near the stage, one sees the candidate speaking but cannot make out his words. The implication is that those words are devoid of meaning, or at the very least not important enough to merit attention. The reporter shields viewers from the candidate's efforts at manipulation by rendering him mute.

Frames "lead a double life...they are structures of the mind that impose order and meaning on the problems of society and...interpretive structures embedded in political discourse" (Kinder & Herzog, 1993). Consequently, framing may be studied as a means of "constructing and processing news discourse or as a characteristic of the discourse itself." (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). My purpose here is the latter – to describe features of the strategy frame in campaign news and their implications for citizen deliberation. In order to investigate the operation of strategic framing, the Campaign Discourse Mapping Project content analyzed a sample of presidential campaign coverage from the three network news programs from 1980 to 1996. Among the measures employed was a judgment of each story's primary structure, defined as the frame introduced in the lead and continuing through the majority of the story. Each story was coded as a "strategy" story (one concentrating on tactics, poll results, etc.), an "issue" story (one concentrating on a specific issue or issues), or as "other," a miscellaneous category. As Figure 2-5 shows, the proportion of strategy stories is near or above fifty percent in all years. Nineteen eighty-four showed the greatest focus on strategy, while 1992 and 1996

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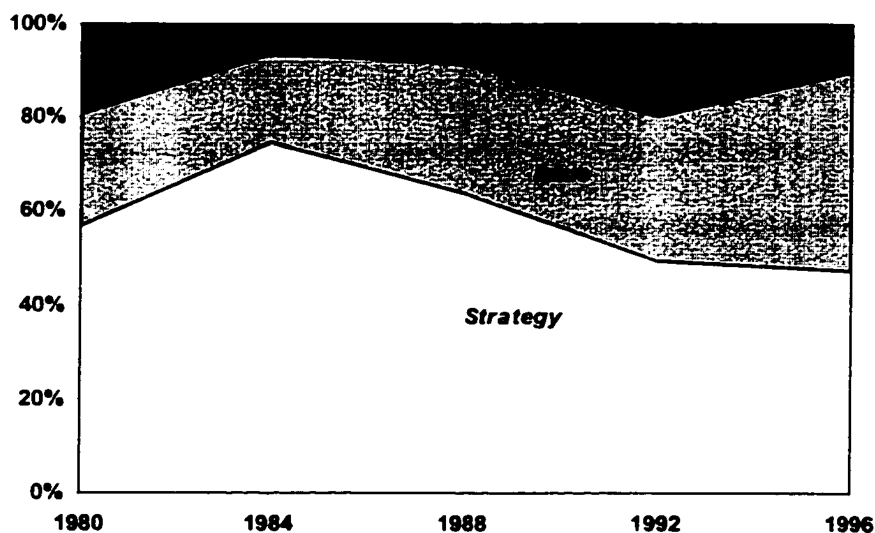
displayed a marked improvement in the proportion of issue stories. CDMP coders also identified a secondary structure if the frame shifted for a substantial portion of the story; data reported here concern only the primary structure. Adding stories that included strategy as a secondary structure increases the totals by approximately ten percent in each year. In addition, while the CDMP gave greater weight to the opening or lead of the story in determining a primary structure, television reporters commonly close stories – even serious issue stories – with a final comment about strategy. Hallin (1992) found that in 1988, 82% of all campaign stories closed with a "wrap-up" concerning strategy. It should thus be noted that these figures understate the total amount of strategic information in campaign news.

Figure 2-5: Primary Story Structure, Campaign Stories on Network News



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Strategic coverage is motivated at least in part by a noble impulse to expose attempts at manipulation. But does such exposure actually benefit citizens, or simply make them, as Todd Gitlin (1991) put it, "cogniscenti of their own bamboozlement"? Without an accompanying analysis of issues, strategic coverage leaves voters unable to assess whether politicians' claims should be believed. If we learn that a candidate appeared at a senior citizen center *in order to make us believe* that he cares about the elderly, we have no evidence that he does or does not in fact care about the elderly. The default conclusion must be that all claims are false. The news thus invites citizens to become as cynical as reporters appear to be.

If they accept the invitation, citizens may conclude that in politics, motives are always suspect. Political actors virtually never admit to the kind of strategic motivations for statements and positions reporters routinely ascribe to them when discussing strategy. The strategic frame by its nature asserts first that real motives are hidden by stated motives, and second that the substance of a speech or a policy is less important for citizens to know than the real (strategic) motive behind it.

One might ask why, if reporters feel that a particular campaign appearance is mere image-making, they bother to cover it all. Most political reporters, particularly those who cover campaigns, are greater experts in politics than they are in policy. Since politics is what they know, politics is what they cover. Within that context, coverage becomes cynical. "Just as TV decries photo-opportunity and sound-bite campaigning yet builds the news around them, so it decries the culture of the campaign consultant, with its emphasis on technique over substance, yet adopts that culture as its own." (Hallin, 1992) Again and again, reporters offer a brief quote from a candidate, then inform viewers that

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what they just heard was an empty sound bite with little to offer. While on the surface this may appear to punish the offending candidate, in practice it does nothing to encourage the candidate to speak at greater length. If, on the other hand, the reporter quoted the candidate at greater length – rewarding substance instead of punishing superficiality – higher quality discourse might become more likely. Candidates want to be quoted making their case, and will adapt their discourse to the dispositions of the news.

The following example, taken from an ABC news report during the 1996 election, shows the strategic frame in operation. The night before, the two candidates held a televised debate that covered a wide range of issue areas. The next day's coverage, however, begins with anchor Peter Jennings relating the results of an overnight poll in which the network asked people which candidate they thought "won" the debate.[8] It is this poll, and not the substance of the debate, which contextualizes the report that follows:

> PETER JENNINGS: Well, if you look to the polls as a guide, the overnight polls tell us that very few minds were changed last night. The ABC News polls show that viewers, by a margin of 20 points, thought President Clinton did the better job. Remember, however, Mr. Clinton held a sizable lead going in and so the assessment of who won may reflect that margin of who was watching. Mr. Dole was in New Jersey today and ABC's John Cochran is with him.
>
> JOHN COCHRAN: To hear Bob Dole tell it, his campaign is rolling along just fine as he borrows a page from the Bill Clinton playbook with a bus blitz through New Jersey.

---

[8] Press coverage of televised debates is if anything even more focused on strategy than ordinary campaign coverage. The guiding question here is whether a debate will shift significant numbers of votes, despite the fact that debates almost never do. News organizations conduct immediate polls to find out which candidate "won" in the minds of voters, then structure their subsequent coverage around these polls. Certain decisive moments – almost always an attack by one candidate against another or a gaffe – are replayed again and again. In the case of debates, this strategic framing is particularly troubling. Post-debate coverage directs voters to recall certain elements of a debate and understand it in particular ways (Lemert et al, 1991). Because debates are the most information-rich events of a presidential campaign, if voters only recall a particular attack, or that one candidate "won" while the other "lost," then a precious opportunity for voter education has been squandered.

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DOLE: Don't look up at the score board, the game is still on. We've got 30 days. We're going to win the election.

COCHRAN: Dole and his top aides are simply ignoring his dismal showing in the overnight polls.

SCOTT REED (Dole campaign manager): The polls are meaningless right now. The enthusiasm you're seeing in New Jersey today is a direct reflection of last night.

COCHRAN: Dole's strategy now? Keep the message simple. Tell them Bill Clinton is an untrustworthy liberal, and keep promising that 15 percent tax cut.

DOLE: If I didn't give you my word, and I've always kept my word, which you can't say for Bill Clinton.

COCHRAN: And for his gender gap problem with women, a new ad with one of his best campaign assets, his wife.

ELIZABETH DOLE (from TV ad): My husband has come out strongly to protect the victims of domestic violence, and to make sure a man and a woman who work at the same job get the same retirement benefits.

COCHRAN: But it's a hard road ahead. No one expects the vice presidential debate to have much impact, and the final presidential debate is a citizen's forum, a setting the Dole camp did not want because Bill Clinton did so well talking to real people in the '92 debates. That's why last night's debate was so important for Bob Dole, and why the early reviews from voters are so disappointing for him. John Cochran, ABC News, Red Bank, New Jersey.

-ABC World News Tonight, 10/7/96

Cochran uses a sports metaphor ("the Bill Clinton playbook"), echoing Dole, who uses one of his own ("Don't look up at the scoreboard, the game is still on."). The only reference Cochran makes to any of the substantive matters Dole discussed during the day is meant as an explanation of strategy: "Dole's strategy now? Keep the message simple." The story closes with another reference to the poll, using a theatrical metaphor (voters' reactions are "reviews").

The dominance of the strategic frame has a number of implications for the practice of deliberation. First, because the strategic frame characterizes all political actors as fundamentally self-interested, it constructs the political world in ways that may be inimical to deliberation, a topic discussed at length in Chapter 5. Secondly, it portrays candidates as more prone to attack one another than they actually are. By focusing on the

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conflictual aspects of a campaign, the news encourages the perception that representatives of different political parties are fundamentally opposed on all issues, making disagreement seem the norm. Finally, the strategic frame gives citizens poorer information by truncating complex arguments, leaving them without the evidence and rationales with which to evaluate competing claims.

The metaphor of the frame is used by communication researchers because it indicates a structuring boundary, placing some things inside and therefore visible, and others outside and therefore invisible. Strategic framing excludes certain types of information in order to focus on tactics and strategy. It also filters the rather substantial amount of candidate discourse in specific ways.

Politics in all its forms is largely comprised of communication. Politicians talk to each other and to citizens, citizens talk back to politicians, lobbying and interest groups talk to government and to the citizenry, etc. In order to report on political activity in the limited amount of time it has available, the press must whittle all this talk down to a few statements meant to convey the essence of the total communication taking place. The filters employed by reporters produce communication which is decidedly different from discourse in its raw form. As the CDMP content analysis reveals, the filtering of candidate discourse is guided by two unstated principles: the exclusion of evidence, reducing complex arguments to simple assertion; and the privileging of arguments that attack.

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Conceal the evidence

The essence of an active, engaged deliberation is the assessment of evidence for claims. The offering of evidence is itself the substance of argumentation. Claims themselves tend to be simple and straightforward; evidence is required in order to establish their validity. Without evidence at their disposal, citizens can do little but trade claims back and forth, a conversational form that resembles deliberation in no way. If one participant claims that taxes should be raised and the other responds that taxes should be lowered, without evidence to answer the questions of "why" and "how," the conversation grinds to a halt.

Once a conversational agenda has been set, the bulk of evidence citizens can utilize must come from news media. While in some cases personal experience can be a source of information and logic, the nature of political issues is such that in a majority of cases, the issue at hand will be sufficiently remote that more generalized information will be required. This information must at some point come from the mass media. The critical question, then, is how well the news media provide the evidence and lines of argument to support claims being made in the political world. In order to answer this question, we must first assess the degree to which political actors themselves offer evidence for their claims. Unless they do, reporters will have little material to pass on to viewers and readers.

Data from the CDMP indicate that presidential candidates almost always offer evidence to support their claims. As Figure 2-6 shows, particularly in the context of speeches and debates, arguments are supported by evidence over ninety percent of the time; this figure surpasses ninety-five percent in most years. While the numbers for ads

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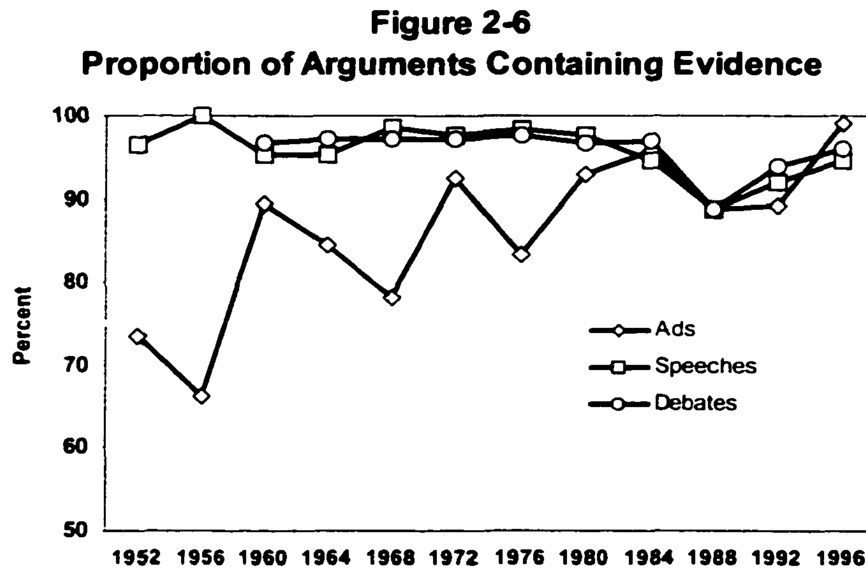
are usually lower, even here evidence was offered for over seventy percent of arguments in all years but one.

Figure 2-6
Proportion of Arguments Containing Evidence



When these arguments pass through the news filter, they get reduced in a specific way. While a presidential campaign speech may contain numerous arguments (between five and ten is typical), reporters tend not to simply choose a single argument and present it in its entirety. Instead, they more often take a number of claims made by the candidate and present them, while omitting the evidence offered for those claims. Thus while it is true that sound bites in network evening news have grown shorter in past years (Hallin, 1992), the filtering of political discourse goes beyond the simple truncation of political actors' statements. What is removed in most cases is evidence for claims. The CDMP coded not only the quotes in news but the source of those quotes, i.e. candidate speeches, debates, etc. We are thus able to directly compare a discourse genre in its raw form and the representation of that discourse in news. As Figure 2-7 shows, while nearly all

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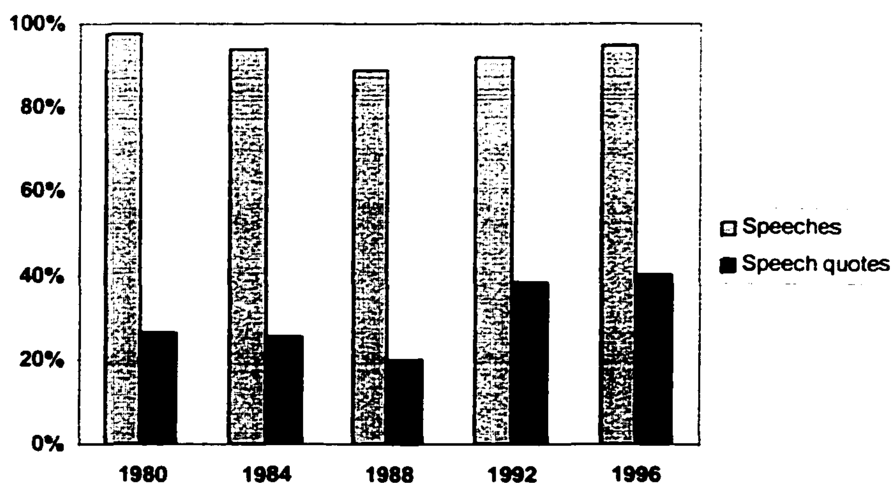
arguments in speeches contain evidence, when speeches are quoted in news evidence is usually absent. In 1988, less than 20% of quotes from speeches contained evidence.



When evidence is removed from an argument, the only remaining information is that the candidate is for or against something. Why he holds this position, we do not know. Consequently, the viewer is left unable to have a discussion about either the candidate's position on the issue, or the issue itself.

The tendency to remove evidence, furthermore, is more pronounced in strategy stories than in issue stories, as shown in Figure 2-8. Hallin (1992) produced very similar results measuring the length of sound bites in issue and strategy stories from 1968 to 1988; sound bites were generally shorter in strategy stories, in some cases dramatically so. While the number of arguments presented with evidence varies from year to year as

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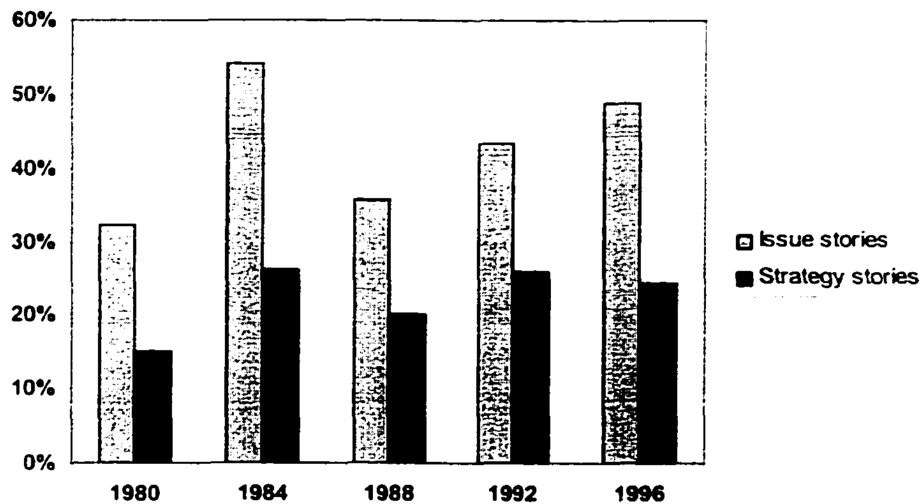
does the difference between issue stories and strategy stories, the critical point is that strategy stories were *always* less likely to contain evidence. This difference is significant at $p<.05$ in all five years examined.

Figure 2-8: Proportion of Arguments Containing Evidence, Quotes in Network News



Because the focus in strategic coverage is not the candidate's words but his intentions, it is not surprising that quotes in these stories are shorter than those in issue stories. In a strategy story, the question of why a candidate takes a position is answered not by the candidate him/herself, but by the journalist. For example, in an issue story about economic proposals, a candidate might be quoted as saying that the minimum wage should be increased (assertion) because it has not kept up with inflation and lower-income workers have failed to share in recent prosperity (evidence). In a strategy story, the candidate states his support for a minimum wage increase, but the reporter explains that labor unions have contributed to his campaign. In both cases a rationale is supplied for an assertion, but it is the reporter who supplies the (very different) rationale in the

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strategy story.

Such a story may enable viewers to have a certain kind of discussion, but that discussion would be limited in critical ways. While they could debate a candidate's motives, on the basis of the story they would not have the wherewithal to assess whether his proposal to raise the minimum wage is reasonable and fair, or what he thinks its economic consequences are likely to be. A judgment of the candidate that connects his campaign proposals to his future performance in office therefore becomes less likely.

Political actors often echo reporters by charging that the true motive behind a proposal or a position is gaining advantage in the upcoming election. For example, Senator Edward Kennedy charged that the Defense of Marriage Act was "Cynically calculated to try and inflame the public eight weeks before the November 5th election" (*CBS Evening News*, 9/10/96). Just as common is the charge that the hidden motive is not simply electoral advantage, but a more sinister intent for which the speaker would be punished if he spoke publicly, as in this statement by Ann Lewis, then a spokesperson for Planned Parenthood, during the debate over the nomination of Henry Foster for Surgeon General: "Let us be clear - there is an issue of credibility here. It is the credibility of those politicians who don't want to admit what their real motives are. They really don't think that abortion or decisions about reproductive health care should be made by women and their doctors. They will take any means to attack it. And so, they're now trying to go back and find any excuse to say you're opposing Dr. Foster except the real one. Any day now, I expect to hear that they don't like the way he parts his hair" (CNN, 2/14/95).

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This is not to say that motive questioning is necessarily a dishonest rhetorical technique, but rather that it crowds out information more useful to citizens in arriving at judgments, particularly on policy issues. For example, members of Congress engaged in a debate about a proposal to use sampling in the 2000 census to address the problem of uncounted citizens. Most stories about the issue featured charges by each side that the other's position, though stated in terms of fairness, accuracy, or constitutionality, was actually determined by concerns about the effects of sampling on redistricting. Democrats were said to support sampling because it would count more poor and minority citizens, who would be more likely to vote Democratic. Republicans were said to oppose sampling for the same reason.

Without doubt, these charges contained a good deal of truth. But if we assume that citizens are or should be making up their minds based not on electoral calculation but on the facts and principles involved, then the question of actors' motives is problematic simply because it takes up space both in news stories and in citizens' minds. Each charge of hidden motives replaces a statement or explication of a "public" reason that could be used to form a public judgment.

Eliminate the positive

It is no accident that news items are referred to as "stories." Like all storytellers, reporters attempt to construct narratives that engage their audience. A key element of storytelling is the presence of conflict. As Vincent Price (1989) observes, "So common is conflict as a theme in the news, in fact, that introductory journalism texts generally include it in their inventories of basic news values." In the context of political news, it

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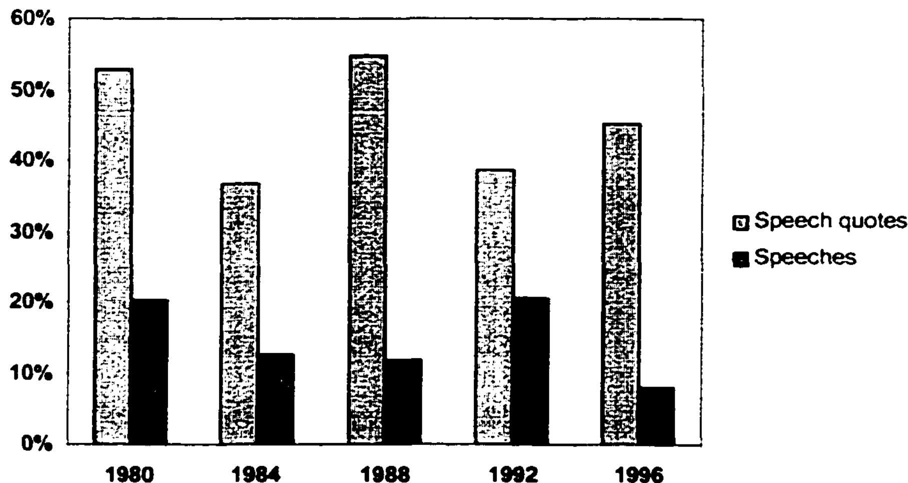
then becomes more likely that statements that attack – whether a candidate attacking an opponent, a legislator attacking a member of another party, or an interest group representative attacking a piece of legislation – will pass through the news filter.

As a result, the political world seen by citizens through the news media is much more conflictual than that world actually is. As Figure 2-9 shows, news dramatically overrepresents the amount of attack in candidate discourse. While the proportion of attack in presidential campaign speeches averages 15% and never rises above 22% in the years studied, the proportion of attack in quotes in network news stories taken from speeches averages 46%. In 1988, attack comprised only 12% of speech arguments, but 55% of speech quotes.

Figure 2-9: Proportion of Attack in Speeches and Quotes from Speeches in Network News



The preference for attack extends beyond the comments of candidates. For example, while none of the three network evening newscasts bothered to air a story about

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the final 1996 presidential debate the following evening, two did find news value in a woman who yelled at Clinton that he was a "draft-dodging yellow-bellied liar" as the President jogged along the beach. The more harsh and insulting a comment, whatever its source, the more likely it is to end up as part of a news story.

Despite the fact that conflict is an organizing theme of most political reporting, the tendency to overstate attack emerges even more strongly in strategy stories than in issue stories. Even in an issue story focusing on conflict, candidates' positions must be stated before they can be attacked by opponents. In a strategy story, positions need not be explicated; the point of the story is often the simple fact that the candidates are attacking each other. Attacks are quoted not for their explicit content, but in order to illustrate the idea that the campaign is "getting nasty." Again and again, campaign stories open with the words, "Candidate X went on the attack today…" As Figure 2-10 shows, attack is more likely to emerge in strategy stories in four of the five years studied. Once again, the greatest difference is in 1988, where 59% of the quotes in strategy stories were attacks, compared to 26% of the quotes in issue stories.

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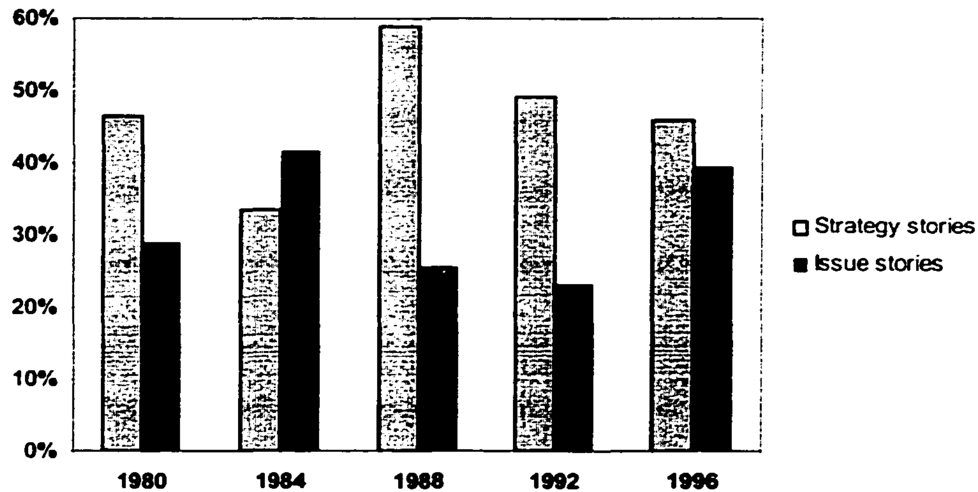
Figure 2-10: Attack as a Proportion of Quotes in Network News



The following story from 1988 shows how the two principles of concealing the evidence and accentuating the negative shape the discourse received by citizens. In their first presidential debate, Michael Dukakis and George Bush discussed a wide range of issues in relative depth. The debate contained 58 arguments, of which 13 (22%) were attacks. Fifty-one of the arguments, or 88%, contained evidence. The report by Lesley Stahl, on the other hand, contains six arguments, five of which are attacks. Only one contains evidence, Bush's assertion that Dukakis was "out of the mainstream," and only one of the many substantive issue positions taken by the candidates during the debate is quoted (Dukakis' position on health insurance). For good measure, a pair of attacks from the campaign managers close the report.

> DAN RATHER: As the presidential candidates growled at each other long distance today, their handlers were fanning out on so-called spin patrol, trying to affect press and public perception of who won and who lost last night. CBS News National Affairs Correspondent Lesley Stahl looks now at the style and substance of last night's joint Bush-Dukakis appearance and what may happen now.

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LESLEY STAHL: The presidential debate last night signaled messages and scenes that'll be repeated in the weeks ahead -- code words like "card-carrying member" and "guns for hostages" -- and there was anger -- Bush and Dukakis engaged in surprisingly harsh, often personal, exchanges.

GOVERNOR MICHAEL DUKAKIS: Well, when it comes to ridicule, George, you win a gold medal. I think we can agree on that.

STAHL: Aides had told Dukakis, "Loosen up; avoid sounding arrogant; but be aggressive and reach out to the middle class with specific proposals."

GOVERNOR DUKAKIS: And I think it's time that, when you got a job in this country, it came with health insurance.

STAHL: Bush's game plan -- in the debate and on the campaign trail -- to keep Dukakis cornered on the left.

VICE PRESIDENT GEORGE BUSH: He said, "I am a strong, liberal Democrat." -- August, '87; then he said, "I am a card-carrying member of the ACLU." That was what he said. He is out there on -- out of the mainstream.

STAHL: At times, Bush slipped back into his rambling, disjointed style of speaking. Once, when he did, he handled it with wit.

VICE PRESIDENT BUSH: Christmas. Christmas. (Laughter) Wouldn't it be nice to be perfect? Wouldn't it be nice to be the ice man, so you never make a mistake?

STAHL: Both used humor -- not often, but they each got off some good one-liners.

GOVERNOR DUKAKIS: He wants to give the wealthiest taxpayers in this country a five-year, $40-billion tax break. If he keeps this up, he's gonna be the Joe Isuzu of -- of American politics. (Laughter)

VICE PRESIDENT BUSH: That answer was about as clear as Boston Harbor. Now -- (laughter)

STAHL: After the debate, just in case the points were missed, armies of surrogates reinforced the scenes that will dominate the rest of the election.

LEE ATWATER / BUSH CAMPAIGN MANAGER: And I think those people who want that kind of mid-sixties, Kennedy -- Ted Kennedy-, George McGovern-type liberalism will be elated.

SUSAN ESTRICH / DUKAKIS CAMPAIGN MANAGER: He's just satisfied to let things stay as they are and hope for the best. That isn't Mike Dukakis's idea of leadership, and I think that came through very clearly tonight.

STAHL: Did it come though? To some extent. In the CBS News poll, 45 percent of those who watched said they now have a more favorable opinion of Dukakis; 35 percent think better of Bush. More voters now see Dukakis as understanding the problems a President has to deal with, but voters still consider Bush more presidential. Lesley Stahl, CBS News, Washington.

- CBS Evening News, 9/26/88

The fact that the press overstates the quantity of attack does not, of course, mean that attacks do not occur. Nor are they always respectful or issue-based. In a speech

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before a group of lobbyists weeks before the 1994 election, soon-to-be House Speaker Newt Gingrich argued that Democrats should be portrayed as "the enemy of normal Americans" (Devroy & Babcock, 1994). Not long before, a memo with a similar message circulated among Republicans in Washington. Prepared by GOPAC, a political action committee founded by Gingrich, the memo was entitled "Language: A Key Mechanism of Control." It gave readers two lists of words, "Optimistic Positive Governing Words" to describe Republicans and "Contrasting Words" to describe Democrats. In the latter list were such terms as decay, failure, corrupt, sick, incompetent, pathetic, lie, disgrace, bizarre, steal, betray, and traitor.

A report by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that in Congressional floor statements, incivility has not increased in recent years (Jamieson & Falk, 1998). Name-calling, hyperbole, and accusations of lying have varied only slightly from year to year. One exception, however, stands out. The first session of the 104th Congress, in 1995, was dramatically less civil than any since 1945.[9] This, of course, was the first session after the Republican takeover of both houses in the 1994 election. While members of the press believed (accurately) that Capitol Hill had become less civil during the 104th Congress, legislators themselves felt that the press was more focused on attack than ever. "I do not remember a time when the press was as negative as it is," said Barney Frank (D-MA). "I am now enjoying the best press of my life. And it's because I am attacking people and being negative. I get much more attention for three wisecracks and a point of order than I get for a full compromise to a difficult legislative solution." (Newswire, 1996) Content analyses have confirmed that coverage of Congress has declined in quantity and become

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[9] There was one other spike in incivility, during the debate on President Clinton's impeachment.

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more negative, superficial and focused on scandal in recent years (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1998; Lichter & Amundson, 1994).

These examples illustrate the fact that, as in all facets of the political world, the amount and nature of attack that citizens ultimately hear is the result of a symbiotic process between the press and political actors. The press highlights attack; politicians realize that attacking is the best way to get quoted, so they include attack in their speeches; the press reports the attacks. At the same time, candidates often display an admirable amount of respect toward one another. On the stump in 1996, Bob Dole often described Bill Clinton as "my opponent, not my enemy." While this assertion was occasionally mentioned in campaign stories, it was usually used as ironic counterpoint when discussing attacks between the two candidates. Comity between members of opposing parties is often portrayed ironically; indeed, as James Ettema and Theodore Glasser (1994) have observed, reporters have an affinity for irony. One finds occasionally a story on the news about two Senators (for example, Joe Biden and Strom Thurmond or Orrin Hatch and Ted Kennedy) who despite their differing ideology maintain a friendship. This fact is portrayed as ironic and extraordinary. Agreement and friendship between those of differing ideology becomes the exception that proves the rule.

Popular commentators have noted what appears to be a harsher tone in public affairs programming in recent years (Tannen, 1998). While the data presented here concern only network news shows, the contribution to the general tenor of political discourse made by public affairs shows should be noted as well. Featured on the networks but particularly plentiful on cable news channels such as MSNBC and the Fox

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News Network, shows such as *Crossfire*, *The Capitol Gang*, and *Hardball* can be seen at almost any time of day. Both the roundtable discussion and interview formats display a similar discursive world where two groups, "liberals" and "conservatives," oppose each other with impassioned argument, charges of dishonesty, and precious little civility. Participants who generate heat are preferred to those who would offer light. The world of politics appears to be inhabited by two armed camps, forever opposed.

In such a world, uncertainty is effectively absent. Those quoted in news are chosen to represent opposing viewpoints; they advocate for firmly held positions. There is no such thing as an undecided participant. Mediated debate thus presents a problematic model for citizen deliberation. For the citizen, a period of uncertainty is a necessary and inevitable stage in opinion formation. While uncertainty should increase the desire to engage in deliberation, news portrays political debate as the province of the certain.

Enemies, adversaries, and conversation

Conflicts between adversaries take place within a system where all parties agree on the fundamental rules of operation. When confronted by adversaries, we critique their arguments, or even their tactics. When faced with enemies, we discuss their inherent nature. "Enemies are characterized by an inherent trait or set of traits that marks them as evil, immoral, warped, or pathological and therefore a continuing threat regardless of what course of action they pursue." (Edelman, 1988)

Politicians do at times describe each other as enemies. Witness the difference in attack ads aired by Jimmy Carter in 1980 and George Bush in 1988. Carter used citizens

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on the street describing Reagan as "risky," someone who might rashly start a nuclear war. In Bush's ads, on the other hand, ominous descriptions of Dukakis' record were closed with the line, "Now he wants to do for America what he's done for Massachussets. America can't take that risk." What Dukakis evidently "wants to do," the ad's visuals suggest, is transform the nation into a polluted dump full of marauding escaped convicts. Thus Dukakis is guilty not merely of imprudence but of intent to harm. It is also common to hear candidates in primary campaigns state that they "want to focus on the real enemy" – the opposing party.

Nonetheless, the bulk of political discourse consists not of descriptions of opponents but of competing arguments. There are a number of classes of arguments one may make about other people's arguments. One accepts that your argument is made in good faith, but holds it to be incorrect, for any number of reasons. Although we share a common goal, you may have misunderstood the nature of present conditions or the ramifications of your proposal. Another would be that we are seeking different goals; although both goals are worthy, mine is more pressing. Arguments of this kind, that recognize the legitimacy of others' claims and reasons, can sustain deliberation. If we acknowledge that others' arguments are offered in good faith, even if we disagree deliberation may continue. A final argument I can make against you is that I believe your argument is made in bad faith. Your proclaimed goal is actually a canard meant to conceal different, less publicly defensible goals.

In mediated discourse, including the words of both political actors and journalists, a common response to any argument is the latter. These meta-arguments are made consistently: reporters explain the self-interested calculation behind politicians' appeals,

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while the politicians characterize their opponents' arguments as disingenuous. For example, as the 1996 general election campaign got underway, CNN's Bill Schneider predicted that each candidate "will try to portray his opponent as a dangerous radical, one extremely liberal, one extremely conservative, and both with a hidden agenda. Well, it looks like we're in for another negative campaign" (*Inside Politics*, 6/17/96). Moderating a discussion between two political consultants, Fox News Network talk show host Catherine Crier admitted that "in politics, we always question motives. It's the standard operating procedure" (*The Crier Report*, 4/29/98).

As with attack generally, while political actors may only sporadically describe other actors as enemies, when they do those arguments are likely to find their way into news. War metaphors are also common, particularly during campaigns. When Al Gore traveled to Texas to criticize George W. Bush's record in July 2000, ABC News described it as a mission "deep in enemy territory" (*World News Tonight*, 7/20/00). The *Christian Science Monitor* said, "It's a classic ploy in war and politics: Go to your enemy's home base, discover a weak point, and exploit it" (Baldauf, 2000), while the *Dallas Morning News* portrayed Gore's trip as "parachuting behind enemy lines" (Minutaglio, 2000) and the *Washington Post* described Texas as "enemy territory" (Edsall, 2000).

Politics is thus characterized by news as persistent conflict between antagonists who never agree, because their values are fundamentally at odds. The legislative process is not one of debate, thoughtful consideration, and judgment; instead it is a pro forma squabble before a preordained vote occurs and one side wins. What is the citizen then to conclude about the prospects for deliberation? While the citizen viewing

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political discourse through the lens of news may not believe that one side or the other is actually evil, she may conclude that the participants believe their opponents to be so, or that they are simply role-playing and are thus not to be taken seriously. If she searches the mediated public sphere for a model of deliberation, she will find none.

