Who Deliberates?
Discursive Participation in America

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ABSTRACT

Much contemporary analysis of American democracy sounds the alarm that citizens are retreating from the process of electing government officials, influencing the legislative process by which government policy is made, and engaging in other forms of civic and political life. This paper addresses an important and understudied outlet for political engagement by citizens: the various ways—from informal conversations to deliberative forums—in which individuals talk in public about policy issues affecting the local, national, and international communities in which they live. We report findings from a national sample of 1,501 adult Americans describing the extent, distribution, and correlates of what we call "discursive participation." We conclude that such participation occurs more frequently than assumed and that while there are notable variations in participation, it appears that discursive participation may be less directly stratified by income than other forms of political and civic engagement. Our organizational and political model of public deliberation largely attributes discursive participation to organizational membership and political interest and knowledge. We conclude by suggesting that public talk may be one dimension of political and civic life that exhibits an energetic, inventive, and vital citizenry.

Much contemporary analysis of American democracy sounds the alarm that citizens are retreating from the political process. Voter turnout appears to have declined over the past thirty years, with this trend most notable among the young. Many public attitudes and opinions about candidates, parties, elected officials, and the campaign and policy processes more generally all show disturbing signs of decay (Texiera, 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Patterson, 2002). Similar trends can be seen in several measures of citizens' cognitive and affective engagement in politics and government, as well as their sense of government officials' responsiveness to their wants and wishes (Erikson and Tedin, 2001; Texiera, 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Patterson, 2002). More ominously, many observers of American public life conclude that low or declining participation in the electoral process reflects a broader civic disengagement that is rooted in the erosion of community networks and the decline in "social capital" (Putnam, 2000; Rahn and Transue, 1998) or new elite strategies geared toward the affluent and professionals (Skocpol, 2003).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some scholars dispute these trends. McDonald and Popkin (2001) argue that recent declines in voter turnout are inflated by counting immigrants, felons, and other individuals who cannot vote as if they were eligible, though even the adjusted turnout rates are below those in the 1960s. Many measures of civic and political engagement (for example political interest, political knowledge, internal political efficacy, and several measures of campaign-related behavior) show little consistent evidence of decline over time (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Smith, 1989; Abramson, 1983). And evidence of a wholesale decline in social capital has been challenged on a number of fronts (Skocpol, 2003; Skocpol and Fiorina, 2000; Ladd, 2000). Without question, portions of the public remain concerned—at times intensely—about a range of issues. Many Americans are engaged in debates over competing social issues related to gay marriage and abortion, conflicts over economic redistribution through taxation and government revenues, and the clash of values and interests witnessed, for instance, in the battles between environmentalists and economic developers. Marches by thousands of Americans who favored and opposed the war in Iraq also appeared to reflect

deep interest in government policy even as participation in the "headline" politics of electoral and legislative processes is atrophying. The debate is further complicated by the possibility that while some forms of participation (for example, voting or membership in traditional neighborhood associations) may be declining, other, less well-understood or measured forms of engagement (for example, on-line "communities" and "associations") may be growing.

Nonetheless, one need not accept the most Cassandra-like warnings of the collapse of civic and political life to be concerned about the health of American democracy. Participation in the electoral process has traditionally been disappointingly low in the United States when compared to other advanced democracies, a point which should not be ignored simply because its roots are deep. Although engagement in civic life may not be decaying to the extent some have argued, Putnam and others have amassed enough evidence of a decline in associational life to give one pause. While more Americans have shown a willingness to engage in acts of compassion and charity than is sometimes acknowledged (as witnessed, for example, in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks) such involvement appears to be sporadic and usually lacks any direct connection to broader issues of policy or politics. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, most forms of civic and especially political engagement in the United States—whether declining or not—are skewed in favor of socially and economically advantaged citizens (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995), leading to Schattschneider's classic and still apt conclusion that "the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper class accent" (1960: 35).

A central question that underlies this multilayered debate about the civic and political health of the nation is "How do Americans voice their preferences on public issues?" In this chapter we address the question using some results from a larger project. We explore an important and to our minds understudied outlet for civic and political engagement by citizens—what we call "discursive participation." By discursive participation we mean the various ways in which citizens can talk in public settings about issues that affect the community, state, or nation in which they live—from one-

on-one conversations to e-mail exchanges to more formal meetings. Such participation does not always provide the kind of institutional guarantees found in electoral and legislative politics. But it may nevertheless bolster the capacities and resources of citizens to understand opposing views and articulate their own views, motivate them to participate, and recruit them into organizations and activities to further their views and interests. Ultimately, we believe that discursive participation by individual citizens can enhance participatory resources, motivations, and recruitment, though the extent and representativeness of these enhancements remain to be established.

More specifically, this chapter addresses three simple but important questions regarding discursive participation in the United States. First, what forms does discursive participation take and how common are they? Second, what are the demographic, political, and social characteristics of citizens who engage in these various forms of discursive participation? And third, which of these characteristics are most important in predicting who deliberates. We begin by reviewing existing theory and research on public deliberation and our concept of discursive participation. After describing our data and measures, we present evidence regarding the extent and types of discursive participation currently occurring in the United States and examine the demographic, social, and political characteristics of Americans who engage in these different forms of public talk.

Theory and Research on Public Deliberation

A large group of scholars, foundations, and public intellectuals agree with Benjamin Page that "public deliberation is essential to democracy" (1996: 1). The celebration of public deliberation by citizens has a long history that flows from the city-states of ancient Greece to the town hall meetings of colonial New England to the salons and cafes of Paris. Democratic theory has long designated public deliberation as a cornerstone of participatory democracy and representative government (Barber, 1984; Connolly, 1983; Dahl, 1989; Dewey, 1927; Fishkin, 1992; 1995; Habermas; 1962; Mansbridge, 1980).

