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The Deliberative Potential of Political Discussion

PAMELA JOHNSTON CONOVER, DONALD D. SEARING AND IVOR M. CREWE*

What is the deliberative potential of everyday political discussion? We address this question using survey data and qualitative data collected in six communities in the United States and Britain. Our findings suggest that political discussion is infrequently public, modestly contested and sometimes marred by inequality. But the factors inhibiting more deliberative discussions – structural, cultural and motivational in nature – should be amenable to some change, particularly through education.

Deliberation is currently a lively topic in political philosophy, though interest in it is by no means new.[1] From Aristotle to Arendt, deliberation has always been near the centre of theories about democracy and citizenship. Political theorists value deliberation for many reasons. Some argue that it promotes democratic governance by stimulating good representation, just laws and institutions, and political legitimacy.[2] Others suggest that deliberation encourages democratic

* Conover and Searing: Department of Political Science, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Crewe: Department of Government, University of Essex. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1998 Annual Meetings of the Midwest Political Science Association. We gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Spencer Foundation in the collection of these data, and the helpful comments of the Editor of the Journal and several anonymous reviewers.

[1] For recent discussions of political deliberation and the issues surrounding it, see James Bohman, *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity and Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996); James Bohman and William Rehg, eds, *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997); Jon Elster, ed., *Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); James S. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991); Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols., trans. Thomas A. McCarthy (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press; 1987); Stephen Macedo, ed., *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Thomas Spragens, *Reason and Democracy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

[2] On deliberation and representation, see William A. Galston, 'Liberal Virtues', *American Political Science Review*, 82 (1988), 1277–90, p. 1283; and Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985). On deliberation and just institutions and laws, see Thomas Christiano, 'The Significance of Public Deliberation', in Bohman and Rehg, eds, *Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 243–78. On deliberation and political legitimacy, see Bruce Ackerman, 'Why Dialogue?' *Journal of Philosophy*, 86 (1989), 5–22; Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980); Seyla Benhabib, 'Liberal Dialogue

communities by fostering mutual respect and the development of a common will.[3] And still others see it as a vehicle for creating democratic citizens.[4]

But despite these presumed benefits, deliberation increasingly has its critics. Some theorists wonder whether it is overrated as a means of resolving disagreements in society and crafting public policy.[5] Others posit that deliberation actually undermines community by disrupting the daily routines of citizens, eroding solidarity and engendering suspicion.[6] And a number of critics argue that political deliberation is vulnerable to serious bias: disadvantaged citizens can be excluded from public deliberations, or if included, can lack the capacities or resources necessary to participate effectively. Even when disadvantaged citizens have the requisite skills and resources to deliberate, their views might be discounted as deep-seated prejudices prevent their arguments from having the necessary uptake.[7] The difficulty of achieving equality in political deliberations has prompted Iris Young to explore theoretically the

(F'note continued)
Versus a Critical Theory of Discursive Legitimation', in Nancy Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 143–56; and Joshua Cohen, 'Deliberation and Political Legitimacy', in Bohman and Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 67–92.

[3] See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics in a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Christiano, 'The Significance of Public Deliberation'; Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[4] Arendt stresses the role of deliberation in the 'good life' (see Arendt, *The Human Condition*). John Stuart Mill sees deliberation as the primary method for developing 'independent' citizens (see John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1956), p. 7). Cohen argues that deliberation contributes to autonomy (see Jean Cohen, 'Discourse Ethics and Civil Society', in David Rasmussen, ed., *Universalism and Communitarianism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 83–108). And public discourse is crucial to the dialogic process through which individuals develop their identities, see Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in Amy Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25–74.

[5] See: Daniel Bell, 'Democratic Deliberation: The Problem of Implementation', in Macedo, ed., *Deliberative Politics*, pp. 70–87; Susan C. Stokes, 'Pathologies of Deliberation', in Elster, ed., *Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 123–39; and Michael Walzer, 'Deliberation, and What Else?' in Macedo, ed., *Deliberative Politics*, pp. 58–69.

[6] Mark Warren, 'What Should We Expect from Democracy? Radically Democratic Responses to Politics', *Political Theory*, 24 (1997), 241–70.

[7] For a discussion of the exclusionary potential of deliberation, see: Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, pp. 107–50; Jack Knight and James Johnson, 'Aggregation and Deliberation: On the Possibility of Democratic Legitimacy', *Political Theory*, 22 (1994), 277–96; Jack Knight and James Johnson, 'What Sort of Equality Does Deliberative Democracy Require?' in Bohman and Rehg, eds, *Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 279–320; Anne Phillips, 'Dealing with Difference: A Politics of Ideas, or a Politics of Presence', in Seyla Benhabib, ed., *Democracy and Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 139–52; Lynn Sanders, 'Against Deliberation', *Political Theory*, 25 (1997), 347–76; Iris Marion Young, 'Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critiques of Moral and Political Theory', in Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, eds, *Feminism as Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 56–76; Iris Marion Young, 'Justice, Inclusion and Deliberative Democracy', in Macedo, ed., *Deliberative Politics*, pp. 151–8; and Iris Marion Young, 'Difference as a Resource for Democratic Communication', in Bohman and Rehg eds, *Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 383–406.

democratic potential of other forms of communication among citizens, while the manifestation of deeply entrenched social hierarchies in deliberative settings has led Lynn Sanders to argue strongly against deliberation.[8]

For the most part, this dialogue about the benefits and risks of deliberative democracy has been sustained by political theorists in an empirical vacuum with little input about the constraints on deliberation among actual people in real settings as opposed to imaginary citizens in ideal spaces.[9] This is not to suggest that normative theory should simply be based on empirical reality; but rather to argue that if such theory is to be of much use, it should at least be feasible to approach normative models given suitable institutional and social arrangements.[10] Nor are we intimating that normative theorists should become empirical researchers (though some have).[11] We are instead exhorting more empirical researchers to explore deliberation with an eye towards what normative theorists say.[12] Towards that end, our goal is to bring empirical data to bear on the debate surrounding deliberation. We do so in two ways. First, we assess the distance between the normative ideals of deliberation and the practical reality of political discussion in an effort to judge both the feasibility of those ideals and the accuracy of their critiques. And secondly, we probe the potential benefits and risks that motivate citizens to engage in political discussions – and to avoid them – thus enabling us to better understand the deliberative potential of discussion.

FROM DELIBERATION TO DISCUSSION

Though theorists disagree over a precise definition, most take democratic deliberation to include citizens voicing rational reasons for their preferences, listening to one another, exchanging information and thereby moving towards decision making on the contentious issues facing society.[13] Many go further and

[8] Iris Marion Young, 'Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy', in Benhabib ed., *Democracy and Difference*, pp. 120–36; and Sanders, 'Against Deliberation'.

[9] But see, Sanders, 'Against Deliberation'.

[10] Even with ideal institutional arrangements, the abilities and motivations of citizens constrain the quality of deliberation. For a related argument, see John S. Dryzek and Jeffrey Berejikian, 'Reconstructing Democratic Theory', *American Political Science Review*, 87 (1993), 48–60, pp. 48–50.

[11] Jane Mansbridge's work is an admirable example of the contributions made when normative theorists undertake empirical research about deliberation. See Jane Mansbridge, *Adversary Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Jane Mansbridge, 'Everyday Talk in the Deliberative System', in Macedo, ed., *Deliberative Politics*, pp. 211–42.

[12] Empirical work on the deliberative activities of citizens does not directly address the criticisms of deliberation outlined earlier: see William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, *Citizens, Politics and Social Communication* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Also see, for example, John Gastil and James P. Dillard, 'Increasing Political Sophistication through Public Deliberation'; *Political Communication*, 16 (1999), 3–23.

[13] Theorists disagree over whether to define deliberation in terms of its outcome (e.g. reaching consensus or changing preferences), its process (e.g. formal procedures), or its setting. See Jon Elster, 'Introduction', in Elster, ed., *Deliberative Democracy*, 1–18, at p. 8.

assume that deliberations should be planned, conducted according to specific procedures, and meant to produce an outcome such as consensus. But there is an immediate and obvious disjuncture here between the ideal worlds envisioned by political philosophers and the real worlds in which actual citizens practice politics: ideal citizens deliberate, but today's citizens mostly have conversations that are spontaneous, unstructured and without clear goals.[14] Therefore, the concept of political 'discussion', rather than deliberation, better describes the empirical territory populated by actual citizens.[15] Consequently, a key question is: to what extent do political *discussions* exhibit the characteristics of *deliberation* deemed important by political theorists? To address it, we must first identify the central features of deliberation.

While theorists offer different visions of democratic deliberation, most accounts include three essential characteristics. First, deliberations must be public.[16] Meeting the criterion of publicity requires that access be open and that citizens deliberate in a rational manner offering 'public' reasons for their preferences. Thus deliberation excludes private talk and, as Sanders points out, talk that is 'impassioned, extreme, and the product of particular interests'.[17] Secondly, democratic deliberations must meet the criterion of non-tyranny in terms of both process and outcomes; that is, discussion and agreements cannot be coerced illegitimately or reflect the undue influence of powerful groups.[18] Meeting the requirement of non-tyranny requires that deliberations admit and examine different viewpoints, that they be open to contestation. Finally, democratic deliberations must meet a standard of political equality.[19] Satisfying the demand for political equality does not require that citizens actually participate equally in deliberations, but it does require that basic procedural and substantive inequalities that could prevent equal participation be eliminated. Thus democratic deliberation depends, procedurally, on citizens having equal access to deliberative arenas, and substantively on them having equal opportunities to influence the deliberation.[20] In sum, political theorists argue that democracy is fostered by deliberations that meet the standards of publicity, non-tyranny and political equality. To what extent do the political discussions

[14] See Michael Walzer, 'A Critique of Philosophical Conversation', in Michael Kelly, ed., *Hermeneutics and Critical Theory in Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 182–96.

[15] For a related argument, see James D. Fearon, 'Deliberation as Discussion', in Elster, ed., *Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 44–68.

[16] See Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, pp. 25–47; Cohen, 'Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy', pp. 68–70; John Rawls, 'The Idea of Public Reason', in Bohman and Rehg, eds, *Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 131–44.

[17] Sanders, 'Against Deliberation', p. 371.

[18] Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, pp. 35–6; and Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989).

[19] Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, pp. 35–7; Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation*, pp. 29–34; Knight and Johnson, 'What Sort of Equality Does Deliberative Democracy Require?'; and Sanders, 'Against Deliberation'.

[20] Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, pp. 107–49; Knight and Johnson, 'What Sort of Equality Does Deliberative Democracy Require?'

in which citizens actually engage meet these same standards? Addressing this question allows us to gauge the extent of the disjuncture between normative accounts and empirical realities, and ultimately the feasibility of many normative claims.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Using a 'most similar nations design', we focus on the United States and Britain, countries that are similar on many dimensions but that vary in institutional arrangements and elements of political culture relating to deliberation – namely, constitutional traditions, governmental structures and educational systems.[21] The still-dominant nineteenth-century liberal interpretation of the British constitution assigns deliberation to the politicians rather than to the public, while the American constitutional tradition is based on the idea of government 'by the people'. Similarly, the American federalist system promotes greater participation at the state and local level, while the more centralized, unitary British government offers citizens fewer opportunities for deliberation.[22] Finally, because citizens are not expected to participate much in public affairs, in Britain there has never been a tradition of civic education of the sort that has existed in the United States. In sum, Britain is more of an 'elitist' democracy and the United States more of a 'populist' democracy,[23] and this bias in political culture should result in less political discussion in Britain.

