

Community, Communication, and Participation: The Role of Mass Media and Interpersonal Discussion in Local Political Participation

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This study examines the role of community integration and mass and interpersonal communication in predicting two types of local political participation; more conventional, "institutionalized" acts of participation and less traditional acts of participating and speaking out in a forum. An analysis of survey data (N = 389) showed a strong role of newspaper readership and a somewhat lower impact of interpersonal discussion on institutionalized participation. Different patterns emerged for participation in a civic forum, with interpersonal discussion having the strongest impact of the three communication variables. Television news use had no direct impact on either type of participation, but it did have a modest indirect impact on institutionalized participation. The data also showed direct effects of dimensions of community integration for participation in a forum only. Orientations toward the larger community rather than the local neighborhood were positively related to participating in a civic forum.

Keywords efficacy, interpersonal communication, knowledge, mass media, nontraditional participation, traditional participation

Active citizenry, a basic tenet of democratic theory, has become the focus of a large corpus of literature (e.g., Bennett, 1986; Conway, 1991; Crotty, 1991; Flanigan & Zingale, 1991; Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba & Nie, 1972). While much of this work is dedicated to documenting levels of participation (e.g., Almond & Verba, 1963; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995) and to discussing normative implications (e.g., Pateman, 1970), studies of the impact of communication and community integration on local political participation are few in number (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Stamm, 1985; Viswanath, Finnegan, Rooney, & Potter, 1990).

Fraught with conceptual and empirical inconsistencies,¹ previous studies reveal links between pairs of all three variables—community integration and media use (Emig, 1995; McLeod et al., 1996; Neuwirth, Salmon, & Neff, 1989), community integration and participation (e.g., Nowak, Rickson, Ramsey, & Goudy, 1982; Vedlitz & Veblen, 1980), and media use and participation (e.g., McLeod et al., 1996; Smith, 1986; Wattenberg,

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1984). However, models synthesizing *community integration*, *communication variables*, and *local political participation* so as to adequately describe local democratic processes are few and far between (Friedland & McLeod, 1998).

In general, local political participation has to be considered a dynamic process rather than a static system outcome. That is, as normative a concept as it may be, local political participation is not evenly distributed within a given society (e.g., Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) or across societies (e.g., Almond & Verba, 1963; Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978). Rather, certain citizens, under certain circumstances, engage in certain acts of participation; trends documenting patterns of participation tend to show that individuals in higher socioeconomic strata are the active ones (Conway, 1991; Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). While these acts of participation have been classified in a number of ways (see Bennett, 1986; Goel, 1980; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1978), the present investigation differentiates between two forms of participation: institutionalized participation ("formal," as noted by Steinberger, 1984, or "conventional" per Goel, 1980), which includes acts such as voting and contacting a public official, and "nontraditional" forms of participating in local political processes, such as attending a civic forum on issues of special interest and making oneself heard at this forum.

Local public issue forums have become increasingly popular as devices for reinvigorating democracy. Although these forums vary greatly in topic and format, most share certain characteristics: They have sponsorship and advance publicity by local media under the rubric of civic or public journalism; they present the opportunity for average citizens to meet and question public officials and to present and discuss their views with others; their agenda is to examine an important local issue and work out a solution; and the proceedings are covered by local media. The structure of forums is sufficiently different from traditional institutional settings that each can be expected to attract a somewhat different set of participants. Institutional participation follows the lines of social status, with recruitment often generated by others in one's social network similar to oneself (Verba et al., 1995). Forums, at least by intent, try to appeal equally to all sectors of the community, including those often excluded from the decision-making process. In contrast to the consensus prevailing in homogeneous groups in institutional participation, prospective participants in a public issue forum can expect to encounter people different from themselves and to have their views challenged should they express them.

Regardless of the type of participation, the willingness to participate is the outcome of a dynamic process of information and motivation. In this process, community integration and communication fulfill equally important but distinctively different purposes. Community integration can be understood as a necessary condition or at least an important prerequisite for local political participation. A lack of social networks and ties to the community makes participation undesirable and difficult. As Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) noted, "the role of politics and political organization are frequently undervalued by failing to take account of the social organization of the electorate" (p. 21). And although political participation can be aimed at both national and regional or local political processes, the actual act of participation will always take place in the community (i.e., at the local level).