The practice of public deliberation has also been a subject of scholarly research. This tradition of research ranges from case studies of group deliberations (Mansbridge, 1980; Gamson, 1992; Gastil, 2000; Lindeman, 2002) to quasi-experimental designs built around face-to-face (Luskin and Fishkin, 1998; 1999) or on-line (Price and Cappella, 2001) discussions, to extrapolations from the psychological literature on small group dynamics (Mendlberg, 2002), to explorations of "mass mediated" (Page, 1996) or "survey based" (Lindeman, 2002) deliberation.

Public deliberation is also enjoying a renaissance outside of the academy. President Clinton's initiative on race in the early 1990s was premised on the power and value of public discussion regarding a divisive but often unspoken issue. Televised initiatives such as James Fishkin's "deliberative polls," town-hall meeting style presidential debates, *Nightline*'s or *Hardball*'s occasional public forums, even talk shows such as *Oprah* all try to capture the spirit of public deliberation, albeit in ways that are more spectator sport than active involvement for the vast majority of American citizens. For others, the Internet holds the potential key for blending the advantages of face-to-face discussion with the scale and convenience of modern communications technology. Public deliberation has been supported by non-profits such as the Kettering Foundation's "national issues forums," the Study Circles Resource Center, and the Pew Charitable Trusts.

This eclectic group of promoters has been attracted to public deliberation for varied reasons, but three tend to stand out. First, public deliberation is a means for citizen education and training. Page credits it with "ensuring that the public's policy preferences—upon which democratic decisions are based—are informed, enlightened, and authentic" (1996: 1). In addition to educating citizens, deliberation can also be a tool for building a sense of efficacy and trust in political institutions and in fellow citizens. Second, participation in public deliberation has been cited as a tool for the moral (and not simply instrumental) development of citizens. Publicly talking about issues of community concern forces citizens to consider competing interests and values and to accept responsibility not only for themselves but also for the well being of others (Pateman, 1970; MacPherson, 1977; Barber, 1984).

Third, public deliberation has been singled out as a unique mechanism for producing collective decisions. Policy entrepreneurs as diverse as urban planners and ecologists have embraced public deliberation as a tool for reconciling competing perspectives. For instance, public deliberation has been used as a method for discussing and negotiating such diverse issues as how to safely produce genetically modified organisms, encourage economic development, and develop efficient and environmentally sustainable uses of energy (e.g. Kapuscinski, Goodman, Hahn, Jacobs et al., 2003; Forester, 1999). In an era of great divisiveness over policy issues and partisan positions, the traditional tools of electoral and legislative avenues to collective decision making remain essential. But they have also become deadlocked or have alienated large parts of America. Public deliberation has emerged as a potentially valuable way of breaking (or at least sidestepping) this deadlock.

Although scholars and practitioners appreciate the promise of public deliberation, there remain deep doubts about its practicality, political significance, and even appropriateness as a core feature of a vibrant democracy. The holding of civic forums is often considered too infrequent and uncommon to deserve much attention, despite the visibility of occasional efforts. Still others are concerned that public deliberation is little more than another enclave of "gated democracy"—a practice reserved for the same group of affluent Americans who disproportionately deploy their checkbooks to lure candidates to their favorite positions or who are well-endowed with social capital. Yet another complaint is that civic forums are "just talk"—idle chat that is cut off from government decision making about important issues of the day. Perhaps most damning, some argue that many citizens are unable to participate effectively in such deliberative settings, that public deliberation can produce unintended consequences such as "opinion polarization… shifts in opinion in new and risky directions… [and] social-normative pressures that can subvert sound judgment" (as summarized by Price, et al., 2003: 5. See also Brown, 2000; Sunstein, 2001; Mansbridge, 1980; Sanders, 1997; Schudson, 1997; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Put simply, the strong and persistent presumption is that public deliberation is so infrequent, unrepresentative, and disconnected from actual decision-

making as to make it an impractical mechanism for determining the public will at best and misleading or dangerous at worst.

There is, however, a noticeable disjuncture between on the one hand the growing debate regarding the potential and pitfalls of public deliberation and on the other hand the relative scarcity of research on it. As noted above, much of the existing research is based on case studies of specific deliberative forums, experiments, or extrapolations from research on non-political small group interactions. In addition, there have been some efforts to use survey-based research to examine discrete aspects of public deliberation—how often citizens attend meetings (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995), talk about politics and public affairs (Bennett, 1998) or try to convince others how to vote (Huckfeldt et al., 1998; Keeter, Zukin, Andolina and Jenkins, 2002). But, to our knowledge, there has been no systematic analysis of the extent to which Americans engage in discursive participation, the specific forms this participation takes, and the traits of those who do and do not participate. Our research starts to fill this significant gap.