Of course, it is not plainly evident that citizens simply adopt the stance of the news media toward politics. As Thomas Patterson (1993) has argued, "The quest for victory and power is connected to issues of leadership and policy in the minds of both journalists and voters. It is not that journalists lack a governing schema or that voters do not have a game schema. But the game schema dominates the journalist's response to new information far more than the voter's response." In interviews, Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992) found that a conflict frame structured only six percent of the comments subjects made about news stories. Citizens are able to reinterpret and reframe the information they receive. But as the data presented here indicate, the information presented in political news may not equip them well for the process of deliberation. By focusing on harsh attacks and framing all political debate as conflict, news may make deliberation appear dangerous. While many citizens may not be influenced by such coverage, there is evidence that conflict in news affects attitudes toward policy debates and political actors. In one study, respondents who perceived a media focus on conflict displayed more cynicism about health care reform (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Those who rely on television and radio for news do not have more negative cognitive evaluations of Congress, but do have more negative emotional reactions (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1998). The decision to engage in political discussion may involve both cognitive and emotional considerations. Will the discussion be informative and interesting, or will it be

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argumentative and unpleasant? Many individuals' answers to those questions will be affected by their perceptions of the character of political argumentation.

Conclusion

The data presented here have implications for each of the elements in our model of deliberation. By eliminating evidence from claims, news offers citizens incomplete information, depriving them of one of the principle tools with which they might deliberate. By focusing on attack, news makes political discussion appear inevitably conflictual. By making conflict appear intractable, news makes political disagreement appear harsh and unpleasant. By focusing on strategic interpretations, news defines self-interest as the primary motivation of political actions and words. Finally, by privileging certainty, news discourages those with less than firm opinions from engaging in political discussion.

While each of these characterizations may accurately reflect news content, the extent to which they actually have the hypothesized effects on those who read and watch the news is an open question, one which the chapters that follow will attempt to address.

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Chapter 3
Conversation and Deliberation

> *It is hard to explain the place filled by political concerns in the life of an American. To take a hand in the government of society and to talk about it is his most important business and, so to say, the only pleasure he knows. That is obvious even in the most trivial habits of his life; even the women often go to public meetings and forget household cares while they listen to political speeches. For them clubs to some extent take the place of theaters. An American does not know how to converse, but he argues; he does not talk, but expiates.*
>
> Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (1835)

Political discussion is often ignored as a form of participation because is it not seen to have systematic effects on electoral or policy outcomes (Huckfeldt, 1999). But for most people, discussion is the primary arena in which they engage the political world. Voting occurs only sporadically, and other forms of participation, such as political protest or writing letters to representatives, are undertaken by relatively few people. In order to understand the political world in which citizens reside, we must address the most common form of political activity, simple conversation.

Theories of deliberative democracy are "not simply about ensuring a public culture of reasoned discussion on public affairs," (Cohen, 1998) but are concerned more broadly with issues of state legitimacy and the exercise of governmental authority. For the present discussion, however, we will leave those issues aside and focus on the presence or absence of a public culture of reasoned discussion. In order to assess deliberation in practice we must abandon, at least temporarily, the conception of deliberation as a set of absolute procedures such that when one is violated, we declare

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that deliberation has not occurred. It is more useful to conceive of a continuum of conversation running from the least to the most deliberative. Where the citizens of a polity are arrayed on that continuum provides one measure of the health of democracy.

Are people talking?

If we are to assess the operation of deliberation in practice, the first question to ask is this: are people talking about politics? In 1996, a multi-wave cross-sectional survey of the American electorate was conducted at the Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Pennsylvania. Respondents were asked how often they talked about politics. As Figure 3-1 shows, about half of the electorate are infrequent talkers – either never talking about politics or talking less often than once a week. Another quarter talk once or twice a week, and the remaining quarter are frequent talkers, discussing politics at least three times a week. There is reason to believe that these numbers are overstated, perhaps considerably, first because this survey interviewed only those who claimed to be registered voters, and second because just as many people claim in surveys to have voted when in fact they have not (Presser & Traugott, 1992), in the context of a survey about political affairs it seems probable that some will exaggerate the frequency with which they talk about politics.

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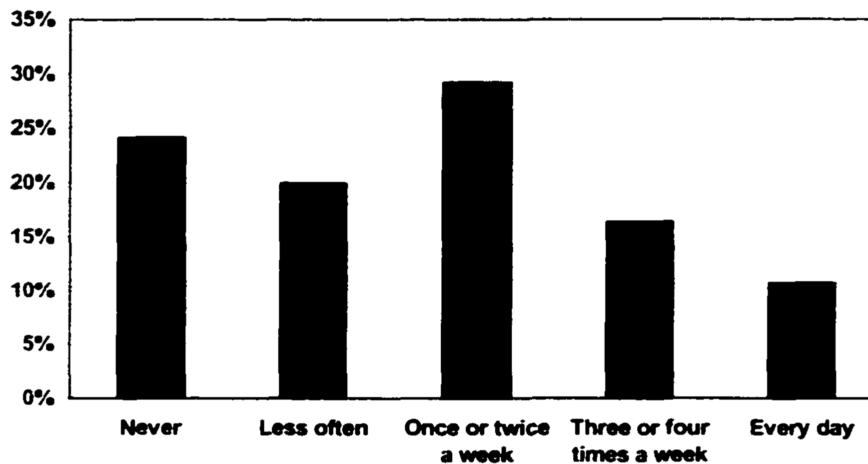
Figure 3-1
How often do you talk about politics?
(1996 Annenberg survey)



What can we conclude about political conversation from this distribution? There is no precise normative standard by which to measure whether a particular individual has engaged in "enough" talk to be considered an active participant in the conversation of democracy. We can say that as a part of daily life, political conversation is the exception rather than the norm for the majority of Americans. Political discussion, furthermore, is less common than more passive forms of political engagement, i.e. media use. Figure 3-2, taken from the National Election Studies, shows that people watch the news on television and read the newspaper far more often than they talk about politics.[1]

[1] While the NES survey items for newspaper reading and political discussion have remained the same over this period, the television news item has changed twice. In 1984 respondents were asked how often they watched "national network news"; from 1986 to 1994 they were asked about "the news on TV"; and since 1996 they have been asked separate questions on local news and national network news. The data points in the graph for 1996 and 1998 represent each respondent's higher score on those two items.

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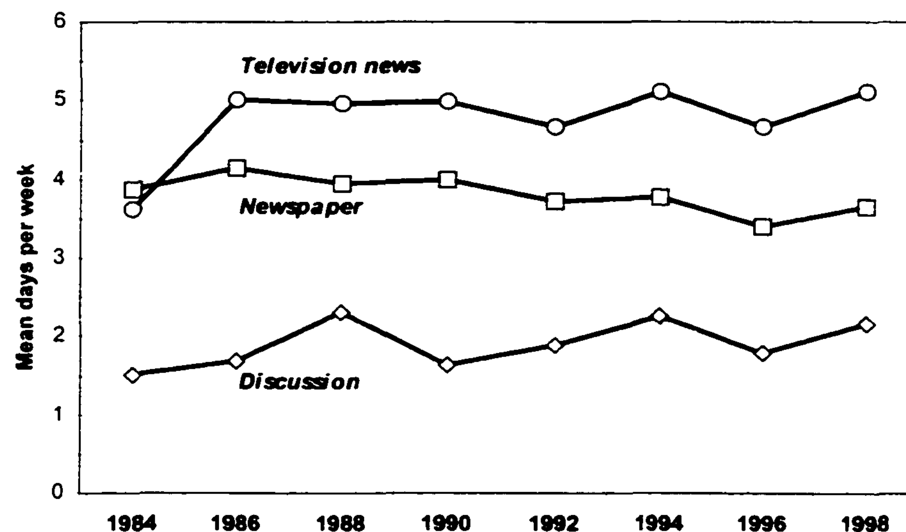
By contrast, in 1944 Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (1944) wrote that "On any average day, at least 10% more people participated in discussions about the election - either actively or passively - than listened to a major speech or read about campaign items in a newspaper...One can avoid newspaper stories and radio speeches simply by making a slight effort, but as the campaign mounts and discussion intensifies, it is hard to avoid some talk of politics." The informational environment in the 1940's was very different than it is today; it seems that unlike their predecessors, contemporary voters have little trouble avoiding political talk.

Figure 3-2: Media Use and Political Discussion (NES)



There is some variation from election year to election year in reported rates of political conversation. While one might expect that people would discuss politics more in advance of presidential elections than before off-year congressional elections, this does not appear to be the case. Conversation is responsive to campaigns; as the election draws

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near, people do increase the frequency of their political discussions. Previous surveys, however, have not captured these changes particularly well, probably because they began interviewing voters when the intense general election had already begun. While people give roughly the same answers over the course of a campaign when they are asked how often they talk about politics in general, answers to the question "How many days in the last week did you talk about politics?" show some variation. Specifically, there appears to be a great deal of conversation that occurs just after election day. After a few days, the level of conversation recedes to its former frequency, around two days per week, as can be seen in Figure 3-3. Although 1992 was in many ways the more interesting campaign, with Ross Perot's viable candidacy and a relatively uncertain outcome compared to 1996 when Bill Clinton held a comfortable lead throughout the campaign, leading up to election day voters in both years reported similar levels of political discussion. Discussion spiked immediately following election day, but we see that in 1996 it dropped off precipitously soon after, dropping below a mean of one day per week. In 1992, discussion levels stayed somewhat high in the weeks following the election, indicating that citizens discussed the transition to a new administration.

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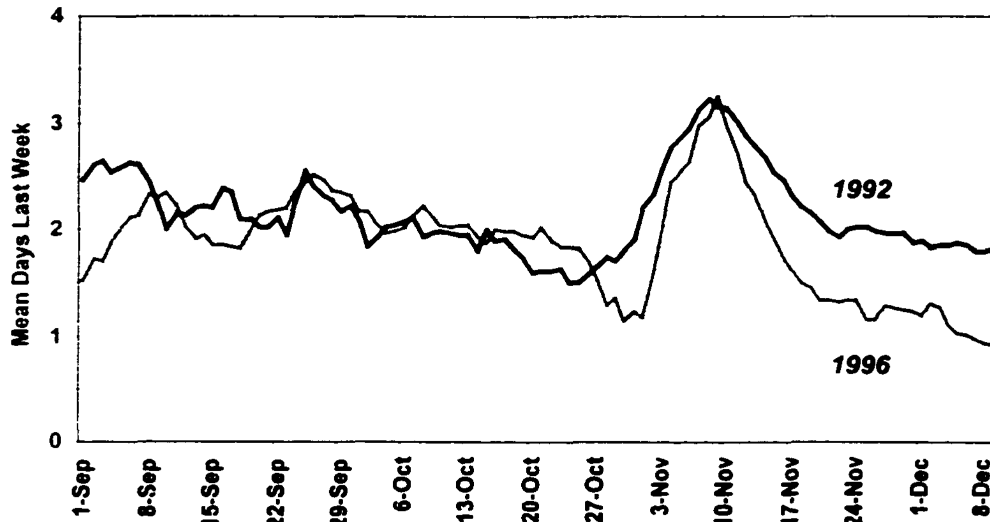

Figure 3-3: Political Discussion in General Election Campaigns (7-day moving average, NES)

The Annenberg 2000 Survey, a rolling cross-section beginning before the 2000 primaries, shows that discussion can vary substantially depending on the presence or absence of a contested primary in a given state. Voters in New Hampshire, who are subject to the most intensive "retail campaigning" of the primary season (in addition to plenty of advertising) discussed politics much more than voters in other states as their primary approached. Their frequency of conversation began to increase approximately one month before the primary, then jumped substantially in the final ten days. Although Iowans discussed politics less frequently than their counterparts in New Hampshire, a similar increase in the final ten days before their caucuses occurred among Iowa voters. Voters in Super Tuesday states (which included California, New York, and many others) - where the candidates spent substantial time and money only in the last three weeks -

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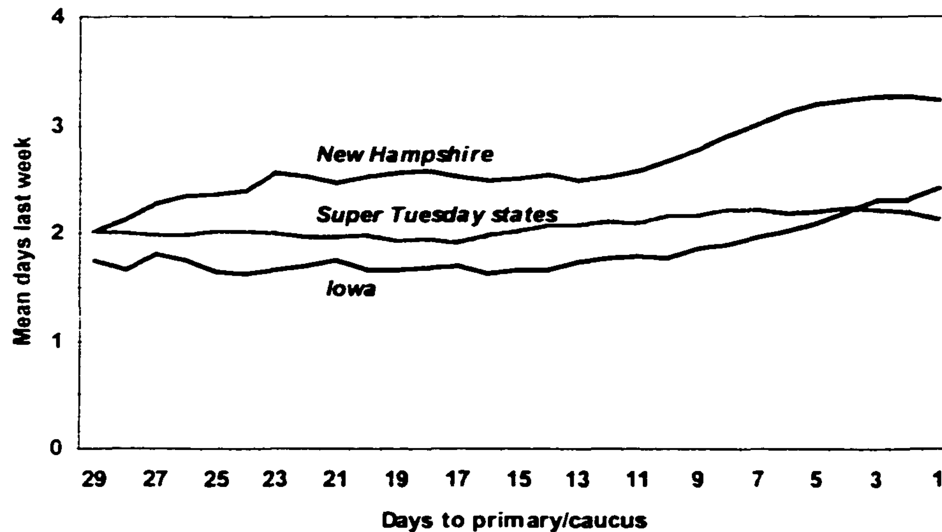
actually discussed politics more than Iowa voters. Their frequency of discussion increased slowly over the two weeks leading up to Super Tuesday.



The 2000 primary data contrast sharply with the general election data from the NES. While in the general election political discussion among voters seems to decline slightly as election day approaches and then spike immediately after the election, in primaries voters appear to discuss politics with greater frequency in advance of the election. This result could be explained by the fact that most people discuss politics with like-minded partners. Members of the same party may have more to talk about in advance of a primary, when there is a choice to be made that usually involves far more subtle distinctions between candidates than are present in a general election.

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Who's talking?

One of the justifications commonly offered for a deliberative conception of democracy is that it is democratic. While other forms of decision-making may operate equally well regardless of any individual's participation or non-participation, deliberative democracy demands that all citizens participate; indeed, the transformative effect of deliberation on individuals is one of its foundations. Thus, for deliberation to be fully realized, discussion must be nearly universal.

In the real world, we would of course not expect that every single citizen in a large society would spend a substantial amount of his or her time discussing politics. There will always be some for whom the political world holds little interest. However, if those who don't participate are drawn disproportionately from certain groups and not others, then a distortion of democracy exists. In fact, this is precisely the case. Political conversation is part of a nexus of activities – including voting, contributing money to political causes, and use of public affairs programming in media – which are highly correlated with those variables we associate with membership in the socio-economic elite. Foremost among these are income and education level.

Figure 3-5 shows that distortions are present in political conversation just as they are in other forms of participation. In order to set aside the anomalous rates of conversation respondents report immediately following election day and focus on habitual conversation, the subsequent tables combine the three pre-election waves of the 1996 Annenberg national survey (n=2623). First, we see that men talk about politics more than women, a gap quite a bit smaller in the U.S. than in most European countries (Inglehart, 1990). Other researchers (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995) have found that both

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men and women talk mostly to those of the same gender. In addition, men have been found to express more willingness to speak in public settings when in the minority (McLeod et al., 1999; Noelle-Neumann, 1993), and speak substantially more often than women in town meetings (Bryan, 1999).

Whites talk more than blacks and hispanics, the more educated talk more than the less educated, and the wealthy talk more than the poor.[2] The figure also shows the percentage of respondents who gave answers at the ends of the conversational spectrum. We see for instance that nearly half of those with less than a high school education never talk about politics, as compared to only 10% of those with a post-graduate degree. Over a third of those earning less than $20,000 a year never talk about politics, while less than 12% of those in the highest income category give the same response. In sum, the picture is one in which political conversation is disproportionately a pastime of the elite.

[2] Ingelhart (1990) found that despite a generally strong relationship between per capita GNP and rates of political discussion, the U.S. lags behind most European countries in overall frequency of discussion.

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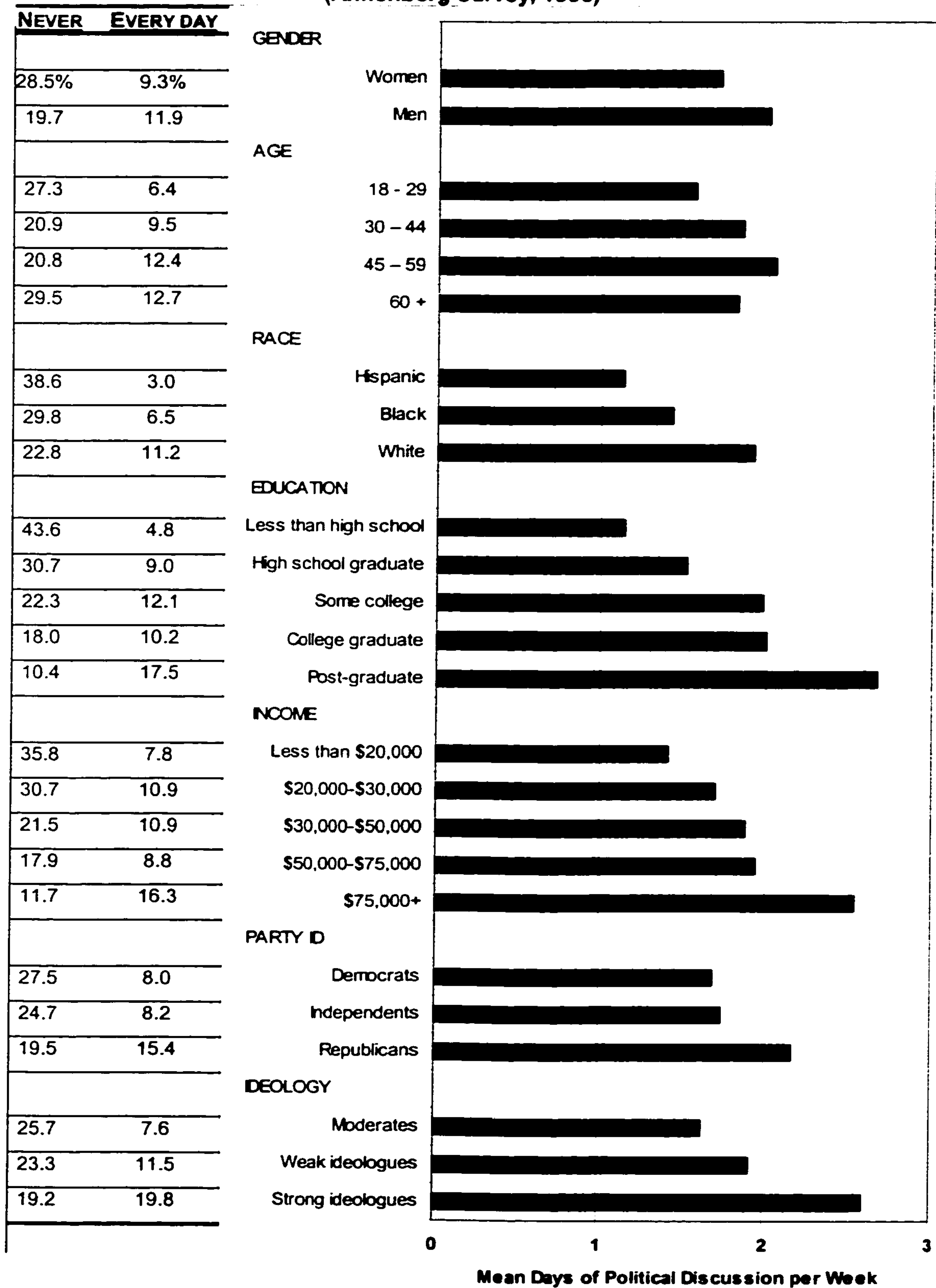
Figure 3-5: Frequency of Conversation by Demographics
(Annenberg Survey, 1996)



Category	Never	Every Day
GENDER		
Women	28.5%	9.3%
Men	19.7	11.9
AGE		
18 - 29	27.3	6.4
30 – 44	20.9	9.5
45 – 59	20.8	12.4
60 +	29.5	12.7
RACE		
Hispanic	38.6	3.0
Black	29.8	6.5
White	22.8	11.2
EDUCATION		
Less than high school	43.6	4.8
High school graduate	30.7	9.0
Some college	22.3	12.1
College graduate	18.0	10.2
Post-graduate	10.4	17.5
INCOME		
Less than $20,000	35.8	7.8
$20,000-$30,000	30.7	10.9
$30,000-$50,000	21.5	10.9
$50,000-$75,000	17.9	8.8
$75,000+	11.7	16.3
PARTY ID		
Democrats	27.5	8.0
Independents	24.7	8.2
Republicans	19.5	15.4
IDEOLOGY		
Moderates	25.7	7.6
Weak ideologues	23.3	11.5
Strong ideologues	19.2	19.8

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When we move to unpack these relationships and predict political discussion, we see that the ability of demographic variables to explain variance in discussion levels drops sharply once controls are introduced. Table 3-1 shows a hierarchical regression analysis entering demographics, followed by media use, followed by party and ideological identification, political interest, and political knowledge.

While it is true that men talk more than women, gender fails to predict conversation once media use is accounted for. Differences between whites and members of other racial groups are eliminated in the final stage of the regression, while education remains as a predictor, albeit a significantly less powerful one. Although the bivariate relationship of age and conversation is a curvilinear one rising up to around age fifty and then falling, as has been found elsewhere (Straits, 1991), a polynomial term for age proved insignificant even in the first stage of the regression. Of the demographic variables, only income remained a strong predictor in the full model.

The fact that television news watching predicts conversation more strongly than newspaper reading is a somewhat surprising finding, given that newspapers contain more information and might thus be expected to produce more conversation; newspaper reading narrowly failed to be significant, with a p-value of .053. Apparently, watching network news is more closely associated with discussion. It should be noted that newspaper reading is more closely correlated with political knowledge than news watching, which could partially account for the insignificant result for newspapers in the full model given the powerful effect of knowledge. Listening to talk radio was a strong predictor of conversation; although almost three-quarters of respondents reported no talk radio use, those who do listen are heavy participants in political discussion.

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It should come as no surprise that the strongest predictors of political discussion are interest in politics and political knowledge. While the more interested will obviously be more likely to begin political conversations, the strength of knowledge as a predictor suggests that confidence may be a key factor in people's willingness to discuss politics.

Table 3-1: Predicting Political Discussion
(1996 Annenberg Survey)

	Model 1		**Model 2**		**Model 3**	
Gender (female)	-.18* (.08)	*-.04*	-.09 (.09)	*-.02*	.01 (.09)	*.00*
Race (white)	.31** (.11)	*.05*	.25* (.12)	*.04*	.16 (.12)	*.03*
Education	.26*** (.04)	*.14*	.23*** (.04)	*.12*	.09* (.04)	*.05*
Income in thousands	.01*** (.002)	*.09*	.01*** (.002)	*.08*	.01** (.002)	*.07*
Newspaper			.03 (.02)	*.04*	.00 (.02)	*.00*
Network news			.14*** (.02)	*.16*	.08*** (.02)	*.09*
Talk radio			.28*** (.02)	*.23*	.15*** (.02)	*.12*
Party ID (Republican)					.23* (.09)	*.05*
Ideological strength					.31*** (.06)	*.10*
Political interest					.68*** (.06)	*.23*
Political knowledge					.08*** (.01)	*.18*
Constant	.61*** (.16)		-.04 (.17)		-2.29*** (.22)	
R^2	**.045**		**.131**		**.236**	

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$
Standard errors in parentheses, standardized coefficients in italic.

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One could argue that the often-observed correlation between education, income and political sophistication on the one hand and participation on the other is actually functional for democracy. Since those who participate are those who know more, their voices are properly being heard more. This is essentially the argument made by Mill in *Representative Democracy* when he argued for weighting the votes of better educated citizens more heavily. Besides being antidemocratic in essence, this argument assumes that sophistication is distributed among the population in something approximating a just way. If those who participate were merely a representative sample of the larger populace, then the outcomes they produced would be the same as if all were participating. In actuality, of course, they are not representative: they are more wealthy, more white, and more male (Verba et al, 1993). Political discussion is weighted toward the elite just as other forms of participation are.

Media and conversation

Beginning with Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet's seminal study *The People's Choice* (1944), interpersonal processes have been seen as a modifier and extender of media influence. In their oft-quoted formulation, the authors suggested that "ideas often flow *from* radio and print *to* the opinion leaders and *from* them to the less active sections of the population." Due in part to their higher media use, opinion leaders were better informed than those with whom they discussed politics (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The "two-step flow" posited uni-directional communication. Later research indicated that while some people have more expansive networks than others and are likely to wield greater influence, and people use political expertise as a criterion in choosing discussion

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partners (Huckfeldt, 1999), status as an "influential" seems unrelated to media use (Weimann, 1991).

As data from the 1996 Annenberg study show, political conversation and use of news media are closely related (Table 3-2). Once again, we see that the respective relationships of newspaper reading and viewing of network news to political discussion are not as one might have predicted. While newspaper reading and political discussion are both elite activities to a greater extent than network news watching in terms of their relationship to education and income, national news watching is actually more closely correlated with political discussion than newspaper reading. The difference is relatively small, but nonetheless in the opposite direction than expected. A substantial number of respondents said they read the newspaper nearly every day but never talk about politics, while far fewer frequent news watchers never discussed politics.

Table 3-2
Zero-Order Correlations: Conversation and Media Use
(1996 Annenberg Survey)

	Conversation	Local news	Newspaper	Network news	Talk radio
Local news	**.073****				
Newspaper	**.154****	.147**			
Network news	**.188****	.468**	.232**		
Talk radio	**.245****	.021	.119**	.054*	
Political interest	**.371****	.179**	.172**	.277**	.257**

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

When addressing media-interpersonal interactions, most current research retains the focus of the two-step flow: some variable (e.g. information or influence) comes from

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media, and is then accepted, rejected, adapted, reinterpreted or ignored by individuals depending on various factors within their individual and interpersonal context. The interpersonal context, then, serves to mediate the influence of the media, either by moderating it or enhancing it. Much of the research in this area treats personal and mass media channels as antagonists (Chaffee, 1986). For example, Matthew Mendelsohn (1996) argues that while press coverage of campaigns focuses largely on individuals and personalities, discussion tends to prime issues in voters' minds. Thus, interpersonal and mass mediated channels pull voters in different directions. An alternative model is a complementary one, positing that the two in combination produce effects which neither could alone, as when discussion reinforces and strengthens evaluations of candidates (Lenart, 1994). However, the influence of media *on* the interpersonal context in the political realm has, with a few notable exceptions, been overlooked.

There is some evidence that media influence not only the topics and frequency of discussion, but the content as well. Using focus groups, William Gamson (1992) found that in discussions, citizens often used the language, lines of argument, and interpretive frames they obtained from the news. However, the nature of the relationship varied from issue to issue in complicated ways. Similarly, Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann (1993) argues that the media perform an "articulation function": they "provide people with the words and phrases they can use to defend a point of view." Michael Delli Carpini and Bruce Williams (1994) also report that the political conversations of focus-group subjects were peppered with media references. When offering evidence from their own lives, they often contextualized personal experience by citing information received from the media. Like Vincent Price (1992), Delli Carpini and Williams describe public opinion as a

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"conversation," arguing that "although individuals may not regularly talk with each other about political issues, television is engaged in an ongoing political conversation; when we turn the set on, we dip into this conversation." Nonetheless, watching a conversation take place is fundamentally different than participating in one.

Because of their informational and agenda-setting value, the news media are critical to the conduct of conversation. Michael Schudson (1997) points out that "Much thinking about the mass media today assumes that face-to-face conversation is a superior form of human interaction for which mass communication is a forever flawed substitute." But the question is less which form of communication is superior than whether democratic goals can be achieved without both. As John Dewey (1927) argued, "The Great Community, in the sense of free and full intercommunication, is conceivable. But it can never possess all the qualities which mark a local community. It will do its final work in ordering the relations and enriching the experience of local associations."

Using the experience of recent developments in Israel as a case study, Elihu Katz has suggested that political conversation may be dependent in part on the perception that potential conversation partners have been exposed to the same news as one's self (Katz, 1996). With an ever-increasing number of sources of political information, the possibility that people will become fragmented in their knowledge of and exposure to political events presents itself. The stratified character of political discussion could thus be exacerbated. Even so, it is possible that the perception of a shared news source creating the context for discussion could account for the strong relationship of network news watching and conversation.

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From conversation to deliberation

Everyday conversation is unlike formal deliberation in a number of ways. Perhaps most importantly, deliberation is undertaken with explicit goals in mind. The individual participant's goal is to persuade others to her position, while the goal of the enterprise as a whole is decision-making. Conversation, on the other hand, is in large part talk for the sake of talking. While citizens talking about politics may arrive at opinions and make decisions (e.g. for whom to vote), these decisions will be individual in nature, whereas true deliberators make a collective decision (even if some dissent). Persuasion is a goal that some citizens will choose to pursue in their discussions, while others will not. Since no immediate outcome hinges on bringing one's partner to one's view, vigorous and persuasive argumentation is optional.[3] Questions may be left unresolved or uncertainty unaddressed.

Citizens in conversation may often not conceive of their discussions as "political." Obviously, the same topic can vary in the political content with which different conversations infuse it. Wyatt, Katz and Kim (2000) found, for instance, that discussion of education and crime at home is more closely related to "personal talk," i.e. family matters, religion, etc., while at work the same topics are more closely related to "political talk," i.e. national and state government or foreign affairs. It is possible that a discussion about crime at work might center on crime trends or municipal policies, while talk about crime at home could concern personal experiences and fears. It seems likely that both

---

[3] It is worth noting that debate in Congress, though restricted by a variety of formal rules and informal norms intended to foster fair and effective deliberation, fails to be deliberative in one critical sense: in most cases, the participants have made up their minds prior to engaging in debate (Granstaff, 1999). Arguments are generally intended to persuade not fellow decision-makers but the public at large.

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discussions will contain some combination of "political" and "personal" content, even if the partners in one case are those with whom we usually discuss public matters, and in the other case those with whom we discuss private matters.

In all cases, however, the discussion of politics takes place among people who have pre-existing relationships that are not based on political discussion itself. The occasions of everyday political conversation are "not perceived as political; therefore, the scripts that apply to them are embedded not in politics but in the routines of friendship, recreation, and parenting." (Merelman, 1998) As a consequence, norms of friendly engagement - which differ from norms of deliberation - must necessarily be in force. For many, one important norm will be an avoidance of argument, without which deliberation may be impossible.

One of the defining features of everyday conversation is that it takes place primarily among people who share the same opinions. One survey found that 65% of respondents indicated that they held precisely the same political orientation as their intimate circle, and a further 24% indicated a difference of only one point on a five-point liberal-conservative scale (Wyatt et al., 2000). Of course, it is not only in political orientation that social networks tend to be homogeneous; people associate with those who are similar to them in income, education and race as well (Marsden, 1987).

On the other hand, Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton and Levine (1995) report that when asked with whom they talked about politics apart from their spouses, 39% of respondents named a discussion partner who held different vote preferences. However, this discordance was masked by a large degree of misperception of preferences, meaning that many discussions between partners of opposing beliefs were probably sufficiently

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homogeneous in form to conceal any disagreement. There is a difference between the willingness to discuss a political issue and the willingness to make one's opinions known (Scheufele, 1999); discussion in which some participants manage to hide their true opinions cannot be characterized by mutual vigorous advocacy. In any case, it appears that people have some *opportunity* to engage in heterogeneous conversation, but most of the time they decline to do so.

If persuasion is an essential element of deliberation (Bessette, 1994), it would appear that most citizens do not deliberate. Many if not most conversations consist of something that would be better termed affirmation. Although it may perform some of the same functions as deliberation, such as the sharing of information and the reduction of uncertainty, affirmation is not deliberative. Although partners may certainly address others' arguments if they have been exposed to them elsewhere (i.e. in news media), without someone to argue in opposition, they will not be forced to formulate their own arguments in persuasive terms.

While the workplace is the arena in which people are most likely to encounter those with opposing views, it is also the place in which people are most hesitant to discuss political matters (Wyatt et al, 1996), both because of the possibility of argument and the perception that political disagreements could have negative professional consequences (Jensen, 1990). In the Annenberg 2000 survey, respondents reported discussing politics with friends and family an average of almost twice a week during the presidential primary period, but less than once a week with co-workers. Seventy-one percent reported no discussion at all with co-workers, compared to forty-three percent who reported no discussion with friends and family.

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For many, political conversation is thus an activity that is both public and private. It is public in the sense that the topics of conversation are those of the larger political world, but it remains private in that the discussion is not open to all, but rather is restricted to partners who share friendship or family ties and, more often than not, the same material interests as well. The nature of those individual relationships will shape the contours of discussion, whether political or otherwise.

This raises the question of whether citizens in conversation may truly be considered a "public." What distinguishes a public from a mass is the fact that members of a public engage one another in debate and discussion. A mass, on the other hand, is merely a collection of individuals who share some object of attention, but are disconnected from one another. Consequently, a mass is incapable of any collective will formation. A number of opinion researchers have concluded that only a small portion of the American electorate could be considered a public, while the great bulk constitute a mass that is unable or unwilling to engage the political world (Converse, 1964; Lippman, 1927; Neuman, 1986). As I noted earlier, Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954) argued that this situation was functional for democracy as it maintained stability by limiting stresses on the system, thus making virtue out of an apparent failure of democracy (Peters, 1989).

This position is antidemocratic if the citizens who qualify as members of the public are not representative of the population as a whole; the data plainly indicate that they are not. Michael Schudson (1998) suggests that "monitorial citizens," who generally pay only slight attention to public affairs but stand ready to devote their energy to deliberation when cued by the news media to do so, might be sufficient to sustain

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democracy. While this notion has practical appeal, one wonders whether the threshold of coverage necessary to focus the citizenry on a particular matter might be so high that many important debates pass by with little popular engagement.

In addition, the fact that most people don't discuss politics with those of differing views means that a single overarching "public" may not exist at all even among those who are talking. Instead, most citizens - even those who are politically sophisticated and involved - are members of smaller, more ideologically constricted publics. Although they may acknowledge each other's arguments, these individual publics rarely engage one another directly.

Only on rare occasions do all members of the public collectively turn their attention toward a single issue and confront one another across lines of disagreement. Two recent cases provide clues to the conditions that foster such deliberation. It may be that conversation is generated in the greatest quantity when two characteristics of the issue are present: first, that individuals can use their personal experience and the experiences of others as evidence for positions; and second, that expert opinion is of relatively little value in arriving at conclusions. This was the case with the issue that generated perhaps more discussion than any other in memory, that of the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings, and was also the case with the issue of President Clinton's alleged affair with Monica Lewinsky. In both cases, objective evidence was minimal, and citizens found themselves no less equipped than journalists or pundits to speculate about the truth of the matter. In addition, in both cases questions of fact became less important than the conclusion to be drawn if the allegations were true. What were Hill's motives for coming forward? Did Thomas' alleged behavior constitute harassment, and

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if so did that render him unqualified to serve on the Supreme Court? Would having an affair with an intern warrant the President's removal? Should such private matters be of public concern? These were questions citizens found themselves quite willing and able to discuss and argue over.

Unfortunately, such occasions are exceedingly rare. Policy questions are usually complex, and although common sense and a few critical pieces of information are often all one needs to arrive at a reasonable judgment, people may not consider themselves qualified to do so. If the "public" exists "only in so far as there are active exchanges of views and information among citizens" (Dahlgren, 1995), then most of the time the public is dormant.

Conclusion

Why isn't political discussion a more common feature of everyday life? Roderick Hart (1999) suggests that "For many citizens, watching governance has become equivalent to engaging governance." Robert Putnam's (1995) analysis might suggest that low levels of political talk are only one aspect of a larger decline in social capital. Others have countered that the apparent decline in social capital is more accurately described as a transformation in civic life away from certain types of activity – within highly organized groups – and toward more individualized volunteer activities. Thus, it is argued, true social capital has not declined, but merely changed form (Bennett, 1998b). It has also been shown that some forms of television viewing, specifically use of news and public affairs programming, is related to public participation in multiple ways, often positively (Norris, 1996). The data I have presented here support that contention.

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Nonetheless, the fact remains that most people interact with the political world primarily as spectators.