The relationship between community integration and local political participation is, however, mediated by communication. Through communication, citizens acquire information about issues and problems in the community and learn of opportunities and ways to participate. Closely related to the first function of information dissemination, media or interpersonal forms of communication may mobilize individuals to local political

participation. While community integration provides the infrastructure for participating, media and interpersonal communication provide the knowledge or incentives to use the opportunities for participation that are provided. If social networks or community ties fail to provide sufficient incentives or opportunities for participation, various forms of communication (e.g., civic journalism) can renew the links between individuals and their community or reveal alternative forms of participation.

Grounded in the conceptualization of local political participation offered by McLeod et al. (1996), this investigation examines the role of community integration as well as mass and interpersonal communication in providing the infrastructure and psychological determinants necessary for local political participation.

Our inquiry into the potential antecedents of local political participation is embedded in an O-S-O-R model (see Markus & Zajonc, 1985, for an overview). Consistent with McLeod et al.'s (1996) findings, a stimulus-response model would predict political participation from different types of media exposure and attention. This study includes a third communication variable, interpersonal discussion of local issues. In addition, we examine two sets of orientations. The first set of orientations (O_1) represents factors preceding and potentially constraining the communication situation. These orientations include structural variables, interpersonal networks in the community, and interest in local politics as potential influences on the way people use media or engage in interpersonal discussion with other people (S). The second set of orientations (O_2) comprises factors potentially mediating the relationship between communication and participation. In other words, the effects of media use and interpersonal communication on participation may work indirectly, increasing levels of knowledge of local politics and external efficacy, which in turn influence levels of political participation.

The present investigation derives a model by which community integration and communication (mass and interpersonal) influence local political participation. We begin by summarizing the literature related to our concepts, and, based on the literature, we propose hypotheses to be tested. Results based on both ordinary least squares (OLS) regression and structural equation modeling are presented, followed by a discussion of their normative implications.

O_1 : Demographics, Structural Anchoring, Integration, and Interest

Demographics seem to play an important role in predicting all other variables in the proposed model. Steinberger (1984), for example, showed a "uniformly positive and moderately strong" (p. 11) impact of demographic variables on local political participation (see also Nowak et al., 1982; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1973). McLeod et al. (1996) found similar positive relationships between different types of participation and demographic variables (age, gender, education, income), structural anchoring (length of residence, likelihood of moving, etc.), and media use (see also Burgoon & Burgoon, 1980).

Where knowledge is concerned, "higher-status individuals are likely to have greater political awareness, more political skill, more political resources, and a greater sense of political efficacy" (Vedlitz & Veblen, 1980, p. 36; see also Verba & Nie, 1972, pp. 125–127). McLeod et al. (1996) found significant relationships between local political knowledge and both demographic and structural variables.

While community integration is characterized by a considerable degree of conceptual and operational inconsistency,² there appears to be relative agreement over its multidimensionality. This quality of community integration, however, has been assumed

rather than empirically tested. In their study on local media, participation, and integration, McLeod et al. (1996) synthesized previous theorizing and measurement of integration into a consistent five-factor model of community integration.³

Their analyses showed that two of the five dimensions of community integration were related to types of local political participation. These factors were "interpersonal networks" and "city versus neighborhood." The notion of interpersonal networks (Bender, 1982; Calhoun, 1988; Wellman, 1982) refers to the "connectedness of individuals to active local primary groups beyond the family" (McLeod et al., 1996, p. 186). The primary groups are not to be confused with formal groups or organizations. Rather, the degree to which an individual is involved in interpersonal networks is defined as his or her discussion with neighbors, discussion of problems in the area, frequency of getting together with other people, and a higher proportion of friends living in the area. The second dimension, city versus neighborhood, pits the individual's focus on the larger community against that of the more local environment or neighborhood. Respondents who focus more on the larger community are less likely to show high levels of identification with their neighborhoods and, instead, identify with social groups or the larger city. This is in large part a function of the fact that local neighborhoods and suburbs often clash on public issues with the interests of the larger town or community and its governmental agencies. Both of these dimensions of community integration link individual-level measures to more macroscopic community characteristics. Individual ties, in other words, produce social capital.

The last concept in this first set of orientations is local political interest, which has been neglected by many studies on local political participation (e.g., Steinberger, 1984). McLeod et al. (1996) showed a relationship between local political interest and various types of media use. Vedlitz and Veblen (1980) found a significant impact of local political interest on two forms of institutional political participation, voting and contacting government officials.