Discursive Participation and its Relationship to Public Deliberation

In the most formal sense, public deliberation is "discussion that involves judicious argument, critical listening, and earnest decision making" (Gastil, 2000: 22). Fishkin (1995) adopts a similarly strict definition, but allows for a more realistic assessment by introducing the notion of "incompleteness" by arguing that "In practical contexts a great deal of incompleteness must be tolerated. Hence, when we talk of improving deliberation, it is a matter of *improving* the completeness of the debate and the public's engagement in it, not a matter of perfecting it…" (p. 41)

How far one is willing to take the notion of "incompleteness" before a particular activity can no longer be considered deliberation is, however, far from clear or agreed upon. For example, Page (1996) acknowledges the "face-to-face ideal" underlying most traditional notions of deliberation and goes on to argue that in modern, mass democracies deliberation is largely "mediated" through professional

communicators "who not only help policy experts communicate with each other, but also assemble, explain, debate, and disseminate the best available information and ideas about public policy, in ways that are accessible to large audiences of ordinary citizens" (p. 5). Lindeman (2002) argues that deliberation need not even involve direct exchanges between two or more citizens, but can also occur through the survey process and/or within the thought processes of an individual citizen. And while not always explicitly using the term deliberation, research on other forms of public talk (for example, talk radio; interpersonal persuasion between a friend, neighbor or co-worker; contacting the media or a public official about an issue; having informal conversations about a community concern) all intersect conceptually with more formal definitions of public deliberation.

Our concept of discursive participation builds on the more formal definition of public deliberation to define it as a distinctive form of political and civic engagement. We define discursive participation as citizens coming together with others in formal or informal settings—face-to-face or via the telephone or the Internet—to discuss local, national, or international issues. Specifically, our conceptualization of discursive participation has five principal characteristics. First, and most obviously, the primary form of activity we are concerned about is discourse with others—talking, conversing, discussing, and/or deliberating. Second, we consider public discourse as a form of *participation*. While analyses of civic and political participation have become more sensitive to the variety of ways in which citizens can act, they seldom include public "talk" as a measure of engagement, focusing instead on activities such as voting, attending rallies, working for a political party, lobbying, joining and actively participating in voluntary organizations, protest and the like (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol and Fiorina, 2000; Ladd, 2000; Brady, 1999). But talking in public with other citizens is a form of participation, one that reflects and contributes to participatory resources, motivations, and recruitment—that is, it enhances the opportunity for individuals to develop and express their views, learn the positions of others, identify shared concerns and preferences, come to understand and reach judgments about matters of public concern, and become integrated into networks

of citizens. Such exchanges are a central way for expressing and negotiating deep divisions over material interests and moral values; they are also critical for publicly airing disagreements that have not been articulated or at least incompletely stated because so many citizens have withdrawn from electoral and legislative politics (Etzioni, 1996; Habermas, 1989, Dryzek, 1990, Elser, 1998; Michelman 1988; Benhabib 1992 and 1996; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996).

Third, discursive participation can include but is not limited to the formal institutions and processes of civic and political life. As such it can involve private individuals in informal, unplanned exchanges; those who convene in public, but who do so outside the realm of the normal process of government operations (for example, in such places as libraries, schools, homes, churches, and community centers); and those who are brought together in settings such as town hall meetings of political representatives and their constituents. Fourth, discursive participation can occur through a variety of mediums, ranging from face-to-face exchanges, to phone conversations, to e-mail exchanges, to Internet forums. And fifth, discursive participation is focused on formal and informal discourse about local, national or international issue of public concern, and does not include meetings or conversations about personal lives that are *unrelated* to issues of broader public concern.

A National Survey of Discursive Participation in America

In order to understand the prevalence, types, distribution, sources, and impact of discursive participation in the United States, we designed a national telephone survey of American adults age 18 and over. Conducted by the Center for Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut, the survey consisted of a random sample of 1,001 respondents and an over sample (N=500) of what we call "Face-to-Face Deliberators"—those who had attended a formal or informal meeting to discuss a local, national or international issue of public importance. For the analyses in this paper, we combined and weighted both samples into a single, nationally representative sample (N=1501).

The survey was in the field from February 10 to March 23, 2003. We asked respondents about their discursive participation in the time since January of the preceding year. This period included not only the 2002 election cycle and debates about state and national budgets, but also a number of post September 11 related issues such as the ongoing war against terrorism, follow-up from the invasion of Afghanistan, and (less anticipated) the build-up and early stages of the war against Iraq. Given this active period with unusually spirited debates about local, national, and international issues, our analyses of the levels of discursive participation in general and face-to-face deliberation in particular should be viewed as what evaluators call a "best case study."

The survey instrument itself included several questions designed to gauge the extent to which citizens engaged in four distinct types of deliberation: what we call face-to-face deliberation, traditional talk, Internet deliberation and Internet talk.[1] As discussed above, for many observers face-to-face deliberation is at the heart of discursive participation. As Page (1996) notes, the "exemplars of deliberation, and many of the ideals and normative standards that we associate with it, are based on situations involving face-to-face talk among small numbers of people" (2-3). Respondents in our survey fell into this group—which we call *Face-to-Face Deliberators*—if they indicated that they had "attended a formal or informal [organized] meeting" since January 2002 to discuss a local, national, or international issue.[2]

Participation in face-to-face group discussions may be the epitome of public deliberation, but it also imposes high costs on individuals in terms of their time (i.e. travel, preparation, and participation), psychological commitment and discursive skills—especially, public speaking and the tension

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[1] While not part of the analysis we present in this chapter, the vast majority of the survey was devoted to items designed to tap respondents' experiences with and reactions to face-to-face deliberative forums of various kinds. While some of these questions focused on respondents' overall participation in such forums (e.g., how many such meetings they attended since January 1st 2002), most asked more specifically about "the last meeting" they had attended during the past year. We chose this approach to allow for a more detailed, nuanced description of the deliberative experience (e.g., what issues were discussed, where it was held, how many people attended) and respondents' reaction to it (e.g., did they feel the discussions were balanced, did they take any action as a result of the meeting).