The relationship between media use and political conversation is a complex and often contradictory one. Although the picture of the political world painted by the news media is one of confrontation and dispute, many citizens are encouraged by media use to discuss politics with family, friends, and co-workers despite the potential for argument. For others, media use discourages political talk, hampering their ability and willingness to engage in meaningful deliberation. Thus, the fear of argument, combined with a perception of inadequate expertise, serves to restrict public deliberation largely to members of the elite. A truly deliberative democracy would include in the dialogue of democracy, if not all its members, at the very least a representative group. Ours does not appear to do so.

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Chapter 4
Disagreement and Deliberation

Conflict on substantive issues – the clash of politics – has a precarious relationship to deliberation. On one hand, conflict is essential to both generating interest in public affairs and to any meaningful public deliberation. On the other hand, when it passes a certain point conflict can become poisonous for deliberation, encouraging cynicism and withdrawal. When conflict appears fundamental and intractable, it threatens to make deliberation impossible.

Although some theories of deliberation emphasize its potential to transform disagreement by leading discussion to what is held in common, disagreement is an inevitable part of political discourse, even under deliberative conditions. As Joshua Cohen (1997) observes, "The good-faith exercise of practical reason, by people who are reasonable in being concerned to live with others, on terms that those others can accept, does not lead to convergence on one particular philosophy of life." The existence of a set of common core values does not necessarily ensure that disagreement will always be resolved once they are invoked and understood. Not all issues are reducible to a single value, and even when they are, disagreement may persist. It is this disagreement that generates the competing arguments that form the content of deliberative discussion.

But disagreement can become dysfunctional for democracy if we assume that it is a sign of mutually exclusive goals, intractable conflict, and fundamental antagonism. Of course, disagreement is often unpleasant. But we view different kinds of disagreement

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differently; how we view political disagreement will in large part determine our willingness to engage in political discussion.

Alfie Kohn (1992) argues that "What makes disagreement destructive is not the fact of conflict itself but the addition of competition." Embedded within our conception of political conversation is the notion that a discussion in which the participants disagree will have a winner and a loser. In actuality, of course, deliberation is not zero-sum. For citizens in particular, the purpose of deliberation is not decision-making but opinion formation. Even in the electoral context, the victorious candidate's supporters do not "win." The community as a whole chooses a leader; s/he will be the president or senator or mayor for all in that community, regardless of whom each citizen voted for. Some individuals and groups may stand to benefit more than others, but whether an individual receives those benefits is not contingent on the opinion he holds.

As such, citizens in conversation constitute what Nancy Fraser (1992) calls a "weak public." Unlike strong publics, weak publics form for the purpose of opinion formation but not decision-making. Even in cases of elections and referenda where decisions are eventually rendered, the decision is individual and secret, and therefore aggregate but not collective. Votes are also separated from citizen deliberation by space and time, further disconnecting the discussion from the decision.

The context in which conflict occurs shapes the effects it has on the participants and their relationship to each other. In zero-sum contexts, a participant sees others' losses as her gains, and vice-versa. Actions within the process must serve the goal; if the goal is victory, those actions will be oriented not toward arriving at the most favorable solution to the problem which the debate is meant to address, but toward defeat of the

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opposition. When legislators deliberate, they often do so under competitive conditions. The side that sees its proposal instituted will be able to claim credit, which increases the chances of electoral success; thus there are finite rewards to be had. For citizens, on the other hand, the distance between discussion and political outcomes should obviate competitive considerations. Although the conflicting goals of individuals may certainly carry over into the political realm, the nature of political issues is such that in most cases, the outcome will be remote enough that self-interest need not be a consideration.

Consequently, political disagreement should be less antagonistic than other kinds of disagreement for a number of reasons. First, the outcome of the question at hand will usually not result in differential benefits for the participants, at least not directly. Second, just as one's vote has only a small effect on the outcome of an election, a single conversation has a small effect on public opinion and the ultimate outcome of collective deliberation. Finally, the process of conversation will elucidate the experience, perspective, and reasoning of one's partner in ways that, while not necessarily resulting in agreement, will at least allow discussants to "agree to disagree" amicably. Further conversation on other topics where common ground may be found thus will remain a possibility (Ackerman, 1989). It has been observed that the exercise of reason is no more likely to produce agreement than other forms of decision-making; it can, in fact, produce more disagreement as deliberators are exposed to arguments they had not previously considered (Cohen, 1989; Knight & Johnson, 1994). The kind of disagreement that is produced, however, should leave open the possibility of future agreement. Nonetheless, political conversation seems to many to be an arena of competition.

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A number of researchers have identified people's reluctance to engage in political discussion. Robert Lane (1962) found that "more than a third of the men say there isn't much point to having political discussion with one's friends." Doris Graber (1984) reported that "both men and women tended to limit discussions to consensual remarks and to avoid political discussions that were likely to be controversial. In fact, several panelists expressed strong reluctance to discuss politics at all. Some said that politics and religion were topics that they avoided because they considered them potentially divisive." Similarly, Nina Eliasoph (1998) was told by one of her subjects, "You don't talk about politics with your friends. Not if you want to keep them." Political disagreement is thus considered so powerful that it can destroy friendships.

The desire to avoid political disagreement is, of course, related to a more general impulse to avoid disagreement in conversation altogether. While deliberation demands that differences of opinion be explored and elaborated, the norms of friendly conversation often demand that they be muted or avoided. According to Charles Willard (1989), in everyday conversation "an antipathy for disagreement is the most uniform and universal finding in the interviews: arguments should be avoided whenever possible; disagreements are impediments to getting things done; they become unpleasant; only quarrelsome people really like them; disagreement is inevitable, but best kept submerged." On some topics, this impulse may simply move conversation to areas of agreement, as William Gamson (1992) found his subjects' discussions did when disagreement appeared. This move can have the functional effect of moving discussion forward by confirming shared values, or the dysfunctional effect of changing the subject without exploring a critical question.

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Michael Schudson (1997) draws a distinction between homogeneous and heterogeneous political conversation. "In homogeneous conversation, people talk primarily with others who share their values and they expect that conversation will reinforce them in the views they already share...In [heterogeneous] conversations, friendly testing is all but impossible; in these settings, there are penalties for expressing uncertainty and doubt, rewards for speaking with conviction and certainty." The operative assumption is that a heterogeneous conversation is a competitive one. Unsurprisingly, many of the terms we use to describe argumentation involve metaphors of war and violence (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Uncertainty and doubt give one's partner an advantage; penalties and rewards lead toward defeat or victory.

If we don't talk politics with those with whom we disagree (or hide our true feelings when we do), we know our opponents only as abstractions, making it easier to discount them and their interests. Even if, for instance, I know that my neighbor favors the Blue Party while I favor the Yellow Party, and even if we have pleasant non-political conversations, unless I talk with her about politics I need not seriously consider Blue Party arguments. In political discussion where we make our true feelings known, it becomes impossible to disconnect her political views from her personality. My general empathy for her necessarily becomes part of my political evaluation, as I am forced through the process of discussion to respond to her arguments.

Nina Eliasoph (1997) asserts that there exists a "culture of political avoidance" that operates apart from any generalized fear of disagreement. I modify this position somewhat by arguing that fear of political disagreement is in fact at the heart of political avoidance. People view political disagreement as particularly dangerous, not simply

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because political discussion may involve fundamental values, but because the political realm is seen as an arena where enemies engage each other with poison-tipped verbal arrows.

Avoidance of political disagreement is not simply part of human nature; rather, it is a component of American political culture. In some other countries, people feel as comfortable arguing about politics as Americans do arguing about sports. Israelis, for instance, consider politics a subject that creates shared ground among non-intimates (Wyatt, Katz, & Liebes, 1995). In the United States, we are more apt to believe that politics is best discussed only in "safe" situations, those in which all participants have the same views.

What's wrong with conflict?

As I discussed in Chapter 2, conflict is a primary organizing frame around which political news narratives are built. Is there necessarily anything wrong with this construction in the abstract? After all, all drama is based on conflict; without it, news might not be able to generate any interest in political matters. One group of researchers has shown that in certain cases the perception of conflict is actually associated with greater knowledge about an issue (Olien, Donohue, & Tichenor, 1995; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1999). They argue that conflict can lead to a renewed emphasis on traditional norms, the emergence of new norms, and heightened group identification and cohesion. But as they observe in their study of local issues, politics in small, homogeneous communities tends to be less conflictual and based less on intergroup differences than politics in larger communities. In addition, local issues are less likely to

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divide along traditional liberal/conservative lines. Thus the idea that those who disagree about a given topic of local concern could never agree about anything has less purchase than it does in the context of national politics.

Defining conflict in terms of mutually exclusive groups has benefits and pitfalls. Richard Merelman (1991) argues that group conflict promotes all the key elements of democracy, including popular participation, majority rule, and the protection of the rights of minorities. Even if this picture is an accurate one, there is a danger that consistent definition of politics in group terms will enhance the perception of politics as zero-sum competition, where benefits received by one group are necessarily taken from other groups. Heightening the salience of group membership can clarify issues, but it can also encourage stereotypical thinking and polarized opinion formation (Price, 1989). One content analysis has identified a trend toward increasing identification of individuals quoted in news by their group identity (Mutz, 1998). If political news is organized around group conflict, one key question is whether citizens adopt that paradigm as their own. Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992) report that while conflict was among the most common frames in news, it made up only 6% of the frames used by citizens to discuss political issues in depth interviews. On the other hand, Gamson (1992) argues that drawing distinctions between "us" and "them" is an important part of social conversation about politics. Many people define their political views in large part by what they oppose, rather than what they favor (Walsh, 1999).

In order for conflict to emerge in conversation, one must know someone with opposing views. Jan Leighley (1990) found that the presence of conflict in one's social network (measured by whether a discussion partner had tried to convince the respondent

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to change his/her vote) heightened participatory activity, including voting, contacting government officials, and volunteering for a campaign. This finding is in some ways an extension of Mark Granovetter's (1973) work on "the strength of weak ties." Granovetter showed that since the family and friends with whom we are closest usually share our perspectives, experiences, and knowledge, it is our acquaintances who are more critical in bringing new information to our attention. In homogeneous networks, inaccurate information is more likely to go uncorrected (Chaffee, 1986). Those with whom we disagree politically are more likely to bring to our attention uncomfortable facts and novel arguments. In addition, by requiring us to construct arguments to defend our positions, they force clear and logical articulation of our beliefs. Leighley's findings accord with one of the principal theoretical justifications for deliberation, that engaging with others in debate not only builds knowledge and political judgment, but enhances feelings of citizenship. The benefits of heterogeneous conversation can only be realized, however, if people are willing to engage in political conversation those with whom they disagree.

Disagreement in conversation

In order to engage in heterogeneous conversation, citizens must encounter those with whom they disagree politically. The primary arena of political conversation is the home simply because we see our families every day. In addition, the vast majority of spouses share the same political beliefs (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Outside the home, a number of variables will help determine the amount of political disagreement to which an individual is exposed: the range of opinions in her social and work contacts, the range

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of opinions in her community, her choice of conversation partners, and the extent to which she and those partners avoid disagreement when discussing politics (Huckfeldt et al, 1998). Any one of these factors can work to suppress political conversation. Nonetheless, since people may have numerous discussion partners in varying contexts, even if most discussion is among the like-minded, most people will encounter disagreement somewhere (Huckfeldt et al., 1995). It appears, however, that the amount they encounter is rather small.

Data from recent Annenberg studies produce similar results. The 1998 California study asked respondents, "When you discuss politics with your family or friends, how often is there some difference of opinion? Would you say there is some difference of opinion often, sometimes, rarely or never?" As Figure 4-1 shows, most respondents claim a difference of opinion at least "sometimes." In the California sample, 18.6% of respondents were frequent talkers (at least three times per week) and said that their political conversations "often" contained differences of opinion. Those who said they never talked about politics are not shown in this figure.

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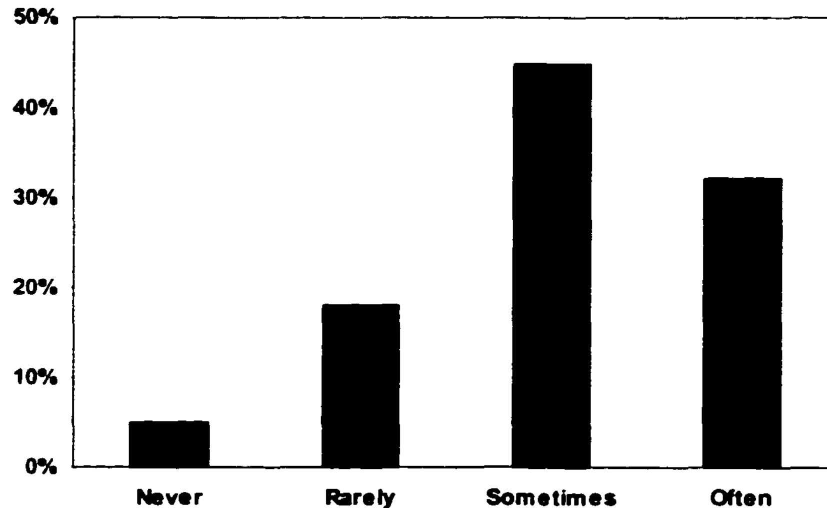
Figure 4-1: How often is there a difference of opinion? (1998 California study)



There is also a positive relationship between conversation and disagreement: people who talk about politics more frequently are more likely to cite disagreement. For those who talk less frequently, when discussion occurs it is almost always consensual. Data from the Annenberg 2000 survey, which also asked about political discussion at work, show that despite low overall levels of conversation at work, people who encounter at least some disagreement at work discuss politics just as often there as they do with family and friends.

There is reason to believe that disagreement would be inversely related to partisanship; that is, those who strongly identify with a party would be less likely to encounter disagreement. While strong partisans may be more willing to speak up and thus initiate disagreements, they may also be more likely to selectively perceive agreement with their strongly held views. In addition, their friends and co-workers,

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knowing how opinionated they are, may be more likely to avoid engaging partisans in discussion. Furthermore, because of their staunchly held beliefs, strong partisans may consider agreement to be a more important criterion in choosing discussion partners than weak partisans do. On the other hand, strong partisans might seek out disagreement in order to advocate for their party. As it happens, the differences between strong and weak identifiers are small.[1] Strong party identifiers are slightly more likely than weak identifiers and independents to cite disagreement. However, when the frequency of overall political conversation is controlled, this difference largely disappears.

Incorporating respondents' overall level of political conversation allows us to examine the absolute frequency of disagreement. In order to do so, a variable combining the two measures was created.[2] The distribution of this variable is striking in how infrequent disagreement appears to be. A quarter of the sample encountered no political disagreement whatsoever. Only twelve percent of the sample encountered disagreement more than once a week.

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[1] It should be noted that the California sample, while reasonably representative on standard demographic items, is quite unrepresentative in the area of party identification. The sample contains twice as many Democrats as Republicans, whereas in national random samples identification with the two parties is usually roughly even.

[2] This variable was generated by assigning percentages to each response to the question, "How often is there some difference of opinion?" then multiplying those percentages by the respondent's frequency of general political conversation. The percentages were as follows: never=0, rarely=.1, sometimes=.25, often=.5.

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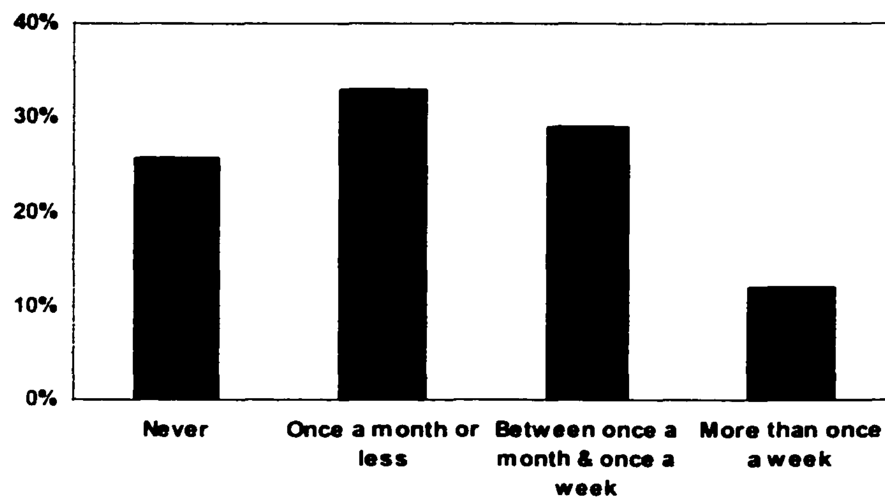

When we attempt to predict frequency of disagreement, we see that respondents with higher incomes, the more knowledgeable, and those who are highly interested in the governor's campaign score higher. Since this variable is a function of respondents' overall level of conversation, it is unsurprising that exposure to national news and talk radio are significant predictors, as they are of conversation. When the level of general political conversation is controlled, newspaper reading and use of local and national news are unrelated to frequency of disagreement; only talk radio remains significantly correlated. One figure from this regression stands out in contrast to the results of predictions of conversation: local news watching is actually associated with a decrease in the degree to which a respondent participates in heterogeneous conversation. Although the coefficient does not reach statistical significance (p=.14), it does suggest that local news may be suppressing heterogeneous conversation. When other factors are

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controlled, local news is unrelated to both political knowledge and general political conversation.

Table 4-1: Predictors of Frequency of Disagreement
(1998 California study)

	B	Beta
Income	.003 *** (.001)	*.17*
Newspaper	.02* (.01)	*.07*
National news	.03*** (.01)	*.10*
Local news	-.01 (.01)	*-.06*
Talk radio	.04*** (.01)	*.13*
Political interest	.12*** (.03)	*.14*
Political knowledge	.04** (.01)	*.11*
Constant	-.21*** (.07)	
R^2	**.151**	

* $p < .10$
** $p < .05$
*** $p < .01$

Although most people do have occasion to encounter disagreement somewhere, the fact remains that for most people most of the time, political conversation happens without disagreement. One could argue that despite the multiple benefits heterogeneous conversation offers, citizens seem to do well enough without it. While psychological experiments have shown that agreement can push attitudes in extreme directions (Baron, 1996), in recent years Americans' political opinions have actually moved in the direction of consensus on many issues (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996). One exception is

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abortion, an issue on which people have in large part "agreed to disagree." What this means, of course, is that we have agreed not to discuss the issue, at least with those whose opinions differ from our own.

Many homogeneous conversations may indirectly engage opposing opinions, if only through reference to arguments obtained through the news media. I would argue that such engagement, while valuable, cannot substitute for interactive discussion with someone who holds those views. Engaging in a heterogeneous discussion requires one to both listen to opposing arguments and to construct arguments that have the potential to persuade others; in this process the benefits of deliberation are to be found. In short, homogeneous conversation, while not without substantial value, does not qualify as deliberation.

Discourse and disagreement

One of the themes running through this study is that our understanding of what "politics" is – what occurs in the political world, how we should think, speak and act when we engage ourselves politically – is shaped by the presentation we see in news media. As I argued previously, news emphasizes conflict, assuming that all actions are undertaken to achieve victory, and that outcomes have winners and losers.[3] This

[3] Even esteemed researchers are not immune from the impulse to cast politics in competitive terms, even when elections are not at issue. At one point in *The Spiral of Silence*, Noelle-Neumann describes the results of one set of survey data on the phenomenon as one where "those confident of victory speak up, while losers tend toward silence." The topics in question were support for a treaty between East Germany and West Germany and opinions of Chancellor Willy Brandt. Note that in neither of these two topics is there truly a "winner" or "loser," and more to the point, even if there were the views of individual citizens would not determine whether they won or lost. If the treaty is adopted, its advocate and critic will be affected equally. If Brandt wins his next election (although the question being asked was not about voting), his supporter and opponent will both live under his policies. One should hesitate before referring to citizens expressing opinions as "winners" and "losers."

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tendency is manifest in the framing of events and in the choices made by reporters when quotes are selected for publication.

As we saw in Chapter 2, news overrepresents conflict in the discourse of candidates. In speeches, debates, and advertising, candidates' attacks on their opponents are more likely to find their way into news than are explanations of their own positions. The result is a picture of campaigns that is substantially more negative than is actually the case. As a general principle, the harsher the attack, the more likely it is to be reported. This is particularly true of arguments that attack the character of opponents as opposed to their positions.

In the context of citizen deliberation, vilifying one's fellow participants is a sure way to break off discussion. Since conversation between citizens is voluntary, primarily expressive (as opposed to goal-oriented), and undertaken by those with personal relationships existing outside of the political world, norms of friendly engagement necessarily must be in force. In elite discourse - whether it takes place in legislative bodies or in media forums – participants are not necessarily friendly; therefore a different set of conversational norms obtains. Debate in legislatures and through the media fails to be deliberative in one significant way: the participants have generally decided their positions before they engage in speech. They spend a great deal of time speaking, but are not required to listen (Barber, 1984); witness the fact that members of Congress routinely give speeches to an empty chamber. Listening requires an openness to change and an empathy for the speaker largely missing from the mediated public sphere. This is one significant respect in which mediated discourse is a problematic model for citizen deliberation.

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In addition, mediated discourse is marked by frequent motive questioning, as speakers charge that those who disagree with them are hiding their true intentions behind a cloak of common interest argumentation. Imputations of bad motives and bad character have long been decried as political fallacies undermining the pursuit of solutions to political problems. The assertion that one's opponent's intents are unworthy "is an all-purpose argument which can be used to discredit any position, whatever its moral merits." (Guttman & Thompson, 1996). Importantly, the charge asks listeners to ignore the content of arguments. It is also unanswerable; I have no way of proving to you what is in my heart. As we will see in Chapter 5, most people do in fact believe that in political questions others are motivated primarily by self-interest. Given that so few arguments in the public forum are explicitly self-interested, the vision of the public sphere is thus one in which most of those engaging in public debate are attempting to deceive their listeners. One of the potential advantages of friendly deliberation – that arguments are less easily discounted when offered by those for whom the listener has preexisting good will – is turned on its head when motive questioning becomes a standard element of political argumentation. If those with whom we disagree by definition have bad motives, we need never attempt to adopt their perspectives and enlarge our own thinking about the issue at hand.

One further element of news reporting – the standard of objectivity – enhances the impression of political disagreement as fundamental value conflict. "Objective" reporting is usually operationalized as an imperative to present "both sides" of an issue. News presentations thus tend to present issues as two-sided conflicts, even in cases where

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areas of agreement are more substantial than areas of disagreement, or when there are more than two sides.

In the picture painted by the news, politics is thus characterized by persistent conflict between antagonists who never agree, because their values are fundamentally at odds. When they engage each other in discussion, they do so on terms that are less than honest. Political disagreement is presented as more fundamental, less likely to be resolved amicably, and more unpleasant than other kinds of disagreement. The key question is whether this presentation affects the beliefs and behavior of those exposed to it.

Fear of argument

Do people fear political disagreement? Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann (1993) argues that what people fear is actually social isolation. Those who believe they are in the minority don't engage others in conversation for fear that they will be set apart from the group. As a result, majority opinion appears increasingly universal, to the point where minorities are effectively silenced. Although testing by other scholars of the "spiral of silence" has produced mixed results (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997), even if it accurately describes patterns of discussion Noelle-Neumann's theory is not incompatible with an explanation based on an avoidance of disagreement. Most of Noelle-Neumann's tests, furthermore, rely on hypothetical situations concerning interaction with strangers: whether one would talk to someone on a train, wear a campaign button, etc.

I argue that while the fear of social isolation may be real, another distinct force also inhibits political conversation. In order to illustrate how a fear of political

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disagreement can operate independently of a fear of social isolation, I offer a reanalysis of data presented by Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague (1987). The authors interviewed subjects, then interviewed the people whom the subjects identified as their discussion partners. They show that respondents are much more likely to misperceive their discussants' vote choice when it differs from their own, and offer two possible explanations for this result. The first is that a kind of selective perception may be operating, in that the respondents ignore evidence of disagreement, then project their own beliefs on to their discussants. A second explanation is that the misperception is a result of the discussant intentionally concealing his/her own preferences in the knowledge that revealing them might initiate disagreement.

Results from the South Bend studies support the second explanation. The likelihood of respondents misperceiving their discussants' vote choice is further influenced by the level of support for the candidates (in this case Reagan and Mondale) in the respondents' neighborhood. I reproduce this table because my interpretation of the data is somewhat more detailed than that of the authors, for whom these findings were one small part of a larger project. I have also drawn lines that do not appear in the original, in order to illustrate the points made about the different situations described.

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Table 4-2
Probability That Main Respondent Correctly Perceives Whether The Discussant Is a Reagan Voter by Main Respondent's Vote, the Discussant's Vote, and the Proportional Reagan Vote in the Main Respondent's Neighborhood

Vote of the Main Respondent and Discussant	Neighborhood Reagan Support: Low (.31)	High (.78)
Reagan-Reagan	.68 *C*	*A* .95
Reagan-Mondale	.88 *B*	*D* .47
Mondale-Reagan	.54 *D*	*B* .84
Mondale-Mondale	.93 *A*	*C* .76

Source: Huckfeldt and Sprague (1987)

The differences between pairs of situations show support for both the spiral of silence and my hypothesis of disagreement avoidance. The highest level of accurate perception appears when both members of the dyad agree, and they agree with the prevailing climate of opinion (line A). In this case, the discussant risks neither disagreement nor social isolation in revealing his preferences. Note that the issue here is the opinion and behavior of the discussant, since he is the one whose opinion will be perceived accurately or inaccurately.

The next highest level of accuracy comes in the case of line B. In this situation, the respondent is at odds with the prevailing environment of opinion, while the discussant is not. The spiral of silence would explain this finding with the fact that discussant, who is in the majority, does not fear social isolation and thus freely states his views. Consequently, the respondent becomes aware of the discussant's opinion, and reports it accurately. However, the respondent is slightly less accurate in this case than in the first situation.

In the case of line C, the respondents agree, but both are at variance with the prevailing climate of opinion, and there occurs a higher level of misperception. Finally,

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in line D, the respondent agrees with the prevailing climate, but the discussant does not. This situation shows the highest level of misperception.

Let us begin with the assumption that if a discussant strongly expresses his beliefs, the respondent will be unable to misperceive them. The respondent can "fill in" the discussant's beliefs up to a point, but if the discussant is clear and unambiguous about her preferences, this will become impossible. Some threshold of intentional ambiguity will have to be passed before the respondent can project his own beliefs on to the discussant. I propose further that there are two potential sources of this ambiguity. The first is offered by the spiral of silence; that is, being in the minority within the environment. The discussant would fear social isolation if his preferences were known, and thus keeps them hidden. The second source of ambiguity is the knowledge or suspicion that one's discussion partner holds conflicting views. In some cases, these two will work in concert, and we are unable to distinguish between the two; even if we assume that the discussants are aware of the distribution of opinion within the environment, we know nothing about their awareness of the respondents' opinions, which would determine the potential for conflict between the two. In other cases, one incentive will be present while the other will not. Selective perception and projection, on the other hand, should operate the same whether one is in majority or minority. The impulse on the part of the respondent to reduce dissonance in the relationship is the same.

The data seem to contradict the selective perception/projection hypothesis. In the case of situation C (both members of the dyad agree but are in the minority), if the discussant is vague about his opinions, the hypothesis predicts that the respondent would simply assume agreement, and thus there should thus be accurate perception even if the

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discussant is vague. However, in this case the level of misperception is high. This means that in dyads where the discussant is vague, the respondent assumes incorrectly that the discussant agrees with the prevailing climate, and thus disagrees with the respondent. We see a complementary result in situation B, where the two incentives for the discussant to be vague are at odds (discussant and respondent disagree, but discussant is in majority). In this case, if the respondent were to assume in the presence of vagueness that the discussant agreed with him, the result would be misperception. If, on the other hand, the respondent assumed that the discussant agreed with the majority, he would be correct, and misperception would be rare. In fact, this is what occurs; the probability of accurate perception here is nearly as high as in situation A, where there are no incentives for vagueness, and selectivity in the direction of dyadic agreement and environmental agreement lead to the same accurate conclusion. In the final situation (D), all incentives point toward ambiguity (fear of social isolation and of disagreement) and toward inaccuracy (assumptions of agreement and of majority concurrence).

In sum, Huckfeldt and Sprague's data do not seem to support the hypothesis of selective perception and projection. Instead, it appears that when one discussion partner, motivated by disagreement avoidance or fear of social isolation, conceals her views, the other partner is more likely to assume her to agree with the majority. Perhaps more importantly, these data indicate that in a substantial number of cases, people who discuss politics are vague enough about their opinions that their regular partners are able to misperceive even such fundamental opinions as presidential vote preference. A later study (Huckfeldt et al., 1998) showed that a full 43.9% of respondents in all discussion dyads not including spouses (including both those with whom the respondent discussed

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"important matters" and politics) and 40.5% in political discussion dyads misperceived their discussant's presidential preference. If these data are representative, in two of every five cases one individual in a discussion dyad is vague enough for his partner to misperceive his opinions, a rather striking figure. It should also be noted that any case in which an individual keeps silent because she is in the minority could be explained equally reasonably by avoidance of disagreement as by fear of isolation. If she voices her opinion, she will be contradicted, and the result may be an argument. In such cases it may be not the fact of isolation but the experience of argument that people find unpleasant. These studies illustrate the distinction between the willingness to discuss politics and the willingness to make one's opinions known (Scheufele, 1999). It appears that significant numbers of people are able to have political conversations while keeping their own beliefs hidden.

Why should people find political argument threatening? A study by Robert Wyatt et al (1995) provides insight into the reasons people choose not to engage in political discussion. Their American subjects cited the workplace as the environment in which they would be least likely to state their political views. On a list of thirty-three possible reasons for keeping quiet, the highest scores were given to "Saying what's on your mind may harm or damage other people," "Speaking your mind may hurt the feelings of those you care for," "You want to be polite," and "You like for everything to go smoothly." All of these justifications are geared toward maintaining the friendly nature of relationships that in many cases are built on fragile foundations. Since people seldom choose their co-workers, the possibility of significantly differing political views is a real one. The more explicitly stated "You like to avoid arguments" ranked eighth on the list,

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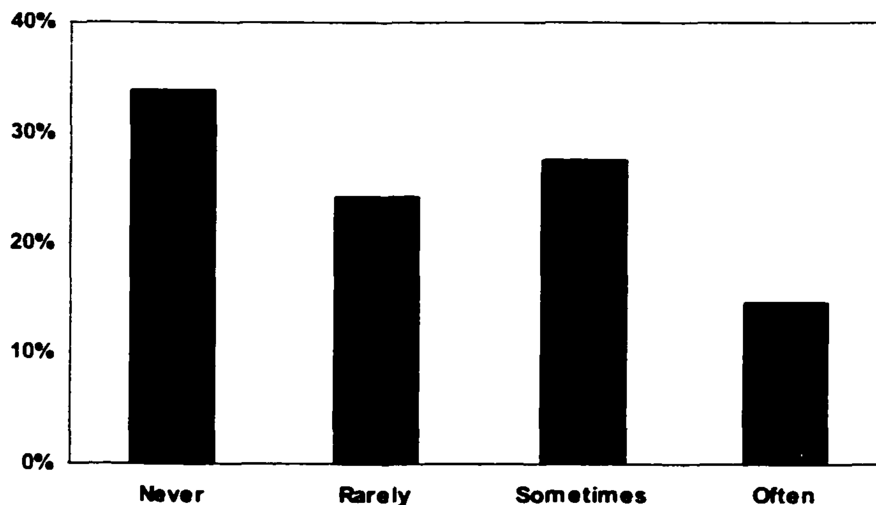
ahead of a variety of items tapping feelings of insecurity, inefficacy, and fear of official reprisal. Interestingly, items tapping the fear of hurting others ranked higher than items measuring fear of being hurt oneself.

In order to examine the operation of the fear of political argument, we inserted the following item in the survey of California voters: "Sometimes people decide not to join in a discussion about politics because they think that if they do, they will end up in an argument. Would you say this describes you often, sometimes, rarely or never?" This wording was chosen to isolate the idea of argument as an interaction in which people express opposed opinions, irrespective of whether the respondent finds him/herself in the majority or minority. As I will use the term throughout this section, "argument" refers to something two or more people *have*, as opposed to something one person *makes* (Jacobs, 1987).[4] The responses to the survey question were distributed fairly evenly (Figure 4-3).



[4] While it is possible that some respondents heard the question to refer to the latter and not the former, the fact that the question used the wording "end up in an argument" makes this unlikely.

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There are a number of factors apart from media use that could affect this variable, which I will call fear of argument. Some are personality factors for which we have no measure; some people are simply quarrelsome and therefore do not fear argument.[5] Others may not be argumentative generally, but may enjoy political argument in particular (Infante & Rancer, 1993). Critically, in order to avoid political discussion an individual must be presented with the opportunity to engage in it in the first place. Because of the others with whom they interact in their social and work environments, many people encounter few political discussions. Therefore they would score low on this measure, but not because they are bravely forging ahead with political conversation despite the potential for conflict. Their potential discussion partners' own feelings about political argument could play a role as well (Levine & Boster, 1996). Unfortunately, we have no measure of the opportunity our survey respondents have to discuss politics.

Another variable influencing fear of argument would be political interest. Highly interested citizens might be unable to tear themselves away from a political discussion, even if it threatened to become hostile. Those with little interest in politics, on the other hand, would avoid political discussion because it bored them, not because they feared argument. One would thus predict a curvilinear relationship between interest and fear of argument, low at the ends and high in the middle. It is those with *some* interest who would show the highest levels of fear of argument.

A final mitigating factor could be political knowledge. Some individuals' fear of argument could be a function of the confidence they have in their knowledge of the

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[5] Although gender stereotypes might predict that men would be less likely to fear argument, there was no difference between men and women on this variable.

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subject matter, and the consequent likelihood that they would be able to hold their own in an argument. If that were the case, the more knowledgeable would be less likely to fear argument. Unlike interest, the relationship with knowledge should, all other things being equal, be a linear one. However, because interest, knowledge, and media use are ordinarily all correlated, bivariate analysis of all three could show a curvilinear relationship, with fear of argument peaking in the middle range.

It should be noted that in this sample, watching of both local news and national news is uncorrelated with knowledge of the gubernatorial candidates. While the network news shows certainly did not cover the California governor's race with any regularity, one might have expected that voters would have learned about the candidates from their local news programs. A content analysis conducted by the Annenberg School revealed, however, that television coverage of the gubernatorial campaign was overwhelmingly focused on strategy and tactics, while issues were given relatively little attention.

As John Zaller (1992) notes, in many cases those in the middle ranges of political awareness are the most susceptible to persuasion; the least aware do not receive any persuasive messages, while the most aware not only receive adequate competing messages but are also able to rebuff attempts at persuasion. While his argument concerns the dynamics of persuasion in communication environments with competing messages, the curvilinear relationships he locates are similar to the one we expect with regard to fear of argument.

The expectations about the relationship of knowledge and interest to fear of argument are not borne out by the data, however. While those at high levels of interest admit a slightly lower fear of argument, there was no difference between those at low and

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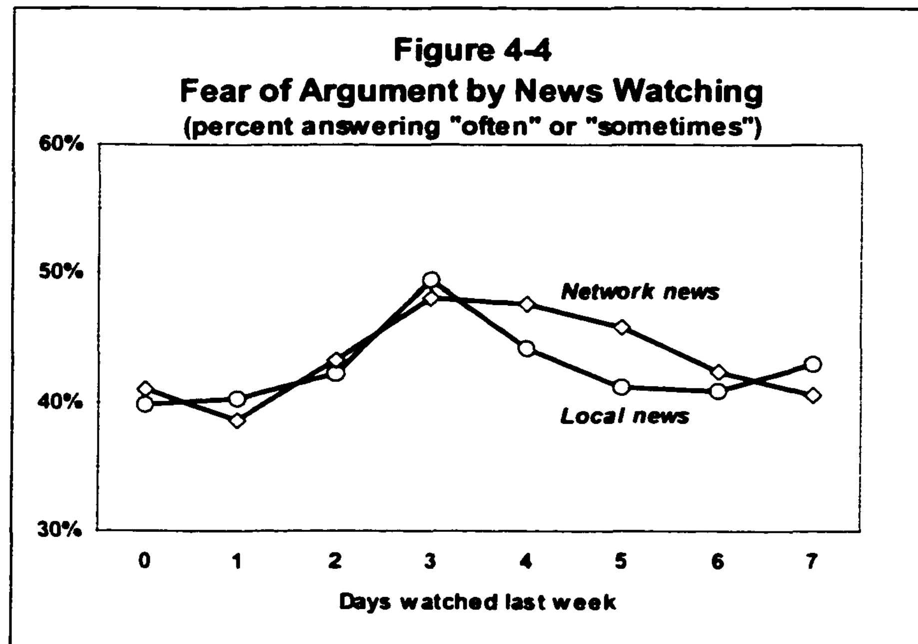
moderate levels of interest. All levels of political knowledge showed roughly the same degree of fear of argument. It is only on levels of media use that we see a substantial relationship with fear of argument. Different media, furthermore, show different patterns. Specifically, newspaper reading and talk radio use appear unrelated to fear of argument, while watching of both local and national news show confirmation of the curvilinear hypothesis.