Cultural biases and institutional arrangements should also vary across different types of communities. The cultural biases that favour discussion should be strongest in communities where political allegiance and participation are high, and these are likely to be communities where citizens are relatively well educated and economically prosperous. But we anticipate that community-level cultural biases will be a function of more than the aggregated effects of individual difference in education and income. The nature of social relationships and institutional arrangements varies across these communities, and this, too, should influence discussion. Thus 'advantaged' communities are characterized by a 'way of life' that accommodates and stimulates political discussions as part of everyday life. By contrast, communities whose citizens are uneducated, alienated and poor may offer fewer meaningful political experiences, including political discussion, as part of a way of life.[24]

With these expectations in mind, our research design[25] led us to three

[21] See Charles E. Ragin, *The Comparative Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

[22] In both countries, much of this discussion is in the context of elections.

[23] Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

[24] For a discussion of how 'ways of life' shape political culture, see Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky, *Cultural Theory* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990).

[25] We have followed a quasi-experimental design, a variation of the 'nonequivalent comparison group design', see Thomas D. Cook and Donald T. Campbell, *Quasi-Experimentation: Design and Analysis for Field Settings* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), pp. 95–206. Country and community type are the two independent variables that constitute the 'treatments' in this design. For purpose of analysis, the random samples are then combined and the effects of country and community type may be examined.

American communities matched with three British communities.[26] These communities represent a diverse range: mobile, growing, economically prosperous suburbs, one in North Carolina, the other just outside London; small farming towns, one in Minnesota, the other in Lincolnshire; and urban, working-class neighbourhoods in decaying parts of Philadelphia and Manchester. In each community, we interviewed students, parents, teachers and community leaders as well as focus groups and a random sample of approximately 125 adult citizens.[27] Our analysis will concentrate on the combined random samples of adults.[28]

PUBLICITY AND DISCUSSION

On normative accounts, democratic deliberations should meet a standard of publicity. There are multiple interpretations of this standard, which pertain to both the content and context of discussion.[29] With regard to content, publicity derives from the nature of the topics discussed and the character of the reasons expressed. Democratic deliberation should relate to matters of public concern, issues dealing with the common good,[30] and should consist of arguments employing 'public reason'. The public character of a reason depends upon the audience to whom it might be offered as a justification: 'public' reasons are addressed to an unrestricted audience of citizens-at-large, and must be communicated in a fashion that they can understand and respond to in their own terms.[31] With regard to context, democratic deliberation takes place in public spaces.[32] Here, publicity refers to social spaces where, ideally, access is open to all citizens, thus promoting the exchange of full information and the democratic nature of the discussion.[33] Moreover, when individuals deliberate in the presence of other citizens, they are motivated to base their arguments on public reasons in order to avoid the embarrassment or shame that might occur

[26] The communities were matched on a number of dimensions: size, urbanization, economic makeup (e.g. farming, manufacturing), mobility, education, per capita income.

[27] In Great Britain, all interviewing was done by a professional survey organization. In the United States, the interviews in the Philadelphia community were conducted by a professional survey organization while interviewers recruited, trained and supervised by the authors did the interviews in the other two communities. The interviewing was conducted simultaneously in both countries; it began during the spring of 1990 and was completed by the end of the year. There is no evidence that short-term factors affected the levels of discussion during the surveying.

[28] The number of respondents in the random samples varies very slightly between communities; consequently the sample has been weighted to produce an *N* of 125 in each community.

[29] See Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, p. 37.

[30] See Joshua Cohen, 'Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy', p. 19; Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, p. 38; Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 109–42, at pp. 128–32.

[31] See Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, p. 26.

[32] See Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, p. 43, and Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', p. 118.

[33] See Iris Young, 'Impartiality and the Civic Public', p. 73; and Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', p. 118.

if they appeared too self-interested. As Jon Elster explains, this 'civilizing force of hypocrisy' does not necessarily eliminate base motives, but it 'forces or induces speakers to hide them' thereby making it more likely that public reason will prevail in the deliberation.[34] So in addition to fostering political equality, a public context also promotes the use of public reason. It is important, therefore, to assess both the content and context of political discussion.

Publicity in Content

During exploratory focus groups and pretests, citizens identified those political issues that they most frequently discussed with other citizens. Based on this, we designed a series of questions that directed our respondents' attention to 'serious discussions or conversations' about fourteen of these issues during a fixed time period (one month).[35] This question format is a significant improvement over previous attempts to measure political discussion. First, citizens, themselves, initially identified the kinds of issues discussed. Secondly, we took great pains to focus on serious discussions. The interviewers stressed that we were not interested in brief comments or exchanges about issues. Thirdly, this format encouraged respondents to search through their memories in a systematic fashion thus increasing the likelihood of accurate reporting.

In assessing the publicity of these discussions, the first task is to determine whether the issues discussed are 'public' in nature. Here, different normative standards can be applied. John Rawls suggests a narrow interpretation: the limits imposed by public reason need only apply to those political questions involving ' "constitutional essentials" and questions of basic justice'.[36] By Rawls's standard, then, most of the everyday political discussion among citizens is probably not about issues that are 'public' in the sense of requiring the use of public reason. But other theorists, like Nancy Fraser and James Bohman, suggest that whether an issue is public – of common concern – is, itself, a matter of deliberation.[37] From this perspective, the public nature of an issue depends on its widespread discussion and thereby recognition as a matter of common concern. Thus assessing publicity begins to reduce to the amount of discussion: any issue being widely discussed would be considered a likely matter of common concern – a public issue. Consequently, by this standard, the critical questions become: how much are citizens discussing particular issues, and what

[34] Jon Elster, 'Deliberation and Constitution Making', in Elster, ed., *Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 97–122, at p. 111. Also, see James Fearon, 'Deliberation as Discussion', p. 54.

[35] 'Please tell me how many times, *if ever*, *you* have had a discussion or serious conversation of five minutes or more about each topic *during the last month*. The first topic is the economy, that is things like interest rates, unemployment and rising prices. In the *last month* how many times have you had a discussion or serious conversation about the economy … not at all, once or twice, or often?' The question was repeated for thirteen more issues, two of which were country-specific.

[36] Rawls, 'The Idea of Public Reason', p. 94.

[37] Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', p. 129; Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, p. 38.

does this suggest about the type and range of political questions that become 'public issues'?

To determine this, we consider variations across issue types rather than the discussion of specific issues, which is likely to be especially sensitive to temporal effects. A factor analysis confirmed that responses to the individual issue questions cluster into three substantively coherent categories: national domestic topics,[38] local topics,[39] and foreign affairs topics.[40] Three domain-specific scales were constructed from these responses as well as a single overall measure of discussion.[41] The frequency distributions for the four scales are presented in Table 1 (see pp. 30–1).

Discussion varies across issue types as illustrated in the last column of Table 1. Among all respondents, foreign affairs are discussed least frequently followed by local matters, while national domestic topics enjoy the highest levels of discussion. The low level of discussion on foreign affairs both confirms traditional wisdom, and poses problems for those who stress the vital importance in modern democratic communities of treating international issues as genuine public issues warranting substantial discussion among citizens. In contrast, the higher level of discussion on national domestic topics is notable because this category includes abortion and welfare, issues whose controversial nature might have discouraged discussion. So a limited range of issues, mostly national issues, produce sufficient discussion to be thought of as 'public' in the sense of evoking widespread common concern.

But this observation is qualified by significant cross-national and cross-community type variation. Americans report substantially more discussion of national domestic issues, though they do not differ significantly from the British in their discussion of foreign affairs or local topics. At the same time, there are significant differences between community types for all three kinds of issues.[42] National topics are discussed most frequently in suburban communities and least often in rural communities where they may have less immediate relevance. There are also significant differences in the discussion of local and especially foreign affairs. And again, the suburban neighbourhoods have the highest levels of discussion. Thus, even controlling for the effects of country, what counts as a public issue varies significantly across community types, suggesting the importance of local contexts.

[38] The issues include: the economy; health care; crime; blacks and immigrants; 'women's issues' such as abortion, day care and rape; environmental issues such as pollution; and problems involving the poor and homeless, such as welfare.

[39] The issues include: quality of education in the community, zoning and housing problems, and traffic and public transport.

[40] The issues include: Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, US relations with the Soviet Union, US relations with Latin America. In Britain, the two questions on US relations were replaced by questions on Britain's role in the European Community and the situation in Northern Ireland.

[41] A fourteenth topic, discussion of the president/prime minister, was not included in any of the domain-specific scales, but it was included in the omnibus overall discussion measure.

[42] Analysis of variance revealed significant differences between community types for all types of issues.

Publicity in content can also refer to the substantive nature of discussions: do citizens employ 'public' reasons that appeal to the common interests of all citizens or do they base their discussion on 'private interests'?[43] Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to assess directly the reasons that citizens employ; this would require transcriptions of their discussions. However, studies on 'framing effects' suggest that the media, political elites and intellectuals help structure reasoning about public issues by influencing which values and beliefs citizens use in their thinking. And critically, issue 'frames' typically run counter to the dictates of public reason, as they are designed to reflect the particular political perspectives of one side in the debate over an issue.[44] Given that we cannot examine directly the reasoning citizens use in discussion, a careful examination of publicity in terms of context becomes even more important, for public contexts are presumed by theorists to induce citizens to use public reason.

The Context of Discussion

The distinction between public and private spaces is critical to assessing the publicity of the context of discussion, but it is as contentious as it is prominent in the history of political thought.[45] Indeed, feminist theorists have questioned the very nature and utility of the public/private distinction.[46] Though it may remain problematic for many purposes, by focusing on the transmission of information, we can use the public/private distinction to establish an empirical basis for studying the context of discussion. Specifically, building on the work of Iris Young and Nancy Fraser, we characterize the public–private nature of spaces in terms of 'access' and the 'exchange of information': two features central to deliberation.[47] Thus the publicness of spaces can be thought of as a continuum bounded on one end by the truly public space and on the other end by the truly private space. The more 'public places' are those settings that are accessible to the public (often as a consequence of government guarantees), places that allow for open discussions and the expression of a broad array of opinions by any interested citizens. The more 'private places', in contrast, are those settings to which access can be controlled by individuals and where the

[43] See Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', pp. 129–32, for a discussion and critique of this position.

[44] See Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 165; also see Gamson, *Talking Politics*.

[45] Jeff Weintraub, 'The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction', in Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar, eds, *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 1–42.

[46] Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 247–62; Joan B. Landes, 'The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration', in Joan B. Landes, ed., *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 135–64.

[47] Young, 'Impartiality and the Civic Public', pp. 73–6, and Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', pp. 118–21.