[2] We treated respondents as "formal face-to-face deliberators" if they answered "yes" to the following question: "Since the beginning of last year - that is since January of 2002 - have you attended a formal or informal meeting organized by yourself, by someone else you know personally, or by a religious, social, civic, governmental or political group to

associated with disagreeing with another person in public. With this in mind we measured three arguably less demanding forms of discursive participation. One form—what we call *Traditional Talkers*—involves participation in informal conversations about public issues. Respondents in our survey fell into this category if they indicated that they had "informal face-to-face or phone conversations or exchanges with people you know about public issues that are local, national, or international concerns" at least "a few times a month."[3]

The Internet has been heralded as a promising means for reengaging a disconnected and atomized citizenry in political life. Our third measure of discursive participation—which we call *Internet Deliberators*—are respondents who indicated they participated since January 2002 in "Internet chat rooms, message boards, or other on-line discussion groups organized to specifically discuss a local, national, or international issue." Finally, *Internet Talkers* are those who report having used e-mail or instant messaging to talk informally about issues of public concern at least several times a month.[4]

We examine all four types of discursive participation in the subsequent analyses.[5] In addition, we also examine what we call *discursive intensity*, defined as the extent to which respondents engaged in multiple forms of discursive participation. *Discursive intensity* was measured as a simple additive index coded 0 to 4, with "0" indicating that the respondent did not engage in any of the four types of

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specifically discuss a local, national, or international issue - for example, neighborhood crime, housing, schools, social security, election reform, terrorism, global warming, or any other public issue that affects people?"

[3] The question was the following: "How often do you have informal face-to-face or phone conversations or exchanges with people you know about public issues that are local, national, or international concerns? I'm talking about exchanges or conversations of any length. Would you say you do this everyday, a few times a week, once a week, a few times a month, or less often than this." Respondents were considered "face-to-face talkers" if they indicated that they engaged in this form of deliberation "everyday," "a few times a week," "once a week," or "a few times a month."

[4] This group of discursive participants is based on the following question: "How often do you use e-mail or instant messaging to talk INFORMALLY with people you know about public issues that are local, national, or international concerns. Would you say you do this everyday, a few times a week, once a week, a few times a month, or less often than this." Respondents were treated as "Internet talkers" if they indicated "everyday", "a few times a week", "once a week," or "a few times a month."

[5] As can be seen, all of these screener questions refer explicitly to conversations (whether informal or formal) that were to discuss a "local, national, or international issue." Our reasoning here was to tap into citizens' discussions about issues related to public life, rather than more general discussions that are of a more personal, less publicly-relevant nature. In addition we attempted to distinguish one-to-one public talk from participation in more collective conversations by defining "public deliberation" as participation in a "formal or informal meeting organized by yourself, by someone else you know

discursive participation we measured, and "4" indicating that the respondent participated in all four types.

In addition to assessing the overall extent of discursive participation in the United States, a second goal of this chapter is to analyze which members of the public are most active in public deliberation. We examine sub-group differences in discursive participation across key demographic variables (race, education, gender, age, and income) and standard measures of political identity (ideology and party identification). Finally, we explore the additional influence of four measures of social capital (organizational membership, religious attendance, length of residence, and social trust) and four measures of political engagement (political trust, political knowledge, political interest, and political efficacy) on the likelihood and type of discursive participation.

Mapping Discursive Participation

Our analysis is divided into three sections: the frequency of different types of discursive participation, who engages in these various forms of discursive participation, and which configurations of citizen characteristics are most related to different modes of deliberation.

The Frequency of Discursive Participation

Despite the general caricature of the average citizen as being uninterested in "politics," our national survey suggests that a sizable portion of Americans are engaging in various forms of discursive participation (Table 1). Not surprisingly, informal conversations about public issues seem to be the most common form of such politically-relevant talk. Two thirds of Americans report they have conversations about public issues at least several times a month—what we call "traditional talking"—and of these the vast majority say they frequently have discussions of five minutes or longer.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

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personally, or by a religious, social, civic, governmental or political group" (in the case of face-to-face deliberation) and in

A far more difficult and time consuming type of discursive participation is attending a formal or informal meeting to discuss a local, national, or international issue—what we label "formal face-to-face deliberation." Nonetheless, one-in-four Americans reported having attended at least one such meeting in the past year. Given the time, interest and effort required to attend such meetings, coupled with the fact that 85 percent of those who said they had *not* attended a meeting to discuss public issues reported they had never been invited to do so, this degree of deliberative engagement strikes us as surprisingly high. A similar percentage (24 percent) of Americans report e-mailing or instant messaging with others about policy issues several times a month or more ("Internet talking"). However, only four percent engaged in what we call "Internet deliberation"—participation in Internet chat rooms, message boards, or other on-line discussion groups—to discuss a local, national, or international issue.

As another way of examining the extent of political talk in the United States, we created a summary variable ("discursive intensity") based on a simple additive index of our four specific measures. Based on this measure, fully 74 percent of Americans reported having engaged in at least one *type* of discursive act in the last year. More specifically, forty percent engaged in one type of discursive act in the last year, 24 percent reported having engaged in two types of such activities, 9 percent reported having engaged in three and two percent said they engaged in all four. It is important to note that this index measures the percent of people reporting that they engaged at least once in each type of discursive participation in the last year. The actual number of total acts is significantly greater since many individuals would have engaged in each type of participation (talking about policy issues, attending forums to discuss policy issues, emailing, etc.) several times a year. Although these percentages suggest that the extent of public talk in America is substantial, it is important to also note that 26 percent of our survey respondents reported having engaged in *no* form of discursive participation in the last year. Nonetheless, taken as a whole, we find it impressive that such a relatively

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"any INTERNET chat rooms, message boards, or other on-line discussion groups" (in the case of on-line deliberation).

large proportion of Americans engage in some form of discussion about public issues, and conclude that discursive participation in contemporary America is surprisingly robust.