As Figure 4-4 shows, it is neither the heavy news watchers nor the light news watchers who are more likely to admit to avoiding political discussion in order to avoid argument. Instead, it is those in the middle - people who say they watch the news three times a week - who are most likely to say they avoid political discussion because of the possibility of argument.



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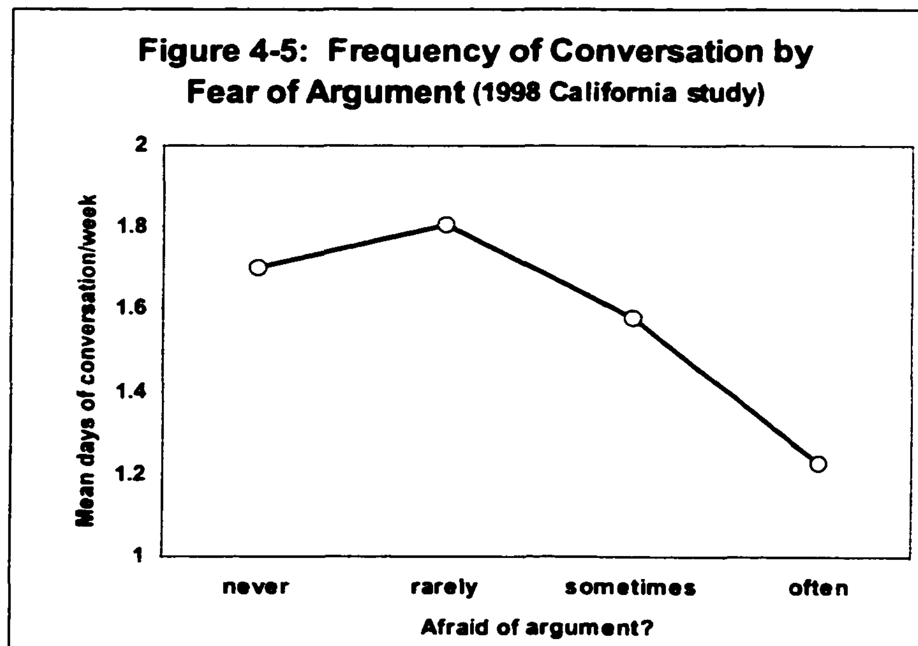
This result has important implications for the operation of deliberation in people's everyday lives. One of the key challenges for democracy is the engagement of the mass of citizens in the middle ranges of awareness and attention (Neuman, 1986). While we would expect that there will always be a small number of highly engaged citizens and a small number of utterly disengaged citizens, the degree to which a system lives up to the ideals of democracy is determined in large part by the character of the bulk of the electorate who resides in the middle. Plainly, if those who pay some (but a not a great deal of) attention to public affairs find themselves reluctant to engage in political conversation for fear of argument, deliberation will take place only among the highly engaged elite.

Unsurprisingly, those who admit to avoiding political conversation because of a fear of argument talk less in total than those who do not express such a fear (Figure 4-5). This relationship is significant not only at the bivariate level but in regression analysis controlling for all other relevant predictors of conversation as well.



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Conclusion

By itself, the perception that political discussion involves unpleasant contention can suppress conversation only if one knows that potential participants do not share one's views, or if one suspects they might not. If fear of argument is a significant factor in deciding whether to have political discussions. uncertainty as to the beliefs of one's co-workers or social contacts will lead many people to avoid political discussions. A key factor in creating this uncertainty is the relative lack of class-based politics in America. While there are certain demographic groups that vote overwhelmingly for one party (e.g. Jews and African-Americans), by and large class is not a useful means to predict the views of one's companions. A factory worker in most western European countries can be fairly sure that his co-workers support the labor-oriented or social democratic party; a factory worker in the United States will be less sure. While class-based voting has become less prevalent in recent years in many European countries, it has always been far less a factor in the U.S. (Inglehart, 1990), and what link exists between class and voting patterns has been eroding over time (Kinder, 1983). Both major parties represent a sometimes uneasy amalgam of economic and social policy positions. As a result, people are largely unable to make accurate predictions of others' political beliefs.

The less firmly grounded a relationship is, the more threatening disagreement can become. Most people argue most regularly (and vociferously) with their families; familial relationships can sustain an extraordinary amount of conflict. Other less important relationships, such as those among co-workers, may not be able to survive even occasional disagreement if the participants feel that it is fundamental in some way. If two friends disagree about the merits of a particular quarterback, each assumes that the other

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is offering arguments in good faith, that there are no hidden agendas, and that the very fact of disagreement does not indicate a fundamental value difference that goes beyond the subject at hand. All too often, the opposite assumptions are made when politics is the issue being discussed. People seem to lack – or believe they lack – a language of political argumentation that can sustain deliberation. They doubt their ability to *make* an argument without *having* an argument.

If the sketch I have drawn of political discourse is an accurate one, it should not be necessary for an individual to be exposed to a great deal of that discourse in order to arrive at the conclusion that politics is an unfriendly realm where opponents quickly become antagonists. While those with a great deal of interest in political affairs will continue to engage their fellow citizens regardless, those with some degree of exposure will be less willing to deliberate in any meaningful way. In a perfectly operating deliberative democracy, there would be a positive linear relationship between media exposure and conversation. Those with moderate interest and exposure would participate in a moderate quantity of deliberation. News media should provide them with the facts and arguments they need to deliberate meaningfully (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), more so if they are exposed more and less so if they are exposed less. The distortion in patterns of conversation is that those who are exposed to moderate amounts of television news resemble those at the low end of the scale more than they resemble those at the top end of the scale. They discuss politics infrequently, and when they do, their conversations are unlikely to involve much disagreement.

Without the give-and-take involved in hearing discordant views and attempting to convince others that one's own view is the correct one, true deliberation cannot take

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place. The process of building arguments aimed at persuading skeptical others is a primary source of deliberation's benefits. Such arguments must be logically consistent, incorporate relevant information, and be articulated in terms acceptable to those with divergent interests. In contrast, arguments made to listeners who already agree with a speaker may be far weaker. While homogeneous discussions can in principle be deliberative, the fact that they need not be makes the likelihood that many are not a strong one.

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Chapter 5
Self-Interest, Conversation, and Deliberation

The extent to which citizens should concern themselves with the good of others in the political realm is an essential question for theories of public opinion and deliberation. For most theorists, the goal of deliberation in the public sphere is to arrive at the common good through a discursive participatory process. In Jurgen Habermas' (1989) account, individual and group interests are set aside before deliberation begins. The ability to ignore self-interest is thus a pre-condition of participation in deliberation. Although others have critiqued and modified this notion as a normative requirement of public speech, discourse in the public sphere is generally thought to be of the greatest value when it addresses the common good. Arguments must be supported by reasons which are "public" in the sense that they appeal to a common or shared interest (Rawls, 1971). At the same time, a separate research tradition has emphasized the rationality of individuals pursuing their own interests in the political world.

This chapter will address a number of questions raised by the issue of individual and common interests in an attempt to connect deliberative theory to the real-world conditions of public opinion and citizen deliberation. First, to what extent do citizens consider the common good when formulating opinions? Second, how do they conceive of their fellow citizens and the role self-interest plays in public opinion? Third, what might the influence of elite mediated discourse be on the role of self-interest in citizen deliberation? Finally, could we revise our conception of interests to allow for

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deliberation which is compatible with citizens' predispositions and resources, stands some chance of being realized, and yet remains oriented toward the common good?

The reasonable ideal of deliberation demands not that self-interest be banished, but that it be reconciled with the common good. Citizens will consider their own interests when deliberating, but they will also be required to address the interests of their discussion partners and the community as a whole. For political discussion to be deliberative, participants must also grant the good faith of their discussion partners. Building on the previous chapter, I will argue that the tone and arguments present in news coverage and public affairs programming encourage imputations of bad faith, threatening deliberation. While citizens' predispositions and the nature of political issues should in principle combine to counter these messages, in practice the assumption of selfish motives is not only widespread but actually exacerbated by political discussion.

Self-interest and public opinion

A large body of scholarship has argued within the framework of rational choice theory for the primacy of self-interest in public opinion. Derived from neoclassical economics, rational choice views the interest of the individual as the proper guide to political decisions. It assumes that people make rational decisions based on the information available to them, that they are motivated to seek pleasure and avoid pain, and most importantly, that they hold their own welfare to be of greater value than that of others.[1] Political decisions follow inevitably from these assumptions about human

[1] Many economic analyses operationalize individual interest in purely financial terms. Robert Lane (1991), observing that above the poverty level income and subjective well-being have virtually no relation to one another, terms this the "economistic fallacy."

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psychology. In the formulation of Anthony Downs (1957), the progenitor of rational choice theory, "Each citizen votes for the party he believes will provide him with more benefits than any other." This logic is extended from voting decisions to policy choices: one's opinion is based on the alternative which promises to provide one with the greater benefit.

As Gordon Tullock (1975) put it, "Voters and customers are essentially the same people. Mr. Smith buys and votes; he is the same man in the supermarket and in the voting booth." It seems odd, though, to assume that because a set of motives and behaviors is evident in one arena, it necessarily prevails in all arenas. It would make no less sense to aver that since some people seek mates who remind them of one of their parents, therefore they also vote for candidates who remind them of their parents, and no further explanation of their vote choice is necessary. In actuality, each of us inhabits many worlds, of which the economic is only one. My task here is not to argue the details of the voluminous body of research in rational choice; instead, I will address its fundamental premise – that people hold their own welfare to be of greater value than that of others, and act accordingly - in forming an account of public opinion and citizen deliberation.

Does this premise hold in the world of politics? The simple answer is that people hold opinions and take actions that are self-interested some of the time, while at other times they do not. What is problematic about rational choice theory is that it proclaims that people are *always* self-interested; the theory is thus gripped by a totalistic impulse, the insistence that economic principles hold sway in all cases, all the time. Disproving

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this proposition becomes relatively simple; one need only show examples of altruistic beliefs and behaviors.

The reply of the rational choice fundamentalist is that self-interest may be defined as anything we value; therefore if we act to advance the interest of others, it is because we value their welfare; therefore we are acting to maximize what we value, and therefore we are acting in our self-interest. Emotional or spiritual satisfaction, which may be derived from seeing others benefit, is simply another of our interests. But the fact that there exists a relationship between personal satisfaction and altruistic action does not mean that one kind of behavior is "really" the other (Kelman, 1988; Sen, 1977). As Jane Mansbridge (1993) points out, it is a fallacy to assume that "if we can detect any self-interested reason to act in a particular way, this reason provides the only explanation we need." In addition, the construction of altruism as merely another type of self-interest makes rational choice theory unfalsifiable. If *any* action may be defined as self-interested, then no hypothetical action would provide evidence against the theory. Let us then set aside this notion and define self-interest more reasonably and simply as one's own perceived well-being. If we are to assess the prospects for deliberative democracy, we must ask if and when citizens are willing to consider the interests of others when arriving at political choices.

Empirical research has established quite clearly that when evaluating the world of politics, citizens look beyond their own interests. For example, Donald Kinder and Roderick Kiewiet (1981) showed that sociotropic considerations – those concerning the economic fortunes of the country as a whole - play a large part in voting decisions. Their analyses of presidential and congressional elections produced scant evidence for the

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"pocketbook" hypothesis. Overall, the authors concluded that "Political preferences thus seem to be shaped by citizens' conceptions of national economic conditions, not by the economic circumstances of their personal lives. Politics is carried on sociotropically, not at the level of the pocketbook."

They also show that the relationship between one's own circumstance and one's perception of the larger economy is extremely tenuous (with correlations on the order of .03), indicating that people do not simply extrapolate from their own situations to make assessments of the country's well-being. This result (which was replicated in a number of election years) shows that voters find means outside their own experience by which they may obtain information on the fate of the larger collectivity. Since people have a natural desire for autonomy and direct sources of information with which to make conclusions about their own lives, they are less likely to blame their own success or failure on government (Kinder and Kiewiet, 1981; Lane, 1962); I got that raise because I deserved it, not because the economy for which the President is responsible is doing well.

When they are called to make judgments about how others are faring, they get much of their information from the news media. Mark Hetherington (1996) shows that perceptions of the state of the economy derived from attention to news influenced vote choices in 1992 to a greater extent than actual individual economic fortunes. A self-interested voter would have been concerned not with the state of the economy but with his own economic gain. The information provided by the media turned out to be somewhat misleading (an economic recovery had begun by mid-1992 but went largely unreported); a relationship between news exposure and economic judgments showed that voters were relying on mediated information to make vote choices. Voters are further

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influenced by their perceptions of how different groups are faring, according to principles of distributive fairness (Mutz & Mondak, 1997). Surveys have also shown that evaluations of the distributive and procedural fairness of government programs influence opinions about the president, while self-interest with regard to the same programs (e.g. Social Security) does not (Tyler, 1990).

The failure to locate the influence of self-interest is not restricted to the effects of the economy on vote choices. In a summary of years of research, David Sears and Carolyn Funk (1991) show that in surveys addressing twenty-five separate issue areas including 147 independent and 168 dependent variables, the average correlation between self-interest and opinion was only .07. In regression analyses, only twenty-three percent of self-interest variables produced significant effects on opinion. The authors conclude that "personal self-interest generally has not been of major importance in explaining the general public's social and political attitudes."

Sears and Funk offer the following explanations for the consistently slight influence of self-interest: the stakes of an issue are usually not large, clear, or certain; people have a bias toward internal attributions for their own fate; politics is presented in symbolic, abstract terms to which people respond by relying on their symbolic predispositions; and finally, socialization encourages people to respond to politics in a public-regarding way. Jack Citrin and Donald Green (1990) offer a similar list of requirements an issue would need to stir self-interest: the consequences would need to be visible, tangible, large, and certain. This is not to say, however, that if people simply had more information and understood the implications of a given policy that their opinions

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would necessarily be guided by self-interest. In many cases, better information would show individuals that a policy does *not* affect them.

Sears and Funk identify five cases in which self-interest was significant: taxes, voting in the 1984 presidential election, the reaction of public employees to tax revolts, one busing proposal in Los Angeles (in contrast to other busing cases where self-interest was not predictive), and smoking restrictions. Of these, tax policy is the only national issue that arises repeatedly. The authors argue that when self-interest influences opinion, it does so only in the narrowest way. With the exception of the 1984 presidential election, only specific proposals that affected the individual in concrete, identifiable ways produced an effect, while broader applications and effects on similar groups did not. Nor did self-interest itself determine the symbolic predispositions held by subjects. Although self-interest has been found in some cases to heighten attitude-behavior consistency (Crano, 1997), this effect seems to emerge only on issues where, once again, the effects of policies are clear and substantial (Sears, 1997). While early voting researchers held that public opinion "is best understood if we discard our notions of ideology and think rather in terms of primitive self-interest," (Campbell et al., 1960) in subsequent years a different picture has emerged. Although there are some noteworthy exceptions, the weight of empirical research "appear[s] devastating for the claim that self interest…is the central motive underlying American public opinion." (Citrin and Green, 1990).

Self-interest and conversation

According to deliberative theory, participation in discussions about public affairs will expand individuals' circle of concern to encompass their fellow citizens. This is a

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difficult proposition to test empirically, particularly if one works only with election surveys. There are multiple ways in which such larger concern might manifest itself, some observable and some not. Even if such effects were occurring, the scant relationship of self-interest to opinion with which one begins makes identification of any further dampening of self-interest impossible to locate. There is one instance in which self-interest has been found to influence vote choice, that of the 1984 presidential election (Sears & Funk, 1991). Since the National Election Studies did ask respondents about their political conversations in the 1984 survey, we may examine whether discussion had any effect on the degree to which self-interest influenced respondents in their vote choices.

Like many theoretically posited relationships, the association between discussion and self-interest is implicitly assumed to be linear: the more one talks, the more one is motivated by the common good. In practice, we might actually expect a threshold effect, where a relationship between self-interest and vote choice disappears beyond a certain level of conversation. In the case of the 1984 election, we see neither a linear relationship nor a threshold effect. In this case it appears that personal evaluations mattered for the groups both high and low in conversation, but not for those individuals who talked about politics occasionally.

Table 5-1 shows a logistic regression analysis using vote for Reagan as the dependent variable. The independent variables are the respondent's assessment of how much better or worse s/he has fared financially in the past year, how much better or worse s/he believes the country has fared economically (both measured on a five-point scale), and his/her party identification (a seven-point scale). We see first that, unlike

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other election years, personal financial situation does have a significant effect on vote choice overall, even when perceptions of national conditions are controlled: those who have done better are more likely to vote for Reagan. When the sample is divided by levels of conversation, we see that this effect disappears for those who talk occasionally (once or twice a week or less often).

Table 5-1: Economic Perceptions and Vote for Reagan
(1984 NES)

	Full Sample		Talk = never		Talk = once/twice a week or less		Talk = 3 times a week or more	
	B *(s.e.)*	*Odds ratio*	*B* *(s.e.)*	*Odds ratio*	*B* *(s.e.)*	*Odds ratio*	*B* *(s.e.)*	*Odds ratio*
Party ID	.90*** (.05)	2.47	.82*** (.10)	2.27	.88*** (.07)	2.41	1.05*** (.11)	2.86
National conditions	.66*** (.10)	1.94	.64** (.18)	1.89	.68*** (.14)	1.97	.80*** (.20)	2.23
Respondent's situation	.23** (.08)	1.26	.32* (.16)	1.37	.12 (.11)	1.12	.45* (.18)	1.56
Constant	-2.07*** (.14)		-1.74*** (.28)		-1.87*** (.19)		-2.88*** (.34)	
% correctly classified	85.45		83.22		82.55		89.80	
N	1313		298		659		353	

*p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Why might this be? It is possible that occasional talkers, having started from a position of self-interest, may learn that their own financial situation is not representative. But frequent talkers would be even more likely to learn information that challenges their assumptions, particularly since frequency of conversation is correlated with frequency of disagreement. Of course, the 1984 election is a single case that may or may not shed

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light on the operation of discussion on self-interest more generally. At the very least, it suggests that deliberative theory may be correct in positing the ability of conversation to affect self-interest; but this effect may only emerge for some people some of the time.

The 1984 election notwithstanding, in most cases self-interest exerts little influence on opinion. It could, however, be a prime motivator of political action. Individuals may be generous in their opinions and even in their votes, but only take action when their own fortunes are at stake. While there is surely some truth to this argument, it is also the case that the political world is replete with examples of individuals acting without regard to self-interest. People turn out to vote with the knowledge that a single ballot cannot result in policies benefiting them,[2] write their Representatives to simply express opinions rather than influence legislation (Thelen, 1996), and contribute to advocacy groups, assuming individual costs for mutual benefits. Nevertheless, there is a widely held perception that *others* are in fact motivated by self-interest.

The myth of self-interest

A stronger influence of self-interest on behavior than on opinion has intuitive

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[2] Rational choice predicts that no one will turn out to vote, since the remote possibility that one's vote would determine an election's outcome is far outweighed by the cost of getting to the polls. The "paradox of voting" – the fact that large numbers of citizens do in fact vote – has long bedeviled rational choice advocates. Some have grudgingly acknowledged that perhaps all citizens do not actually construct decision tables and carefully compute the expected utility of voting in deciding whether to make their way to the polls on election day (Aldrich, 1993). In fact, one could argue that in the time it would take the average person to make such a calculation, he could have gone to the polls and returned home. This would make rational decision-making itself irrational. Interestingly, one survey found that economists, who presumably understand the cost/benefit ratio of voting better than anyone, were only slightly less likely than other academics to vote (Frank, Gilovich, & Regan, 1993). Although the authors do not report absolute voting rates, given the correlation between education and turnout it is reasonable to assume that even the economists in their sample voted at a substantially higher rate than the population at large.

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appeal. While merely expressing an opinion has no concrete costs, the prospect of taking action leads individuals to assess costs in terms of money, time, and effort (Green & Cowden, 1992). Previous surveys may thus have underestimated the effect of self-interest on politics by focusing more on opinion than on behavior. Dale Miller and Rebecca Ratner (1996) contend, however, that "those without vested interest are inhibited from acting not only because they lack an incentive, but because they lack a justification." Knowing that only those with vested interests are expected to join an organization or participate in a protest, they often shy away despite their beliefs precisely for fear that their motivations will be questioned. An experiment varying the cues given to subjects about the need to justify their involvement with a hypothetical political group seemed to support this hypothesis.

While an experiment on a single issue may not be conclusive, it does indicate that the perceived need for justifying action may be an additional variable affecting political participation. Participation involves not simply a decision to attempt to influence the political process, but also a decision to enter into a particular social interaction where opinions are necessarily on display. It is therefore not surprising that some would be inhibited from political action when they feel it is "not their place" to act. One's place, furthermore, seems to be defined not by conviction or simple citizenship, but by the presence or absence of a material interest in the outcome of a debate. One focus group study found that citizens often questioned the motives of community activists, believing that there must be self-interested motives for involvement (Conover, Crew, & Searing,

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1991). If such interests are perceived to be the only justifiable motivation for action, then participation is substantially constrained.[3]

This process is abetted by the perception that political opinions among the general population are primarily motivated by self-interest. A later study by Miller and Ratner (1998) gives persuasive evidence that this perception is in fact prevalent. The authors found in five separate experiments that while their own opinions were largely unaffected by self-interest (with the exception of smokers' and non-smokers' reactions to anti-smoking regulation), subjects consistently overestimated the effect that self-interest would have on others' opinions. "Participants' actions and attitudes may not have revealed them to be ardent self-interested agents, but their predictions revealed them to be ardent self-interest theorists."

In short, "self-interest has become an influential myth, a social construction of man that influences self-presentation, attributions, expectations, and actions." (Montada, 1996) The idea of self-interest influences not only our own decisions and understanding of our roles in the political process, but our perceptions of others as well, making it a key element in the cycle of opinion and action. The political world comes to be seen as that in which people pursue narrow ends, where participation becomes morally questionable once it becomes "political." Recall that when we accuse someone of "playing politics," it is because they have used a public process for their particular ends (Bellah et al, 1985).

[3] Some evidence in the other direction comes from Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), who conducted a comprehensive survey of political activists and found altruistic motivations cited more often than material or social gratifications. However, the authors' survey items allowed respondents to agree with multiple motivations for their participation, enabling them to define themselves as both self-interested and other-regarding. Verba et al's findings do not necessarily refute Miller and Ratner's; the myth of self-interest may be a more important variable in deterring specific acts of participation among the less active than in structuring the self-conceptions of those who do in fact participate.

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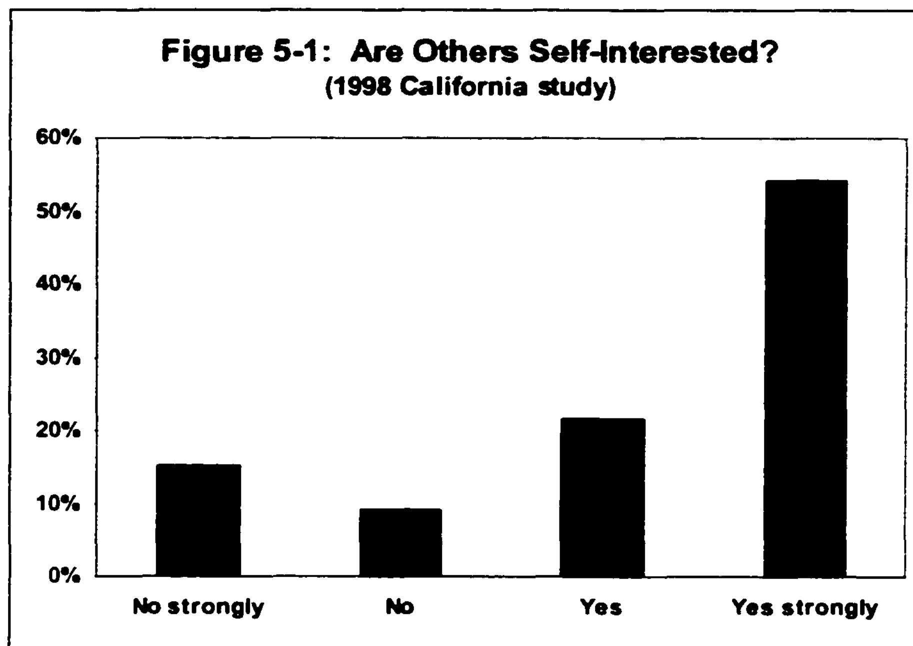
Data from the 1998 Annenberg pilot study lend further support to the presence of the myth of self-interest. Survey respondents were asked, "When it comes to political issues, would you say most people form their opinions by thinking about what is best for themselves or by thinking about what is best for the country as a whole?" A follow-up question asked how strongly they felt.



The first noticeable feature of these data is that whether or not self-interest is a myth, the perception of its prevalence is certainly widespread. Fully 76 percent of survey respondents agreed with the statement that most people are self-interested in their political opinions, with over half of the respondents agreeing strongly. Furthermore, this sentiment is not simply a function of ideology. While one might expect that more conservative respondents would be more likely to agree that others are self-interested, this turns out to be only partly true. Although the great majority of those describing

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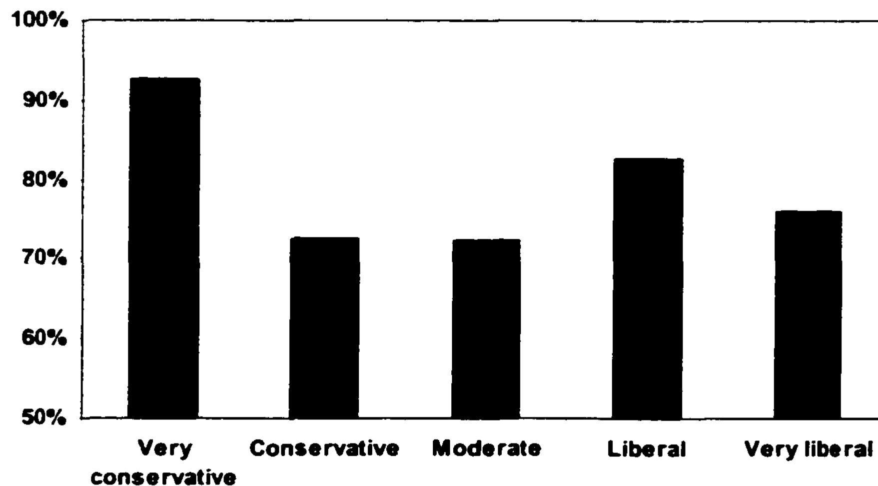
themselves as "very conservative" did agree with the statement, liberals actually scored higher than conservatives and moderates (Figure 5-2).



One variable that had a strong effect on the perception of self-interest was age. The notion that young people today are cynical and disconnected from politics is widely circulated in popular commentary, and research seems to support this view (Bennett, 1998a). Robert Putnam (1995) has argued that "social capital" has undergone a steady decline, measured by, among other things, disagreement with the statement that "most people can be trusted." Analyzing NES data from 1972 to 1994, Putnam shows that while the young tend to score lower on social trust, there is little difference between all age groups over 40. In the 1996 study, however, the young remain low in social trust, but a negative relationship with age emerges for those over 35. At the same time, the 1998 Annenberg pilot study shows a different relationship between age and the perception of

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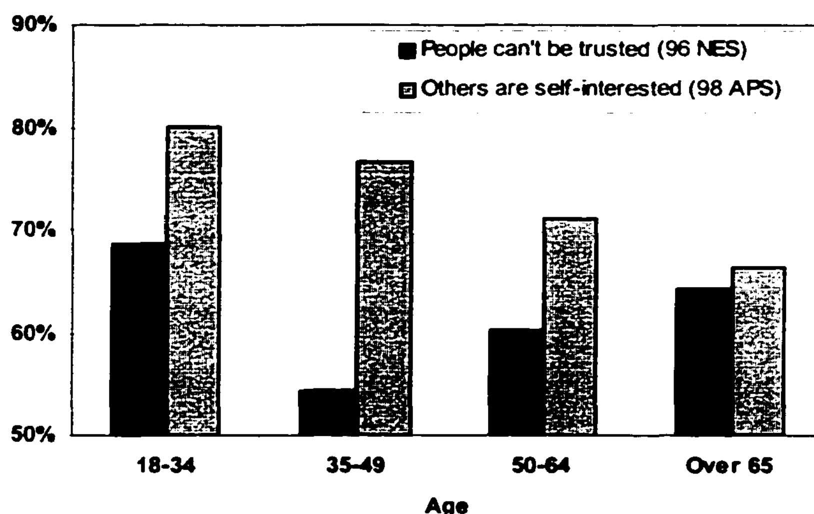
self-interest. To a significant degree (r = -.11), higher age is associated with a decreased perception that other citizens are motivated by their own interests in forming their political opinions. Unlike that between age and trust, this relationship is linear. The contrast between these two sets of data indicates that perceptions of self-interest in politics are distinct from related factors that would fall under the headings of social capital or cynicism.

Figure 5-3: Interpersonal Trust and Perception of Self-Interest, By Age



Self-interest in discourse

Since the late nineteenth century and the work of Gabriel Tarde, the fostering of political conversation has been understood as one of the press' key functions (Katz, 1992). By supplying citizens with news of the day's events, the press provides topics of discussion, setting a conversational agenda. This effect has been largely taken for granted rather than investigated empirically. Although a substantial body of research has explored the ability of the press to influence perceptions of the country's "most important

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problem" (Rogers, Dearing, & Bregman, 1993), whether the agenda-setting effect of the press operates on conversational agendas in the same fashion is a question that has been essentially overlooked by agenda-setting research. For the moment, I am less concerned with the press' success in placing particular items on the conversational agenda than with its role in maintaining an active conversational sphere regardless of topic and its influence on the form political conversations take.

In order to fully understand this role, we must look beyond the topics being reported and examine news frames, narrative structures, and the content of political discourse. The picture that emerges is a complex and often contradictory one. On one hand, political actors consistently use the language of common interests to build arguments for and against policy proposals. On the other, journalists frame politics and political discourse as a zero-sum competition among self-interested participants.

Mediated political discourse does in large part adhere to the deliberative standard of "public" speech. When political actors, particularly office-holders, speak, they offer reasons for arguments based on an idea of a common good. Specific policies are generalized to larger principles and effects. The most naked assertions of self-interest must be made out of public view. Officials feel compelled to describe private needs in public terms in order to gain support. When talking to his constituents, the Congressman who acts to preserve a weapons system manufactured in his district speaks of "jobs." In this context, the jobs constitute a common good, providing direct or indirect benefits to the community and all its members. When interviewed on the national news, however, he is more likely to speak of "national security," a common good applicable to the nation.

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This does not hold true in all cases, of course. Just as empirical research has located tax policy as an area where citizens' opinions are substantially motivated by self-interest, candidates have used appeals to economic self-interest to mold persuasive arguments. In 1980, Ronald Reagan asked voters, "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?", transforming a poll question into a persuasive appeal,[4] and establishing a criterion of judgment that has been raised by one presidential candidate or another in every election since.[5] The purpose of the question is to frame the election in terms of the individual's economic fortunes; it is notably different from "Is the country better off now?" Data from the NES indicate that while Reagan's appeal was not successful in motivating self-interested voting in 1980, by 1984 self-interest influenced at least some votes (Sears and Funk, 1990).

In a related vein, Bob Dole justified his 1996 plan to cut taxes by fifteen percent with the argument that "It's your money." At the same time, however, Dole argued that the Clinton administration was not serving common needs at all. In his nomination speech, he criticized the Clinton administration by saying, "It is demeaning to the nation that within the Clinton administration, a core of the elite who never grew up, never did anything real, never sacrificed, never suffered and never learned, should have the power to fund with your earnings their dubious and self-serving schemes...Are they taking care of you, or are they taking care of themselves?" Dole's rhetoric thus combined an appeal to self-interest with the accusation of self-interest.

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[4] The Roper organization began asking people whether they were "better off now than you were a year ago" in the 1970's.

[5] In a debate four years later, Reagan's opponent, Walter Mondale, said, "I would rather lose a campaign about decency than win a campaign about self-interest. I don't think this nation is composed of people who care only for themselves."

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These examples raise the question of whether appeals to self-interest are simply a part of conservative ideology, and thus will be found whenever Republicans speak. In fact, while these exceptions to the principle of common-interest argumentation are important, they are by no means the norm. Republicans and Democrats both seek support by appealing to notions of the common good, particularly outside the realm of tax policy. Such arguments, however, are likely to be interpreted and reframed by journalists through the prism of self-interest.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the bulk of political news is delivered through a strategic frame in which all actors are self-interested. When the question asked of any statement or action is what the actor's hidden purpose might be, the answer is always the same: gaining political advantage. Two kinds of self-interest emerge here: the interests of those affected by policy, and the interests of politicians in gaining and holding power. All parties are viewed through the same lens. At least one set of experiments (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) has shown that exposure to strategic news leads people to understand policy debates in terms of the interests of the actors involved.

Framing all questions in terms of self-interest or narrow interests leaves the question of common interests unaddressed. Let us elaborate on the example used earlier. A Congressman gives a speech arguing that increased production of a particular helicopter is essential to our national security, and without it our ability to defend our nation from attack would be seriously compromised. The clever reporter finds that, unsurprisingly, the factory that manufactures the helicopter is located in the Congressman's district; therefore the Congressman has personal political reasons for supporting further expenditures on the helicopter. In addition, the company that produces

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the helicopter has made hefty donations to each member of the Armed Services Committee, and is counting on new helicopter orders to boost its earnings. Although few would assert that the reporter should omit these pieces of information from her story, the discovery of the particular interests involved does not settle the question of the common interest, it merely sets it aside. There is still an important question to be answered, which is whether more helicopters are in fact vital to national security. In many cases, however, this question will not be addressed, because evidence may be more difficult to gather and the reporter will be unable to offer a conclusion without the appearance of editorializing, where she may do so freely on the "political" questions of the hidden motivations of the actors and the legislative prospects of the proposal.

The news receiver is then left with the impression that the substance of the argument made by the Congressman has no value. Part of the journalist's role is to take the unmanageable bulk of political discourse and deliver to the citizen the most important parts; this selection signals that the motivation of those making arguments is where attention should be focused. In this way, strategic framing undercuts the "public" nature of arguments, in the sense that they are concerned with the common interest. It effectively strips the common good of any substantive meaning by recasting it as merely a rhetorical tool used disingenuously to achieve private ends.

One could protest (and many reporters no doubt would) that journalists are merely exposing the truth; what some see as cynicism is in fact realism. Politicians *are* concerned with maintaining their positions. If journalists don't explain how, the public will never know. One will never hear the Congressman proclaim, "Mr. Speaker, I support this bill because doing so will generate more contributions from the defense

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industry to my next campaign," though that may indeed be the case. There is, furthermore, the possibility that "The Senator weaving a mantle of public talk around a purely private interest still does a small service to the very idea of the public, though he may be putting it to a scoundrel's use." (Barber, 1984) Strategic framing, however, assumes that every use is that of a scoundrel. Stories which do not actively assess competing claims but merely offer each, then comment on actors' hidden intents, encourage the conclusion that no one is concerned about the common good.

The news media's emphasis on self-interest may have consequences for public opinion. There is evidence from experiments (Young et al, 1991) and surveys (Sears & Lau, 1983) that individuals can be primed to consider self-interest more heavily in forming opinions and in explaining their vote choices. Again, there are two levels of self-interest at issue. With regard to the individual's self-interest, the question is whether appeals such as Reagan's result in self-interested thinking. The second question is whether a focus on the self-interested motivations of political actors affects the citizen's presumptions about the general political world and the specific individuals – family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers – with whom he might deliberate.