TABLE 1 *Discussion of Different Topics by Community Type and Country*

	Community type			Country		
	Suburban	Rural	Urban	USA	Britain	All
Discussion on All Topics						
Very low	15.5	20.2	25.4	17.5	23.3	20.3
Low	34.7	41.3	37.0	39.6	35.7	37.7
Moderate	37.4	28.5	26.2	31.2	30.2	30.7
High	12.4	10.0	11.4	11.7	10.8	11.3
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
(*N*)	(250)	(250)	(250)	(375)	(375)	(750)
Discussion on Domestic Topics						
Very low	10.3	14.0	15.3	8.8	17.6	13.2
Low	28.8	36.4	29.2	27.0	35.9	31.5
Moderate	41.7	37.6	34.6	42.4	35.5	38.0
High	19.2	12.0	21.0	21.9	12.9	17.4
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.1%*	100.1%*	99.9%*	100.1%*
(*N*)	(250)	(250)	(250)	(375)	(375)	(750)

Discussion on Foreign Affairs Topics						
Very low	18.5	19.2	40.8	26.9	25.5	26.2
Low	33.6	42.6	34.3	38.1	35.6	36.8
Moderate	31.1	27.3	17.7	24.0	26.7	25.3
High	16.8	10.8	7.2	10.9	12.3	11.6
Total	100.1%*	99.9%*	100.0%	99.9%*	100.1%*	99.9%*
(*N*)	(250)	(250)	(250)	(375)	(375)	(750)
Discussion on Local Topics						
Very low	13.3	16.5	21.0	16.4	17.5	16.9
Low	41.8	47.2	40.2	44.4	41.7	43.0
Moderate	30.7	26.7	28.3	29.6	27.5	28.6
High	14.1	9.6	10.6	9.6	13.2	11.4
Total	99.9%*	100.0%	100.1%*	100.0%	99.9%*	99.9%*
(*N*)	(250)	(250)	(250)	(375)	(375)	(750)

*Does not equal 100 per cent due to rounding.

TABLE 2 *Discussion in Private Settings by Country*

	Home		Large family gatherings		Social occasions (know well)		Social occasions (don't know well)	
Frequency	USA (%)	Britain (%)	USA (%)	Britain (%)	USA (%)	Britain (%)	USA (%)	Britain (%)
Never	8.2	12.6	17.4	42.1	8.9	18.5	25.9	34.8
Rarely	16.0	18.1	29.4	24.8	18.8	21.7	42.4	35.4
Sometimes	44.4	39.3	35.8	23.4	48.0	39.3	28.4	26.1
Often	31.5	30.1	17.4	9.7	24.2	20.5	3.2	3.7
Total	100.1*	100.1*	100.0	100.1*	99.9*	100.0	99.9*	100.0
(*N*)	(375)	(375)	(375)	(375)	(375)	(375)	(375)	(375)

*Does not total to 100 per cent due to rounding.

exchange of a wide range of diverse opinions is more likely to be limited.[48] Private places, therefore, allow for the protection of personal conversations from intrusions by the public (or the government). The location of particular places or settings on this continuum is not fixed, but instead is conditioned by historical and cultural contexts.

To assess publicity in context, we asked respondents how often they had serious political discussions about political concerns in a range of settings that vary in their 'publicness'.[49] We chose four settings that are relatively private in their nature, where access is controlled by individuals and the range of information exchanged is likely to be more limited: home, large family gatherings, social occasions with people that are known very well, and social occasions with people that are not known very well. We also asked respondents how often they discussed politics in five relatively public places where access is more open and discussion is potentially less bounded: work, church, public meetings, bars/pubs and with neighbours.[50]

The frequency distributions for discussion in the more private places are presented in Table 2.[51] Americans report more discussion at large family gatherings and social occasions with friends, but there are no significant cross-national differences in the other private settings. And suburban communities have the highest levels of discussion and urban communities the lowest for every private setting except large family gatherings. Discussion also varies considerably across these private settings with the most discussion occurring at home in both countries. The other settings have considerably less discussion. Most striking is the fact that two-thirds of the Americans and 70 per cent of the

[48] The exchange of information in private places should be more limited both because of the greater homogeneity of participants and the greater ease with which people can resort to the use of 'private' or self-interested reasoning.

[49] There are two caveats about our measure. First, it should not be confused with a measure of the formality or informality of the setting. Secondly, it does not include all possible settings for political discussion; instead, it is a sampling of possible settings. This series of questions followed those about the content of discussion. We asked: 'People also discuss politics in different places and with different kinds of people. I'm going to read you a list of places where people sometimes talk about public issues. For each one, please tell me how often you usually have discussions or serious conversations of more than five minutes about political issues like those just mentioned. The first is at home. Generally speaking, how often would you say you have discussions or serious conversations about political issues at home? … Never, rarely, sometimes, or often?'

[50] Because of the ambiguous meaning of 'neighborhood' across communities, we asked respondents how often they talked with neighbours rather than in the neighborhood. As a setting for political discussion, church falls in the middle of the public–private continuum. Access to churches is not subject to government control, but neither can individuals easily control it; churches are very open to some kinds of discussion but not other kinds. Because we wish to define 'public' discussion broadly, we have placed churches on the public side of the continuum.

[51] Analysis of variance reveals significant between-country differences for large family gatherings and social occasions with people the respondent knows well. There are significant effects between community types for all of the more private settings except large family gatherings; and a significant community-type × country interaction for social occasions with people that are known well.

TABLE 3 *Discussion in Public Settings by Country*

	Work		Church		With neighbours		Bar/Pub		Public	
Meetings frequency	USA (%)	Britain (%)	USA (%)	Britain (%)	USA (%)	Britain (%)	USA (%)	Britain (%)	USA (%)	Britain (%)
Never	31.7	53.6	41.2	79.3	22.9	41.8	66.6	55.7	44.7	77.0
Rarely	10.4	9.6	33.6	10.8	32.0	29.1	17.2	14.7	26.7	10.1
Sometimes	29.3	20.2	21.7	7.5	39.1	23.6	11.4	28.9	21.1	10.5
Often	28.6	16.7	3.5	2.4	6.1	5.5	4.8	8.7	7.6	2.4
Total	100.0	100.1*	100.0	100.0	99.9*	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
(*N*)	(375)	(375)	(375)	(375)	(375)	(375)	(375)	(375)	(375)	(375)

*Does not total to 100 per cent due to rounding.

British never or only rarely discuss political topics at social gatherings with people that they do not know very well.

Such findings bear unevenly on theoretical assumptions about the nature of private discussion. They lend some support to Michael MacKuen's formal model of the choice of political discussion partners, which posits that in certain private settings people may adopt a rule of thumb against all political talk, foreclosing discussion before it begins.[52] Our data suggest that MacKuen's 'rule' applies especially to large family gatherings and social events with acquaintances, but less frequently to intimate social gatherings or at home. These same findings are more problematic for Bruce Ackerman, a dialogic theorist who argues that we can afford to exercise conversational restraint in more public settings because we still have 'the chance to talk to one another about our deepest moral disagreements in countless other, more private, contexts.'[53] What Ackerman does not bargain for is that such discussions may not be welcome in many, or even all, private settings. If sensitive topics are taboo in most private as well as public settings, where will they receive the full discussion they need and deserve?

But perhaps there is sufficient public discussion to dispel Ackerman's worries. To probe this possibility, the frequency distributions for public discussions are presented in Table 3.[54] Generally, public discussions are most common at work and with neighbours, and least common at church or in bars/pubs. Moreover, 71 per cent of the American and 87 per cent of the British respondents report that they never or only rarely engage in political discussions in the setting designed explicitly for that purpose: public meetings. Within the contours of this general pattern, there are significant differences in public discussion between nations and community types. Consistent with their cultural tilt, Americans report significantly higher levels of discussion than the British everywhere except at pubs/bars. Across these public settings, there are fewer significant differences between community types than before, and the pattern is more mixed. Thus, context matters: public discussion is pursued in different settings in different communities and in different countries.

There is considerably more discussion in private as opposed to public settings, as seen by comparing the frequency distributions for two scales summarizing discussion in private and public places (see Table 4).[55] The majority of all

[52] Michael MacKuen, 'Speaking of Politics: Individual Conversational Choice, Public Opinion and the Prospects for Deliberative Democracy', in John A. Ferejohn and James H. Kuklinski, eds., *Information and Democratic Processes* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), pp. 23–58

[53] Bruce Ackerman, 'Why Dialogue?' p. 18.

[54] Analysis of variance reveals significant between-country differences for all five public settings. And there are significant differences between community types for work, church and public meetings. There were no significant country × community type interactions.

[55] Public discussion ranges from 0 to 15 and is the sum of the discussion measures for public meetings, neighbours, church, bars/pubs and work. For Table 4 only: 0–3 = 1, very low; 4–7 = 2, low; 8–11 = 3, moderate; 12–15 = 4, high. Private discussion ranges from 0 to 12 and is the sum of the discussion measures for home, social occasions with people not known well, social occasions with people known well, and at large family gatherings. For Table 4 only: 0–2 = 1, very low; 3–5 = 2, low; 6–8 = 3, moderate; 9–12 = 4, high.

TABLE 4 *Discussion in Public and Private Settings by Community Type and Country*

	Community type			Country		
	Suburban(%)	Rural(%)	Urban(%)	US(%)	Britain(%)	All(%)
Discussion in private settings						
Very low	5.2	10.4	20.0	7.0	16.7	11.8
Low	28.2	25.3	32.5	24.8	32.6	28.7
Moderate	39.8	47.2	32.9	44.9	35.0	40.0
High	26.8	17.1	14.6	23.3	15.8	19.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.1*	100.0
(*N*)	(250)	(250)	(250)	(375)	(375)	(750)
Discussion in public settings						
Very low	36.1	37.1	53.2	29.9	54.3	42.1
Low	50.1	45.2	34.9	50.2	36.5	43.4
Moderate	13.3	16.8	10.7	18.2	9.0	13.6
High	0.5	1.0	1.2	1.7	0.1	0.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.9*
(*N*)	(250)	(250)	(250)	(375)	(375)	(750)

*Does not equal 100 per cent due to rounding.

respondents report that they discuss political issues fairly frequently in private settings. But when it comes to public settings, 85 per cent fall to the bottom half of the scale suggesting that public discussions occur rarely or not at all. Though the patterns in these findings are consistent with the cultural biases that we have discussed,[56] they are, none the less, disappointing from the perspective of deliberative democracy. Citizens in both countries engage in far less public discussion than democratic theory deems desirable. The public landscape looks very much like that of Benjamin Barber's 'thin democracy', indeed perhaps worse.[57] To the extent discussion occurs at all, much of it is happening in more private settings.

What should we make of this? Generally, political theorists have downplayed the significance of discussion in private settings on the presumption that public discussions are more likely to be deliberative – based on public reason, non-tyrannous and open to all citizens. But the validity of this assumption is unclear. By definition, discussions in private settings do have more limited access than those in more public settings. It remains to be seen, however, whether private discussions are, indeed, less likely to be contested and less likely to rely on public reason than discussions in more public settings. Consequently, without further study, we should not dismiss the possibility that private discussions have some deliberative value. Moreover, there is another reason for cautioning against the depreciation of private discussions: their connection to public discussions.

If we dichotomize the public and private discussion scales described earlier, we can identify four types of citizens: (1) those who seldom discuss politics in either public or private settings; (2) those who discuss politics in private, but rarely in public; (3) those who seldom discuss politics in private, but often do so in public; and (4) those who discuss politics in both contexts. Table 5 provides our most informative summary of political discussion in the two polities that have been the most common models for liberal democracy in the twentieth century. And here, 30 per cent of the Americans and nearly 50 per cent of the British fall in the first category of 'silent' citizens, a gap of roughly 20 percentage points, which again reflects the cultural biases we have identified. Another 50 per cent of the Americans and 42 per cent of the British fall in the second quadrant of private-only discussants. The truly participatory citizens who discuss public affairs in both settings (the fourth quadrant) number few in the United States (18 per cent) but fewer still in Britain (9 per cent). But what is most intriguing is that the third category – silent in private and talkative in public – is virtually empty in both countries.