Who Deliberates?

Analysis of political participation typically focuses on the impact of standard social and economic status (SES). The findings from this research are that political participation is stratified, with greater participation associated with those who have higher levels of income, education, and other markers of affluence and advantage (Milbrath and Goel, 1977; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). The critical question posed by research on political participation is whether discursive participation is similarly stratified. Answering this question requires an analysis of who is engaged in political talk of different kinds, including attending deliberative forums.

Research on civic life in America suggests we should study not only the standard measures of SES—education and income—but also age, gender, race, and the political characteristics of party identification and ideology. Individuals with strong ideological and partisan identities are especially motivated to participate in politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Smith, 1989; Patterson, 2002). In addition, government policy legacies and political identity (based on ideology or party) can increase political participation and activism (Skocpol, 2003; Campbell, 2003; Mettler, 2002; Soss, 1999). Research on well-developed government programs such as Medicare and the Social Security program, which largely—but not exclusively—benefit seniors, finds that they generate higher participation by their recipients (Campbell, 2003).

Table 2 shows that Americans at all education levels are participating in discursive politics. There are, though, small but consistent patterns indicating that those with a high school degree or less are under represented in discursive politics, while those with at least some college (and especially those with at least a college degree) are over represented. For example, whereas 25 percent of our sample has a college or postgraduate degree, 39 percent of face-to-face deliberators, 42 percent of Internet deliberators, 38 percent of Internet talkers, and 31 percent of traditional talkers are college

educated. The one exception to this pattern is the over representation of those with less than a high

school degree among Internet deliberators, which we attribute to the greater number of young people

who go on-line. The differences are less striking by income, though those with reported family

incomes below $30,000 are noticeably less likely to be engaged in discursive activities than their

proportion in the population would expect, all other things being equal.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Age differences in discursive participation are particularly intriguing, especially Internet

talking and Internet deliberation. Many political commentators bemoan the lack of political

participation among the young, and it is true that young adults aged 18 to 29 are less likely than older

adults to vote and to engage in a number of other political activities (Keeter, et al., 2002). However,

our data show that they are a good deal *more* likely than adults over age 30 to talk about and deliberate

about policy issues on the Internet. Of course, it is not surprising that they are more likely than older

adults to use the still relatively new Internet technology, but given the concerns over their overall low

rates of political participation, it is important to note that commentators may have missed this

heretofore unnoticed way for the young to make their voices heard. The other age-related pattern worth

noting is that despite elderly (age 65 and over) Americans' high rates of voter turnout, their discursive

participation rates are generally slightly lower than their proportion in the population would predict.

In terms of race and ethnicity, African Americans appear to be slightly under-represented

among Internet deliberators and traditional talkers, Hispanics are slightly under represented among all

forms of discursive participation, and whites are slightly over represented among Internet deliberators,

Internet talkers and traditional talkers. Overall, however, these distortions are relatively modest. The

one gender difference of note is that men are over represented among Internet deliberators.

Turning to our two political variables, there is some evidence that those who identify

themselves as "strong liberals" are slightly over represented among discursive participants, though this

distortion is slight. And Democrats are somewhat over represented among Internet deliberators and traditional talkers.

Another way of exploring group differences in discursive participation is to examine those who *do not* engage is this type of activity. The last column in Table 2 does just this, showing the breakdown among groups for the 26 percent of our sample who told us they had not engaged in any of our for types of political talk in the last year. Among this group, those with a high school degree or less, those with reported family incomes under $30,000 a year, African Americans and Hispanics, and those over 65 years of age were over represented, while those with at least some college, those earning $50,000 a year or more, whites, strong liberals, and self identified Republicans were under represented.

What do we make of this first cut at our data? The traditional biases that have been found in other forms of political and civic participation appear to also exist for discursive participation. Although these disparities in political participation are important, the biases appear to be modest in size, and it appears that citizens from all backgrounds and walks of life are talking about politics and public issues.

A Closer Look at Who Engages in Discursive Participation

While the initial descriptive data suggests some disparities in representation, we do not yet know what is driving discursive participation. In this section, we examine the determinants. First, we include the seven demographic and political characteristics presented in Table 2 as independent variables in a set of logit analyses. Results of the first set of these analyses are provided in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Consistent with prior findings regarding other forms of political and civic participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995), we find that even when controlling for other factors education has a consistent and positive impact on three of the four types of discursive participation we measured. The one exception to this pattern is Internet deliberation, which while showing a positive impact, does not reach statistical significance (undoubtedly due to the small sample size of Internet deliberators).

Beyond education, however, the group characteristics we measure show little consistent impact on discursive participation. Contrary to the expectations of the SES model, income does not have a significant effect on the likelihood of engaging in any of our individual discursive acts. While income may be an important resource in many participatory acts such as campaign contributions and contacting public officials, it may be less important in terms of its direct effect on whether an individual decides to engage in discussions about policy issues.