The consequences for democratic deliberation could be substantial. In an ethnographic study focusing on political conversation, Nina Eliasoph (1997) reported that "citizens sounded more public-minded in casual or intimate contexts than in public contexts; the wider the audience, the narrower were the ideas citizens could express." The fact that her subjects tended to revert to self-interested justifications when speaking publicly indicates that at least some citizens believe self-interest to be the coin of the political realm. What produces this ironic inversion of the public speaking norm

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described in democratic theory, where citizens are expected to give public reasons for their opinions when discussing political matters in a public context? Note also that it is survey research (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981; Mutz & Mondak, 1997; Sears & Funk, 1991; Sears et al, 1980), an arena of "private" opinion, that consistently produces data indicating a lack of self-interest.

I contend that we derive our understanding of how we should and should not behave in political conversation at least in part from the political world shown to us by the news media. The effect of news media framing of politics as a competition of interests may not produce self-interested thinking and opinions on the part of news receivers, but it may influence their assessment of what other people think, an effect described by Diana Mutz (1998) as "impersonal influence." Whatever their own opinions, individuals may come to believe that everyone else is self-interested. When they speak in public, they may simply offer an account of their own interest in the question at hand, just as everyone else does. Since those who speak of the common interest in elite discourse are almost inevitably charged with disingenuousness by their opponents, the press, or both, citizens in public contexts may choose to simply lay their interests on the table. While in 1927 John Dewey (1927) could optimistically advocate "the perfecting of the means and ways of communication of meanings so that genuinely shared interest in the consequences of interdependent activities may inform desire and effort and thereby direct action," much of today's news focuses instead on interests which are not shared, but which motivate action directed toward individual gain in a seemingly zero-sum enterprise.

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Eliasoph (1998) also reports that the citizen activists she studied had learned from experience that the only way to get quoted in the local press was to hide their activist affiliations, eschew policy analysis, and present themselves as concerned citizens acting out of self-interest. Her review of local press coverage bore out this observation: citizens were only quoted when they were speaking for themselves, explaining their opinions or political participation in terms of their own interests (or those of their children). This raises a vital question about the role of news in the maintenance of citizenship: how are citizens presented overall in media reports? Are Eliasoph's findings true of the larger media environment? The news presents models of involvement and identity. It instructs citizens as to which roles are appropriate and what norms of discourse apply to their participation in the public sphere. If it is true that citizens are shown as defined only by their interests, then individuals' perceptions of each other and of their own behavior could be influenced in troubling ways.

Perceptions of self-interest

What then is the relationship between exposure to news media and the perception of self-interest? Although the preceding argument might lead one to predict a linear association, this proves not to be the case. Analysis of this variable is hampered by the small variance; since the vast majority of respondents agreed that others are motivated by self-interest in their political opinions, there is little differentiation among groups. As Figure 5-4 shows, there is almost no difference across levels of media exposure; scores run between 3 and 3.3, where a score of 3 corresponds to a response indicating agreement

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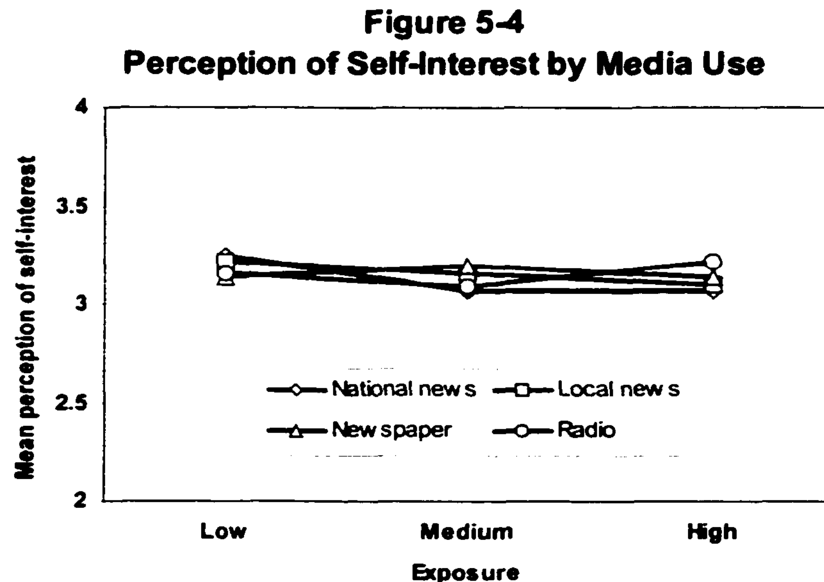
with the statement that others are motivated by self-interest, and a score of 4 corresponds to a response indicating strong agreement with the statement.[6]



How do we explain the scant relationship between media exposure and the perception of self-interest? The first explanation is, once again, that since so many respondents agreed with the statement that in political issues most people form their opinions by thinking about what is best for themselves, there simply was not enough variance to allow for media effects. It may be that the underlying construct of perceptions of self-interest is more complex than agreement or disagreement with this statement is able to capture. Perhaps if respondents were given a seven-point differential scale on which to place themselves instead of an agree-disagree item, more

[6] Exposure levels are as follows. Newspapers: zero or one day per week=low; two to six days per week=medium; every day=high. Local and national news: zero or one day per week=low; two to four days per week=medium; five to seven days per week=high. Radio: zero days per week=low; one or two days per week=medium; three to seven days per week=high. These divisions are based on the variables' distributions.

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variance would have emerged. A second explanation, of course, is that the hypothesis is simply incorrect. The fact that accusations of self-interest play a key role in political rhetoric does not necessarily mean that there will be a linear relationship between exposure to that rhetoric and the perception of self-interest. People could be arriving at this opinion independent of the discourse they encounter, perhaps basing it on their interpersonal contacts.

A final explanation would be that accusations of self-interest are so ubiquitous in political discourse that the vast majority of people, no matter what their level of media exposure, are influenced by them to the degree that they pass the threshold represented by the survey question. This particular type of motive questioning may simply be a part of American political culture, one maintained and renewed by the discourse present in news.

Conversation and perceptions of self-interest

When we turn to conversation, we encounter another result that at first appears difficult to explain. In theory, conversation should be negatively related to the perception of self-interest. Those who believe that people are motivated by self-interest would see little purpose in engaging in political discussion, much less discussion that could be called deliberative. Since people are out for themselves, there is little use trying to convince them to change their opinions or support a given candidate. At the same time, those who do talk about politics, and as a result experience the benefits of conversation in the acquisition of knowledge and the building of connections between the individual and community, should be less likely to believe that others are self-interested. Once we talk with each other, we may come to realize that self-interest is in fact largely a myth.

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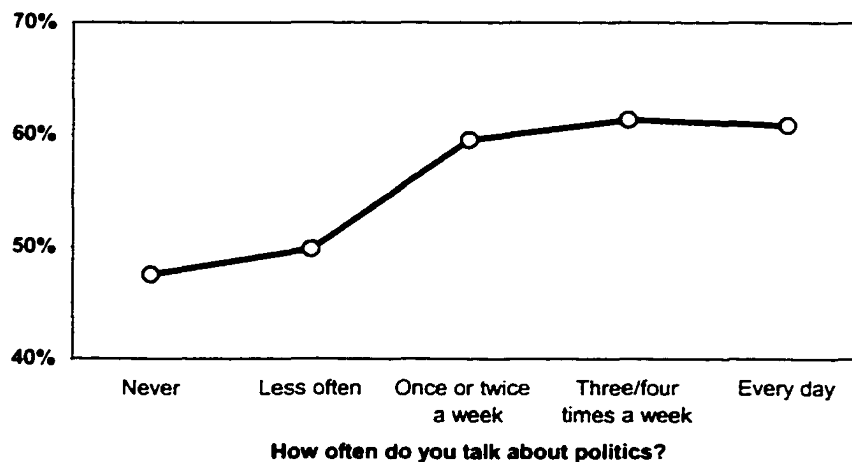
But the data show the opposite to be true. In fact, there is a positive relationship between conversation and the perception of self-interest, as Figure 5-5 shows. Those who talk more about politics are more likely to believe others are motivated by their own interests. While the association is not overwhelming, it is statistically significant. The correlation between frequency of conversation and strongly agreeing that others are self-interested was .09 ($p<.01$). But the figure shows not simply a positive correlation, but the presence of two distinct groups. Among those who rarely or never talk about politics, between 45% and 50% strongly agree that others are self-interested. Among the remainder of respondents – essentially all those who discuss politics with any regularity – 60% strongly agree.

Figure 5-5: Strongly Agreeing Others Are Self-Interested By Frequency of Conversation



How can we account for this result? An explanation may lie in the fact that elite discourse provides citizens with both the content and form of argumentation they use

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when discussing politics. In conversation, people repeat the arguments they hear in news, which include accusations of self-interest. When we converse, we not only hear these arguments again, *we make them ourselves*, leading us to adopt them with more conviction. Therefore, in an environment in which accusations of self-interest are a common mode of counterargumentation, the more we talk, the more practiced we become at identifying hidden self-interest, and the more clearly we come to believe that others are in fact self-interested.

This is, of course, a speculative claim. These data do not inform us about the content of citizens' conversation. If it is correct, however, it would mean that conversations between citizens fail to be deliberative in an important sense. Deliberative conversation should reduce the extent to which people believe others are self-interested, or at the very least not affect it in either direction. There is certainly the possibility that despite increased deliberation, many would continue to believe that most people are self-interested, even if those in their own circle of friends and acquaintances are not. Many people may believe this true to be true of the larger population but not of their own social circle, people whom they know and like. Nonetheless, if that were the case there would be no relationship between the two variables. The amount one talked with friends and co-workers would not affect the perception of self-interest, since people would be not be making a judgment based on their interpersonal contacts.

Deliberative theory asserts that the form and content of the arguments participants make can have subsequent effects on their own opinions. If they are required to argue in terms acceptable to others and in favor of some conception of the collective interest, their opinions will grow more expansive. If this is true in regard to the arguments they make

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in favor of their own position, it should also be true of the arguments they make to refute opponents. Persistent motive questioning would therefore provide a reasonable explanation for the correlation between conversation and attributions of self-interest. While theorists regard argumentative norms as positive influences on opinion, it is equally likely that a norm such as motive questioning could negatively affect opinion as well.

On the other hand, it might be that talking about politics exposes one to the opinions of self-interested people. Despite the repeated findings indicating the weakness of self-interest as a predictor of opinion, many public-spirited individuals will make self-interested arguments in conversation, as Eliasoph (1998) argues: "In the contemporary American public sphere, paradoxically, what marks a context as clearly 'public' is often precisely the fact that the talk there is so narrow, not at all public-minded." It also seems plausible that when people talk about politics, they engage in the kind of motive-questioning so evident in elite discourse. They need not be charging each other with disingenuousness; two altruists who agree can discuss the ulterior motives of third parties involved in a larger debate. The fact that most political conversation occurs between people who agree means that when the motives of political actors or other citizens are questioned, no one is present to defend them, and therefore the unanswered accusation is more likely to be accepted.

We might then expect that those who encounter more disagreement in their conversations would be less likely, at a given level of conversation, to believe that others are self-interested than those who do not encounter disagreement. Participants in heterogeneous conversation might learn that those who hold opposing opinions are

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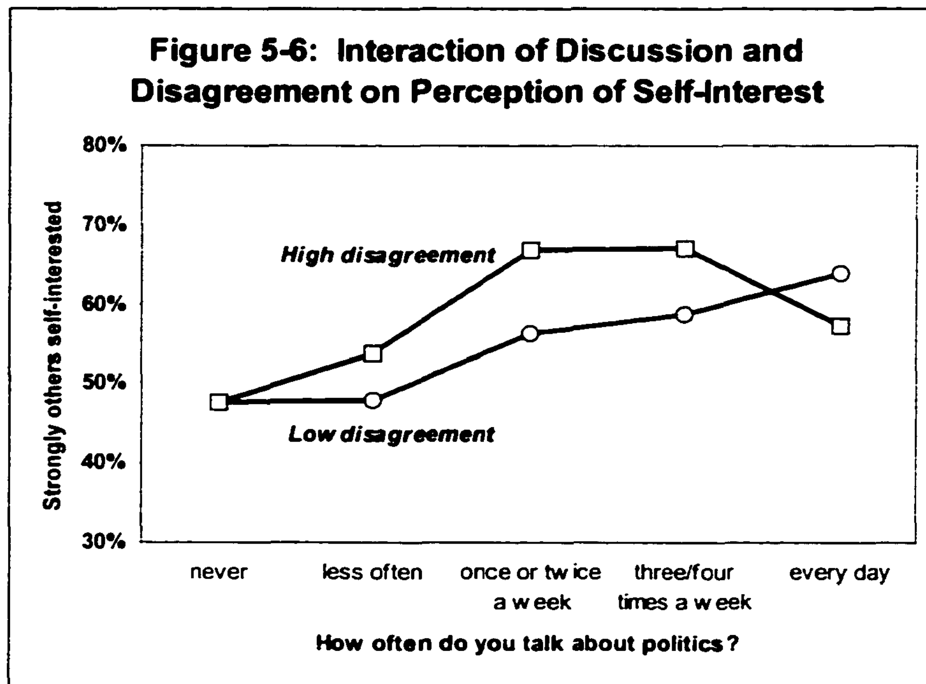
people of good faith with whom they have honest differences. In fact, the opposite proves to be the case. Frequency of disagreement is positively related to the perception of self-interest, even when overall frequency of conversation is controlled (Figure 5-6).[7]



We do see that among one group, those who discuss politics every day and report frequent disagreement, the perception of self-interest declines somewhat. Nonetheless, overall both conversation and disagreement are positively related to the perception of self-interest. In explaining this result, we can extend the previous argument to speculate that in discussions that include disagreement, the give and take of argumentation leads people to question others' motives with even greater frequency than is required in a

[7] Those who reported never discussing politics were not asked how much disagreement they encountered. For the purposes of Figure 5-6, both disagreement groups begin at the mean self-interest score for this group (47.5%).

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concordant discussion. Whatever they hear in response from their discussion partners, those who find themselves arguing in this way on a more regular basis could become still more likely to believe that most people are self-interested in their opinions. Once again, this is a plausible explanation of this result, but not one that these data can address directly.

It is no doubt the case that some of the political conversations that occur every day are truly deliberative. It is possible for participants who agree with one another to address competing claims fairly, granting the good will of those of opposing views. It is similarly possible for those who disagree to discuss the merits of policies and candidates without resorting to motive questioning. Nonetheless, the fact that both political conversation and political disagreement are positively related to the perception of self-interest strongly suggests that these kinds of conversations are the exception rather than the rule.

Rethinking the role of interest

One inescapable conclusion is that while some differences exist, the perception that others are self-interested is widespread. Where does this leave the citizen? If politics is nothing more than a competition among self-interested parties, is there any point to deliberation? Should we bother to engage those with whom we disagree if their opinions are narrowly self-serving? In fact, deliberation can and should be based on an integration of self-interest and the interests of others. When the types of interest truly at stake in political debate are distinguished, it becomes clear that the self-interest/common interest dichotomy does not adequately capture the effects of government policy on

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individuals. Most issues occupy a middle ground for the citizen, where self-interest is minimal, but the interest at stake is not universal. Instead, the most apparent effects are on a finite set of other citizens.

As I discussed earlier, certain proposals have clear, direct, and significant effects on individuals. At the national and state level the most notable are changes in tax policy. For example, opinions of Proposition 13 in California, which proposed (among other things) hefty reductions in property taxes, were closely correlated with home ownership and the value of individuals' property (Sears and Funk, 1991). At the other end of the scale are issues that involve absolute common interests. In order for an interest to be common, benefits must be distributed equally to all members of a society or community. National security is a common good, as is a public park. It is not always the case that providing a common good will involve equal costs to all citizens, first because all government expenditures involve the use of taxes taken more from some individuals than others (although the progressive taxation system operates on the principle that each citizen's payment constitutes a roughly equal level of hardship), and second because any expenditure involves an implicit trade-off with other potential expenditures. More specifically, it is also often the case that the costs for a common good are borne by a specific group (as when education, a quasi-public good, is paid for by those who play a state lottery).

Finally, there are issues where the interest at stake is not common, but does not involve the individual forming an opinion. The group affected could be small (e.g. taxi drivers) or large (e.g. welfare recipients). The vast majority of decisions made by government involve such interests. Furthermore, while most government decisions have

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wide effects, each will usually affect some individuals more than others. It is also important to note that any one issue may involve multiple considerations. To use the example of funding the helicopter, whether the government should do so raises questions of the common interest (national defense) and the interests of specific others (employees of the contractor which produces the helicopter).

Often, the different types of interest will conflict. In order to enhance mutually shared goods, we must almost always expend an individually held good, namely money. State funds are scarce, and every dollar spent in one area reduces that available to others, including the allocation of individually enjoyed benefits. In the case of government edicts imposing costs on private individuals or groups, the starting point (enhancing the mutually shared good by taking from individual goods) is the same, but the process brings different considerations into play.

For example, let us imagine that we wish to enhance the mutually shared good of clean air, and we have two alternatives. If we spend state money by buying pollution control devices for privately owned factories, we have reduced the available funds available for the satisfaction of other state goals, some of which are mutually beneficial (e.g. national security) and some of which are individually beneficial (e.g. tax cuts or entitlement benefits). In this case, the debate will likely center on the benefits to be gained in relation to a particular conception of costs, i.e. how bad the air really is and whether the devices are a "good buy" for the government. This does not mean, however, that consideration of individual costs will be completely absent. One common rhetorical tactic used by opponents of a particular program is to translate the common expenditure back to individual costs: "The taxpayers in my district didn't give us their money so we

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could waste it on this boondoggle."[8] On the other hand, if the proposal is to make the industries themselves pay for the devices, the benefits will be discussed in the same terms, but the costs will be weighed on questions of fairness, i.e. whether they impose too great a hardship on the industries, how they measure against the industries' responsibility for creating the pollution, etc. The industry will in turn argue that in order to pay for the devices they must lay off workers. Thus in both cases, common benefits are weighed against individual costs, although the connection may be more central to the debate in the second case.

However, unless you happen to work for the affected industry, self-interest will be of little use to you in arriving at an opinion. Rational choice theorists tend to assume that all kinds of policies are alike in that they may be reduced to a calculation of the individual's self-interest, but a look at the political world shows that this is plainly not the case. Some matters involve concrete benefits and costs for an individual, but most are more remote. If I am a farmer, a change in farm subsidies will directly affect my life, while my cousin the computer programmer will not be so affected. For the computer programmer, the interest in seeing his cousin prosper may be sufficient to outweigh the cost to each taxpayer of maintaining farm subsidies, as long as that cost remains minimal. If, on the other hand, the proposal is to drastically increase farm subsidies by cutting welfare benefits to millions, the computer programmer may conclude that the benefits to his cousin are insufficient to justify a hardship inflicted on a large segment of society. The citizen will seek a balance between his own interests and those of others; as the

[8] This formulation is sometimes used in support of expenditures as well, with speakers emphasizing the trivial per-taxpayer cost of a particular program.

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number of others affected by a policy and the severity of that effect increase, the relative weight of self-interest should decrease.

Only on rare occasions will a clear and direct cost compete with a clear and direct benefit. Nonetheless, in the majority of political choices, the weighing of self-interest and the interests of others will be, if necessarily imprecise, relatively uncomplicated due to the slight self-interest involved. While every citizen is affected by government policies in numerous ways, the total range of policies is so great that in most cases, the individual's interest in a particular policy will be remote and difficult to ascertain. If we set aside the fact that each expenditure involves some of each taxpayer's money, we see that it usually becomes extremely difficult for even the most informed and educated citizen to follow a path from a policy to his own interest. While the computer programmer could calculate the impact of farm subsidies on food prices, taking into account grain imports and exports to arrive at the possible change in the price of his corn flakes, chances are that he won't, not simply because of the cost of doing the calculation, but because the result of either outcome will seem insignificant. This point must be emphasized: *in most political choices, the impact on the individual is either so slight or so difficult to assess that self-interest becomes useless as a consideration*. Consequently, other criteria must be employed.

Although most policies affect many people, very few affect all or most people. There are notable exceptions, such as Social Security (of which all citizens are present or potential beneficiaries). When the benefits and costs to a particular individual are negligible, considerations apart from self-interest will have to determine her opinion. Since most policies affect a finite subset of the population, this means that *the majority of*

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citizens will, on any given policy, be forming their opinions on grounds other than self-interest. While some have lamented the difficulty that incentives for self-serving behavior pose for theories of deliberative democracy (Knight & Johnson, 1994), this simple mathematical fact of the distribution of costs and benefits provides an answer. It is only necessary to accept a less utopian vision of public debate, acknowledging that self-interest may become an appropriate consideration in those circumstances where, for that particular individual, it becomes applicable.

Furthermore, in an ironic way the lack of influence held by an individual citizen frees her to consider the welfare of others. The disconnect between individual political choices and ultimate political outcomes enables consideration of others. In the economic realm, individual outcomes are the direct product of individual choices: if the consumer chooses Colgate over Crest, he gets Colgate (Meehl, 1977). In the political realm, on the other hand, outcomes have only an indirect relationship to individual choices. Except for the relatively small number of citizens who regularly take concrete political action, politics is fundamentally *not* about behavior. One may freely hold altruistic opinions without the concern that the holding of such opinions will result in adverse consequences for oneself. There is neither a cost for the opinion one holds, nor a cost in terms of outcome for casting one's vote a particular way, since a single vote will not determine the outcome of an election. Even for those who do participate actively, on an individual level their involvement in collective action will usually not have a demonstrable effect on outcomes (Olsen, 1965). Consequently, citizens are free in both opinion and action to ignore or act contrary to their interests without cost. As an example, one election year an upper-class liberal couple told me, "We realized that either way, we win. If the

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Democrats win, they'll put in place liberal policies with which we agree. And if the Republicans win, they'll reduce taxes on the wealthy." They voted Democratic without hesitation. Their vote was an opportunity for political expression; its lack of apparent material value liberated them from the need to consider self-interest. While people are quite imaginative in making connections between seemingly distant issues and their own lives (Gamson, 1992), the purpose is not necessarily to evaluate their own costs and benefits, but to bring insight and understanding.

Deliberation and self-interest

The context of citizen deliberation enables individuals to move beyond self-interested conceptions of politics because of its non-purposive nature (Habermas, 1984). Although citizens vote for candidates and on issues in referenda, their votes are not directly tied to the deliberative process. As a public, they are free to incorporate any considerations they wish. In conversation, these considerations will usually be required to be expansive. Citizen deliberation is above all a social undertaking. When we discuss political issues, we must provide reasons that incorporate consideration of others in order to maintain a conversation that goes beyond simple statements of preference.

Even in conversations without disagreement, people need to support their positions with reasons acceptable to others in order to carry discussion forward. This is not to say, of course, that people who are sufficiently similar not only in outlook but in interests could not discuss political matters in plainly self-interested terms. Two restaurant owners, for instance, might discuss a proposed increase in the minimum wage without expanding their discussion beyond the effects such an increase would have on

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their expenses. But these cases will be relatively infrequent; more often, political discussion will need to expand beyond the interests of the participants simply because of the nature of political issues. In this way, everyday conversation does largely adhere to the deliberative standard.

Political conversation thus has the potential to enhance regard for others. Even if some common-interest argumentation may be motivated by a desire not to appear selfish (Fearon, 1998), when one is forced to argue in terms that incorporate others, one may not only come to understand one's positions in more public terms (Bohman, 1996), but one may in fact change, taking on new concerns as a citizen (Arendt, 1959) rather than merely an individual or a consumer. Simply participating in a common enterprise can encourage cooperation. Experiments on rational choice dilemmas have shown that in circumstances where non-cooperation maximizes individual benefits, subjects are more likely to cooperate when given the opportunity to communicate with each other (Dawes, van de Kragt, & Orbell, 1990). A communicative process in which the interests of others and the possibilities for mutual action for common benefit are explored can thus produce other-regarding choices, even when incentives for free riding are strong.

Undeniably, citizens are conflicted when it comes to balancing their own interests and the interests of others, particularly members of the larger national community, most of whom we never meet. As Robert Bellah et al (1985) report, "Buried within their language of individual self-interest is what we have called a second language of social commitment...Such 'natural citizens'...experience little conflict between their self-interest and the community's public interest precisely because a long-term involvement in the community has led them to define their very identity in terms of it." Enabling

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citizens to share the same feelings of kinship and involvement with more remote others is a key challenge for advocates of deliberation. A reconciliation of self-interest and the common good requires first an acknowledgment that the two are not necessarily in conflict. When presented with specific issues, we find that most of time the decisions are less troubling than we imagine them to be in the abstract. Implicit in much deliberative theory is an assumption that without a normative requirement mandating the bracketing of interests, political discussion will inevitably degenerate into incompatible self-interested claims. But as we have seen, the extent to which this is likely is highly dependent on the issue at question and the identity of the participants. The greater danger may be that people will assume that others are self-interested.

Unfortunately, much of the presentation of politics in news media tells a story in which self-interest is the primary motivation behind statements and actions. Media presentations are important to conversation in part because they perform an "articulation function" (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) by giving us the words, phrases and lines of argument we then use in political discussion. They also influence the frames of reference through which we understand and discuss political issues (Gamson, 1992). Our expectations of conversation may also be influenced by news media, just as they are by the larger opinion climate in which we reside (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). For instance, if most people in town seem to be voting Republican, I expect that my coworkers will be Republicans, even if we haven't discussed the election yet. It seems reasonable to suggest that similar expectations could prevail with regard to a larger national community and conversational norms: if the citizens I see in news media seem to be self-interested in their political opinions, then I may predict that some of my interpersonal contacts will be as well.

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In the political realm, we concern ourselves with the well-being of others and the community. Both the norms of discourse and the nature of the questions involved invite us to think, speak, and act with the concerns of the public in mind. Political decisions by definition involve the community at large. Even when parties explicitly argue for their self-interest, they do so with the understanding that their intended audience will judge the validity of their claims on more general criteria, either the common good or principles such as fairness.

Deliberative democracy demands that citizens discuss politics with each other. When they do, they must offer at least some public reasons for their choices and opinions. Vote choice offers a good illustration. We may make two arguments for our vote choices, one private and one public: *I prefer* Candidate X for reasons A, B, and C; or *Candidate X is the better candidate* for reasons D, E, and F (Stoker, 1992). The first requires little or no justification, while the second demands public reasons. A normative requirement prohibiting *any* self-interested claims, however, not only places unrealistic demands on the participants, particularly those with more limited skills of analysis and articulation, it is not functional for democratic purposes. Because it excludes personal testimony (Sanders, 1997), it actually makes it harder for the participants to understand and assess the interests of others. Often, individuals are the only ones who can offer the most complete articulation of their interests. If they are forbidden from doing so, their interests will not be known or accounted for.

The demand of "public" reasons should therefore be reconceived not as a requirement that all reasons must be based solely on the common good, but simply that all reasons must be acceptable to others, thus allowing arguments based on, for instance,

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the principle of justice (Cohen, 1997). What Laura Stoker (1992) argues about acting ethically, that it "does not require a subversion of self-regard or interest, but it does minimally seek a reconciliation of that self-regard and the interests of others," can also be said of deliberation. One individual's conception of the common good may include the interests of specific others; "...the interests, aims, and ideals that comprise the common good are those that survive deliberation, interests that, on public reflection, we think it legitimate to appeal to in making claims on social resources." (Cohen, 1989). We may on occasion judge some individual claims as legitimate; a reasonable ideal of deliberation leaves this possibility open.

James Madison insisted in Federalist #10 that "No man is allowed to be a judge in his own cause, because his interest would certainly bias his judgment, and, not improbably, corrupt his integrity." The nature of politics is such that the cause is usually not our own; deliberation thus allows citizens to judge their common cause with minimal concern for self-interest. Unfortunately, the survey evidence presented here suggests that while everyday political conversation may increase people's regard for others in political questions, it reduces the extent to which they believe others are motivated by concern for the larger community. Conversation dominated by motive questioning could produce such opinions – and would necessarily fail to be truly deliberative.

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Chapter 6
Information, Conversation, and Deliberation

[Man] is capable of rectifying his mistakes, by discussion and experience. Not by experience alone. There must be discussion, to show how experience is to be interpreted. Wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument: but facts and arguments, to produce any effect on the mind, must be brought before it... In the case of any person who is really deserving of confidence, how has it become so? Because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct... Because he has felt, that the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this; nor is it in the nature of human intellect to become wise in any other manner.

John Stuart Mill, On Liberty

The importance of political knowledge to an active citizenry seems beyond question. In order to participate in a meaningful way, citizens must have some understanding of the workings of government, the consequences of policies, and the goals of those they elect. Deliberation is itself impossible without political information. One cannot deliberate on a proposed policy without knowing its content, or on an election without knowing the agendas of those seeking office. In order to assess whether news media prepare citizens adequately for deliberation, and whether the political conversation that does occur performs the educational function characteristic of deliberation in theory, we must examine the political knowledge held by the citizenry

Unfortunately, it appears that a great many Americans are ill-equipped for deliberation. For years, researchers have bemoaned the low levels of political knowledge identified in survey research. As Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) wrote, "The democratic citizen is expected to be well informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what

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alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are. By such standards the voter falls short." Similarly, Angus Campbell et al (1960) found citizens to be largely unaware of what the government was up to. Philip Converse (1964) classified only 2.5% of voters as "ideologues," those whose opinions were constrained by a coherent set of overarching themes, and a further 9% as "near-ideologues." The rest of the citizenry, he argued, held attitudes which were inconsistent, ungrounded, and contradictory. In addition, only 17% had a complete understanding of the concepts of liberalism and conservatism. "The two simplest truths I know about the distribution of political information in modern electorates," Converse wrote later, "are that the mean is low and the variance high." (1990). Lack of understanding of the nature of ideology and its use in the political world appears to persist. When asked which of the two major parties was more conservative on the national level, only 57% of respondents to the 1992 NES answered the Republicans; this figure has not risen above 60% in the last thirty years.

Although another of Converse's findings, response instability - the tendency of respondents to give varying answers to the same questions at different points in time - may reflect reasonable ambivalence rather than ignorance (Hochschild, 1993), researchers continue to find that citizens perform poorly on political information quizzes (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Nor has there been an appreciable increase in citizens' political knowledge in recent years, despite steadily increasing educational levels (Bennett, 1989).

There are some who make a conscious decision to avoid news and conversation about politics, wearing their disaffection as a badge of honor (Eliasoph, 1990).

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Nonetheless, most citizens view keeping informed as a civic obligation, however sporadically they comply (Graber, 1984; Hagen, 1997). Low levels of information thus appear to represent a serious weakness in the practice of democracy. However, if the electorate seems ill-informed at a particular moment, the context in which such a result is found is as likely a suspect as the citizenry's inherent limitations (Alvarez, 1998; Key, 1966; Kinder & Herzog, 1993). That context is created by both press reports and political discussion.

An opposing body of research contends that citizens actually do quite well with the information they have. This opinion comes from rational choice theorists starting with Anthony Downs (1957), who argued that since the costs of acquiring political information far outweigh the benefits, it would be irrational to seek information. More recent advocates of "low information rationality" (Popkin, 1991) argue that a few informational shortcuts – for instance, the endorsements of key political figures - provide voters with all the data they need to make good decisions. Informational shortcuts use limited data as a proxy for a larger body of data, allowing the voter to draw conclusions as though the larger body of information were known. For instance, Arthur Lupia (1994) found that in voting on insurance reform initiatives, relatively uninformed California voters were able to use knowledge of which position the insurance industry advocated to arrive at voting decisions that mirrored those they would have made with more complete information.

In another example, Samuel Popkin (1991) offers the story of Gerald Ford failing to shuck a tamale before eating it as a cue to Hispanic voters in 1976 that Ford did not appreciate their concerns. The publicity attending this story, however, was less the result

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of people reaching conclusions based on the event than the result of journalists believing that they would and presenting the event as such; Popkin offers no evidence that Ford was in fact insensitive to Hispanic concerns. A journalistic interpretation of the event and the repetition that comes with it are essential to its enshrinement as an "official" informational shortcut. Such cases are far from uncommon; political reporters are always on the lookout for events or statements that can be presented as symbols of a candidate's electoral prospects or personality. This is particularly true of debate coverage, which often pivots on supposedly "decisive moments" meant to characterize a candidate. George Bush looking at his watch, Michael Dukakis answering a question about the death penalty with reason instead of passion, Richard Nixon sweating profusely – all were presented by the press as particularly revealing, and thus became shortcuts for voter understanding of these candidates.

In these cases as well as others, particular moments were highlighted by the press because they graphically incarnated conclusions reporters had already reached about the candidates. This is not necessarily problematic, but in order for an informational shortcut to be useful, it must lead to accurate conclusions; the goal is not simply to arrive at a decision as quickly as possible. Although misconceptions and false information are rarely discussed in public opinion literature (particularly rational choice analyses, which usually follow Downs (1957) in assuming that all available information is accurate), they can play a significant role in opinion. For example, Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter (1996) show that significant numbers of people who voted for Bush in 1988 were in effect fooled into doing so: they believed that the Reagan administration had increased funding for causes they supported, such as the environment, schools and the poor, when

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in fact the opposite was true. These individuals not only voted differently than they might have, but were also almost certainly less likely to engage in any political action to change administration policy on these issues. Unlike lack of information, misperception tends to be valenced, in that it leads to conclusions supportive of one or another side of an issue (Kuklinski & Quirk, 1997). Misperception can thus have electoral as well as policy consequences; despite the apparent utility of information shortcuts, a substantial number of voters do not use them successfully (Bartels, 1996). If it is truly endemic, misperception on a particular issue may constitute prima facie evidence that deliberation has either failed or failed to occur.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Walter Lippmann (1922) argued that given the complexity of the modern world and the varied activities of the state, the ideal of the "omnicompetent" citizen, who was informed about all issues, was an impossibility. Instead, society should rely on a class of impartial experts that would provide policymakers with the information needed to make decisions. John Dewey (1927) responded that "No government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few." To those such as Dewey who advocated expanding democracy to rely more on the input and participation of the citizenry, Lippmann (1927) responded that doing so would only exacerbate democracy's ills by giving more power to a populace ill-equipped to make decisions.

Is there a way to reconcile Dewey's optimism and Lippmann's realism? One answer to Lippmann would be that greater engagement would enhance knowledge, creating competent if not omnicompetent citizens. Even if the public's abilities to

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analyze policy are necessarily imperfect, they need not be perfect to arrive at good decisions. The question is not whether the masses have as much information at their disposal as the experts, but whether they have sufficient information to render judgment, and the capacity and ability to do so. Given the time and permission to decide, they may indeed prove wise (Yankelovich, 1991), arriving at decisions which benefit not only themselves but the populace as a whole. Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro (1992) argue that the question is not how much each individual citizen knows, but whether the citizenry holds enough information collectively. If it does, a collective deliberation may take place without any particular citizen necessarily deliberating (Page, 1996). The notion that the public can show sound judgment without any of its members necessarily knowing very much can actually be traced to Aristotle (Bickford, 1996a). Although Dewey did conceive of a collective aspect to knowledge and discourse (Peters, 1989), the question of individuals becomes critical if it appears that certain individuals are systematically shut out of deliberation. As I argued earlier, it would be one matter if half the public deliberated on any particular issue, and membership in that half was randomly determined or at least varied from issue to issue. But if certain people usually deliberate and others never do, then a systematic distortion exists. As we saw in Chapter 3, this is precisely the case: conversation is in fact largely the province of members of more powerful groups.

Although Dewey (1927) conceded that "There are too many publics and too much of public concern for our existing resources to cope with," he also hoped that evolving communication technology could mitigate the atomizing effects of mass society and establish, if not a substitute for face-to-face contact, some basis on which to bond remote

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citizens to one another. This view is shared by others as well (Abramson, 1992; Barber, 1984; see Simonson, 1996 for a review). His argument is not so much that communication will produce civic education in the form of factual knowledge, but that it will show us where our common interests lie. The logical question, then, is whether the extraordinary changes in communication technology in the intervening years have in fact done so. The unfortunate answer is that enhanced opportunities for political learning have not enhanced the aggregate knowledge held by the bulk of the citizenry (Neuman, 1986).