Frequent private discussion appears to be a necessary precondition for public discussion. Regardless of their deliberative worth, private political discussions

[56] Analysis of variance reveals significant between country effects for both scales with the Americans discussing more, and significant differences between community types with discussion highest in the suburban settings.

[57] Barber, *Strong Democracy.*

TABLE 5 *Crosstabulation of Public Discussion by Private Discussion, by Country**

	United States: private discussion		
	Low	High	Total (*N*)
Public discussion			
Low	30.4	49.8	80.2 (301)
High	1.4	18.4	19.8 (74)
Total	31.8	68.2	100.0%
(*N*)	(119)	(256)	(375)
	Britain: private discussion		
	Low	High	Total (*N*)
Public discussion			
Low	48.9	41.9	90.8 (341)
High	0.3	8.9	9.2 (34)
Total	49.2	50.8	100.0%
(*N*)	(185)	(190)	(375)

*Entries are percentages of total *N*.

perform a valuable 'rehearsal' or 'socialization' function that we have overlooked. They provide opportunities to develop and practice arguments in the supportive and relatively 'safe' world of one's family and intimate friends. In our study, very few citizens are willing to chance public discussions without the experience of such private rehearsals. The difficulty is that even among those who practise privately, all too few step out on the public stage. Still, the private discussions that they have may serve some of the functions that theorists have assigned to deliberation. For that reason, it is important to consider whether such political discussions meet the second criterion of deliberative democracy: non-tyranny.

NON-TYRANNY AND DISCUSSION

Proponents of deliberative democracy also argue that deliberations must meet a criterion of non-tyranny. Discussion must be open to the reasoned consideration of alternative arguments so as to allow for the contestation of ideas. Democratic theory places a high value on contested discussion. Indeed, public discussion is deemed so important, in part, because it is assumed that truly contested discussion is most likely to occur in more public settings where people of diverse viewpoints are most likely to encounter one another.

We examine 'contested' discussion in two senses: discussions involving people with different views on specific issues, and discussions involving people with generally different life perspectives. Thus we employed two questions to assess contested discussion and introduced them in the following fashion: 'Now I am going to list various kinds of people with whom you might have had a discussion or serious conversation about political issues like those just mentioned'. Using this lead-in, citizens were asked about people with 'different political views to your own'; 'working-class people'; and 'middle-class people'. A direct measure of contested discussion is provided by the respondents' reports of how often they talked to people with political views different from their own. An indirect measure was created by measuring how often respondents talked with people from a social class different from their own.[58] Our assumption is that the probability of contested discussion is highest when one hears regularly the views of citizens with different life perspectives. These two measures, direct and indirect, were combined to produce a single summary measure of 'contested' discussion. Frequency distributions by country and community are presented for this measure in Table 6.

Here again, we find the anticipated differences across country and community type.[59] Over three-quarters of the Americans report moderate to high levels of contested discussion as compared to 58 per cent of the British respondents, a substantial difference. Similarly, though there are no significant differences between the suburban and rural communities, both of them show significantly higher levels of contested discussion than do urban communities.

In general, our measure of contested discussion is skewed towards the upper end of the scale.[60] Some may wonder exactly how modest are the differences that these citizens are counting as 'different' in their responses. But we have no sound reasons for dismissing these findings. On the contrary, based on the focus group discussions that we will discuss later, it seems likely that many citizens are having discussions that genuinely admit alternative viewpoints. This is surprising primarily because it has been assumed that contested discussions occur most often in public settings – and these are the same respondents who have already told us that they are not having very many discussions, contested or not, in public settings. So we need to re-examine our assumption that

[58] A 'different class' measure was created by determining how often citizens who had identified themselves as middle-class spoke with working-class people, and how often citizens who had identified themselves as working-class spoke with middle-class people. Respondents who refused to categorize themselves in social class terms were assigned to the working class or middle class on the basis of their income.

[59] Analysis of variance reveals significant between-country differences and significant differences between community types. The country × community type interaction was not significant.

[60] These findings contradict the argument that people avoid discussion where there is disagreement; see MacKuen, 'Speaking of Politics', and Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, 'Networks in Context: The Social Flow of Political Information', *American Political Science Review*, 81 (1987), 1197–216.

TABLE 6 *Contested Discussion by Community and Country*

Level of contested discussion	Community type			Country		
	Suburban (%)	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	USA (%)	Britain (%)	All (%)
Very low	4.3	5.4	16.2	4.4	12.8	8.6
Low	21.2	19.2	29.2	17.7	28.7	23.2
Moderate	58.3	61.1	42.3	60.3	47.5	53.9
High	16.2	14.4	12.3	17.6	10.9	14.3
Total	100.0	100.1*	100.0	100.0	99.9*	100.0
(*N*)	(250)	(250)	(250)	(375)	(375)	(750)

*Does not total to 100 per cent due to rounding.

contested discussion is experienced primarily in public rather than private settings.

But we also need to recognize the limits of this measure of contestation, limits that dictate caution in our interpretation. Our findings establish that citizens are having discussions that admit different viewpoints, but our measure does not assess how deeply citizens 'examine' those alternative perspectives, nor whether they subject their views and those of others to reasoned argumentation. At best we can say, then, that citizens frequently have discussions that have the potential to be truly contested.

POLITICAL EQUALITY AND DISCUSSION

Finally, deliberations must satisfy a standard of political equality. Political theorists disagree about how best to interpret that demand. The simplest – and roughest – way of gauging the equality of political deliberations is to ask if there is actual equality of participation. But focusing on equality of participation can be misleading.[61] Individual citizens may freely choose not to participate for non-political reasons, and this should not be viewed as undermining political equality. Instead, democratic theorists should be concerned when non-participation is a reflection of procedural or substantive inequalities.

Procedural equality demands that power asymmetries in society do not undermine equality of access to deliberative arenas.[62] While access to formal deliberations is often controlled politically, entry into informal political discussions is determined socially by the availability of discussion partners,[63] making true equality of opportunity impossible for most of the everyday discussions of citizens. It makes sense, therefore, to interpret procedural equality as a demand that disadvantaged groups not be excluded systematically from discussions.[64]

Similarly, substantive equality requires that existing asymmetries in power and resources not undermine the ability of citizens to have equal opportunity to exercise their influence in discussions.[65] And this requires that during

[61] Knight and Johnson, 'What Sort of Equality Does Deliberative Democracy Require?' p. 289.

[62] On some accounts, procedural equality also demands that the procedures governing the actual process of deliberation must be unbiased. But most discussions that citizens have are totally unstructured and lacking in any sort of deliberative arrangements. Consequently, such procedural equality is largely irrelevant to our concerns. For a discussion, see Knight and Johnson, 'What Sort of Equality Does Deliberative Democracy Require?' pp. 288–92; and Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, pp. 107–49.

[63] Huckfeldt and Sprague, 'Networks in Context', pp. 1198–200; Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, 'Discussant Effects on Vote Choice: Intimacy, Structure, and Interdependence', *Journal of Politics*, 53 (1991), 122–60.

[64] But see Benhabib, ed., *Democracy and Difference*; Sanders, 'Against Deliberation'; and Young, 'Difference as a Resource for Democratic Communication.'

[65] Joshua Cohen, 'Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy', in Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit, eds, *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 17–34, at p.23; Knight and Johnson, 'What Sort of Equality Does Deliberative Democracy Require?' p. 292.

discussions no citizens be unfairly advantaged (such that they might coerce less powerful discussants), or disadvantaged (such that they are unable to initiate discussions and make their views heard).[66] Citizens need not have equal material resources (for example, income, status, time) to ensure fair deliberations. But they must meet a basic threshold of equality of resources if there is to be equality of influence within deliberations.

To ensure equal opportunities for political influence, citizens must also have equal capacities for deliberation so that they can translate their resources into successful participation in deliberation.[67] Evidence that the demand for equal capacities has been met occurs when individuals and groups can achieve public attention and deliberative uptake: that is, when they have the ability to initiate discussions on issues of importance to them, and their arguments are heard and respected.[68] Some of the capacities that are useful in attaining equal political influence in deliberations include: autonomy, which enables citizens to develop authentic preferences; 'the effective use of cultural resources' such as knowledge and language; cognitive capabilities; and skill at discussion.[69]

Substantive inequalities in resources and capacities undercut equality of political influence at both an individual and group level. Individual differences in resources and capacities produce 'communicative inequalities' that discourage specific individuals from participating and make it impossible for them to have an equal influence in those discussions they do join.[70] Differences in resources and capacities can also manifest themselves at a group level.[71] Thus stereotypes can lead to the exclusion of disadvantaged citizens from discussions or can make it impossible for them to attain deliberative uptake once they are admitted to discussions, thus effectively depriving them of a political 'voice'.

Equality of Participation

To what extent does equality manifest itself in the political discussions of actual citizens? To address this question, we begin by focusing on equality of participation, and ask: do 'disadvantaged groups' in society participate equally in political discussions? In particular, we ask if women, the poor and the old[72] are equally represented among the political discussants identified by the public and private discussion scales described earlier.[73] Both scales were trichotomized with those respondents falling in the lower third labelled 'low discussants' and

[66] See Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, pp. 107–49; Knight and Johnson, 'What Sort of Equality Does Deliberative Democracy Require?' pp. 292–309; Sanders, 'Against Deliberation'.

[67] Sanders describes this requirement in terms of 'epistemological authority', having the 'capacity to evoke acknowledgement of one's arguments'; see Sanders, 'Against Deliberation', p. 349; also see Knight and Johnson, 'What Sort of Equality Does Deliberative Democracy Require?', p. 295.

[68] Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, p. 110.

[69] Knight and Johnson, 'What Sort of Equality Does Deliberative Democracy Require?' pp. 298–9.

[70] Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, p. 119.

[71] Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, p. 125. Also see Sanders, 'Against Deliberation'.

[72] Our sample includes too few minority members for the kind of analysis that will be employed.

[73] For this analysis, the 'old' are citizens over 60; the 'poor' are citizens whose score on our standardized income measure is less than -1.04 (GB) or -0.623 (US).

those in the upper third 'high discussants'. Then we calculated 'representativeness' scores by country and community type for high and low discussants for both public and private discussion.[74] These scores range from minus to plus infinity with zero marking equal representation. Negative values indicate underrepresentation of the disadvantaged group and positive scores overrepresentation. The results are presented in Table 7.

All three groups – women, the old and the poor – are consistently *underrepresented* among the high discussants and *overrepresented* among the low discussants for both public and private discussion.[75] Importantly, the degree of misrepresentation is greater for public rather than private discussion. Moreover, there are consistent contextual differences as well. The degree of misrepresentation tends to be higher in Britain than in the United States, and lower in the rural communities than in the suburban and urban communities. Finally, there are between-group differences in the patterns of misrepresentation. Across countries and community types, the old suffer the most misrepresentation in public discussions; conversely, women appear to suffer the least misrepresentation in most cases. How should we interpret the underrepresentation of these disadvantaged groups among high discussants and their overrepresentation among low discussants? Are there procedural and substantive inequalities that influence their level of discussion, and thus help to explain their misrepresentation? To address this question, we must measure the core elements of procedural and substantive equality described above.[76]

Measuring Procedural and Substantive Equality

We measure procedural equality in terms of equal opportunities for discussion. Because discussion is a social act, the opportunities for discussion are socially determined by the availability of discussion partners and their willingness to engage in discussion. Accordingly, we measure the availability of discussion partners by the respondent's social connectedness: the degree to which he or she is enmeshed in networks of social relationships (such as relatives, friends or co-workers) and activities likely to produce such relationships.[77] We measure

[74] We use Verba *et al.*'s 'Logged Representation Scale' (LRS). In trichotomizing our discussion measures, we are actually dichotomizing them twice: 'high discussion' vs. everyone else, and 'low discussion' vs. everyone else. The LRS is the logged ratio of the percentage of the high (or low) discussers who belong to the disadvantaged group to the percentage who belong to the group in the whole population. An LRS of -0.3 means that the disadvantaged group is half as likely to be in the discussant group as others; an LRS of -1.0 indicates underrepresentation by a factor of 10. See Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Scholzman and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 184–5.