Age has a significant impact on three of our four measures of discursive participation, but unlike most other forms of civic or political engagement, this effect is negative, meaning young people are *more* likely than older ones to engage in Internet deliberations, Internet talk and, surprisingly, traditional public talk. Being African American suppresses traditional talk, but is unrelated to the other three types of discursive participation, while being Hispanic suppresses both traditional talk and Internet talk. Gender shows no significant relationship with any of our four measures of discursive participation. Being more conservative has a negative impact on engaging in traditional talk, but then so too does being a self-identified Democrat. And those with no party affiliation are less likely to talk about public issues via the Internet or through more traditional means.

A pattern that is somewhat more consistent with the traditional SES model emerges when we look at the impact of our seven group characteristics on the likelihood of not participating in *any* discursive act (last column of Table 3). Interpreting these results, we find that having low levels of education and income and being Hispanic and a Democrat increases the likelihood that one engages in no form of discursive activity. Surprisingly, however, ideology also has an effect: the more likely citizens are to be conservative, the more likely they are to be among those who don't engage in acts of public talk. Age and gender show no significant relationship.

Taken as a whole, the results of these analyses, much like those presented earlier, suggest that discursive participation suffers from some of the biases found in other forms of civic and political participation—most noticeably and consistently through education. But they also suggest that these

biases are relatively modest and inconsistent, holding out some hope that public talk—including fairly demanding activities such as deliberative forums—may be more equitably distributed within the U.S. population than other forms of engagement.

As an additional attempt to better understand the predictors of discursive participation, we move beyond the simple SES model, adding a number of additional measures of social capital (organizational membership, religious attendance, length of residence in the community, and social trust) and political engagement (political trust, political knowledge political interest, and political efficacy to the model presented in Table 3. Results of these analyses are presented in Table 4.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Eight findings resulting from the addition of measures of social capital and political engagement to the model are worth noting. First, and not surprisingly, the expanded model explains a larger percentage of the overall variance (as indicated by the R2s). Second, it dampens many, though not all, of the few effects found in our initial logit analyses, indicating that these earlier effects (most notably education) operate indirectly through other attitudes and behaviors. Third, the most consistent relationship with most forms of discursive participation is organizational membership, which is positively associated with attending face to face deliberative forums, participating in Internet deliberative chat rooms, and engaging in traditional talk. Fourth, those who have lived in an area a short time are more likely than others to engage in Internet talk. Fifth, religious attendance increases the likelihood of attending face to face deliberative forums. Sixth, political interest is positively associated with participation in face to face deliberative forums and in traditional talking. Seventh, political knowledge is positively associated with Internet talking. And eighth, political efficacy is positively associated with both face-to-face deliberation and Internet talking.

The findings in Table 4 modify the SES model, suggesting an organizational and political explanation for discursive participation. This model shows the strong effects of organizational

membership, indicating that the impact of education is indirect. In addition, political factors like political interest and political knowledge are also important influences on discursive participation.

As a final step to understanding the predictors of discursive participation, we return to our measure of discursive intensity. Recall that this index ranges from 0 to 4, with 0 indicating a respondent participated in none of our four types of discursive activities in the last year and 4 indicating he or she participated in all four types. Table 5 gives the results of two regression analyses—the first using only demographic and political characteristics and the second adding the variables that measure social capital and political engagement.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

Our analysis of discursive intensity replicate our previous findings of an organizational and political model of public deliberation. Looking first at Model 1, education increases the likelihood of discursive participation, while lower levels of participation are associated with being Hispanic, older, conservative, and/or having no party identification. When we add measures of social capital and political engagement (Model 2) the effects of education and Hispanic status become statistically insignificant, indicating that they operate primarily through other factors, though age and ideology continue to have a direct effect on discursive intensity. As in our analyses of individual types of discursive participation, discursive intensity is positively affected by organizational membership and interest in politics.

Conclusions

Scholars and practitioners express two common concerns about the health of American democracy. The first is that participation in the electoral process and in other forms of civic and political engagement such as working for campaigns, making campaign and charitable contributions, contacting officials, and informal community involvement is low in comparison to the past, as well as in comparison to normative standards of what critics think it should be. The second is that the citizen

participation that does exist is not equally distributed across the population, often showing biases in favor of those with higher levels of income and education. Since civic and political participation provides avenues for citizens to communicate their opinions, interests and needs, these worries are important. But there are other outlets for citizens to express their political preferences on public issues. In this chapter we have explored one such alternative outlet—discursive participation, or the ways that people talk about, discuss, and deliberate with each other on public issues that affect the community, state or nation in which they live.

Clearly our analyses in this chapter provide only a glimpse into the world of discursive politics, and they represent only the first step in a larger project on this topic. Nonetheless the findings are tantalizing. It appears that two thirds of Americans engage in at least some kind of regular political talk, and that a quarter participates in forums and meetings that begin to approximate accepted definitions of "public deliberation." While we find evidence of the unrepresentativeness and bias found in other forms of political engagement, these distortions appear to be less consistent or extreme in the case of discursive participation. These findings suggest that discursive participation may be a promising, under theorized and under examined pathway into public life.

Two of our most tantalizing findings have to do with the roles of SES and age. It is well established in the civic participation literature that people with high levels of income and education are most likely to participate. Our findings about *discursive* participation are somewhat different. In multivariate analyses, income appears to have no significant effect on discursive participation. This runs counter to findings of direct income stratification found in other forms of political participation and may suggest an encouraging opportunity to expand equitable involvement of citizens in public life. For example, fully 85 percent of those who had not attended a deliberative forum or meeting in the last year reported that *they had never been asked to do so*. Perhaps one way to increase citizen involvement is simply to make clear to citizens the routes open to their participation and to be sure they are invited to participate.