One conclusion that is widely embraced is that those who rely on the medium dominant in Lippmann and Dewey's day, the newspaper, are better informed than other citizens. Numerous studies have found that newspaper reading outstrips other media as a source of political information (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997). John Robinson and Dennis Davis (1990) list the traditional explanations for the assumed superiority of newspapers in imparting knowledge:

> First, a TV newscast has fewer words and ideas per news story than appear in a front-page story in a quality newspaper. Second, attention to a newscast is distracted and fragmented compared to attention when reading. Third, television newscasts provide little of the repetition of information, or redundancy, necessary for comprehension. Fourth, TV viewers cannot 'turn back' to, or review, information they do not understand or that they need to know to understand subsequent information. Fifth, print news stories are more clearly delineated, with headlines, columns, sidebars, and the like. Sixth, television news programs fail to coordinate pictures and text. Finally, television has more limited opportunity to review and develop an entire story.

Despite an impressive body of research arguing against television's ability to impart political knowledge, recent studies have in fact found significant information gains from television viewing (Chaffee & Frank, 1996). Thomas Patterson and Robert McClure's (1976) dramatic finding that voters learn more from campaign advertisements

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than from television news has been challenged in subsequent years, with many studies reaching the opposite conclusion (Zhao & Chaffee, 1995). One panel study found that television use (but not newspapers) increased knowledge of candidates over the course of a Senate campaign (Lesher & McKean, 1997). Jeffrey Mondak (1995) found that even explicit newspaper content aimed at familiarizing readers with candidates' issue positions in the form of front-page boxed statements on one issue at a time did not notably increase knowledge of candidate positions. Information that voters gained from newspapers was apparently also available elsewhere. Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992) report that in some cases learning from television surpassed learning from newspapers when the information contained in each was the same. Their experiments suggest that cognitive skills determine in part how much individuals retain from exposure to media messages, indicating that self-selection, modality, and content are all critical factors in explaining differences in learning from various media.

Similarly, Vincent Price and John Zaller (1993) suggest that information gain from media is best predicted by prior knowledge. In other words, while the less-informed learn some things and miss others, "well-informed people succeed in learning most types of news, regardless of the topic." This may be due in part to the fact that the better-informed have more highly developed political schemas, allowing them to assimilate and integrate new information more easily (Conover & Feldman, 1984; Lau & Erber, 1985). In addition, it is possible that, as Doris Graber (1994) argues, "most election news stories cater to the concerns and comprehension levels of politically sophisticated elites." In sum, the contribution of television news to voter information is still open to debate (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997).

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In one sense, it is not surprising that the studies mentioned here reach varying conclusions. Although they go back almost thirty years, most concern a single election. One must keep in mind that each election or policy debate creates a distinct information environment. It is therefore possible – in fact likely - that the news in general and different media in particular will provide more issue information in one election than in another.

The relative value of various media in imparting different kinds of knowledge tells only part of the story, however. I propose accepting a number of principles to lead us toward a reasonable ideal of citizen knowledge. The first and most obvious is that no citizen can know everything. There is simply too much information available on too many issues, as Lippmann pointed out. The second is that more information is better than less information. Assuming that what one knows is not false, the more one knows, the more complete a decision will be. The third principle is that some pieces of information are more important than others. This principle allows one to circumvent the need for the omnicompetent citizen.

For any given issue, there will be three general classes of information: information about the nature of the problem or the status quo; information about the content of proposals; and information about the possible consequences of proposals (while there are certainly other kinds of information, these will be most central to any debate). The first class is usually (although not always) characterized by less uncertainty; the question here is which facts are important to evaluating proposals. The second class is easily ascertained, but critical to forming judgment. The third class is open to the greatest amount of interpretation. Unfortunately, it is difficult to assess, except on a case-

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by-case basis, whether the public holds the specific information it needs to make appropriate judgments. Each issue brings with it a distinct universe of information; in some cases a citizen will require only one or two facts to be adequately informed, while in others more complex knowledge will be necessary.

Consequently, there is no single body of facts we can specify which will differentiate the informed from the uninformed. This distinction may be possible, however, when we examine a single issue in isolation. An adequate test to determine whether a particular piece of information is vital to understanding an issue might be this: would knowledge of the information cause anyone to change his or her opinion on the issue? An example will illustrate the kinds of information that would pass this test. Recently, Republicans in Congress passed, and President Clinton later vetoed, a repeal of the estate tax, which they refer to as a "death tax." A citizen considering whether the tax should be abolished would need to know one vital piece of information: that the current tax does not apply to the first $675,000 of any individual's estate, a figure scheduled to rise to $1 million in 2006. Concerns of fairness and appropriate taxation will likely turn on this fact, because the tax applies almost exclusively to substantial estates, i.e. those of wealthy citizens.

This is an example of what I call a *critical datum*: a piece of information that is sufficient in and of itself to determine an individual's position on the issue (or candidate). A critical datum could be an informational shortcut, such as the stance of the insurance companies in Lupia's (1994) research, but it is not necessary that it permit the individual to infer other information. Of course, there is no general theory that will predict the effects of a critical datum within a given issue; some issues will have no critical data, and

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different critical data will have different power. In an election campaign, one issue position could function for some as a critical datum, although evidence indicates that most people do not belong to an "issue public" for whom one issue is all-important (Jacoby, 1999; Neuman, 1986). We may conceive of a hierarchy of data for each issue running in importance from the critical datum down to the irrelevant fact. Of course, each individual's hierarchy will be slightly different.

Thus, the second principle of political knowledge must be modified: whether more information is better than less depends on the relationship of each new datum to the store of data already held. If a datum high in the hierarchy of information is missing, the addition of a lower-ranked datum will be unhelpful, and may lead to an erroneous conclusion. Consider the following example concerning a voter in 1988. The voter is in favor of increased protection of the environment, but knows nothing about the environmental records of either George Bush or Michael Dukakis. If he sees a particular Bush advertisement, he will learn that Boston Harbor has remained polluted under Dukakis' tenure as Massachusetts governor. He now has more information than he did before. If he makes his vote choice based on the information now in his possession, he will conclude that Bush is more likely to protect the environment than Dukakis. Given his preferences, this is likely to be an incorrect choice, since Dukakis had been endorsed by all the major environmental groups and in fact had a record on the environment superior to Bush's. The endorsements and the rest of Dukakis' and Bush's records on the environment should rank higher in the hierarchy of information than Boston Harbor; only if those higher-ranking facts are known can the fact of Boston Harbor be properly contextualized and weighted.

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The logical question then, is whether the vital pieces of information actually find their way to individual citizens. Benjamin Page (1996) argues for a division of labor, in which a small group of "professional communicators" is responsible for obtaining information and building arguments, then passing what they know on to the public: "...if extensive political information is available somewhere in the system, not everyone has to pay attention to it all the time; a lot of information, and reasonable conclusions from it, will trickle out through opinion leaders and cue givers to ordinary citizens." Is this formulation also too optimistic? It attempts to answer those who offer hegemonic interpretations of news coverage (Gitlin, 1980; Herman & Chomsky, 1988) by arguing that in a communication environment as varied as ours, most ideas and facts will be published or broadcast somewhere; as long they are, they will find their way to the citizenry. For such a system to work, however, one critical element is required: citizens must engage each other in political discussion so that information and arguments can "trickle out."

When they do, the body of knowledge held in aggregate by the group becomes the resource available to each individual. Importantly, the breadth of this knowledge will depend in part on the makeup and diversity of the group. If everyone in the group is alike in their opinions and information sources, discordant facts and arguments are less likely to find their way in (Granovetter, 1973), and inaccurate information is less likely to be corrected (Chaffee, 1986).

The nature of critical data is such that once they are known, they are highly likely to be raised in conversation as people formulate arguments and arrive at positions. In news coverage, on the other hand, quotes are more apt to be selected for publication if the

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speaker attacks and vilifies opponents than if she offers a particularly cogent rationale for a policy. This is one possible explanation for the fact that exposure to political conversation frequently outperforms exposure to news media as a predictor of political knowledge. To use the example of the estate tax, a Lexis/Nexis search for the first six months of 2000 revealed that only 18% of newspaper articles, 12% of magazine articles, and 9% of news transcripts concerning the estate tax mentioned the $675,000 figure. It would then seem likely that most people would be unaware of the critical datum necessary to judge this issue, particularly if they have not discussed it with others.

Conversation and information

There is ample evidence that when discussion occurs, knowledge is enhanced. Early research on political campaigns in the United States found that personal interaction was an important determinant of information flow. Formulated by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) and elaborated by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), the "two-step flow" hypothesis posited a one-way flow of information from the media to "opinion leaders" and from them to followers. Although later research indicated that the view of a politically sophisticated elite speaking to uninformed others was not an entirely accurate representation of political conversation (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995), Katz and Lazarsfeld's work introduced a critical element to the analysis of political information reception.

Other research has confirmed that conversation remains critical to learning and retaining information. For instance, in a study of news comprehension, Robinson and Davis (1990) showed that while education is the greatest predictor of comprehension,

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quantity of political talk showed a strong linear relationship with knowledge in four separate surveys. Those who talked more were more likely to recall stories in the news and correctly describe the actors and events involved. This result echoed an earlier finding that discussion of events in the news predicted comprehension to a greater degree than any media use variable (Robinson & Levy, 1986). As Dewey (1927) put it, "Publication is partial and the public which results is partially informed and formed until the meanings it purveys pass from mouth to mouth."

The following analysis uses three data sets to explore the relationships among media use, conversation, and knowledge in electoral contexts. The first set is the National Election Studies, which since 1984 have asked respondents how often they discuss politics. The second is a study conducted in 1996 by the Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Pennsylvania consisting of a four-wave cross-section supplemented by a panel drawn from the first wave and reinterviewed at later points in the campaign. Finally, the 1998 Annenberg California survey is examined as well.

Political knowledge tests such as those discussed here have been justifiably criticized for focusing on a narrow range of facts and ignoring what citizens *do* know (Popkin, 1991). Admittedly, surveys are not particularly good at assessing whether citizens are able to process political information and arrive at reasonable conclusions. As Doris Graber (1996) argues, "The typical survey research knowledge test focuses on what people ideally ought to know, rather than testing whether people are well-informed enough to cope with the civic tasks that face them." In short, while the types of knowledge measure by the NES and the Annenberg studies are useful, they do not tell

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anything approaching the entire story of citizen knowledge. Nonetheless, taken together they may stand in rough correlation to "true" political knowledge in all its breadth and complexity. While factual knowledge may be less important in evaluating a policy debate than an understanding of history or an appreciation of the realities of policy implementation, these qualities will usually travel together. We may therefore make cautious evaluations of patterns of knowledge while avoiding categorical conclusions about whether the American public is smart or stupid when it comes to politics.

Political sophistication, furthermore, is not a static characteristic of individuals, but is instead constantly renewed through media attention and discussion. It is, in short, "a resource rather than a trait" (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). One is not born sophisticated; political knowledge requires constant upkeep, and discussion is essential to this process (Gastil & Dillard, 1999).

The first questions I will ask are, how does conversation correlate with political knowledge, and to what extent does conversation predict knowledge over and above the contributions made by demographic variables and media use? As we see in Table 6-1, media use, conversation, and political knowledge are closely correlated. The only non-significant relationship is between talk radio listening and local news watching. It is worth noting that local news has less political content than national news; furthermore, a certain number of people watch local news primarily for sports or weather. It is thus not surprising that local news shows a lower correlation with political knowledge than other media variables.

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Table 6-1
Zero-Order Correlations:
Conversation, Media Use, and Political Knowledge
(1996 Annenberg Survey)

	Conversation	Newspaper	Local news	National news	Talk radio	Political interest
Newspaper	**.154****					
Local news	**.073****	.147**				
National news	**.188****	.232**	.468**			
Talk radio	**.245****	.119**	.021	.054*		
Political interest	**.371****	.172**	.179**	.277**	.257**	
Knowledge	**.354****	**.249****	**.197****	**.177****	**.229****	**.322****

* p<.05
** p<.01

These results come from a national sample of registered voters. Respondents were told an issue position, then asked whether it was held by Clinton, Dole, both candidates, or neither candidate. Twenty-three separate issues were tested, offering a scale including both easy and difficult questions (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1993) which resulted in a normal distribution, unlike the knowledge scales in the other data sets (see Appendix). Despite the fact that all four options were reread by the interviewer before every question, respondents were largely unwilling to answer "both" or "neither." The issues on which the candidates agreed (NAFTA, the death penalty, and same-sex marriages) had among the lowest percentage of correct responses. This pattern might indicate a great deal of guessing, with respondents more likely to guess one candidate or the other. On the other hand, because press accounts stress disagreement between candidates within an overarching campaign narrative structured around conflict, the idea that opposing candidates could agree on anything may simply not occur to most people.

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The National Election Studies measure a number of different political knowledge domains, and offer the benefit of data going back to 1984, when questions about political conversation were first included.[1] To assess knowledge of public figures, respondents are asked if they know the position held by a number of individuals. Although the list varies from year to year, it always includes the vice-president and usually includes Congressional leaders and foreign heads of state. The second knowledge domain is control of Congress: respondents are asked which party controlled each house before the election. Finally, knowledge of the issue positions of the two major party candidates for president is measured. Respondents are asked to place each candidate on a differential scale on a series of issues. For instance, the abortion question runs from "By law, abortion should never be permitted," to "By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice." I coded answers as correct if a respondent placed the Republican candidate closer to the conservative position than the Democratic candidate. Only issues marked by clear differences in positions were utilized.

As Figure 6-1 shows, the correlation between conversation and knowledge as measured by the NES varies considerably from year to year. Nineteen ninety-two appears to be a low point for the effectiveness of conversation for knowledge of candidate issue positions, while talk and knowledge of political figures and control of Congress were lowest in 1996. Of course, correlations are affected by the general variance in knowledge; the low correlation in 1996 between conversation and knowledge

[1] The NES asks whether respondents ever discuss politics, then asks those who say yes how often they discuss politics and how many days in the last week they did so. The three questions are asked in sequence. The Annenberg survey of 1996 used an identical format.

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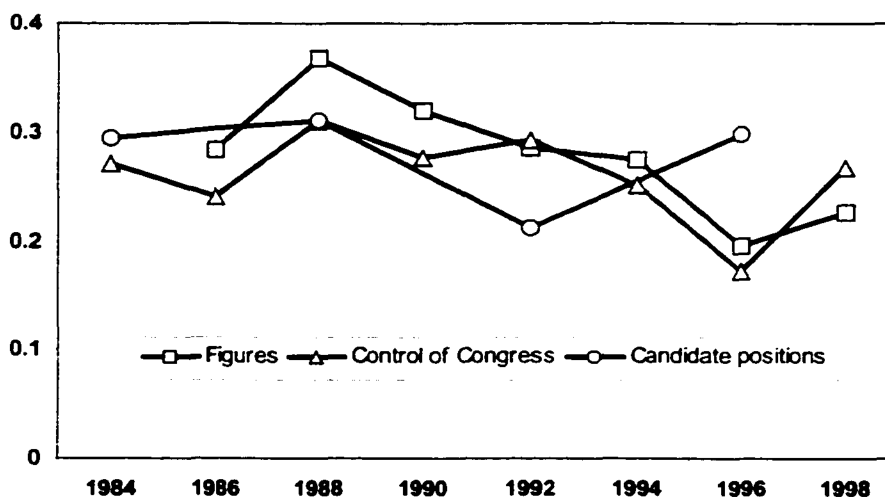
of control of Congress is due in part to the fact that three-quarters of respondents knew that Republicans were in the majority. This may also explain the low correlation for identification of political figures in that year, since here too most respondents scored well (see Appendix). Overall, the correlation between knowledge and conversation is a strong one, falling between .25 and .35 in most years.

Figure 6-1: Zero-Order Correlations Between Frequency of Conversation and Measures of Knowledge (NES)



It is notable that the correlations between knowledge of candidate issue positions and political conversation on the National Election Studies are lower than that obtained by the 1996 Annenberg survey. The format of the NES questions, where respondents were asked to place both candidates in separate questions, may result in less guessing than the Annenberg format, where respondents are given a position and asked which

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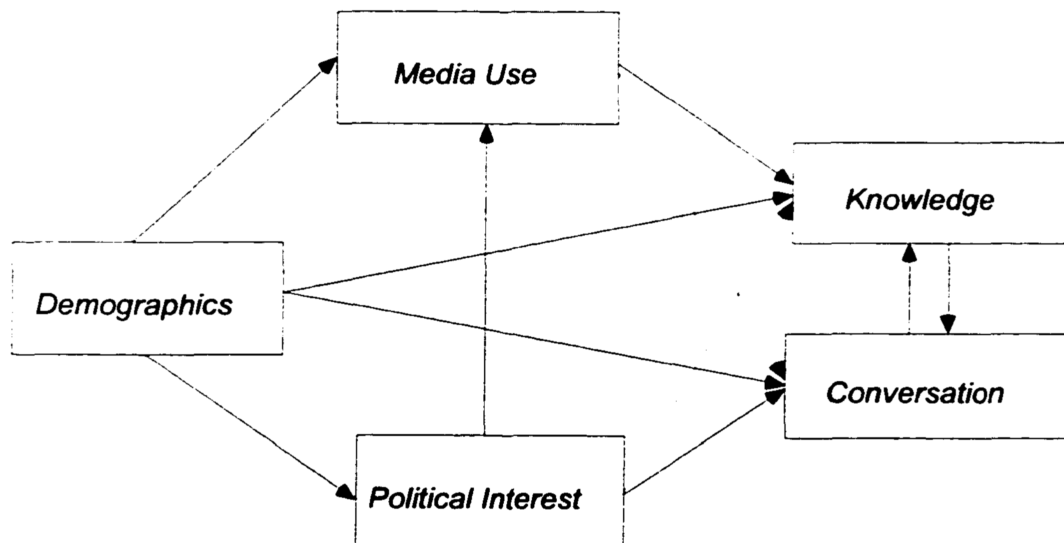
candidate holds it. Respondents on the NES do score slightly lower on similar questions than respondents on the Annenberg survey.

The question of causality

The next question to address is whether conversation leads to knowledge or knowledge leads to conversation. There is reason to believe that both are in fact true. Without question, people can learn political information from their conversation partners as issues and candidates are discussed. In addition, it seems likely that those who are more knowledgeable about politics will be more willing to discuss political subjects with their family, friends, and co-workers. They will be less likely to fear displaying ignorance or being unable to provide justifications and evidence for their opinions. Furthermore, both knowledge and conversation are influenced by the same classes of variables. A general model of influence, then, can be seen in Figure 6-2:

Figure 6-2
General Model of Influences on Conversation and Knowledge



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The close correlation between political discussion and political knowledge, combined with the inherent weaknesses of cross-sectional data, make precise estimates of the comparative magnitude of reciprocal effects extremely difficult. Obtaining such estimates using a technique such as two-stage least squares regression or structural equation modeling would require the identification of exogenous variables that are correlated with knowledge but not discussion, and separate exogenous variables correlated with discussion but not knowledge. As it happens, such variables are not easy to find. While party identification is associated with discussion but not knowledge (Republicans talk about politics more than Democrats and Independents, but show no higher levels of knowledge), there is no variable measured in the data sets at hand that is associated with knowledge but not talk. The consequence is that while we may use party identification to construct an instrument for use in a two-stage least squares regression predicting knowledge, we are unable to do the same for conversation.

This is not to say that the predictors of discussion and knowledge are identical, but rather that they are associated in bivariate terms with an identical set of variables. In addition to the media use variables shown in Table 6-1, both discussion and knowledge correlate with education, income, gender, age, race, political interest, and ideological strength. This close association suggests that discussion is both an arena of learning and in significant part the province of the knowledgeable.

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Table 6-2: Predicting Candidate Knowledge

	NES (1996)		Annenberg National (1996)		Annenberg California (1998)	
Gender (female)	-.39*** (.11)	*-.09*	-1.47*** (.17)	*-.16*	-.28* (.13)	*-.06*
Race (white)	.43* (.17)	*.06*	.73** (.24)	*.06*	.26 (.15)	*.05*
Age	-.02 (.02)	*-.15*	.10** (.03)	*.34*	.03 (.02)	*.20*
Age squared	.00 (.00)	*.01*	-.001** (.00)	*-.33*	-.00 (.00)	*-.18*
Education	.48*** (.05)	*.25*	.88*** (.08)	*.22*	.31*** (.06)	*.17*
Income in thousands	.00 (.00)	*.04*	.01** (.003)	*.06*	.001 (.001)	*.02*
Newspaper	.03 (.02)	*.04*	.16*** (.03)	*.10*	.07** (.02)	*.09*
Network news	.03 (.02)	*.04*	.11** (.04)	*.06*	-.04 (.03)	*-.05*
Talk radio	.06 (.03)	*.04*	.29*** (.05)	*.11*	.14*** (.03)	*.14*
Ideological strength	.35*** (.04)	*.21*	.06 (.12)	*.01*	-.08 (.09)	*-.03*
Political interest	.60*** (.09)	*.19*	1.00*** (.13)	*.16*	.91*** (.08)	*.36*
Political discussion	.10*** (.03)	*.10*	.35*** (.04)	*.16*	.11** (.04)	*.10*
Constant	1.35** (.51)		3.24*** (.80)		-.25 (.55)	
R^2	.360		.302		.325	

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$
Standard errors in parentheses, standardized coefficients in italic.

The differences between the two data sets beg some cautions in interpreting these results. While both the Annenberg survey and the NES measured respondents' knowledge of candidate positions, they did so in different ways. While the Annenberg survey offered a specific issue position and asked whether it was held by Clinton, Dole,

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both or neither, the NES asked respondents to place each candidate on a scale; correct and incorrect answers were then built from these scales. Overall, respondents did slightly better on the Annenberg versions of questions covering the same issues. The NES version required respondents to at the very least be willing to place both candidates, whereas knowledge of only one candidate would in most cases have been sufficient to answer correctly on the Annenberg questions. In addition, while there is some overlap the NES questions are less specific than the Annenberg questions; any number of governmental policies could fall under the categories of "aid to blacks" or "protecting the environment."

If we then assume that the NES scale measures a more complex and integrative form of political knowledge while the Annenberg scale measures a wider array of issues, a few differences are worthy of note. While the curvilinear relationship of age to knowledge is significant in the Annenberg data, it fails to predict results on the NES scale. While education has a roughly equivalent effect in both cases, income provides no further predictive power in the case of the NES.

None of the media use variables reaches statistical significance in the case of the NES, while all are significant in the Annenberg data. One interpretation of this result is that the more difficult but broadly focused NES questions measure political knowledge that is less dependent on the issues discussed in a particular campaign and more general in nature. While more frequent users of media might be more likely to learn that Dole supported a 15% tax cut, knowing which candidate was more supportive of environmental regulations requires a general assessment of a variety of policy positions which may or may not have been reported on recently. It is therefore not surprising that

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ideological strength shows an extremely strong effect in the NES data but not in the Annenberg data; strong conservatives and strong liberals are apparently more adept at connecting issue positions to arrive at a placement of the candidates on more general themes of government priorities.

Despite these differences, the frequency of political conversation predicts levels of political knowledge fairly strongly in both cases, even when all other factors are controlled. It is reasonable to conclude that a significant amount of learning takes place in everyday political conversation. It is also fair to assume that if learning on candidate issue positions occurs in conversation, there are other types of political knowledge that are bolstered as well. Increases in the factual knowledge measured by these survey items may not be the most important effect of political discussion. If the benefits of discussion are a result of its dynamic nature, participants may be gaining sophistication in ways difficult (though by no means impossible) to measure in surveys. Citizens should in theory emerge from deliberation not only with new facts but with a more complex understanding of issues and an ability to assess evidence for claims and construct persuasive arguments. It is possible that the positive effects of political discussion could be identified even more strongly with data that combined a factual quiz with in-depth interviews (Luskin, 1987).

Conversation and knowledge gaps

Conversation significantly predicts knowledge, but are those with knowledge simply gaining more, while those without knowledge gain nothing? Some hold that interpersonal communication may have the potential to mitigate knowledge gaps

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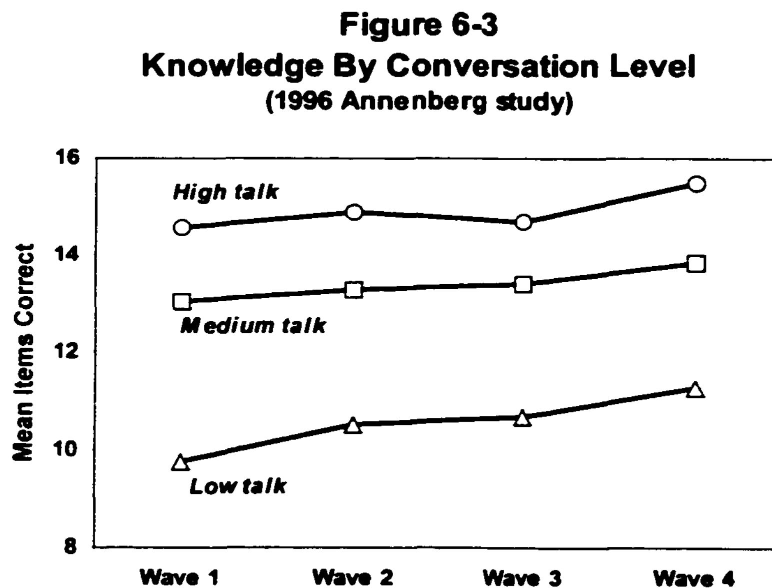
(Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996), although this has yet to be demonstrated empirically. Briefly, the knowledge gap hypothesis states that because of unequal access to media and unequal ability to comprehend mediated information, communication campaigns generally and political news in particular primarily benefit those who already possess information, thus exacerbating inequality (Gaziano, 1983).

Political discussion is likewise distributed unequally: those who are more highly educated, wealthy, and knowledgeable are more likely to discuss politics. If there is a linear association between discussion and learning, those who talk more will learn more. We may nonetheless be able to find some situations in which political discussion does narrow knowledge gaps.

As the 1996 campaign progressed, the overall gap in candidate issue knowledge between people engaging in different levels of conversation did narrow somewhat, with those talking less frequently gaining slightly more:

Figure 6-3
Knowledge By Conversation Level
(1996 Annenberg study)



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The 1996 survey also included a smaller panel study using the same questionnaire. Although the small size of the subgroups in this sample constrains us from making any sweeping conclusions, the data in Figure 6-4 do suggest that conversation can mitigate knowledge gaps. Those who scored lower on knowledge at Time I gained more from conversation than did those in the medium and high knowledge groups over the course of the campaign. The correlation between conversation and knowledge at Time II for the group scoring low in knowledge at Time I was .273, compared with .183 and .195 for the medium and high knowledge groups. This is unsurprising for two reasons. The first is that the less one knows, the more one is able to learn. Many in the high knowledge group are aware of (or can guess correctly at) candidate stands on all but the most obscure issues, so they have less to gain as the campaign progresses.

The second reason is that unlike media presentations, each conversation is particular to its participants. The knowledge gap hypothesis is based on the presumption that those with high levels of knowledge and cognitive skills are better equipped to understand and recall mediated information. This information arrives in the same form to those who comprehend it and those who don't. On the other hand, if my conversation partner tells me something I don't understand or my mind wanders as she speaks, I can ask her to repeat herself or elaborate. An hour of political discussion is very different from an hour spent watching or reading the news (Mondak, 1995). It is thus possible that the less one knows, the more one gains from discussion.[2]

[2] Another possibility that should be acknowledged is that of testing effects. Improvements in knowledge scores from one panel wave to the next could be attributed to the fact that subjects were prepared by their first attempt. This effect could be more pronounced for those low in knowledge, who had more to learn.

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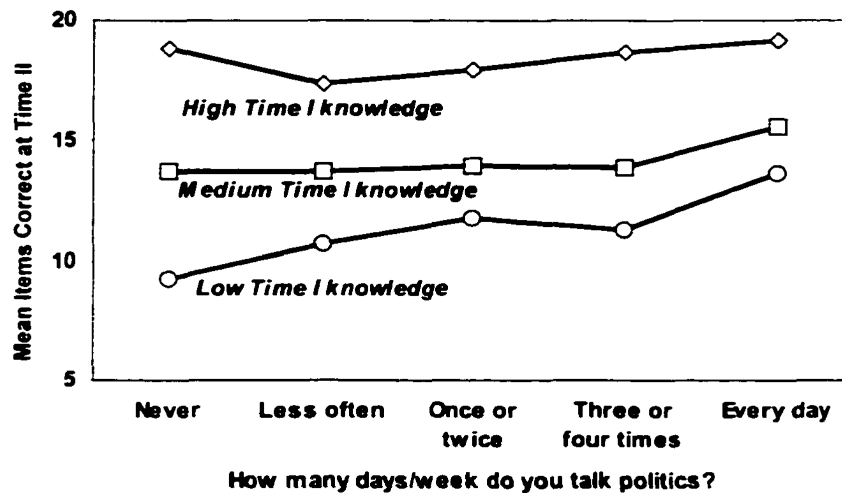
Figure 6-4
Effect of Conversation on Time II Knowledge, By Level of Time I Knowledge



Interactions with media use

Judging from the cross-sectional data from 1996, there does not appear to be a significant interaction between conversation and media use. As Figures 6-5 and 6-6 show, conversation has roughly the same impact on knowledge at different levels of media use.[3] There is one exception, however. Those who frequently discuss politics but rarely watch network news actually score quite high on knowledge of candidate issue positions. This result may be accounted for by the fact that members of this group tend to be heavy newspaper readers.

[3] Levels of conversation were coded as follows. In response to the question "How often do you talk about politics?": every day, 3 or 4 times a week = High; once or twice a week = Medium; less often, never = Low. Newspaper use was coded as follows: every day = High; 2 through 6 days = Medium; 1, 0 days = Low. Television news use was coded as follows: 5 through 7 days in week = High; 2 through 4 days = Medium; 1, 0 days = Low. Divisions were made on the basis of each variable's distribution.

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Figure 6-5: Interaction of Conversation and TV News Watching (1996 Annenberg Survey)

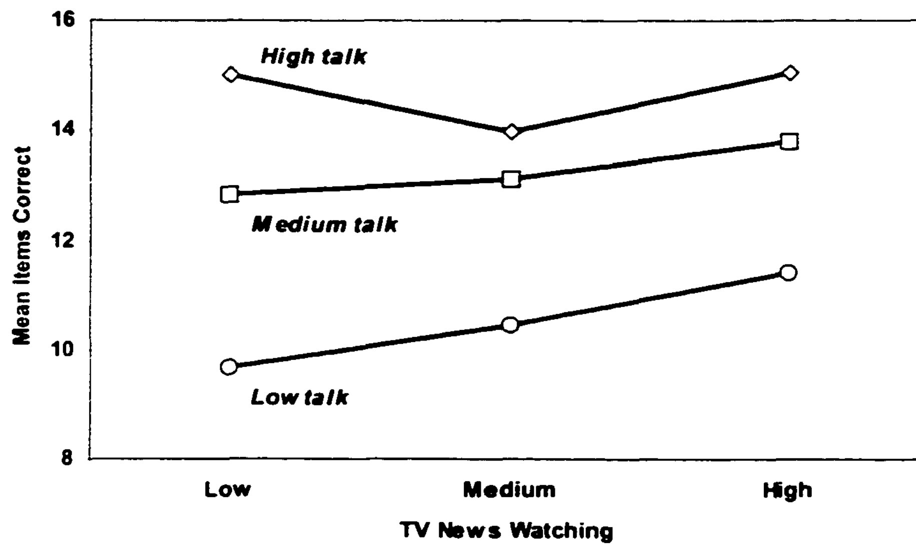
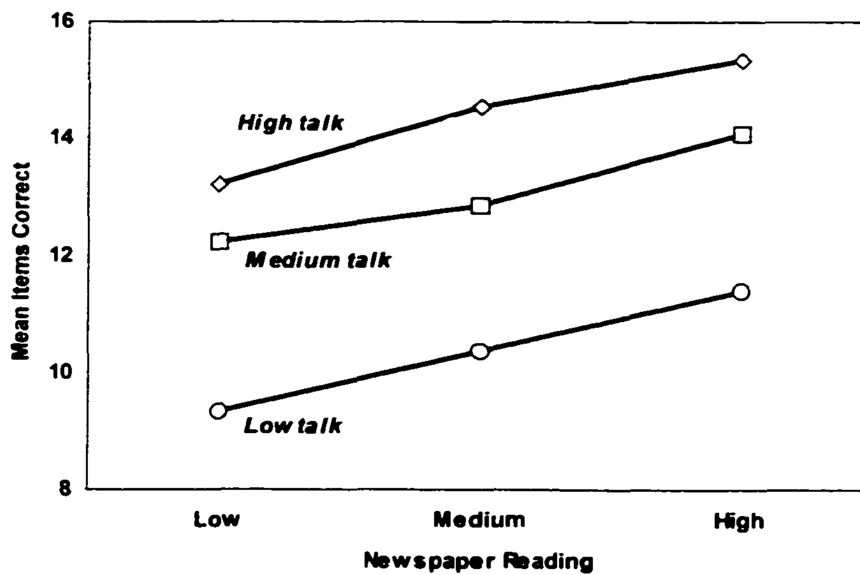


Figure 6-6: Interaction of Conversation and Newspaper Reading (1996 Annenberg Survey)



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At first glance this result might seem to strike a blow at the effectiveness of citizen deliberation. Ideally, conversation should enable individuals to store and retain what they learn from media as events are related and discussed. If the effects of the two are completely independent, then the deliberative system would not appear to be operating as a coherent whole.

At the same time, this lack of interaction may not be a threat to deliberation if one keeps in mind that conversation partners are not necessarily exposed to precisely the same media diet. Let us imagine three co-workers, John, Mary and Alex, who talk about an election together. John reads the newspaper and learns facts A, B and C; Mary watches the news and learns facts D, E, and F; and Alex listens to the radio and learns facts G, H and I. After a discussion, each will have added some of what the others learned from media to their body of knowledge. Conversation would boost knowledge for each in this context not because of the reiteration of facts already heard elsewhere, but because of the introduction of new facts. Thus, in their case there will not be any evident interaction between media use and conversation in increasing knowledge. This occurs precisely because most individuals are exposed to a variety of news sources in varying combinations. Despite the fact that most American cities do not have competing newspapers, even in one-paper towns citizens have access to local and national news, radio, magazines, and web sites. As a consequence, there is at least the potential that a conversation may bring in disparate information. Whether this in fact occurs is an open question; although we know that most groups are relatively homogeneous in terms of opinion, one direction for future research should be to investigate whether discussion partners tend to share the same media diet as well.

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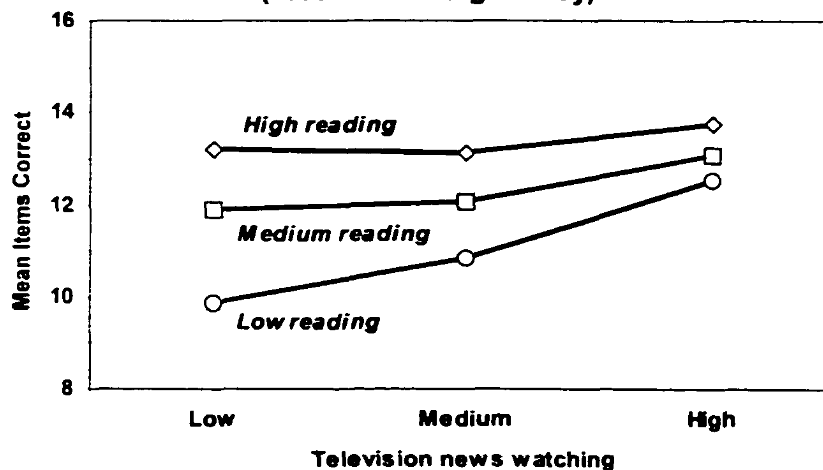
In each case, we see that the difference between infrequent talkers and moderate talkers is greater than the difference between moderate talkers and frequent talkers. As Figure 6-7 shows, those moderate or high in newspaper reading gain almost no knowledge as television news watching is increased. Infrequent newspaper readers gain substantial knowledge as television watching is increased, but only at the high level of network news watching do those low in newspaper reading score as high as even moderate readers.

Figure 6-7: Knowledge by Newspaper Reading and Television News Watching
(1996 Annenberg Survey)



While this result may be partly explained by the differences between newspaper readers and television viewers in education and cognitive ability (Neuman et al., 1992), it indicates that those who are exposed to moderate amounts of news media do far better when the medium in question is the newspaper. Those who claim to rely primarily on newspapers for their news score better on knowledge quizzes than those who rely on

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television (Culbertson & Stempel, 1986; Robinson & Levy, 1986), but most people do not use one medium exclusively. These results indicate that the relative quantity of each may be an important determinant of knowledge acquisition.