[75] The analysis was repeated for the 'contested' measure and produced very similar results with the exception that the poor, though overrepresented among the low discussants, were equally (rather than under) represented in rural and urban communities.

[76] See Appendix for a description of the measures.

[77] Our measure of social connectedness is not a formal measure of the respondent's social networks; see Peter Marsden, 'Core Discussion Networks of Americans', *American Sociological Review*, 52 (1987), 122–31. Instead, we focus on the activities (e.g. neighbouring, going to work, going to church) or relationships (e.g. married) that are likely to determine both the size and density of the formal network. For a related measurement strategy, see Richard Timpone, 'Ties that Bind: Measurement, Demographics and Social Connectedness', *Political Behavior*, 20 (1998), 53–77.

TABLE 7 *Representativeness of 'Disadvantaged Groups' among High and Low Discussants*

	Community type						Country			
	Suburban		Rural		Urban		USA		Britain	
	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
Public discussion										
Women	0.149	−0.125	0.068	−0.076	0.086	−0.110	0.146	−0.093	0.100	−0.168
Old	0.265	−0.629	0.299	−0.400	0.276	−0.636	0.230	−0.427	0.267	−0.607
Poor	0.053	−0.699	0.174	−0.069	0.017	−0.225	0.199	−0.159	0.121	−0.376
Private discussion										
Women	0.127	0.025	−0.003	−0.024	0.065	−0.053	0.025	−0.027	0.111	−0.019
Old	−0.051	0.083	0.201	−0.276	0.207	−0.204	0.182	−0.066	0.167	−0.281
Poor	0.182	−0.301	0.196	−0.071	0.076	0.017	0.179	0.004	0.223	−0.537

the willingness of potential discussants in terms of the norms about political discussion: whether political discussion is perceived as acceptable in social settings. And we assess the respondents' socially determined motivation to discuss by their belief that there is a duty to talk about politics.

We measure substantive equality in terms of material resources, cultural resources and capacities for discussion. Material resources are tapped by measures of income and social status or class. Three kinds of cultural resources are assessed: political knowledge (of political facts and leaders), media use and community consciousness. Four types of individual capacities for discussion are measured: autonomy, political competence, liking to talk,[78] and education, which promotes the development of verbal cognitive proficiency.[79]

All of the above variables were rescaled to a 0 to 1 scale except the measures for education and income (which were measured as *z*-scores within countries). We then regressed public discussion on all these measures as well as indicators for context (country and community-type dummy variables) and key demographic variables: two dummy variables scored 1 for women and 1 for non-whites; and age measured in years, and with two terms, age and age^2, to capture its non-linear effects.[80] The results for the entire sample as well as regressions by community type and country are presented in Table 8.[81]

Explaining Public Discussions

Procedural inequalities in access are by far the most important factors in explaining the variations in levels of public discussion (see Table 8). Political discussion cannot occur without the co-operation of at least one other citizen. Thus the potential for political discussion is a kind of social capital: social relations act as channels for information exchanges thereby promoting discussion between citizens.[82] Consequently, it is not surprising that variations in social connectedness – in the opportunity to find discussion partners – are critical in determining overall levels of public discussion. But the use of social relationships for political discussions depends upon more than the mere existence of social ties. It is also affected by another kind of social capital: norms

[78] The 'like to talk' variable is a 'ledger sheet' for the respondents' previous attempts at political discussion. Respondents who like to talk presumably have encountered success – achieved the kind of deliberative uptake that they desired and found it to be a positive experience – in previous discussions.

[79] See Norman Nie, Jane Junn and Kenneth Stehlik-Barry, *Education and Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[80] Bruce Straits found that political discussion is a parabolic (quadratic) function of age: it increases with age to a certain point and then begins to decline; see Bruce Straits, 'Political Information and Influence Ties', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 55 (1991), 432–48. The unrecorded version of the public discussion scale is used.

[81] Due to the small sample sizes, respondents with missing values on a variable were assigned the mean value for the missing variable.

[82] James Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 300–24.

TABLE 8 *Regression of Public Discussion on Measures of Access, Resources and Capacities*

	Community type			Country		
Independent variables	Suburban	Rural	Urban	Britain	USA	All
Access						
Social connection	0.33(1.19)**	0.33(1.2)**	0.23(1.3)**	0.26(1.05)**	0.34(0.95)**	0.31(0.69)**
Norms	0.12(0.53)*	0.16(0.51)**	0.13(0.53)**	0.15(0.46)**	0.11(0.38)**	0.13(0.29)**
Duty	0.10(0.61)	0.08(0.79)	− 0.01(0.65)	0.01(0.49)	0.10(0.62)*	0.05(0.38)
Material resources						
Income	0.01(0.21)	0.03(0.11)	0.03(0.23)	0.01(0.19)	0.00(0.16)	0.01(0.12)
Status	− 0.03(1.68)	− 0.06(1.68)	0.00(1.3)	− 0.05(1.38)	0.01(1.1)	− 0.02(0.84)
Cultural resources						
Knowledge	− 0.08(0.86)	− 0.13(0.61)*	− 0.04(0.73)	− 0.07(0.53)	− 0.06(0.64)	− 0.08(0.39)**
Media use	0.09(0.85)	0.07(0.79)	0.11(0.84)	0.06(0.69)	0.09(0.65)*	0.09(0.46)**
Communal conscious	0.08(0.99)	0.15(1.02)*	0.13(1.02)*	0.12(0.77)*	0.09(0.86)*	0.11(0.56)**
Capacities						
Autonomy	− 0.04(0.92)	− 0.03(0.89)	− 0.06(0.87)	− 0.05(0.74)	− 0.06(0.66)	− 0.05(0.49)
Education	0.06(0.15)	− 0.01(0.17)	− 0.02(0.26)	0.09(0.14)	− 0.07(0.15)	0.02(0.10)
Political competence	0.03(0.74)	0.17(0.71)**	0.24(0.76)**	0.07(0.61)	0.23(0.60)**	0.15(0.42)**
Likes to talk	0.16(0.58)**	0.07(0.64)	0.08(0.59)	0.12(0.50)*	0.07(0.48)	0.09(0.34)**
Groups						
Women	− 0.14(0.33)*	− 0.05(0.33)	− 0.11(0.34)*	− 0.13(0.27)**	− 0.09(0.26)*	− 0.11(0.19)**
Non-whites	− 0.01(1.06)	− 0.04(1.86)	0.14(0.71)*	− 0.03(1.16)	0.12(0.62)**	0.06(0.53)*
Age	0.37(0.06)	0.09(0.06)	0.17(0.05)	0.49(0.05)	0.22(0.05)	0.24(0.03)
Age^2	− 0.63(0.00)	− 0.37(0.00)	− 0.36(0.00)	− 0.72(0.00)*	− 0.43(0.00)	− 0.47(0.00)*
Context						
USA	0.17(0.39)*	0.06(0.38)	0.12(0.42)	–	–	0.12(0.21)**
Rural	–	–	–	0.09(0.34)	− 0.00(0.33)	0.04(0.25)
Urban	–	–	–	− 0.04(0.37)	− 0.09(0.34)	− 0.06(0.25)
Constant	− 0.48(1.92)	0.48(1.80)	− 2.0(1.54)	− 0.40(1.56)	− 1.08(1.35)	− 0.85(0.99)
Adj. R^2	0.38**	0.39**	0.35**	0.30**	0.38**	0.39**

Note: Unparenthesized entries are standardized regression coefficients; parenthesized entries are standard errors.
** = Significant at 0.01 level.
* = Significant at 0.05 level.

about the appropriateness and desirability of political discussion. In both countries and every community, public discussion is higher when citizens perceive political discussion to be an appropriate social behaviour. Finally, in the United States only, citizens who perceive that it is their duty as a citizen to discuss politics are more likely to do so. In sum, procedural inequalities in access, broadly defined, have a strong and consistent effect across countries and communities in explaining the level of public discussion.

Equally consistent is the total lack of effect for material resources. Money and social status may be important resources for engaging in other forms of political participation,[83] but they have no direct effect on the amount of public discussion. Cultural resources are more important in fostering discussion. Community consciousness encourages discussion especially in Britain and in the close-knit rural communities in both countries, presumably by increasing interest in the community and the desire to discuss common concerns.[84] Media use also has a positive effect, albeit a weak one. And political knowledge has a weak negative effect, perhaps because knowledge of facts and leaders is irrelevant to the political discussions that citizens are having or, as our focus groups suggest, because people with less knowledge sometimes use discussion as a means of gaining information.

Equality of capacities influences whether individuals are successful in converting their resources into effective discussion. Deficiencies in deliberative capacities are revealed when citizens are unable to achieve deliberative uptake during discussions or even unable to initiate discussions.[85] Thus deliberative capacities should affect the amount of discussion, as well as its quality. That expectation is only partially borne out. Education, which we treat as a surrogate for certain verbal capacities, has no significant direct impact on the amount of public discussion, regardless of country or community type. Two explanations seem plausible: the deliberative capacities promoted by education influence primarily the quality, rather than quantity, of discussion, or our other measures are picking up the effects of education on the amount of discussion. Similarly, individual autonomy has no significant impact on the amount of public discussion. It, too, might have a more significant impact on the quality, rather than quantity, of discussion.

But political competence is important. It affects the willingness to discuss by shaping one's anticipation of achieving deliberative uptake. Presumably, citizens who doubt their own competence as political actors worry that they will be unsuccessful – inarticulate, uniformed, unpersuasive and, in the worst case, simply unheard – in political discussions. To avoid such failure, they avoid discussion. A citizen's enjoyment of talking has a similar effect, though not as strong, on discussion among all respondents, and especially those in Britain and suburban communities. The context-specific nature of the effects of political

[83] See Verba *et al.*, *Voice and Equality*.
[84] Barber, *Strong Democracy*, p. 223.
[85] Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, pp. 116–18, 126.

competence and enjoyment of talking suggests the different ways in which citizens convert their resources into discussion: political competence has its strongest effects in those communities where resources are scarcest and the chances of achieving deliberative uptake more questionable, while enjoyment of talking has its strongest effects in resource-rich communities where citizens presumably have fewer worries about simply achieving deliberative uptake.

In sum, public discussions do not meet all the criteria for equality that political theorists set for true deliberations. For the most part, the problem is not unequal resources.[86] But inequalities in access do have a substantial impact on the levels of public discussion, as do inequalities in capacities such as political competence and enjoyment of talk. Moreover, these inequalities in access and capacities are not randomly distributed throughout the population. Women, the poor and the old all tend to have significantly lower levels of social connectedness, are more likely to perceive a norm *against* discussion, and have lower levels of perceived duty to discuss. So there is a systematic bias in individual access to political discussions. Similarly, there is a systematic bias in individual capacities: women, the poor and the old all have significantly lower levels of political competence, and this influences their willingness to engage in discussion.