The story about education is more complicated. When taking into account only demographic characteristics and political identity, education has a large statistically significant effect on participating in discursive activities. People with higher levels of education appear to be more likely to engage in face to face deliberative forums, traditional talking, and Internet talking. They are also more likely to engage in multiple types of discursive activities (i.e., discursive intensity). But when we add measures of social capital (especially organizational membership) and political engagement (especially political interest) the effect of education is largely eliminated. Thus, it is not education *per se* that shapes discursive participation; it is instead belonging to organizations and being interested in political issues. This suggests an organizational and political model of discursive participation.

The important role of organizational membership has been noted by a range of scholars, especially Putnam (2000) and Skocpol (2000). If one is a member of an organization, one has some type of social network, which enhances the resources, motivations, and recruitment of individuals into politics. The central premise of social capital theory is that community networks generate trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation that have significant individual and group effects. Our work on discursive participation shows the value of organizational membership enhancing the likelihood of citizens engaging in discussions about policy issues.

The role of political interest is not surprising. Measures of psychological engagement with politics have long played a central role in theories of political participation. It is also a central component of the civic voluntarism theory of Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995).

The second intriguing finding relates to age. Many commentators bemoan the low electoral participation of young adults (Keeter, et al., 2002), and research on senior political activism (Campbell, 2003) points to the high participation of the elderly in contrast to that of adults under age 65. But our survey uncovered areas where the young are more likely participants, and the old are less active. Young adults aged 18 to 29 engage in conversations about policy issues on the Internet, as well as in person, at a level greater than would be predicted based on their proportion in the population, a

finding that survived a number of our more elaborate tests. Political talk may be a largely unnoticed way for the young to make their voices heard in social networks (though not necessarily in the halls of government).

Clearly more work is needed to fully support these conclusions. And discursive participation, in and of itself, is not a substitute for other important forms of civic and political engagement. Nonetheless we find these results encouraging. Discursive participation is one pathway into public life, a pathway that appears to be more common than oftentimes assumed. At a minimum, the research presented in this chapter suggests it is an area of inquiry deserving of more attention and study than it has received to date. And, perhaps, it may prove to be a way to help counter the steady erosion of political and civic life in America.

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Table 1. The Frequency of Engaging in Different Types of Discursive Activity

Types of Discursive Activity	Number	Percent of Total
Traditional talking	1018	68%
Formal face-to-face deliberation	379	25%
Internet talking	360	24%
Internet deliberation	61	4%
No discursive activity	387	26%

Total N=1501

Note: Respondents could engage in more than one form of discursive activity. Therefore, the numbers add to more than the total number of respondents, and the percentages add to more than 100.

Table 2. The Percentage of Americans by Demographic and Political Characteristics Who Engage in Different Types of Discursive Participation

	Whole sample	Face-to-Face Deliberators	Internet Deliberators	Internet Talkers	Traditional Talkers	Nondiscursive Participants
			Percentages			
Demographic Characteristics						
Race						
African American	8	9	5	7	6	11
Hispanic	7	4	5	2	4	14
White	78	77	84	81	82	68
Other	8	10	6	10	8	7
	(N=1458)	(N=366)	(N=60)	(N=350)	(N=988)	(N=373)
Education						
<HS Degree	10	5	15	5	5	22
HS degree only	37	26	5	23	32	48
Some college	28	30	38	35	32	18
College degree	16	22	19	22	19	9
Post Grad Degree	9	17	23	16	12	3
	(N=1466)	(N=368)	(N=61)	(N=355)	(N=996)	(N=375)
Gender						
Male	48	46	58	49	48	48
Female	52	54	42	51	52	52
	(N=1501)	(N=379)	(N=61)	(N=360)	(N=1018)	(N=387)
Age						
18-29	23	24	31	32	24	24
30-39	17	18	12	16	17	16
40-49	22	24	33	19	23	20
50-64	21	22	20	22	21	18
65+	16	12	4	14	11	22
	(N=1460)	(N=365)	(N=61)	(N=351)	(N=994)	(N=372)
Family Income						
<$30,000	32	21	21	23	27	51
$30K-$50K	21	23	20	21	21	20
$50K-$75K	23	24	29	27	25	16
$75K-$100K	12	17	16	16	12	10
>$100K	12	14	13	13	14	4
	(N=1128)	(N=307)	(N=53)	(N=299)	(N=791)	(N=256)
Political Characteristics						
Ideology						
Strong Liberal	8	14	15	16	9	2
Liberal	13	11	12	11	14	12
Moderate	42	42	49	43	42	44
Conservative	20	16	8	16	19	23
Strong Conservative	17	17	16	15	16	19
	(N=1302)	(N=350)	(N=60)	(N=341)	(N=919)	(N=294)
Party ID						
Democrat	35	32	43	33	41	39
Independent	26	28	25	25	28	25
Republican	25	27	25	29	21	18
Other ID	13	12	8	12	10	16
				(N=1159)		
	(N=1480)	(N=745)	(N=105)	)	(N=480)	(N=200)