Conclusion

Many analyses of political knowledge assume that people learn, store, and use information primarily for a single purpose: voting. For example, one recent volume entitled *Political Judgment* (Lodge & McGraw, 1995) consists entirely of essays on the determinants of vote choice. While deciding for whom to vote is undoubtedly an important task for citizens in a democracy, it is by no means the only judgment to be made. In a system in which deliberation is the underpinning of democratic practice, information is held for use in future discussion as well as future action and votes. The focus on voting leads to the conclusion that what people know is less important than whether they are able to vote as if they know a great deal (McKelvey & Ordeshook, 1986).

However, the citizen, unlike the voter, needs to do more than simply make the "correct" vote choice; she also needs to appreciate the consequences of her choices (Yankelovich, 1991). Let us take as an example a liberal voter in 2000 choosing between Bush and Gore. One of the issues she cares about is the death penalty; if she is unaware of the candidates' positions, she may assume based on party heuristics that Gore opposes it while Bush supports it. What if she learns that Gore too supports the death penalty? She is unlikely to change her vote, since Gore remains the more liberal candidate. Nonetheless, she votes with an understanding that whoever wins, a death penalty

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advocate will reside in the White House. This knowledge will aid in her understanding future debates and may alter the kinds of political action she is motivated to undertake. If one focuses only on her vote choice, one will conclude that whether she knows the candidates' positions on the death penalty is unimportant. But it may be important to her responsibilities as a citizen, which do not end the moment she steps out of the voting booth.

One of the key arguments for deliberation is that it educates those who engage in it; in this, the present data indicate that ordinary conversation seems to succeed. Talking about politics aids citizens in understanding campaigns, candidates, and issues. Whether those citizens – both the ones who talk and the ones who don't – can be said to be "informed" is ultimately largely subjective. In fact, the holding of information about politics is both a precondition and a consequence of deliberation. In order to deliberate, we need information; by deliberating, we share our knowledge with others and learn from them. On this foundation of deliberation, the performance of the media seems a mixed bag. On one hand, significant learning takes place as a consequence of media exposure. On the other, different media operate with varying effectiveness in different contexts; television news appears to produce no learning in some cases. Talking about politics, however, produced learning in all of the data sets examined. Everyday conversation thus fulfills one of the critical requirements of deliberation.

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Chapter 7
Uncertainty and Deliberation

As Aristotle observed in *Nicomachean Ethics*, uncertainty is what makes deliberation essential; we do not deliberate about questions open to straightforward empirical resolution (Aristotle, 2000). If you believe it is two o'clock while I think it is closer to two-thirty, we would do better to find a clock than to deliberate. Much of public debate, furthermore, proceeds on utilitarian principles, namely that policies should provide the greatest benefit to the greatest number (Guttman & Thompson, 1996). If the consequences of policies could be known precisely, then benefits and harms could simply be calculated, one subtracted from the other, and the proper course of action determined. They could be if all benefits and harms were translated to a common currency; utilitarianism argues that "utility" is such a currency, but in practice different types of benefits and harms are difficult to equate. One of the central tasks of deliberation is to debate potential consequences of decisions and weigh competing benefits and harms. Despite what Rousseau and other theorists believed, the best course of action to serve the common good is not always readily apparent (Mansbridge, 1999).

In an uncertain political world, citizens must thus be willing to accommodate their own uncertainty in order to deliberate. If they are not, they will be unwilling to enter into discussion when they are unsure of their positions, and unwilling to change when they are. Given that every policy has consequences that are usually difficult to predict and relevant facts are themselves often contested, individual uncertainty is not only understandable but eminently reasonable. The imprecise relationship between intentions

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and outcomes makes a period of uncertainty a necessary part of political decision-making. But uncertainty often seems paralyzing; those who are less certain of their positions are less willing to express them (Lasorsa, 1991). This may be logical if we see political conversation in the same competitive context in which the rest of politics appears to exist. The reliance on personal testimony in public speech identified by Eliasoph (1998) may also reflect the desire to avoid uncertainty. One may tell one's own story without worrying about being questioned or having all the facts. But when testimony is inapplicable, many shun political discussion. The desire to avoid displaying uncertainty provides an even stronger disincentive for discussion with those with whom we disagree.

Although there is a large body of research examining the implications of uncertainty for voter decision-making dating back to Anthony Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), and before that to the Columbia election studies (Berelson et al., 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), my concern is less with uncertainty as a lack of information that influences decisions than as a subjective feeling and a mode of expression. In a deliberative democracy, citizens would enter into political discussion regardless of their level of certainty, but emerge from discussion more certain of their positions than they were at the outset. In reality, however, discussion may be considered the province of the certain, an arena best joined only when opinions are set and immovable. This model of deliberation can be seen clearly in news presentations of the political world.

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Uncertainty in Discourse

The citizen viewing the political world through the eyes of the news media sees an arena where uncertainty is utterly absent. Speakers in the mediated public sphere strive to give the impression of absolute certainty in the rightness of their positions and the wrongness of their opponents'. Members of Congress, who may actually go through a period of uncertainty on issues, wait until they have made up their minds to make public statements. Congressional hearings function less for the purpose of fact-gathering than as a forum for argumentation. Politicians demand of each other that they have clear issue stands which are never subject to change. In campaigns, changing one's mind is an unpardonable sin; a common charge is that one's opponent has "flip-flopped." For example, Michael Dukakis dealt the final blow to Richard Gephardt's 1988 presidential bid with an ad that showed a figure in a suit representing Gephardt doing back flips. Similarly, a Nixon spot in 1972 showed pictures of George McGovern flipping back and forth atop a weather vane. Another Nixon ad detailed instances where McGovern had changed his position from the year before, ending ominously, "Last year, this year. The question is, what about next year?" In 1992, George Bush aired an ad discussing opposing positions held by two candidates, who were revealed to both be Bill Clinton. In 2000, Bush's son said of his opponent Al Gore, "He's changed his tune…I believe it's important to have somebody who's willing to have the same message all of the time in the course of a campaign" (Neal & Nakashima, 2000). Thus, changing one's position on an issue – often an indication of uncertainty resolved - is constructed as a failure. A few weeks later, Gore was asked whether he would favor the execution of a pregnant woman. To this unusual ethical

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dilemma, of which there has not been a single recorded case in the United States, Gore did not instantly take a position but replied that he would need to consider the question. Bush then criticized Gore for his uncertainty (Seelye, 2000).

Another crucial element in the assault on uncertainty in mediated politics is the importance opinion polling holds for news coverage of both campaigns and policy debates. The proliferation of opinion polls has had wide-ranging effects on the conduct of politics and political journalism, which are too complex to discuss at length here. There are, however, a few essential points to be made about the relationship of polling to uncertainty.

When the technique of opinion sampling emerged, it was quickly embraced within a paradigm of progress that equated scientific methods with higher truth (Herbst, 1993). "Public opinion" came to be understood as that which public opinion polls measured. Although some warned that polls were incapable of capturing opinion's social element (Blumer, 1948), the imperative of quantitative measurement swept such dissent aside. However accurately a sociological model might describe the public, it is of little use if the goal is predicting the outcome of an election.

Opinion polling assumes first that everyone has an opinion on a particular subject, and second that any one individual's opinion is equal to any other's (Bourdieu, 1979). Distinctions among informed, uninformed, and misinformed opinion - three very different animals (Dalager, 1996; Kuklinski & Quirk, 1997) - are washed away. A further distinction, between certain and uncertain opinions, is also obscured. This is a product not simply of the assumptions on which the enterprise of polling is based, but of the particular methods used and the dynamics of the survey interview that emerge.

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Within the context of the survey interview, individuals prefer not to respond that they "don't know" or are "unsure" to an opinion question, whether because they don't want to seem uninformed, or because they are attempting to please the interviewer, who plainly is seeking an answer (Converse, 1964). This dynamic has been amply demonstrated by Howard Schuman and Stanley Presser (1981), who showed that survey respondents were quite willing to offer opinions on issues which were actually fictitious. In addition, "Training manuals [for survey interviewers] often urge interviewers not to accept DK [don't know] too easily, on the assumption that it may represent only momentary hesitancy, and questionnaires frequently do not provide a DK option for interviewers to check." The imperatives of quantitative research (including data with a minimum number of missing cases) shape the survey with the assumption that uncertainty is unacceptable. The result is a set of data in which almost everyone seems to know exactly where he or she stands. When these data are reported in news and read by an individual, he sees that all his fellow citizens are certain of their opinions. Certainty appears to be the accepted norm, making uncertainty a kind of personal failure. He may then decide that unless he has made up his mind, he should just keep quiet.

Furthermore, the media's need for data that can be analyzed quickly and reported in simple terms leads them to pose most survey questions in a format with two possible responses: Do you intend to vote for Bush or Gore? Do you approve of the job the President is doing? Do you favor or oppose abortion? Posing questions this way distorts results in a number of ways. First, it makes it simple for respondents to guess or invent opinions that reflect no actual convictions; the number of "don't know" responses in such polls is always suspiciously low. Second, it obscures important subtleties of opinion;

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Jesse Helms and Jesse Jackson may both disapprove of the job President Clinton is doing, but for very different reasons. Third, it poses each political question as having two (no more, no fewer) sides, accentuating conflictual framing.

Another function of the dissemination of poll results may be to discourage participation, not simply by quieting the uncertain but by informing news receivers that their participation is unnecessary. Polls act as a system of representation; the sample survey uses a small number of individuals to represent the larger universe of citizens. Each citizen, therefore, sees herself represented. In the survey interview, someone has expressed her opinion for her; she need not do so herself. If she finds herself in the majority, she is assured that no action on her part is necessary - things will work out the way she would like them too. If she is in the minority, then political action seems useless - the votes are in, and her side has lost. Journalists also tend to take even slim majorities revealed in polls and make disproportionately sweeping conclusions about what "the public" thinks, reducing complexity to a single voice.[1]

The use of opinion polling in policy formation might seem on its face to involve the people more directly in the functions of government by using their opinions as a guide. However, by invalidating uncertainty and thus hampering deliberation, polls may be considered an agent of what Robert Dahl (1989) calls "pseudodemocratization," "a change taken with the ostensible, and perhaps even actual, purpose of enhancing the democratic process that in practice retains the aura of its democratic justification and yet has the effect, intended or unintended, of weakening the democratic process." The

[1] Brady and Orren (1992) observe that while academic researchers are more comfortable with Type II errors (rejecting correct hypotheses), journalists would rather commit a Type I error (accepting an incorrect hypothesis) than miss a story.

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combination of poll-driven news and a discourse marked by statements of unswerving conviction produces a political world in which uncertainty is not merely absent, but delegitimized. As a result, the citizen has no model of deliberation that incorporates this necessary part of political opinion formation.

When news programs use "person-in-the-street" interviews, they do portray a more active public sphere with actual citizen involvement (Larson, 1999). However, these interviews are usually used to provide an illustration of poll results; if, for example, two-thirds of individuals polled are found to favor Candidate A and one-third Candidate B, the segment is likely to feature two citizens proclaiming their support for Candidate A and one for Candidate B. Interviewees who are ambivalent or have no opinion are unlikely to be featured. As a consequence, such interviews serve to perpetuate the image of public opinion as a static fait accompli. Opinion is also portrayed in different ways on different issues; while the news media may represent opinions on one issue as the product of an active citizenry, on others citizens are absent, merely assenting to the decisions of elites. These portrayals are often at odds with the reality of citizens' actual understanding and participation (Bennett & Klockner, 1996).

Polls also serve a variety of functions for journalists, including enabling them to disguise opinion as fact (Salmon & Glasser, 1995). While a reporter might not be permitted to opine that Bill Clinton is dishonest, he is free to report that 65% of the public believes that Clinton is dishonest. Sweeping generalizations can then be made about what "the public" believes. If the public has already decided, deliberation seems less worthwhile. The endless dissemination of poll results - as James Carey (1995) describes

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it, "an attempt to simulate public opinion in order to prevent an authentic public opinion from forming" - can thus serve to dampen deliberation.

Of course, survey research as a means of ascertaining public opinion is not necessarily incompatible with deliberative democracy. While some argue that discussion increases the likelihood that consensus will be achieved (Barber, 1984), most theorists assume that even after deliberation some disagreement will persist (Knight & Johnson, 1994; Mansbridge, 1980). In such cases, some form of aggregation – votes, for instance – will be necessary to arrive at a decision. Polls are in one sense simply another form of aggregation, by which individual opinions are collected to describe the collective will. If opinion is to translate into policy, there must be some way for officials to ascertain what public opinion is. What would be required for polls to fit within the framework of a deliberative system is that the opinions sought and received by the poll reflect a completed process of deliberation. For that to be true, the respondents must have deliberated prior to being polled, and the interview itself must reflect the product of their deliberation and not describe a set of opinions dictated by the particularities of the survey interaction. This is what James Fishkin (1991) and others have attempted to do with "deliberative polling." As Joseph Bessette (1994) has observed, the context of a telephone survey, where respondents are interrupted from other activities and asked to produce opinions instantaneously, can produce undeliberative opinions even when the same individuals in a more deliberative context would produce deliberative ones. For the moment, however, deliberative polling remains an interesting experiment that has yet to have any impact on policy in the United States.

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Ordinary media polls, on the other hand, which reflect no deliberation and are structured to simplify opinion, influence not only official decision-making but public opinion itself on a daily basis. Combined with a rhetorical norm that excludes expressions of uncertainty, they produce a news discourse that stands in contrast to the natural evolution through which we would expect any individual's opinion to move, from greater to lesser uncertainty.

Data on uncertainty

If ordinary political conversation were to operate in a deliberative fashion, uncertainty would motivate joining political discussion, while certainty would be an outcome of discussion. Since in a cross-sectional survey we can measure only the conversation which has already taken place, what will be visible is only the outcome: reduced uncertainty. It is possible that a failure to find a significant effect of conversation on uncertainty could reflect the countervailing effects of two processes. While deliberation can illuminate unknown facts and arguments, thereby reducing uncertainty, it can also demonstrate an issue's complexity, making participants ambivalent about theretofore firmly held positions. While there may be issues characterized by such an effect, we would nonetheless predict that overall, political discussion should ultimately reduce uncertainty, making individual opinions more stable.

Experimental research has shown that group dynamics can push opinion in extreme directions, particularly when consensus is the goal (Moscovici & Doise, 1994; Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969). Corroboration of one's views can also lead to increased opinion extremity (Baron, 1996); when someone else agrees with me and together we

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reject the arguments of opponents, I become more convinced that I am right. Since most political conversations take place between people who agree, this dynamic could be another key factor in any relationship between conversation and uncertainty.

Uncertainty in voter perceptions of candidates' positions has been measured in a number of ways at both the aggregate and individual level (Bartels, 1986; Campbell, 1983). The principle focus of prior research has been to assess the impact of uncertainty on vote choice; while some researchers have argued that uncertainty about a candidate can in some cases confer an electoral advantage, thus making ambiguity an effective strategy (Glazer, 1990; Shepsle, 1972), others have found situations in which ambiguity and uncertainty reduce support (Alvarez, 1998; Rudd, 1989).

Only recently, however, have direct subjective measures of uncertainty been developed to permit voters to express the uncertainty they feel about issues and ideology (Alvarez & Franklin, 1994). In the 1996 National Election Studies, respondents were asked to place themselves and the presidential candidates on a number of scales. On six of these scales - liberal-conservative ideology, abortion, government aid to blacks, spending on social services, spending on defense, and tradeoffs between environmental protection and jobs - follow-up questions asked, "How certain are you of [Clinton's/Dole's/your] position on this scale? Very certain, pretty certain, or not very certain?"[2] Out of these questions, I constructed uncertainty scales running from 1 (very certain) to 4 (don't know).

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[2] Certainty questions were also asked about two trait items, Ross Perot, and local House candidates. The present analysis is restricted to liberal-conservative placement and the five issue questions.

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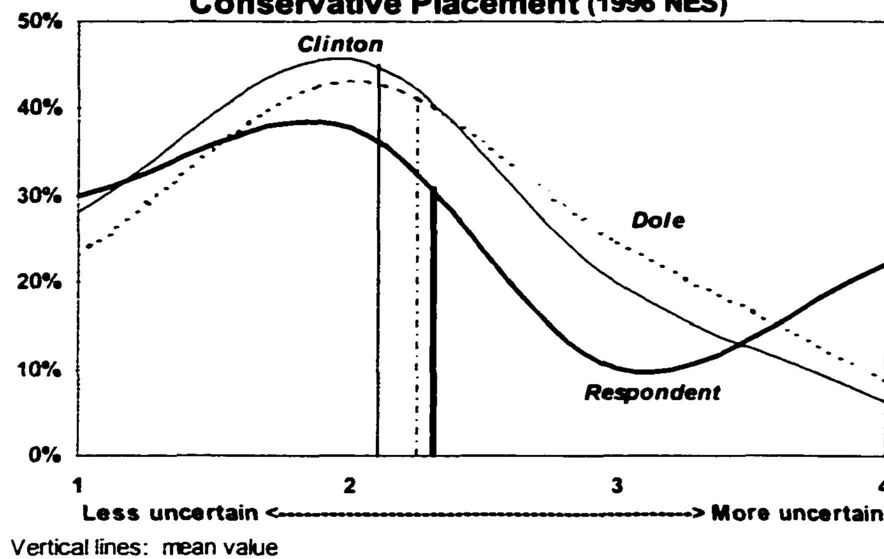

The distribution of uncertainty shows some interesting results. First, as we see in Figure 7-1, respondents express slightly more certainty of the candidates' ideology than of their own. In contrast, they express significantly more certainty of their own issue positions than of the candidates' (Figure 7-2). This result accords with Converse's (1964) finding on the lack of understanding of ideology. Many people may feel certain that Clinton is a "liberal" but have a less than complete understanding of what that implies; when asked to apply an ideological label to themselves, they hesitate. In general, mean uncertainty of Clinton and Dole on issues runs between 2 and 2.5, at or near "pretty certain," while the respondents' uncertainty of their own positions goes from a low of 1.3 on abortion to a high of 2 on the environment. Interestingly, the issue on which respondents expressed the most certainty - abortion - is one which is considered by many to be so highly charged and personal that it is rarely discussed except by those who

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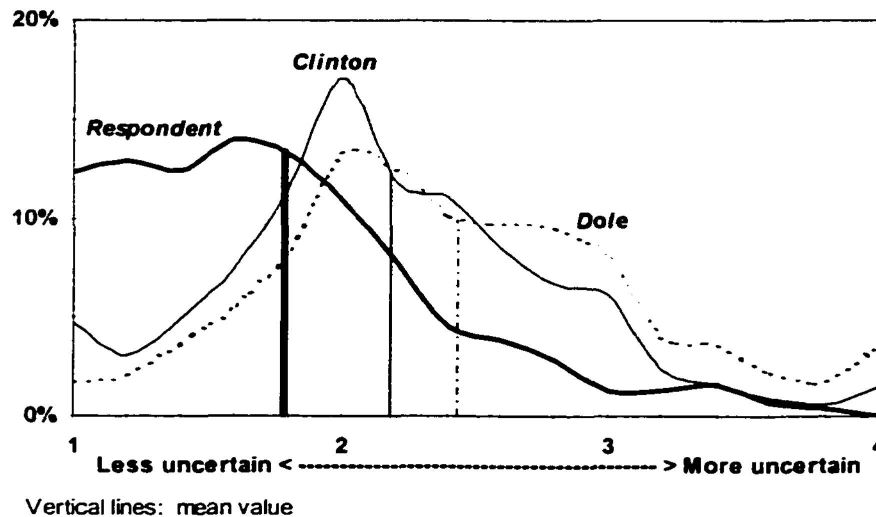
share the same opinions. There was not a single respondent who was unwilling to place him or herself on the abortion scale (see appendix for distributions on each issue).

Figure 7-2: Average Uncertainty on Issues
(1996 NES)



While all the uncertainty scales are correlated, there are some differences, as shown in Table 7-1. As one would expect, we see stronger correlations within referents (e.g. between uncertainty on Clinton issues and Clinton ideology) and within realms (e.g. between uncertainty on Clinton ideology, Dole ideology, and self ideology). Across both referents and realms (e.g. between uncertainty on Clinton issue stands and the respondents' ideology) correlations are somewhat lower. The most striking figure is the high correlation (.77) between uncertainty on Clinton and Dole's issue stands, despite the somewhat higher certainty on Clinton's positions overall.

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Table 7-1
Zero-Order Correlations: Uncertainty
(1996 NES)

	Respondent liberal-conservative	Clinton liberal-conservative	Dole liberal-conservative	Respondent issues	Clinton issues
Clinton liberal-conservative	.407				
Dole liberal-conservative	.465	.570			
Respondent issues	.448	.322	.346		
Clinton issues	.351	.522	.469	.487	
Dole issues	.375	.481	.568	.448	.770

All significant at $p < .001$

One would assume that people who understand the candidates' positions - or at least can guess correctly at those positions - would express more certainty than people who couldn't give an answer or guessed incorrectly. While this is in fact the case, the correlations are less than overwhelming. The correlation between getting an answer right on a given issue[3] and expressing certainty of the candidate's position on that issue averaged .448 for Dole but only .345 for Clinton. Overall, people felt more certain of the incumbent president's positions in 1996, as they did in previous years (Alvarez, 1998). Uncertainty is imperfectly related to knowledge; not only are many people uncertain of what they know, many others are quite certain despite being incorrect.

Regressions identifying predictors of the four types of uncertainty produced a

[3] Correct answers were determined as follows. Respondents were asked to rate each candidate on a seven-point scale (or a four-point scale in the case of abortion) running from a liberal position on the issue to a conservative position. For example, the ends of the environment scale were "protect the environment even if it costs some jobs or otherwise reduces our standard of living" and "protecting the environment is not as important as maintaining jobs and our standard of living." If respondents placed Clinton more toward the liberal side than they placed Dole, they were coded as having given a correct answer, regardless of the absolute placement of either candidate. Respondents who answered "don't know" on one or both candidates, placed them at the same point, or placed Dole as more liberal than Clinton were coded as incorrect.

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variety of results (Table 7-2). Men expressed more certainty than women, while whites were more certain of their own positions and ideology than blacks, hispanics, and asians, but no more certain of the candidates. Education produced more certainty on candidate issue positions and respondent ideology, but not on candidate ideology or respondent issues. Uncertainty on issues declines until middle age, then increases as respondents get older; this result mirrors the relationship between age and discussion or knowledge. Strong ideologues are much more certain of their own ideological placement.

Although those who accurately report the candidates' issue positions are more likely to be certain about them, knowledge does not explain all the variance in uncertainty by any means. Political discussion did not affect uncertainty on ideology, but it was associated with reduced uncertainty on issue positions, a result consistent with Mendelsohn's (1996) finding that discussion primes issues in voters' minds. This was true for both the respondents' placement of themselves and their placement of the candidates. Conversation thus appears to aid in voters' confidence about issues, but has no effect on their perceived ability to tie those issues together into a coherent understanding of ideology.

Here again we must be cautious about making causal claims. The inability to identify instrumental variables precludes precise nonrecursive modeling of the relationship between conversation and uncertainty. While the regression in Table 7-2 indicates that discussion predicts certainty, it is also true that certainty predicts discussion. In other words, while those who talk more are more certain, it is possible that this is as much a consequence of the uncertain avoiding discussion as it is the result of discussions themselves producing certainty.

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Table 7-2: Predicting Uncertainty
(OLS regression, 1996 NES)

	Respondent Ideology		Respondent Issues		Candidate Ideology		Candidate Issues	
Gender (female)	.07 (.05)	*.03*	.11*** (.03)	*.10*	.08* (.04)	*.05*	.17*** (.03)	*.14*
Age	.001 (.01)	*.02*	-.01 (.01)	*-.29*	-.01 (.01)	*-.14*	-.01** (.005)	*-.36*
Age squared	-.00 (.00)	*-.01*	.0001* (.00)	*.41*	.00 (.00)	*.14*	.0001** (.00)	*.46*
Race (white)	-.18* (.08)	*-.05*	-.14** (.05)	*-.08*	-.01 (.06)	*-.002*	.07 (.04)	*.04*
Education	-.07* (.03)	*-.07*	.01 (.02)	*.01*	.004 (.02)	*.01*	-.06*** (.01)	*-.12*
Income in thousands	-.002 (.001)	*-.05*	-.001 (.001)	*-.05*	-.00 (.001)	*-.002*	-.00 (.001)	*-.01*
Newspaper	-.01 (.01)	*-.02*	.01 (.01)	*.03*	-.004 (.01)	*-.02*	-.004 (.005)	*-.02*
Network news	-.004 (.01)	*-.01*	-.01* (.01)	*-.06*	-.03** (.01)	*-.09*	-.03*** (.01)	*-.12*
Talk radio	-.005 (.02)	*-.01*	-.003 (.01)	*-.01*	-.02 (.01)	*-.03*	-.01 (.01)	*-.02*
Party ID (Republican)	-.10 (.06)	*-.04*	.04 (.04)	*.04*	-.10* (.04)	*-.06*	-.03 (.03)	*-.03*
Ideological strength	-.37*** (.02)	*-.47*	-.06*** (.01)	*-.15*	-.11*** (.02)	*-.19*	-.01 (.01)	*-.03*
Political interest	-.16*** (.04)	*-.12*	-.11*** (.03)	*-.13*	-.09** (.03)	*-.09*	-.13*** (.02)	*-.15*
Political knowledge	-.07*** (.02)	*-.11*	-.05*** (.01)	*-.14*	-.16*** (.01)	*-.34*	-.18*** (.01)	*-.49*
Political discussion	-.02 (.01)	*-.04*	-.02** (.01)	*-.09*	-.01 (.01)	*-.04*	-.02** (.01)	*-.08*
Constant	3.75*** (.24)		2.46*** (.15)		3.19*** (.18)		3.19*** (.13)	
r^2	**.426**		**.189**		**.321**		**.426**	

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001
Standard errors in parentheses, standardized coefficients in italic.

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Newspaper reading and talk radio use had no effect on uncertainty, while viewing of network news had a significant effect. Recall from Chapter 5 that the results on prediction of political knowledge were the reverse: newspaper reading and talk radio predicted knowledge more strongly than television news watching. In other words, viewing of network news increases the certainty with which respondents believe they know things without actually increasing the degree to which they do in fact know them. While use of television news, newspapers, and talk radio all correlate negatively with uncertainty, controlling for knowledge significantly reduces the correlation with radio and makes the correlation with newspapers disappear completely, but the correlation with television news use remains unchanged. Although it is surely true that many people gain information from television news (even if other predictors account for their knowledge), the key point is that increases in certainty occur as network news use rises *regardless* of whether individuals actually learn anything.

Bluster

In many cases, individuals who have answered incorrectly will express great certainty in their answers. For example, some respondents were quite certain that Clinton favored more restrictions on abortion than Dole, or that Dole favored greater environmental protection. Experimental research has shown that the tendency to express certainty about incorrect assessments is quite common (Fischoff, Slovic, & Lichtenstein, 1977). For lack of a better term, I will refer to this outcome as "bluster." As it happens, a rather large proportion of respondents falls into this category. On abortion, 25.5% of the respondents who incorrectly identified Clinton and Dole's relative positions on the

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issue also said they were "pretty certain" or "very certain" of *both* candidates' positions. On aid to blacks, the figure was 26.5%, on the environment 27.7%, on defense 34.4%, and on social spending 35.4%. Similarly, 30.2% of respondents who rated Dole as equally or more liberal than Clinton felt certain of both candidates' ideology.

If we attempt to explain bluster, a number of significant predictors emerge. Men are more likely than women to express certainty about incorrect beliefs, the less educated are more likely than the more educated, and the less strongly ideological are more likely than strong ideologues to express certainty about incorrect beliefs. Interest in politics and overall political knowledge (on issues other than the one in question) decrease bluster. Finally, two media use variables have an effect: talk radio use decreases bluster, while viewing of television news increases it. This result held for both an OLS regression of a scale combining all six measures, and a logistic regression in which the dependent variable was bluster on any one of the six items. In all, 36% of respondents expressed bluster on at least one issue.

Differences in the quantity of information present in various media are insufficient to explain this result. The fact that television news stories about presidential campaigns tend to have relatively little detailed issue information would not in and of itself lead heavy TV news viewers to express certainty despite their lack of knowledge; in fact, given that the medium produces less learning than newspapers or talk radio, television watching should either increase uncertainty or have no effect at all. It seems more likely that the cause lies in the fact that those viewers are presented a particular model of political discourse in which certainty is valued, and political arguments are won by those whose voices are loudest and most self-assured. The fact that this description

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would also apply to talk radio (perhaps more so than in any other medium) makes the negative relationship between talk radio use and bluster somewhat harder to explain.

To return to political discussion, the original hypothesis was that those who discuss politics more should display lower uncertainty, both of their own beliefs and those of the candidates. When we talk about politics, we supposedly explore issues, both learning facts and making and hearing arguments. In the process our opinions are given shape and depth; if we have heard the arguments in opposition and found reasons to reject them, we should be more certain of our own positions. In addition, we can make connections among issues, gaining understanding of the ways they relate to various ideologies. When we discuss candidates a similar process should occur, in which we learn from our partners about their positions and the rationales for their candidacies, becoming certain of who they are so that we may decide on our votes.

According to the 1996 data, this set of hypotheses turns out to be only partly correct. Political discussion does predict certainty on issues, but it does not predict certainty on ideology. Citizens may thus be emerging from political discussion with a feeling that they have a greater command of facts, i.e. where the candidates stand, but with no greater understanding of how those stances cohere into an ideological position. The results for the respondents' own positions were the same: increases in the frequency of political discussion led to increased certainty about issue positions, but not to a greater certainty about whether those positions made one a liberal or a conservative.

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Conclusion

Some have bemoaned the fact that the opinions of most survey respondents do not appear to be ideologically consistent (Converse, 1964). Consistency is often defined as adherence to the ideological structures held and defined by elites. Those who hold some "liberal" positions and some "conservative" positions - or whose positions waver over time - are assumed to be confused or uninformed. Attitudinal constraints, however, may be just that – schemas that inhibit us from understanding, closing our minds to the perspectives of others. As Jennifer Hochschild (1993) argues, "A democracy composed of consistent, tranquil, attitudinally constrained citizens is a democracy full of smug people with no incentive and perhaps no ability to think beyond their own circumstances... Conversely, a democracy composed of citizens coping with disjunction and ambivalence is full of people who question their own rightness, who may entertain alternative viewpoints, and who, given the right conditions, are more driven to resolve problems than ignore them."

It should also be noted that Americans are profoundly ambivalent on many specific issues and on the role government should play in general (Cantril & Cantril, 1999). However, ambivalence and uncertainty are not the same thing; while uncertainty can be explained in part by a lack of information, given the complexity of many issues, ambivalence - simultaneously holding contradictory impulses or beliefs - may be a natural response to full information. It is possible that NES respondents understood the certainty questions on their own opinions to be asking about whatever ambivalence they might have, while the questions on candidates asked about their understanding of what are assumed to be precise positions, whether the respondent is aware of them or not.

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Respondents could have understood the questions to ask whether they were certain that their own opinion was *correct*, but whether their perception of the candidate was *accurate*.

While each of us may carry a good degree of both ambivalence and uncertainty, candidates rarely portray themselves as less than certain of the correctness of their positions. Although they may fail to communicate their positions because of a strategic decision or the limitations of time and energy (Page, 1978), one is unlikely to hear a candidate state, "I can't make up my mind." This is true not only of candidates but of virtually all whose voices are heard participating in debates in mainstream news.

In spite of that norm of political discourse, citizens' understanding of candidate positions is remarkably vague. A relatively small proportion of the population can place the candidates on issues with both accuracy and certainty. While part of this lack of understanding may be explained by the time candidates devote to various issues, much of it persists regardless of the conduct of a particular campaign. Nonetheless, voters find ways to make decisions. They project their own beliefs on to candidates with varying degrees of accuracy (Conover & Feldman, 1989), and use a variety of cues to make inferences about candidate positions (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Popkin, 1991).

When they are called to go beyond choosing a candidate and offer a public expression of opinion - whether to a survey interviewer or in a discussion about politics - their knowledge and beliefs about issues interact with their beliefs about public expression itself. What some people seem to learn from the elite discourse to which they are exposed in news is not only the content of arguments but the message given by their form, namely that when opinions are offered, they should be spoken with conviction.

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This appears to be true even in the semi-private context of a survey. We may conceive of the survey situation itself as a rhetorical arena, one in which respondents are influenced by the norms of political communication they see modeled in news. If the effects of news discourse emerge in the survey context, it seems likely that in citizens' political discussions they will be equally likely to follow the models of discourse they have been offered.

In a deliberative system, political discussion would dissipate uncertainty through a process that involves learning of positions but goes beyond acquisition of facts to a more nuanced understanding of why a candidate might hold that position or how it relates to other issues and character traits. Knowledge of the issue position itself would be the bare minimum gained along the road to certainty produced by conversation. If conversation produced certainty without producing knowledge, it would only be able to do so via an effect similar to the one suggested for news viewing, namely that conversational norms give one practice in expressing opinions with certainty whether one knows what one is talking about or not.

Results indicate that everyday political conversation has both a direct and an indirect effect on certainty. Conversation boosts knowledge, which in turn decreases uncertainty. On issues, conversation is directly associated with decreased uncertainty. In this area, political discussion seems at least in part to serve its proper deliberative function. The null finding on ideology does indicate, however, that this effect is limited. If discussion were to mimic deliberation, it would reduce uncertainty both on specific questions and on the larger themes of politics, of which ideology is certainly one of the most central.

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Chapter 8
Conclusion

Half a century ago, Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (1948) suggested that by delivering a seemingly endless supply of political information, modern media make simply keeping up with politics feel like action. The citizen, they wrote, "comes to mistake *knowing* about problems of the day for *doing* something about them." More recently, Roderick Hart (1999) argued, "For many citizens, watching governance has become equivalent to engaging governance." Indeed, watching governance is the closest many people come to political participation. This may be true in part because news media portray the political world as an unfriendly place, marked by endless and angry conflict.

In a number of cases, I have located only small effects of media exposure on the outcome variables of interest. The relatively weak power of exposure variables has troubled communication researchers for some time; it has been suggested that in some areas the crucial question is not the quantity of news to which a person has been exposed, but simply whether he has been exposed at all (Zukin, 1981). At the same time, we have been able to identify effects of news exposure on variables related to deliberation. Those who are exposed to more news, particularly newspapers and talk radio, do learn about candidates and issues. However, television news increases the likelihood that those with incorrect information will express certainty, suggesting the possibility of immovable opinions based on inaccurate information. While media exposure is generally positively associated with political discussion, exposure to television news does appear to

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discourage discussion for some people by increasing the fear that political discussion will turn contentious. Based on the evidence I have offered in the preceding chapters, I conclude that while news media do aid deliberation in some ways, they serve to limit it in others.

The hypotheses generated from the reasonable ideal of deliberation have produced a variety of results, some positive and some negative. To summarize:

1. *Political conversation will be a common feature of everyday life, not only for members of the elite but across all social strata.* This element of the reasonable ideal clearly does not characterize the United States today. On almost any demographic variable – most notably gender, race, education, and income – the more advantaged members of society discuss politics more often.

2. *Citizens will regularly engage in political discussion with those whose views differ from their own.* This requirement of deliberative democracy is likewise absent. Overwhelmingly, citizens discuss politics only with those who share their views.

3. *Political conversation will enhance both the participants' own concern for the common good, and concomitantly the perception that others are similarly motivated.* Here, the conclusions are mixed. While we were able to identify one case (the 1984 presidential election) in which political discussion led some to be less likely to act in accord with self-interest, the more troubling finding was the positive association between conversation and the perception of self-interest.

4. *While lack of political knowledge should not hinder participation in political conversation, conversation should subsequently increase knowledge.* Evidence

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here suggests a two-way relationship between knowledge and conversation, that those who know more talk more, and those who talk more learn more.

5. *While uncertainty should not hinder participation in political conversation, conversation should subsequently increase the certainty of opinions.* Conversation is associated with increased certainty on issues. This relationship is also likely two-way; conversation reduces issue uncertainty, but those who are more certain are more likely to discuss politics.