Moreover, controlling for such individual-level inequalities in access, resources and capacities does not always erase the inequalities in participation in discussion experienced by the disadvantaged that we discussed earlier. Among all respondents, older people are still less likely to enter into discussion. And women remain less likely to enter into public discussions in both countries, particularly in suburban and urban communities; rural communities are the only context in which women achieve parity in public discussion once inequalities are controlled for. The persistence of some age bias and a strong gender bias in public discussion suggests that a group-level bias works to exclude older people and especially women from public political discussions. As a subordinate group in society, women might be socialized not to engage in public discussions or they might be actively discouraged from entering into such discussions. And when allowed to discuss, stereotypes might prevent them from achieving deliberative uptake thus discouraging their future participation. Whatever the explanation, this finding provides fuel for the critics of deliberative democracy. As Sanders and others have worried, it is difficult to prevent the dominance hierarchies in our society, especially those rooted in gender, from undermining the equality of political discussions.[87]

[86] Inequalities in basic resources might still have a fundamental impact on the quality of discussion – who is listened to and their influence. Our findings pertain only to their impact on the initiation of discussions.

[87] Sanders, 'Against Deliberation'; Phillips, 'Dealing with Difference: A Politics of Ideas, or a Politics of Presence'; Young, 'Communication and the Other; and Young, 'Justice, Inclusion and Deliberative Democracy'.

Explaining Private Discussions

Can the same be said for private discussions? Is their political equality damaged by inequalities in access, resources and capacities? As shown by a comparison of the adjusted R^2s in Table 8 and 9, such basic inequalities do influence the level of private discussion, but not as much as they did the level of more public discussions.[88] Furthermore, the pattern of effects for individual factors varies from public to more private discussions (see Table 9).

As in the case of public discussions, inequalities in access are most important in explaining variations in private discussions. But where opportunities for discussion far outweighed social norms in shaping public discussion, the two have a more equal impact on private discussions. Citizens vary a great deal in how engaged they are in civil society – in whether they work, go to church, participate in organizations or attend public meetings. But they are more similar in their patterns of personal relations: most individuals have at least some family and friends. Consequently, opportunities for private discussions are more equally distributed than are those for public discussions, and thus equality of access in private discussions has more to do with whether people are equally encouraged to make use of their opportunities. Accordingly, social norms become more important in determining the level of private discussion. A sense of duty also has an impact on whether citizens make use of their opportunities, but its effects are considerably more modest than are the effects of norms.

Material resources again have no direct impact on the level of discussions. And cultural resources have less impact than they did on public discussions. Thus private discussions are relatively immune to the influence of status hierarchies; most citizens are able to enter into such discussions regardless of their material and cultural resources. However, the level of private discussion, like public discussion, is influenced by certain citizen capacities, notably political competence which has a strong impact in both countries rivalling that of social norms. 'Liking to talk' also has a significant positive effect for all respondents. But education, again, has no impact on discussion. And autonomy has only a weak negative effect among all respondents.

There is, however, a notable contextual variation on this general pattern. Private discussion in the suburban communities is more heavily influenced by social factors – norms, a sense of duty and community consciousness – than in any other context; and citizen autonomy (or more accurately the lack of it) rather than competence is the important capacity. Thus the dynamics underlying the level of private discussion apparently change as communities grow more resource and capacity rich. In communities where most citizens have social status, political knowledge and the sense of political competence that often goes hand in hand with such resources, private discussions become more a matter of social norms and an individual's sense of duty and attachment to the community.

[88] The decline in adjusted R^2s for private discussion suggests that inequalities are less important in explaining private discussion. Also note that the unrecorded version of the private discussion scale is used.

TABLE 9 *Regression of Private Discussion on Measures of Access, Resources and Capacities*

	Community Type			Country		
Independent variables	Suburban	Rural	Urban	Britain	USA	All
Access						
Social Connection	0.15(1.22)*	0.32(1.16)**	0.21(1.28)**	0.15(1.1)*	0.29(0.93)**	0.22(0.70)**
Norms	0.27(0.54)**	0.22(0.50)**	0.16(0.55)**	0.17(0.49)**	0.24(0.37)**	0.20(0.30)**
Duty	0.20(0.62)**	0.11(0.76)	0.02(0.67)	0.10(0.51)*	0.08(0.60)	0.09(0.38)**
Material Resources						
Income	0.08(0.21)	0.08(0.21)	−0.05(0.24)	0.03(0.20)	−0.03(0.15)	0.02(0.12)
Status	−0.07(1.71)	−0.03(1.6)	0.03(1.3)	−0.05(1.5)	0.03(1.06)	0.00(0.85)
Cultural Resources						
Knowledge	0.01(0.87)	−0.10(0.59)	0.05(0.75)	0.00(0.96)	0.02(0.62)	0.01(0.39)
Media use	0.12(0.87)	0.08(0.76)	0.09(0.86)	0.11(0.72)*	0.07(0.63)	0.09(0.46)**
Communal conscious	0.16(1.01)*	0.02(0.99)	0.10(1.05)	0.04(0.80)	0.10(0.83)*	0.06(0.57)
Capacities						
Autonomy	−0.13(0.94)*	−0.04(0.86)	−0.04(0.90)	−0.08(0.78)	−0.07(0.65)	−0.08(0.50)*
Education	0.03(0.16)	0.01(0.17)	0.02(0.09)	0.05(0.15)	0.01(0.15)	0.01(0.10)
Political competence	0.10(0.75)	0.27(0.68)**	0.23(0.79)**	0.17(0.63)**	0.25(0.58)**	0.21(0.42)**
Likes to talk	0.11(0.59)	0.10(0.62)	0.08(0.61)	0.10(0.52)*	0.07(0.47)	0.08(0.34)**
Groups						
Women	−0.04(0.34)	0.13(0.32)*	−0.04(0.35)	−0.03(0.28)	0.11(0.25)*	0.02(0.19)
Non-Whites	0.01(1.08)	0.00(0.00)	0.12(0.73)*	0.03(1.22)	0.12(0.60)*	0.09(0.54)**
Age	0.26(0.06)	0.18(0.58)	0.41(0.05)	0.68(0.05)*	0.19(0.51)	0.38(0.03)
Age^2	−0.38(0.00)	−0.30(0.00)	−0.51(0.00)	−0.80(0.00)**	−0.24(0.00)	−0.49(0.10)**
Context						
USA	−0.01(0.39)	−0.10(0.37)	0.15(0.43)*	–	–	0.01(0.22)
Rural	–	–	–	0.01(0.36)	−0.08(0.32)	−0.03(0.23)
Urban	–	–	–	−0.20(0.39)**	−0.01(0.33)	−0.10(0.25)*
Constant	−1.29(1.96)	0.99(1.74)	−2.38(1.59)	0.14(1.63)	−1.23(1.31)	−0.31(1.00)
Adj. R^2	0.23**	0.31**	0.31**	0.29**	0.31**	0.31**

Unparenthesized entries are standardized regression coefficients; parenthesized entries are standard errors.
** = Significant at 0.01 level
* = Significant at 0.05 level

Critically, unlike the case of public discussion, controlling for basic inequalities in access, resources and capabilities erases many of the group-based inequalities in participation discussed earlier. Among all respondents and in Britain, older people still engage in fewer discussions. But the significant gender bias that characterized public discussions is absent from private discussions. Indeed, when basic inequalities are controlled, women actually engage in a significantly higher level of private discussion in the United States and in rural communities. Earlier we discovered that private discussions were important 'practice stages' for public discussions, and that they were often contested. Now we find that, for most citizens, they offer a more level playing field than does the public arena. So while public discussions occur infrequently and are marred by inequality, private discussions are more plentiful and available to most citizens. It becomes important, therefore, to understand better the nature of these discussions. We turn to that task now.

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL DISCUSSION

To this point, we have assessed the democratic nature of political discussion and explained its levels in terms of access, resources and capacities. Our explanatory model of political discussion parallels the more general models of participation developed by Sidney Verba and his colleagues.[89] Yet, on our account, such models are inadequate for truly understanding political discussion and its democratic potential, because they leave out the most important factor: the motivations of citizens. Such motivations ultimately determine not only if citizens engage in political discussion but also the very nature of the discussions themselves. To explore the motivations of citizens, we conducted two focus groups in each of the six communities. We asked the participants to talk about political discussion: why people did it; why they avoided it; when and where it felt most comfortable – or uncomfortable.

THE MOTIVES FOR DISCUSSION

Previous empirical examinations of political discussion have assumed that people are motivated primarily by political desires: to gain political information, to express their issue positions and candidate preferences, and to persuade others.[90] These are also the motives implied by political theorists who value deliberation for its contributions to democratic governance. Such motives were mentioned in most of the focus groups in the United States and some of those in Britain. 'Gaining information' was mentioned most frequently, by far; as one woman in a rural community said, 'I want to pick their brains; I want to learn more'. Similarly, the desire to express one's political preferences was noted: 'I

[89] Verba *et al.*, *Voice and Equality*.

[90] Huckfeldt and Sprague, 'Networks in Context'; and Huckfeldt and Sprague, 'Discussant Effects on Vote Choice'.

think some people have very strong opinions about some things, and they very much want to voice them.' A few people also thought that discussion was sometimes motivated by a desire to persuade others: 'I think some of them do it where they intentionally are trying to sway the other person maybe.' But far more frequent were comments about the futility of persuasive attempts – 'my opinion does not change very often in those discussions; it's already pretty heavily formulated' – and their inappropriateness and undesirability. No one in any of the groups reported that people entered into discussions to reach a consensus or to make a decision about an issue. Thus the deliberative potential of discussion holds little conscious appeal for these citizens; other purposes appear more important.

Social motives are suggested by theorists who advocate deliberation as a means of developing democratic communities. Mutual respect is likely to emerge when discussants are as attentive to the process of discussion as to its outcomes, when they listen and hear what others have to say. Listening and hearing are valuable aspects of discussion that political theorists sometimes neglect.[91] Not so with these focus group participants who mention repeatedly the importance of discussion as a venue for listening to others. As several women from different communities noted: 'We need more respect for what others think, and we need to be better listeners.' 'If you can respect another person's opinion long enough to listen, then you've got it made.' Listening not only conveys respect, but it is needed to uncover what people have in common. And this search for mutual ground and for broadening one's understanding apparently motivates many discussants. As an American woman noted, when she hears the views of other citizens:

> I may disagree with you, your whole opinion about it, but you'll say something and I'll think 'Gee. I didn't think of it from that side' … That opinion means something to me, and I've learned something from putting myself in a set of circumstances where you could have a little friction.

Citizens are motivated to gain information, then, not so much for political advantage or to persuade others, but to learn about the lives of others and to understand better different perspectives. Thus social motives – the desire to listen and to show respect for others, and the desire to uncover common ground – may be much more important than we have thought in motivating political discussion.