Table 3: Demographic and Political Determinants of Deliberation

	Face-to-Face Deliberators	Internet Deliberators	Traditional Talkers	Internet Talkers	Nondiscursive Participants
Demographic Characteristics					
Race					
African American	.23(.31)	-.73(.65)	-1.1(.40)**	-.30(.35)	.70(.45)
Hispanic	-.70(.41)	-.61(.77)	-1.1(.49)*	-1.3(.59)*	1.4(.51)**
Other	.30(.31)	-.44(.53)	-.67(.35)	-.26(.33)	.94(.39)*
Education	.36(.07)***	.30(.25)	.47(.10)***	.37(.09)***	-.42(.12)***
Gender (m=0; f=1)	.14(.16)	-.38(.36)	.08(.21)	-.08(.19)	-.20(.25)
Age	-.01(.01)	-.03(.01)**	-.01(.01)*	-.02(.01)**	.01(.01)
Income	.09(.06)	.04(.10)	.05(.08)	.02(.07)	-.24(.11)*
Political Characteristics					
Ideology	-.09(.08)	-.19(.14)	-.32(.11)**	.02(.07)	.30(.12)*
Party ID					
Democrat	-.04(.22)	.29(.49)	-.64(.29)*	-.28(.27)	.70(.35)*
Non-identifier	-.02(.20)	-.08(.43)	-.76(.29)**	-.74(.26)**	.72(.25)*
Constant	-1.4(.50)**	-1.2(1.0)	2.2(.74)**	.62(.63)	-2.1(.87)*
Total N	1099	1099	1099	1099	1099
Pseudo R square	0.05	0.06	0.11	0.08	0.14

*:p<.05; **:p<.01; ***:p<.001

Note: The first numbers are logit coefficients. The numbers in parentheses are robust standard errors.
Ideology is coded such that 1=strong liberal and 5=strong conservative.

Table 4: Determinants of Deliberation: The Full Model of Determinants

	Face-to-Face Deliberators	Internet Deliberators	Traditional Talkers	Internet Talkers	Nondiscursive Participants
Demographic Characteristics					
Race					
African American	.35(.37)	-.83(.76)	-1.3(.43)**	-.06(.38)	1.0(.50)*
Hispanic	-.41(.49)	-.38(.84)	-.54(.59)	-1.2(.60)	1.1(.62)
Other	.70(.42)	-.36(.61)	-.55(.44)	-.16(.39)	.87(.50)
Education	.01(.10)	-.04(.19)	.28(.13)*	.11(.11)	-.11(.15)
Gender (m=0; f=1)	.09(.19)	-.43(.41)	.15(.26)	-.08(.22)	-.13(.31)
Age	-.02(.01)	-.03(.01)*	-.02(.01)*	-.01(.01)	.01(.01)
Income	-.03(.07)	.05(.12)	-.16(.11)	-.11(.09)	-.07(.12)
Political Characteristics					
Ideology	-.12(.10)	-.22(.17)	-.40(.13)**	-.19(.11)	.31(.14)*
Party ID					
Democrat	.21(.28)	.23(.49)	-.80(.34)*	.25(.32)	.58(.39)
Non-identifier	.43(.24)	-.23(.58)	-.74(.34)*	-.32(.31)	.42(.40)
Social Capital					
Organizational Membership	1.3(.19)***	1.2(.40)**	.76(.26)**	.14(.22)	-.94(.35)**
Religious Attendance	.09(.05)*	.01(.08)	.03(.06)	.04(.05)	-.13(.07)
Length of Residence	.00(.01)	-.01(.01)	.00(.01)	-.02(.01)*	.01(.01)
Social Trust	.00(.10)	-.25(.14)	.15(.13)	.09(.11)	-.03(.16)
Political Engagement					
Political Trust	.14(.11)	-.17(.21)	-.02(.14)	.09(.13)	-.13(.16)
Political Knowledge	.04(.08)	-.06(.17)	.11(.10)	.20(.09)*	.00(.12)
Political Interest	.15(.04)***	.07(.11)	.18(.05)***	.04(.05)	-.17(.05)
Political Efficacy	.12(.05)*	.07(.10)	-.08(.07)	.14(.05)**	.05(.08)
Constant	-3.0(.69)***	-.66(1.8)	2.0(.95)*	-1.3(.78)	-1.5(1.1)
Total N	865	865	865	865	865
Pseudo R square	0.15	0.1	0.17	0.12	0.16

*:p<.05; **:p<.01; ***:p<.001

Note: The first numbers are logit coefficients. The numbers in parentheses are robust standard errors. Ideology is coded such that 1=strong liberal and 5=strong conservative.

TABLE 5: Determinants of Deliberative Intensity

	(Unstandardized)	Standardized	(Unstandardized)	Standardized
Demographic Characteristics		Model 1		Model 2
Race				
African American	-.26(.15)	-.06	-.25(.16)	-.06
Hispanic	-.55(.16)**	-.14	-.34(.20)	-.09
Other	-.12(.16)	-.03	.00(.19)	.00
Education	.24(.03)***	.27	.06(.04)	.07
Gender (m=0; f=1)	.01(.06)	.00	.02(.08)	.01
Age	-.01(.00)***	-.14	-.01(.00)**	-.14
Income	.03(.03)	.04	-.05(.03)	-.07
Political Characteristics				
Ideology	-.14(.04)***	-.15	-.13(.04)***	-.14
Party ID				
Democrat	-.15(.10)	-.07	-.03(.11)	-.02
Non-identifier	-.28(.09)**	-.13	-.12(.10)	-.06
Social Capital				
Organizational Membership			.45(.08)***	.23
Religious Attendance			.03(.02)	.06
Length of Residence			.00(.00)	-.05
Social Trust			.03(.04)	.03
Political Engagement				
Political Trust			.03(.04)	.03
Political Knowledge			.05(.03)	.08
Political Interest			.07(.01)***	.19
Political Efficacy			.03(.02)	.08
Constant	1.8(.24)***		1.2(.28)***	
Total N		1099		865
R square		0.18		0.26

*:p<.05; **:p<.01; ***:p<.001