Along with the political philosophers from whom they draw inspiration, contemporary deliberative theorists imagine a series of individual benefits arising from democratic practice in general and deliberation in particular. It has been noted that those living in stable democracies appear no happier than those in less democratic systems once income is controlled (Lane, 1999); self-rule, it is concluded, does not lead to contentment. But is this a commentary on democracy itself or on the particular forms it takes in the contemporary world? John Stuart Mill would probably argue that we have plenty of democracies but far too few citizens. He understood that occasional voting without any further action was insufficient to generate the educative effects of participation, which empirical research confirmed (Pedersen, 1982). The survey data I have presented suggest that few Americans deliberate about political matters, particularly if we define deliberation as necessarily involving engagement with those of opposing views. The data also indicate that the discussions that do occur nonetheless succeed in producing some of the hypothesized benefits of deliberation. Specifically, citizens appear to gain knowledge and reduce uncertainty through conversation, although the

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effects on uncertainty do not extend to uncertainty about ideology. They also may in some cases become less self-interested in their voting decisions as a result of political discussion.

Conversation appears to have at least one negative result: those who talk about politics more are more likely to believe that their fellow citizens are motivated by self-interest, despite the slight relationship of self-interest to opinion. This belief is further exaggerated by the amount of disagreement they encounter. Although we should be cautious when making inferences about the content of conversations from survey data, I have suggested that the source of this effect may be the argumentative norm of motive questioning so common in mediated discourse. If we follow the lead of those we see in news and question the motives of our discussion partners or of others in the political world to the degree that it actually changes our beliefs about our fellow citizens, then we have made our discussions less deliberative in a critical way. While a goal of deliberation is a careful and complete examination of all arguments around a particular issue, motive questioning attempts to constrict debate by delegitimizing the source of a particular argument. Although we may still *speak* in accordance with the norms of deliberation, we have failed to *listen* in the same fashion. We have thus deprived ourselves of the benefits that accrue from adopting alternate perspectives. If we refuse to grant the good will of others, we make our discussions less deliberative and decrease the degree to which they enhance public spirit.

It should be noted that the results presented here tell only part of the story of political conversation. The survey questions used have limitations, not least of which is the way political conversation was operationalized. Most surveys addressing political

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conversation, including the ones I have utilized, have in the past had two features in common: they were conducted in the weeks before or after an election (usually a presidential election), and they asked people how much they talk about "politics." It seems likely that different people consider different issues to fall under the category of politics. For instance, when two people talk about an election they are certainly talking about politics. But what about when they talk about crime in their city, or the actions of the local school board? These topics are political, but many people may not conceive of them as such. Whether they do consider them political could affect the way their conversations proceed. It may also be that most of the time, people understand a wide array of topics to be political, but when a campaign is underway, respondents hear the word politics and think "the campaign." This could be particularly true when they have just been asked a series of questions about the candidates, and have thus been primed to consider the campaign.

It is therefore possible that while deliberative discussion about the subjects people understand to fall under the category of politics – e.g. campaigns and legislation - is relatively infrequent, conversations about the events of the day actually adhere to deliberative norms and serve deliberative ends. We may adopt different modes of speaking and conceive of our partners in different ways when we forget that the topic is "political" and, in effect, let our guard down. If these types of conversations duplicate the benefits of political discussion and avoid the pitfalls, and if they do so for a more representative portion of the population, then our democracy may be more deliberative than it appears.

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Throughout this study, I have argued for an understanding of the public itself and public opinion in particular as constituted in the interactions between citizens. While this view is shared by many scholars, popular discourse tends to define public opinion as an aggregation of individual, private opinions; public opinion is, for all intents and purposes, whatever is measured by polls.

Within this dominant view of opinion, it becomes difficult to envision political discussion as a core element of democratic citizenship. If the citizen's role is only to be counted on election day or at some other time via a survey, then we need not engage one another. Without such engagement, however, we are members not of a public but of a mass. We may occasionally share some object of attention, but without discussion we are incapable of collective will formation and expression.

Despite discussion's weaknesses, when we talk about politics with our fellow citizens, we engage in an act of political participation. Traditionally, participation has been defined as involving either a decision with direct consequences (e.g. voting) or an action involving the expenditure of time, money, or some other resource. In effect, we have built a standard of participation that assumes that if a citizen hasn't engaged in a difficult, unpleasant, or costly activity, then he has not truly participated. It is no wonder that some would conclude that "democratic processes are generally painful, fail to contribute to good cheer in democratic publics, and do very little to relieve what seems to be an epidemic of unhappiness and depression" (Lane, 1999). We also assume that participation requires intentionality: as Steven Rosenstone and John Hansen (1993) defined it, "Political participation is action directed explicitly toward influencing the

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distribution of social goods and values." If we do not realize we are participating, it is thought, then we aren't.

We should not dismiss political discussion as "just talk" simply because it is free, easy, and often pleasant. Discussion engages other citizens, passing influence in a potentially wide circle. If public opinion itself has a role to play in policy formation, then participation in the formation of that opinion is participation in the policy process. If one believes further that public opinion is not merely an aggregation of individual attitudes but something that emerges from the process by which citizens engage one another, then political discussion – sharing information and arguments, attempting to persuade others – qualifies as participation in a way that solitary opinion formation, however considered, does not. It creates a ripple of effects on opinion that diffuses outward from individuals' immediate circles to their acquaintances and ultimately to those they have never met. Discussion, therefore, is more than simply practice for "real" participation (Merelman, 1998), it *is* participation just as surely as is writing a letter to a member of Congress or marching in a protest. Citizens deliberating are not merely "judicious spectators" (Boyte, 1999), they are active participants because their discussions affect political outcomes.

To understand why this is the case, let us accept that policy proceeds in relation to public opinion, not public opinion as it might be or should be but strictly as it is.[1] The areas in which the public is inattentive, indifferent, or lacks the requisite knowledge to assess options are those in which policy-makers have the widest latitude (Page & Shapiro, 1992). Public opinion affects policy in these cases by creating a vacuum into

[1] The precise extent to which this is the case has been the subject of extensive research, complicated by the issue of causal direction (Page, 1994). While it is certainly true that officials influence public opinion, few would argue that opinion has no influence on policy.

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which other forces – the preferences of policy makers or the influence of special interests, for instance – may flow. If we further accept that something like "true" public opinion as envisioned by advocates of deliberative polls – what opinion would be under optimal circumstances – does in fact exist, then the extent of deliberation among the populace, and thus the extent to which observable opinion reflects "true" opinion, is a not unreasonable measure of the quality of opinion. Higher quality opinion is in turn more likely to be reflected in policy. On those questions where there is substantial deliberation and as a consequence informed and stable opinion, that opinion will be understood by policy makers and the sanctions for contradicting it more substantial. Where deliberation is minimal, opinions will be more easily manipulated. Where deliberation is completely absent, policy makers will be free to do as they wish without fear of consequence. Of course, in many cases policy will correspond to "true" opinion regardless of its distance from current opinion, but without deliberation it need not necessarily do so. Although the degree of consensus that exists within "true" opinion will be a complicating variable in this process, we may nonetheless say that in general terms, deliberation on an issue will correlate with responsiveness on that issue. A culture of deliberation will in turn tend to produce a more responsive government (Putnam, 1993).

One could argue that in a representative system, we delegate both authority and the obligation to deliberate to our representatives; as long as they deliberate, the citizenry need not. In practice, however, we expect public officials to arrive at decisions through a balance of personal judgment and responsiveness to public opinion. Moreover, to satisfy even the minimum responsibility of assessing whether they have performed their duties well and should thus be returned to office, we must have some understanding of the

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issues that the representatives have confronted. In the absence of deliberation, that understanding will be less than complete. A public opinion that incorporates only certain views, furthermore, is less than truly public. Decision-making bodies acknowledge, through the requirement of a quorum, that some threshold of participation is necessary for a decision to be meaningful. A similar threshold of participation is necessary for a representative public opinion to form. The absence of some is problematic not simply because they will be denied their "piece of the pie" but because of the increased likelihood that the deliberation will fail to accurately assess the common good if some voices are not heard (Sunstein, 1991).

This view of democracy does demand participation in the form of discussion. It defines its citizens not simply as bearers of rights but as active producers of the common will. While most people don't conceive of their discussions as participatory acts with consequences for policy outcomes, as Gabriel Tarde (1969) put it, "There is a tight bond between the functioning of conversation and changes of opinion, and on this depend the vicissitudes of power." The fact that the effects of an individual conversation on public opinion may be extremely small in no way lessens its status as an arena of participation. An individual vote or an individual letter to a legislator may have similarly slight effects on outcomes, but we do not doubt that they represent participatory acts.

Although news discourse may be partly to blame for Americans' tendency to avoid political discussion, that tendency is renewed and reinforced daily in the interactions among citizens. Every time we skirt a political subject, we reinforce the notion that the potential of deliberation in finding creative solutions to problems and in binding citizens together in common cause is outweighed by the danger that we might

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find ourselves at odds. The possibility of disagreement leads us to avoid the very process that could enable us to transcend it.

Because there is no such creature as an "average American," we cannot say that the average American is uninformed or that she does not participate (Kinder & Herzog, 1993). The results presented here suggest that some do participate in something resembling deliberation. They discuss politics frequently, engage those with opposing opinions, learn from their conversations, and reduce their uncertainty about issues. This group, however, is fairly small. More common is the citizen who talks less frequently and only with those who share his beliefs. This citizen cannot be said to be a participant in deliberation. There may be times, however, when an issue of sufficient interest and ubiquity will arise, and he will deliberate in a meaningful way. At those moments, our democracy becomes truly deliberative, if only briefly.

Widespread lack of political knowledge is problematic only in the absence of deliberation. We assume that citizens are able to serve on juries regardless of their prior expertise; the fact that jury members do not know all the facts before arriving at a trial is unimportant. Each citizen is assumed to possess a more important quality, that of judgment. Likewise, whether citizens will be able to arrive at political judgments is less a function of what they possess than whether they are willing to deliberate. If true deliberation were widespread, we would have nothing to fear from a plebiscitary democracy. It is the absence of deliberation that, at least in part, makes ill-informed and ill-considered judgment possible.

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Implications for further research

The survey data presented here are suggestive, but they go only so far in painting a picture of the degree to which everyday political conversation resembles deliberation. A number of specific issues have arisen that beg further research. I have argued that motive questioning is a common mode of argumentation in mediated discourse. A content analysis of news would be useful in establishing first to what degree this assertion is correct, and more specifically if differences emerge between various media and on different issues in the extent to which it is evident.

The inherent weaknesses of cross-sectional data have made firm conclusions about causality difficult, particularly in the relationship of conversation to knowledge and uncertainty. A number of approaches could be used to attack this problem, including panel studies and the utilization of alternative variables related to conversation – personality measures or analysis of social networks – that when combined with survey items on political topics could be used to build structural models that would provide more evidence with which to make causal inferences.

I have also argued that critical data on issues are often missing from media reports, but perhaps more likely to emerge in conversation. An obvious task would then be to analyze political discussions to see how items at various positions in the hierarchy of information are used. While such an enterprise would require some subjective judgments about the relative value of different pieces of information, given the right issue such an analysis should be possible.

This brings us to the most pressing need for research in this area: scholars focusing on political conversation should spend more time listening to actual citizens

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talking to one another. While there have been a few excellent works doing so, there is yet much more to be learned by allowing citizens to not only respond to survey questions but to speak in their own words. Such research could reveal, for instance, whether motive questioning is in fact a common practice in everyday conversation, how information is used and traded, and how political disagreements are addressed or circumvented. We also need a better understanding of the situations in which people choose not to talk about politics, particularly in the workplace, the locale in which they are most likely to encounter those with differing experiences, perspectives, and beliefs.

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Appendix
Methodology

Because there are a number of different data sets used throughout this dissertation, this appendix will be divided by chapter. In some cases, analyses from the same survey will contain different numbers of cases, since some questions were asked of some respondents but not others.

Chapter 2

The content analytic data in Chapter 2 are taken from the Campaign Discourse Mapping Project, which analyzed speeches, ads, and debates from the 1952 through 1996 presidential campaigns, and television news coverage from the 1980 through 1996 campaigns. Candidate discourse was broken down into a series of arguments, defined as a claim plus evidence or justification for that claim. The following table shows the number of texts and the total number of arguments for each discourse genre.

Year						
	Texts	*Arguments*	*Texts*	*Arguments*	*Texts*	*Arguments*
1952	22	100	44	45	-	-
1956	25	171	11	26	-	-
1960	27	251	122	127	4	148
1964	23	140	47	48	-	-
1968	23	162	59	60	-	-
1972	22	116	52	70	-	-
1976	20	145	99	115	3	88
1980	33	359	106	94	2	119
1984	22	165	61	71	2	65
1988	22	325	83	89	2	116
1992	22	326	62	64	3	228
1996	38	191	87	87	2	153

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Year		
	Texts	*Arguments*
1980	104	156
1984	63	119
1988	97	136
1992	86	169
1996	70	78

The content analysis was conducted between 1994 and 1996. The following text details the coding instructions for the relevant measures. Intercoder reliability on all measures exceeded a minimum Krippendorf reliability alpha of .60, which depending on the variance in the data usually translated to agreement between ninety and ninety-five percent. While the speech and TV news portions of the content analysis are based on samples (as detailed below), we analyzed every general election advertisement by the major candidates and every presidential (but not vice-presidential) debate.

■ CENTRAL CLAIMS: THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS

We divided each speech, debate, TV ad, and free time statement into its main points, or *central claims*. We divided each TV news story into quotes and paraphrases of candidates' central claims. Coders grouped with each central claim any supporting material for the claim.

We coded each participant's remarks in a debate separately. We stipulated that each TV news central claim could quote or paraphrase only one candidate.

Coders identified central claims after reading each text and noting its organization. Central claims represent the highest level of generalization; if a text were outlined, central claims would occupy the first outline level. Typically, changes in topic signaled changes in central claims. For example:

"Here's what I want to accomplish in my second term. *We need legal reform.* I want caps on frivolous lawsuits. Too many parents are frightened to coach Little League because they know they can get sued.

Then we need to get to work improving our schools. We'll provide tax credits so all parents can afford to send their children to private or parochial schools."[1]

We coded as central claims only statements that made *arguable assertions*. We ignored six types of *inarguable statements: courtesies* ("It's good to be here," "This is the best crowd yet," "Thanks for your support," "God bless"); *categorical self-endorsements* ("Vote for me," "I am the better candidate," "America will be better with a Democrat in the White House"); *speculations on the horserace* ("I think we can take Michigan on Tuesday," "Don't listen to the polls," "In the end, America will do what is right and vote Republican"); *inarguable generalizations* ("I want a better America," "I want a better future for our children," "I want clean air"); *statements of broad agendas* ("I have an plan for making America better," "Here's what I promise to do if elected"); and *patriotic appeals* ("America is the best country in the world," "I'm proud to be an American"). We also did not code endorsements of other candidates (usually at the beginnings of stump speeches and sometimes quoted or paraphrased in news).

[1] All examples in this codebook are based on actual texts but are fictitious.

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ENGAGEMENT: ADVOCACY, ATTACK, AND COMPARISON

After identifying a text's central claims, we categorized each claim as *advocacy, attack,* or *comparison:*

Advocacy makes a case for the speaker's position: "I want a tax cut." "As a senator, I consistently voted for tax cuts and against tax increases."

Attack indicts the opponent's position: "My opponent says you don't need a tax cut; in fact, he wants to raise your taxes." "As governor, my opponent voted time and time again for tax increases."

Comparison both indicts the opponent's position and makes a corresponding—on the same topic—case for the speaker's position: "I want a tax cut, but my opponent says you don't need one." "As governor, my opponent voted time and time again for tax increases. As a senator, I consistently voted no to tax increases and yes to tax cuts."

Another way to think of this categorization is in terms of *self-promotion* and *opposition.* Self-promotional messages promote the speaker; oppositional messages criticize the opponent. Advocacy is self-promotion. Attack is opposition. Comparison is both self-promotion and opposition.

We stipulated that the self-promotional part and the oppositional part of a comparison claim be on the same topic.

We also stipulated that the opponent in an oppositional message (attack or advocacy) be another presidential candidate, his running mate, his relatives or associates, his staff, his party, or a member or members of his party. We coded criticism of other opponents—for example, Washington in general, business leaders, foreign politicians—as self-promotion (advocacy).

ARGUMENT VS. ASSERTION: EVIDENCE

We considered any supporting material for each central claim and coded each claim as *evidenced* or *unevidenced.* We coded a central claim as evidenced if it was accompanied by information that *documented, elaborated,* or *justified* the claim. For example:

evidence that documents: "As a senator, I consistently voted for tax cuts and against tax increases. *I was one of the architects of the historic Reagan tax cut in the early 1980s.*"

evidence that elaborates: "I want a targeted tax cut. *I want to give a tax credit to families so they can send their children to college, so they can buy a first home, and so they can pay medical expenses.*"

evidence that justifies: "I propose expanding the Family and Medical Leave Act to give parents time off for family functions. *Too many parents can't go to their children's PTA meetings or soccer games because they can't take off work without fear of losing their jobs.*"

We stipulated that evidence could not merely restate the claim.

For this analysis, we did not evaluate the truth, suitability, or completeness of evidence.

NEWS STORY STRUCTURE

We categorized the frame each TV news story as developed in the first three paragraphs—the *primary structure*—as *strategy, issue,* or *other:*

A strategy frame focuses on the campaign in terms of who's winning and who's losing. Candidate statements and actions are deemed important or relevant because of their strategic value: "The presidential race tightened today as a new poll shows the incumbent trailing by just 10 points." "Our campaign focus tonight is whether the Republican emphasis on family values is having the desired effect."

An issue frame focuses on the candidate's positions for what they are—positions: "The president unveiled a new program to help laid-off workers retrain for new jobs." "Welfare—everyone agrees something should be done, but not what should be done. The candidates' approaches differ markedly."

An other frame focuses neither on the strategy of the campaign or the issues of the campaign: "The Commission on Presidential Debates announced the moderator for Sunday's face-off."

We assigned strategy primary structures to stories that began by framing issues as strategy: "Wooing the Midwestern blue-collar vote, the president today promised tax breaks for depressed industries in and around Detroit."

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If more than half of the story developed a frame that differed from the primary structure, we coded a secondary structure: strategy, issue, or other. If not more than half of the story developed a different frame, we coded the secondary structure the same as the primary structure.

- SAMPLING

We coded a sample of each candidate's speeches: the convention acceptance speech, any television speeches, one randomly selected Wednesday stump speech from Sept. 1 through the week before Election Day, and one randomly selected stump speech from the Monday before the election. When no Wednesday stump speeches were archived for a candidate, we looked to Tuesday, then to Thursday, then to Monday, then to Friday; if no stump speeches were archived for a candidate in a Monday–Friday period, we did not code a speech for the candidate for that week.

We also coded Clinton's and Dole's (1996) Saturday morning radio addresses.

We coded a sample of campaign (not candidate) news aired on *ABC World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News*, and *NBC Nightly News* Sept. 1 through Election Eve. The stump speech sample determined the news samples: We sampled all archived TV news campaign stories the nights of sample stump speeches.

Chapter 3

The Annenberg surveys utilized in this study were conducted by telephone with respondents obtained via random digit dialing. The 1996 national survey, which was conducted by Chilton Research Service of Radnor, PA, administered the questionnaire to only those who claimed to be registered to vote, while the 1998 California survey and the 2000 rolling cross-section (both conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates of Washington, DC) interviewed any adult. In all three cases, the adult in the household with the most recent birthday was chosen as the respondent. Methodological information on the National Election Studies is available at http://www.umich.edu/~nes. The tables below list the sample sizes represented in figures and tables. Regression analyses have slightly lower N's because respondents listed as missing on any included variable were not included.

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Item	N
Figure 3-1	2646
Figure 3-2	2223 ('84) 2154 ('86) 2009 ('88) 1966 ('90) 2300 ('92) 1525 ('96) 1276 ('98)
Figure 3-3	2482 ('92) 1532 ('96)
Figure 3-4	2827 (IA) 3329 (NH) 4341 (ST)
Table 3-1	2646
Table 3-2	2203
Table 3-3	2233 – 2643

Chapter 4

This chapter presents data from the 1998 California survey, which was administered to residents of the San Francisco Bay Area. Because questions in the knowledge battery were asked of subsets of the California sample, analyses including knowledge (e.g. Table 4-1) will have lower N's than those without knowledge as a variable. Small variations are the result of missing cases.

Item	N
Figure 4-1	1581
Figure 4-2	2033
Figure 4-3	2026
Figure 4-4	2013
Figure 4-5	2015
Table 4-1	812

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Chapter 5

Item	
Figure 5-1	1939
Figure 5-2	1886
Figure 5-3	1712 (NES) 1902 (ASC)
Figure 5-4	1929
Figure 5-5	1929
Figure 5-6	1924

Chapter 6

Item				
Figure 6-1	**Year**	**Congress**	**Figures**	**Candidates**
	1984	1924	n.a.	1252
	1986	2168	2158	n.a
	1988	1757	1752	1479
	1990	1970	1969	n.a
	1992	2244	2244	1739
	1994	1769	1770	n.a
	1996	1531	1347	1295
	1998	1281	1267	n.a
Figure 6-2	n.a.			
Figure 6-3	607 (Wave 1) 1011 (Wave 2) 1029 (Wave 3) 1023 (Wave 4)			
Figure 6-4	381			
Figure 6-5	2630			
Figure 6-6	2643			
Figure 6-7	2635			
Table 6-1	2222 - 2646			
Table 6-2	1370 (NES) 2203 (96 ASC) 1456 (98 ASC)			

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Figure 6-8: Knowledge of Figures and Candidate Positions
(1996 NES)

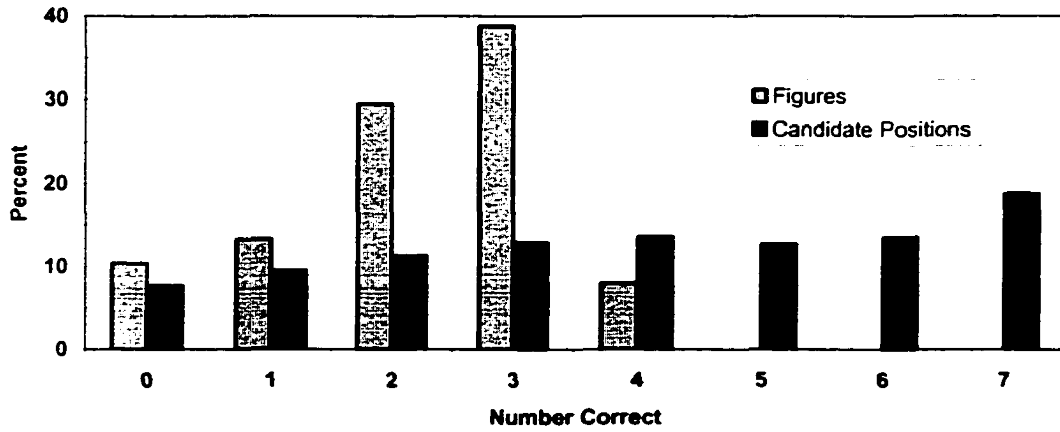

Figure 6-9: Knowledge of Candidate Issue Positions
(1996 Annenberg Cross-Sections)

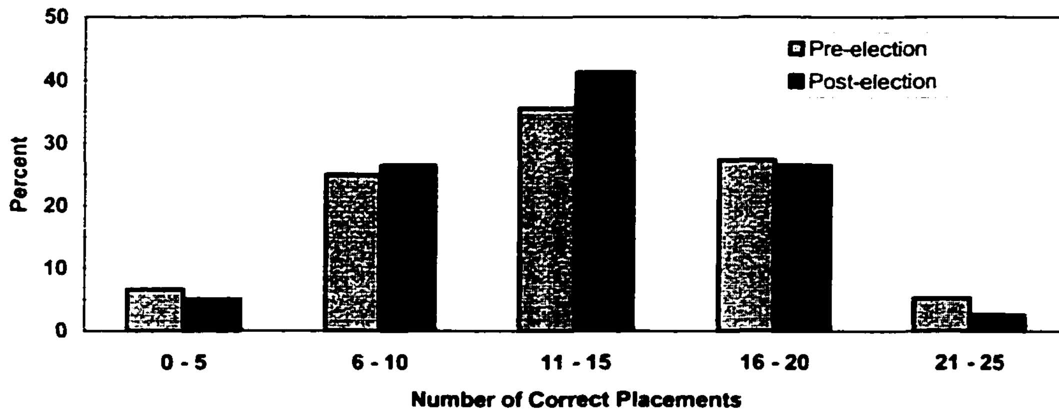

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Figure 6-10: Knowledge of Candidate Facts and Issue Positions
(1998 California Study)

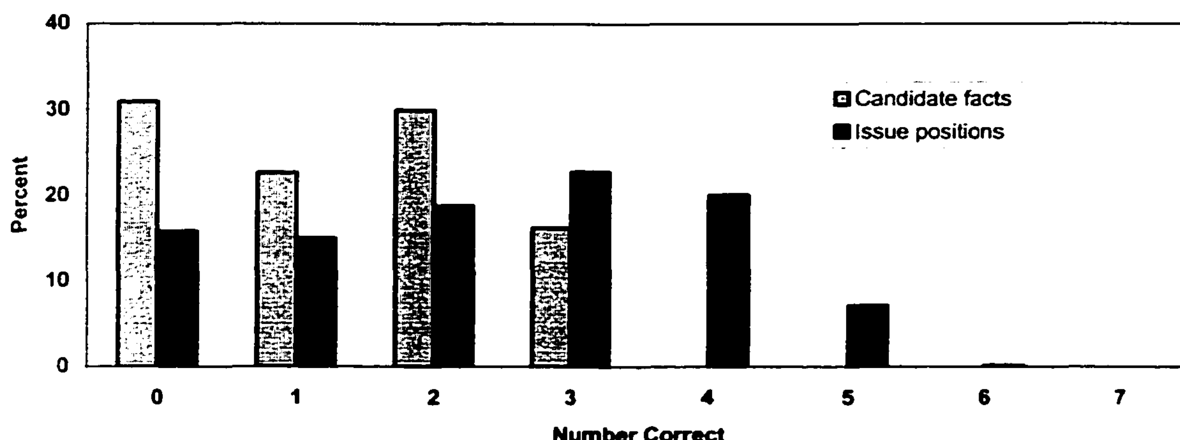

Table 6-3: 1996 Annenberg Survey, Final Post-Election Cross Section: Percent Answering Correctly, Candidate Issue Positions

"I am going to read you a list of campaign issues. For each one, please tell me which candidate favored it. Who favored (READ ITEM): Clinton, Dole, both candidates, or neither candidate?"

		Percent answering correctly
1.	Making it harder for women to obtain abortions	74.2
2.	The deepest cuts in federal government spending on domestic social programs	68.4
3.	The greatest increase in defense spending	56.0
4.	The greatest reduction in future Medicare spending	58.5
5.	Government vouchers to allow parents the choice of sending their children to public, private, or parochial schools	45.2
6.	A Constitutional Amendment to balance the federal budget	43.9
7.	A Constitutional Amendment to allow voluntary prayer in public schools	48.0
8.	The elimination of the U.S. Department of Energy	47.0
9.	The immediate development of an anti-missile defense system	40.9
10.	Increased federal funding for job training programs	77.0
11.	Expanding family leave	80.4
12.	Shifting the greatest amount of control of federal programs to the states	57.6
13.	A fifteen percent across the board tax cut	80.3
14.	A ban on cigarette advertising to children	67.8
15.	The elimination of the Department of Education	65.8
16.	Permitting late term abortions using the so-called partial birth abortion procedure when the life or health of the mother is at stake	65.8
17.	Legalizing same-sex marriages	39.2
18.	NAFTA	21.2
19.	Opposing the death penalty	24.9
20.	Ending the IRS as we know it	49.3
21.	Cleaning up two-thirds of the toxic waste dumps in the next four years	57.9
22.	Every child being able to read on his or her own by the age of eight	62.3
23.	Targeted tax cuts	28.7

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Table 6-4: National Election Studies: Percent Answering Correctly - Identification of Public Figures, Relative Placement of Candidate Issue Positions, Control of Congress

1984		1986		1988		1990	
Figures:		*Figures:*		*Figures:*		*Figures:*	
		Bush	77.3	Wright	13.9	Quayle	81
		Dole	12.3	E. Kennedy	69.1	Mitchell	2.3
		O'Neill	56.6	Schultz	38.8	Foley	8.9
		Rhenquist	13.5	Rhenquist	3.5	Rhenquist	4.3
				Thatcher	52.2	Thatcher	50
				Arafat	36.9	Mandela	15.3
				Gorbachev	71.2	Gorbachev	69.3
Candidate positions:				*Candidate positions:*			
Gov't services	68.7			Defense	65.7		
Guaranteed job	60.1			Spending	58.7		
Ctrl. America	57.6			Insurance	44.2		
Minorities	54.9			Stndrd. Living	49.2		
Women	56.7						
Defense	72.5						
Russia	60.2						
Party control:		*Party control:*		*Party control:*		*Party control:*	
House	51.2	House	33.3	House	59.4	House	48.8
Senate	30.4	Senate	47.9	Senate	54	Senate	41.9

1992		1994		1996		1998	
Figures:		*Figures:*		*Figures:*		*Figures:*	
Quayle	87.8	Gore	80.1	Gore	88.2	Gore	88.9
Foley	25.7	Foley	34.6	Gingrich	58	Gingrich	65.7
Rhenquist	8.4	Rhenquist	7.1	Rhenquist	9.3	Rhenquist	10.7
Yeltsin	45	Yeltsin	46.7	Yeltsin	64.8	Yeltsin	49.8
Candidate positions:				*Candidate positions:*			
Defense	63.2			Abortion	58.1		
Spending	64.6			Aid to blacks	60.4		
Guaranteed job	55.7			Defense	48.8		
				Environment	49.1		
				Regulations	51.7		
				Health care	64.5		
Party control:		*Party control:*		*Party control:*		*Party control:*	
House	59.4	House	74	House	75	House	67.4
Senate	51.2	Senate	66.4	Senate	71.6	Senate	55.7

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Table 6-5: 1998 Annenberg California Study: Percent Correctly Identifying Candidate Information and Issue Positions

Candidate information:	
Which was Attorney General	50
Which was Lieutenant Governor	54.2
Which was member of Congress	25.1
Issue Positions:	
Abortion	64
HMO reform	5.3
Indian casinos	26.7
School vouchers	47.2
CA join tobacco suit	2.3
Ban assault weapons	53.4
No farming on endangered land	36.5

The Lexis/Nexis search regarding the estate tax was conducted with the following syntax: (estate tax OR inheritance tax) AND Congress AND date aft 12/31/99 AND date bef 7/1/00; the term "AND 675,000" was then added. The search located 727 newspaper articles during the period, of which 130 mentioned the 675,000 figure, as did 6 out of 52 magazine articles and 18 out of 198 news transcripts.

Chapter 7

The sample sizes in the figures for Chapter 7 are higher than that for Table 7-2 because not all respondents were asked about political discussion. Small variations in sample sizes on the figures are due to missing cases.

Item	
Figure 7-1	1677-1711
Figure 7-2	1673-1710
Table 7-1	1641-1702
Table 7-2	1448
Figure 7-3	1703-1710
Figure 7-4	1706-1711
Figure 7-5	1691-1706
Figure 7-6	1703-1709
Figure 7-7	1707-1713

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Figure 7-3: Uncertainty on Government Services (1996 NES)

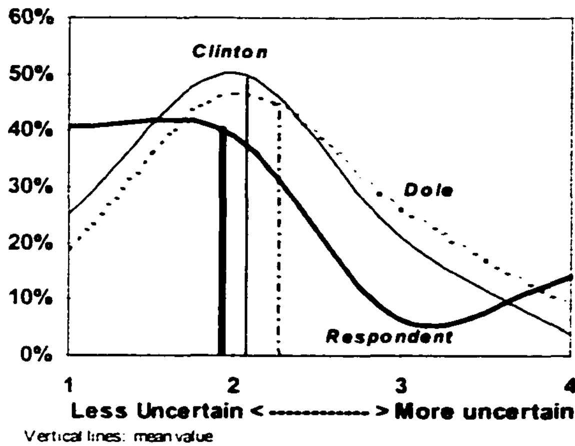


Figure 7-4: Uncertainty on Defense Spending (1996 NES)

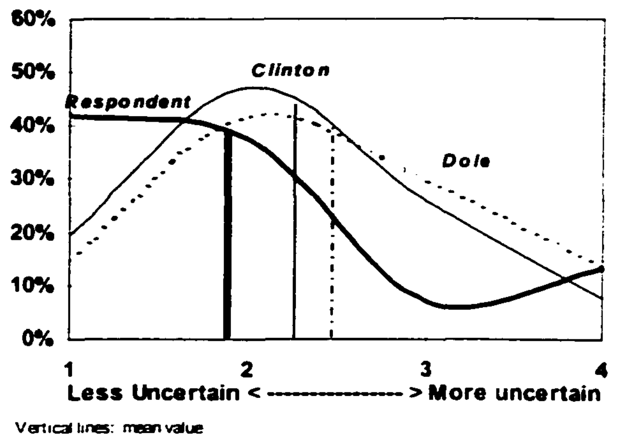


Figure 7-5: Uncertainty on Aid to Blacks (1996 NES)

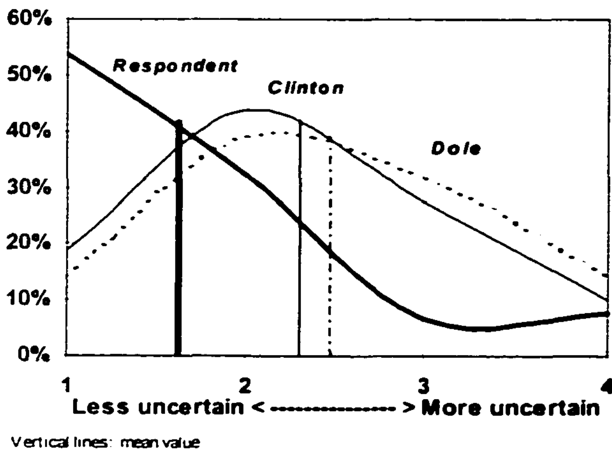


Figure 7-6: Uncertainty on Abortion (1996 NES)

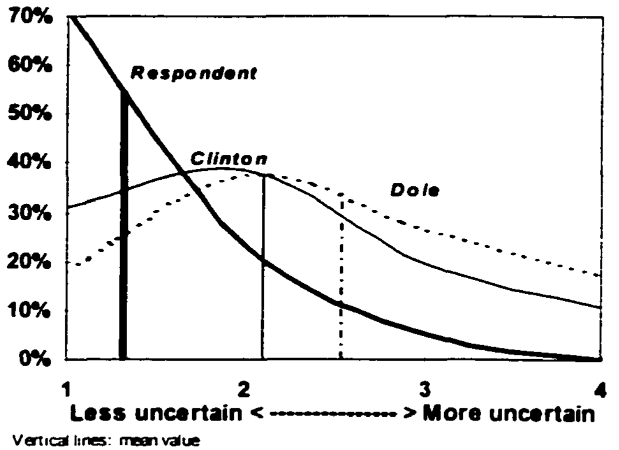
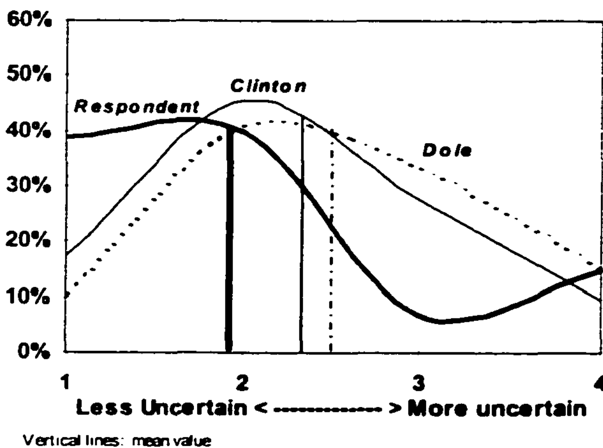


Figure 7-7: Uncertainty on Environment vs. Jobs (1996 NES)



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