Political theorists also argue that deliberation benefits the citizen, thus suggesting individual or personal motives for discussion that include: self-development, gaining recognition and enjoying a good life. John Stuart Mill stressed the critical importance of deliberation for developing independence and autonomy.[92] Citizens in a number of communities echoed his views closely. As

[91] Exceptions include Barber, *Strong Democracy*; and Susan Bickford, *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict, and Citizenship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

[92] For a recent expression of the same idea, see Mark Warren, 'What Should We Expect from Democracy? Radically Democratic Responses to Politics', *Political Theory*, 24 (1997), 241–70.

a suburban American explained, the value of discussion lies in the fact that 'it is an education process. If you learn other views, you can be more informed and make better judgements on your own. So its always good to hear other views.' Similarly, the comments of a woman in another group illustrate how people are motivated by a desire to 'educate' their own preferences: 'when people give their opinion, you usually hear why they have that opinion. And that's valuable for me. If I form my opinion alone, it's all based on *my* circumstances, and *my* education, and *my* background, and *my* "this" and *my* "that".' Finally, some citizens mentioned the personal pleasure of expressing their views and the act of talking. In most of the focus groups, similar stories were told about people who 'liked to argue', and 'simply enjoyed it'. As one man frankly admitted, 'I like to hear myself talk'.

It is not surprising that citizens mention multiple motives for engaging in discussion, which, after all, serves multiple functions. It is surprising, however, that the political motives of expressing preferences and persuading others to adopt them are regarded as among the least important by all of the focus groups participants in these six British and American communities. Social and personal motives are more important in their minds. Moreover, though some motives are mutually reinforcing, others are contradictory: treating discussion as an opportunity for persuading others, for example, can conflict with educating oneself. If different citizens enter into discussions with contradictory motives, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to have successful exchanges. Social norms can regulate the nature of discussion and thus reduce the likelihood of participants clashing in their expectations. Still, the complexity of the motivational foundation for discussion suggests that it is a risky enterprise that carries not only benefits but also potential costs. Understanding the risks – and the corollary advantages of silence – is essential, therefore, to understanding discussion itself.

THE RISKS OF DISCUSSION AND BENEFITS OF SILENCE

Why do people avoid political discussion? Certainly, as political theorists worry, inequalities in resources or capacities discourage some citizens from even attempting discussion. In every focus group, some participants mentioned that lack of information, of the 'facts', kept them quiet. As an American woman explained, 'I'm not going to bring it up because I have not studied it; I've not read about it. And I don't want to be made to look dumb.' Similarly, others cited a lack of political competence. Thus a British man explained, 'a lot of people feel uncomfortable, unsure about it … they don't feel confident to talk about politics.' And when pushed by her friends to explain why she did not discuss politics publicly, one British woman insisted, 'I'm not that brave'.

But deficiencies in resources and capacities can only explain part of the silence. What are the other risks of discussion and benefits of silence that motivate citizens to forgo political discussion? Using discussion for political purposes, like persuasion and consensus building, is often difficult precisely

because it requires people to do two things they are wary of: publicly stating their preferences and engaging in contested talk.

Some people choose silence because they do not want to reveal their issue stands. Researchers have typically interpreted such silence as an indication of self-censorship: citizens with unpopular preferences are pressured into limiting their own freedom of expression.[93] The focus groups confirmed that people with unpopular preferences do sometimes avoid discussion because of the fear of social opprobrium: 'people are gonna think you're a terrible person if you don't believe exactly what they believe.' Indeed, 'political correctness' depends upon people whose preferences are in the minority willingly silencing themselves for precisely such reasons.[94] But as we discovered, it is a mistake to presume that hiding one's preferences is always an indicator of self-censorship, and thus a loss of freedom. Sometimes people are cautious about revealing their preferences because they are themselves uncertain: 'they don't really know where they stand; they're kind of half here and half there'. And sometimes the refusal to reveal one's preferences must be counted as a positive exercise of freedom – when discussion is perceived as an invasion of privacy. Many of these discussants had a strong sense that their stands on public issues are fundamentally private matters, things that are much 'too personal' to be discussed, things that 'no one else needs to know'. Why should one's stand on a public issue be understood as something so very private? Perhaps because many of our issue preferences say something about who we are – about our basic values, our character and our identities. Consequently, citizens often feel as this woman did: 'I'm not at all sure I want to bare my soul'. Many citizens spurn discussions because they strongly dislike the fundamental act of making their preferences known to others.

These citizens are also extremely wary of truly contested discussions, those that both admit *and* seriously examine different viewpoints. To be clear, hearing diverse opinions does not worry these discussants; on the contrary, as we have seen, they welcome discussions in which they are exposed to different and particular perspectives, especially by listening to one another's stories. However, true contestation requires not only diversity of opinion but reasoned justification around it, and it is the reasoned justification, the argumentation, that troubles them. These citizens dislike and fear being 'forced into defending' their opinions; they find that too invasive. As an urban citizen explained, 'maybe you don't want that controversy where you have to constantly defend what you believe in and stating why you believe it'. And all too frequently reasoned justification is indistinguishable from an attempt at persuasion, which many discussants loudly rejected. They do not want their preferences challenged or to be pushed to change their minds. To some, it is simply inappropriate to try to

[93] James Gibson, 'The Political Consequences of Intolerance: Cultural Conformity and Political Freedom', *American Political Science Review*, 86 (1992), 338–56.

[94] Glenn Loury, 'Self-Censorship in Public Discourse', *Rationality and Society*, 6 (1994), 428–61.

persuade people to abandon their preferences. We have a right to our own opinions whatever they are, they say, and therefore, we ought 'to allow a person to believe what they want to believe'. To try to persuade people to change their minds is an invasion of their privacy and 'a violation of their rights'– a kind of 'verbal force'. Even more threatening is the possibility that people might actually change their opinions as a consequence of contested discussion – and to do that could challenge who they are: 'When you start to talk, … you may have to start changing your value systems … and you don't want that to happen.'

A second danger of contested discussions is contentiousness; they often lead to emotional arguments, and thus should be avoided for social reasons. The potential for disrupting social relations is heightened when discussion becomes passionate. A few people 'like heated discussions'; they 'sit back and enjoy it'. But far more worry about the social consequences of contentiousness. When passions rise, people stop listening and discussion becomes impossible. People find themselves 'sucked into an argument' – 'we can't talk *with* each other; we talk *to* each other'. They cease to offer information, and instead 'just kind of argue without facts'. Too often, things get out of control; people feel hurt and fall silent:

> it can go beyond being a passionate debate to being an argument, you know? You hit someone's nerve, and you know, politics is close to religion in that it's *my* little politics, these are *my* beliefs, and when you step on them or threaten them there's a fly or fight reaction.

In the end, often 'it's not worth it … to try and have an open discussion if it gets them [other citizens] upset'.

There are other social reasons for silence. As suggested earlier, citizens avoid expressing controversial preferences to prevent negative judgements of themselves. But they also avoid it so as not to 'ruffle anyone's feathers', to prevent alienating friends and disrupting social relations. Certainly, this is self-protective. People are 'afraid to be disliked, or to be cast out of the group, or appear different from the rest, as opposed to standing up and saying, "hey!" ' But it is also protective of others. By not discussing controversial issues, we avoid learning more than we really 'need' to know about friends and acquaintances, things that might disrupt our ongoing relationships with them. 'You might find out something that maybe you don't want to find out about somebody … And these come down to real value systems. So what you do is to back off a little bit, allow that person to believe what they want to believe.' Here again, discussions reveal not just the preferences of the participants but also their characters and sometimes their core identities. And this can alert discussants to deeper, more fundamental differences that can make it difficult to maintain relationships.

Citizens also refuse to enter into political discussions out of mutual respect for others and their desire for privacy. As one man described, he was quick to end a conversation because 'these are good friends of mine … And we would maybe try to start talk about something and it was like "I'd just as soon not talk

about that" '. Or mutual respect can lead a citizen to recognize that there is no common ground to share on an issue, and therefore, in the interest of friendship, perhaps little point to discussing it. As another man explained about his best friend, 'I will not discuss politics with him. He is as passionate on the other end of the scale as I am on this side. And there's not any common ground for us, and I know that.'

Finally, some people, women in particular, do not participate in political discussions because they are systematically discouraged from doing so. Several women in our American focus groups observed that women are socialized to avoid such discussions: 'times are changing, but I just feel like women are not raised to utter an opinion about politics'. And, those who do choose to participate often find that men do not accord them mutual respect and that their opinions are not taken very seriously. As one British woman complained: 'you know, the men get talking, and the men are talking, and the ladies and, you know, the wives or whatever, and we are almost spoken down to – because they know better than us! So I think we've had to keep quiet, you know [nervous laughter].'

Thus people are motivated to avoid discussion for many reasons. Some citizens lack the requisite information or capacities; others are actively discouraged from entering discussions. And still others choose not to enter discussions because they reject the fundamentally political nature of the act.

POLITICAL DISCUSSION AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

As the focus groups make clear, citizens understand political discussion as an act of 'self-expression'. There are two senses in which this is true. Most obviously, when we discuss issue concerns, we are required to make known our preferences on those issues. But there is a deeper and more dangerous sense in which political discussion involves self-expression. Some of our preferences are 'constitutive' preferences in that they are central to the meaning of a particular identity. Therefore, stating your issue positions can expose more than just your preferences; it sometimes reveals a basic identity, who you are at your core. Thus discussion can fuse a 'politics of ideas' with a 'politics of identity or presence'.[95]

In this way, political discussion becomes a part of a 'politics of recognition', an opportunity to unveil to other citizens your basic identities, and to have them recognized, judged and received with respect or not.[96] In effect, discussion exposes one's preferences and identities, and makes both the object of public scrutiny and possibly contestation. This makes discussion a dangerous enterprise, and not just because of the risk of being 'misrecognized' and disrespected. There are also the risks of being truly recognized and thereby revealed to one's fellow citizens, or being 'pressured' to transform your preferences and thereby change the nature of your identity. Ironically, then,

[95] Phillips, *The Politics of Presence*.
[96] Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition'.

citizens find discussion risky because of its public and contested nature – the very qualities that make it so desirable to democratic theorists.

Now we better understand why people are more willing to engage in private discussions. It is not just that access to them is more readily available, or that inequalities in resources and basic capacities are less likely to undermine their occurrence. It is also because private discussions are far safer than public discussions, precisely because they are less public and more resistant to the 'dangerous' aspects of contestation.

Citizens are more willing to state their preferences in private discussions with family and close friends, because the risks of disclosing something unknown about oneself are lower; not because these discussions are less revealing, but because we are more likely to be talking with people who already know and accept who we are. By contrast, public discussions with acquaintances or strangers pose a greater danger; because citizens are less known to each other, there is much more to reveal – or hide. By opting out of public discussion, people can protect the privacy of their preferences and thus the privacy of their identities.

Similarly, in a private discussion it is easier to deal with contestation, particularly when it involves persuasion and contentiousness. Here again, it is not because private discussions never involve contestation or persuasion and heated argument, but rather it is because close relationships afford individuals more flexibility in their responses. Close relationships are strong enough to withstand the potential disruption that might occur from either abruptly – and rudely – disengaging from a contested discussion or turning it into a real argument full of passion and anger. With close friends and family, 'you feel like they're going to accept you … You might have a temporary argument but they love you and you love them. And you're not going to lose that love just because of politics.' By contrast, persuasive and argumentative discussions with acquaintances run the risk of alienating people and disrupting social relations that must be maintained (such as co-workers). Outside of close relationships, you cannot be sure if you will be accepted 'for yourself or just by what you say or how you act'.

CONCLUSIONS

What have we learned about the deliberative potential of political discussion? First, political institutions and cultural biases condition discussion. In Britain, we found a cultural and institutional bias that offered less support for political discussion than in the United States. Different kinds of communities also vary in the encouragement they give political discussion. Context matters. Recognizing these limits imposed by political institutions and culture, how feasible is democratic deliberation among citizens? To address this question, we examined how political discussion currently measures up to the standards set by political theorists: publicity, non-tyranny and equality.

The standard of publicity applies to both the content and context of

discussion. Of the various political issues that citizens might discuss, only a handful of national issues are discussed by enough citizens to be considered 'public issues'; most local and foreign affairs issues are discussed infrequently by too few citizens to warrant the label. Moreover, with respect to context, most political discussions occur in relatively private places. So currently, the publicity of political discussions is quite limited, both in the range of topics and the context of discussion.

Public reason is also an important dimension of publicity. Though our data provide no means of directly examining the use of public reason in actual discussions, the focus groups do provide valuable insight on the topic. They make clear that these citizens value the experience of hearing others express their particular standpoints, often through personal narratives; as Iris Young has suggested, 'storytelling' can be an important 'communicative form' through which citizens learn about one another.[97] But describing one's viewpoint is different from justifying it. And most of these discussants do not want to hear reasons – either public-minded or self-interested ones – for viewpoints that might seriously challenge their own preferences. Nor do they especially want to offer reasons for their own preferences to those with different perspectives, perhaps because they are unclear about the reasons. But also because they believe – contrary to J. S. Mill, who argued that preferences without reasons are prejudices – that preferences need no justification. Indeed, they think we should respect one another's preferences without requiring a defence of them because it is our right as citizens to believe whatever we want. Based on these focus groups, some citizens – perhaps many – would surely find it an imposition to use public reason. Private discussions allow them to avoid this.

The standard of non-tyranny requires that political discussions involve contestation, the reasoned consideration of alternative arguments. Many of the survey respondents and focus group discussants engage in public and private discussions that are contested in the weak sense of admitting different viewpoints. But the boundaries of acceptable contestation are clearly and narrowly drawn. Citizens want to hear and learn from the particular perspectives of others.[98] Indeed, doing so is a major reason why they discuss political issues. But they resist contestation conceived of more strongly as involving both diversity of opinion and reasoned justification. The focus groups firmly reject argumentation, particularly when it feels like persuasion or becomes contentious. Instead, citizens prefer weakly contested discussions that are civil in tone and informative, rather than justificatory or transformative, in nature.

The standard of political equality requires equal access and equal opportunities to influence discussions. Because access to most discussions is determined socially rather than politically, it is impossible to attain equality of

[97] Young, 'Communication and the Other', pp. 131–2. Sanders discusses 'giving testimony' as an alternative to deliberation: Sanders, 'Against Democracy', pp. 370–2.

[98] This is consistent with Iris Young's argument for a public life that acknowledges particularity. See Young, 'Impartiality and the Civic Public', pp. 73–6.

opportunity in its provision. This undermines public discussions considerably more than the private ones. Though inequalities in material resources do not discourage either public or private discussions, public discussions are more vulnerable to inequalities in individual capacities such as political competence. Most seriously, in both Britain and the United States systematic group biases work to exclude the old and especially women from public discussions. Private discussions are more equal in this regard. Thus as critics of deliberative democracy have worried, the value of public discussions is diminished by significant social inequalities.

In sum, political discussions currently fall short of the ideals of deliberative democracy. Public discussions occur infrequently. And though often modestly contested, they are marred by political inequality. The sceptics of deliberative democracy are justified in their caution. But what are the prospects for change? Do political discussions have unrealized deliberative potential?

The low levels of public discussion and the inequalities that characterize them are affected by a number of factors. Some citizens, like the elderly and women, lack frequent opportunities for public discussion because they are not situated in social networks that could provide them with discussion partners, or social norms inhibit their discussions with available partners. For women, this should change in the future as they continue to enter the workforce and the gendered norms surrounding political discussion erode. Moreover, given the rehearsal function that private discussions play for more public ones, the fact that women are not currently disadvantaged in their levels of private discussion bodes well for increasing their levels of public discussion in the future. Reducing the systematic underrepresentation of the elderly may be more difficult; but as the 'baby boom' generation ages, social changes in how the elderly live may well increase their opportunities for political discussion. Cultural norms that discourage public discussion are likely to be more difficult to change because they are perpetuated by a variety of institutions. Thus the British bias against public discussion is reinforced by an educational system that fails to teach students that they should engage in public discussion, a social system that discourages public discussion of political issues and a political system that treats discussion as an activity best left to the politicians.

The lack of public discussion is also a reflection of the individual capacities of citizens, many of whom lack the necessary sense of political competence and understanding of the role of deliberation in a democratic society. Here, education could play a key role in training citizens for deliberation.[99] Specifically, civic education can instil the notion that public discussion of issues is a pleasure and duty of citizens. Our findings suggest that recognition of this

[99] Our own research has shown that schools are influential settings for teaching children to discuss politics. See Pamela Johnston Conover and Donald D. Searing, 'The Democratic Purposes of Education: A Political Socialization Perspective', in Lorraine M. McDonnell, R. Michael Timpane and Roger Benjamin, eds, *Rediscovering the Democratic Purposes of Education* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000).

duty, at least among Americans, raises the levels of discussion. Similarly, schools can consciously work to change the norms about political discussion by teaching students that it is appropriate to discuss public issues in a variety of settings.

Education can also provide young citizens with practice in discussion. It is not enough, however, that we teach our children to present their views confidently, and to listen with respect to others as they do the same. If political discussion is to become more deliberative, we must also teach our children to value justifications and not to fear argumentation and persuasion. As Jon Elster notes, 'deliberative democracy rests on argumentation, not only in the sense that it proceeds by argument, but also in the sense that it must be justified by argument.'[100] But citizens are wary of argumentation, in part because it can become passionate and socially disruptive, but also because justifying their political beliefs often seems to them to entail justifying their very identities, and persuasion likewise feels like an assault on their identity. These reactions might be interpreted as an outright rejection of discussion as a means to transforming preferences and moving towards consensus. But a careful reading of the focus group transcripts suggests otherwise: citizens are willing to learn from discussions so long as it feels as though they are *educating themselves*, but they do not want to be pushed by others to accept ideas that challenge them. Thus to facilitate more deliberative discussions, our schools must teach students that political discussion is a means for citizens to *educate one another*. Indeed, we all need to learn that transforming our preferences and even our identities can be a satisfying process.

There remains, however, a major obstacle to encouraging more deliberative, public discussions. According to our focus groups, a number of citizens avoid public discussions precisely because they are too public. They view their political preferences as fundamentally private and do not want to reveal them to acquaintances and strangers. And they see argumentation and persuasion, as not only threatening their preferences, but as an inappropriate invasion of their privacy. Political discussion is simply too revealing, for it can inadvertently expose our basic identities and character. And for that reason, many citizens have absolutely no desire to engage in public discussions. For them, politics is ultimately personal and private, and that privacy is safeguarded by liberal principles. This seems to us to be an unavoidable tension between liberal politics and the aspirations of deliberative democracy, a tension that is unlikely to be resolved.

Philosophers accord deliberation a special place in democratic theory. And they envision citizens who accord deliberation a special place in their lives. But in fact, the citizens of modern liberal states have neither a special time nor a special place for the practice of democratic discussion; there is no agora, and not even very many town meetings. Still, woven into the fabric of these citizens' everyday lives, there is political discussion. Though such discussion typically

[100] Jon Elster, 'Introduction', in Elster, ed., *Deliberative Democracy*, p. 9.

falls short of the standards that political theorists set for democratic deliberation, its deliberative character might well be improved with institutional and social changes. In the long run, however, we think that political discussion in the everyday lives of contemporary citizens is unlikely to become very much more public, contested or equal. Given that, we think it more productive to stop focusing on whether political discussions are ideally deliberative and, instead, start exploring more realistically what the feasible benefits of discussion might be.[101] In that regard, our findings highlight the potential of private discussions to afford citizens the opportunity to discuss political issues in ways that are personally satisfying and less revealing than more public discussions. The value of such private discussions for improving the quality of democracy in contemporary liberal states is surely a topic that warrants future research.

APPENDIX: INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Measures of Procedural Equality

Social connectedness: Respondents were given one point for: working full time, belonging to an organization(s), going to church, going to a public meeting(s), neighbouring activities with relatives, neighbouring activities with non-relatives, living with a spouse/partner. This 0–7 scale was then rescaled to a 0–1 format with high scores indicating high levels of social connectedness.

Norms about discussion: Respondents were asked: 'In your experience, are social gatherings occasions on which: most people think it best to avoid talking about politics, or most people think it perfectly suitable to bring up political issues? Do you feel strongly or not so strongly about this?' Responses ranged from '1' (strongly avoid talking) to 5 (strongly favour talking), and were recoded to a 0–1 format with high scores indicating strong support of a norm in favour of talking.

Duty to talk: Respondents rated the relevance of thirty-six activities to the practice of citizenship. As part of that series, they were asked whether 'participating in public discussion of political issues' was a legal duty of citizens (scored 3), a moral duty of citizens (scored 2), a good thing for citizens to do (though not a duty) (scored 1), or whether it had little to do with being a citizen (scored 0). Responses were rescored to a 0–1 format with higher scores indicating a stronger sense of a duty to discuss politics.

Measures of Substantive Equality

Income: In each country, respondents revealed their incomes according to a twenty-six category measure. Within countries, these responses were converted to *z*-scores.

Social class: Respondents were asked: 'Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as belonging to the lower class, working class, middle class, upper middle class, or the upper class; or don't you think of yourself in this way?' Responses were scored from 0 lower class to 4 upper class and then rescaled to a 0–1 format with high scores indicating higher social status.

Political knowledge: Respondents were asked to identify three items pertaining to foreign

[101] This is the strategy suggested by Fearon, 'Deliberation as Discussion'.

affairs (people, organizations etc) and four items pertaining to domestic affairs (items varied between countries and communities). Correct items were scored 2; partially correct items scored 1; incorrect items received a scored of 0. Items were then summed and rescaled to a 0–1 format to form a scale where high scores indicate high knowledge.

Media use: Respondents were asked how often they watched the television network news and how often they read a newspaper. The original 0–8 point scale was rescaled to a 0–1 format where high scores indicate high media use.

Community consciousness: Based on five-point Likert items, four of which tap identification with the local community and neighbourhood, and three tap sense of communal interdependence. Summed to form a scale ranging from 0–26 then rescaled to a 0–1 format with high scores indicating a strong communal consciousness.

Autonomy: Five-point agree/disagree Likert statements (appropriately reversed) summed to form a scale ranging from 0–12 and then rescaled to a 0–1 format where high scores equal high autonomy: 'Like a lot of people, I sometimes don't mind when other people make decisions for me'; 'In making decisions, I am sometimes influenced more by the advice of others than by own feelings'; and 'I always make my own decisions; I am my own person'.

Education: Based on the number of years of formal schooling, and standardized within countries so that the education measure is a *z*-score.

Political competence: Using a five-point Likert format, respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements: 'I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics', and 'I often don't feel sure of myself when talking with other people about politics and government'. After appropriate reversals of questions, responses were combined and rescaled to a 0–1 format to create a measure where high scores indicate a high sense of personal competence.

Likes to talk: Based on two questions, the first whether the respondent would be willing to participate in a focus group about public issues, and the second, the interviewer's rating of the willingness of the respondent to talk. Responses were combined and rescaled to a 0–1 format with high scores indicating a high willingness to talk.