S: Communication

The impact of structural and integration variables on local media use has been documented (Burgoon & Burgoon, 1980; Edelstein & Larsen, 1960; Neuwirth et al., 1989; Stamm & Guest, 1991; Stamm & Weis, 1986). However, these studies do not systematically identify and examine the many possible channels of communication in local political processes. According to Stamm (1985), "traditionally community ties have been viewed in relation to newspapers, and other media have been ignored" (p. 360). This is only partly true for studies of political participation. While earlier studies ignored communication variables completely (e.g., Nowak et al., 1982; Vedlitz & Veblen, 1980), more recent studies have included communication variables that go beyond newspaper subscription or readership. Viswanath et al. (1990) found that civic and political involvement, as well as voting in local elections, were positively related to subscribing to local and regional newspapers but not to subscribing to cable television. McLeod et al. (1996) showed significant effects on local political participation for exposure and attention to public affairs and entertainment content both in newspapers and on television. Researchers like Lemert (1984) and Schudson (1995), however, have argued that mass media do not enable citizens to participate in political processes to the degree that they are provided more mobilizing information. McLeod et al. (1995), for example, demonstrated that a large proportion of local television news is devoted to local crime stories, taking away from other community-related information.

In addition to examining the role of newspaper and television hard news content more carefully, however, studies need to take interpersonal discussion of local issues into account. For example, Steinberger (1984) predicted "elaborate systems of communication" (p. 7) for highly integrated individuals and consequently higher levels of participation, but he did not include those variables in his research design. More recently, however, Stamm, Emig, and Hesse (1997) suggested a key role of interpersonal discussion as "the primary mechanism for community integration" (p. 106). Therefore, the extension of the communication variables and an examination of the role of interpersonal communication is a first major focus of this research.

Second, most studies do not examine the potential indirect links among community integration, communication variables, and participation. Rather than having a direct impact, the link between community integration and forms of participation can be expected to be mediated by a number of cognitive and communication variables. At the same time, it is possible that the relationship between various types of communication and political participation is mediated by community integration variables or some kinds of structural anchoring. A second focus of this article, therefore, is to go beyond simple direct links and examine the indirect links among community variables, communication variables, and forms of participation in greater detail. This will provide us with a better understanding of the *processes* leading up to participation in political activities.

O₂: Knowledge and Efficacy

A relationship between knowledge and efficacy as independent variables and participation as a dependent variable has been hypothesized by various researchers, yet this relationship has been empirically measured in only a few cases. Where knowledge and participation are concerned, research reveals differences in knowledge and articulation between those who are more politically active and those who are not (e.g., Bennett, 1986; Neuman, 1986). Similarly, those who are more politically sophisticated are more likely to vote and engage in other political activities (e.g., Inglehart, 1979; Klingemann, 1979).

Political efficacy, or "the feeling that one is capable of influencing the decision-making process" (Goel, 1980, p. 127), consistently has been viewed as having two dimensions (Converse, 1972). An internal dimension measures one's feelings of personal effectiveness, while external efficacy reflects one's beliefs about government responsiveness to individual influence attempts (Abramson, 1983). Given Nowak et al.'s (1982) definition of institutional local participation as an "activity attempting to influence decision makers by modifying their alternatives and redefining the social resources available to them" (p. 339), the external dimension of efficacy theoretically should play a dominant role in predicting local political participation (Gans, 1967). This is in line with Pomper and Sernekos's (1991) findings, which, although somewhat mixed, show that external efficacy consistently plays an important role in predicting institutionalized participation. Similarly, Vedlitz and Veblen (1980) argue that "it is possible, regardless of government structure, that negative orientations and disenchantment with government may result in certain kinds of unconventional political activity" (p. 39).

R: Local Political Participation

Only recently has thinking about the process by which community integration and communication influence local political participation placed emphasis on the community. Although classical liberals would contend that the "community—understood as

structural property comprised largely of [*sic*] primary and traditional ties—is *not* essential to the development of a vital and active citizen body” (Steinberger, 1984, p. 4), a growing body of research shows a close link between forms of community involvement or integration and local political participation (e.g., Nowak et al., 1982; Pomper & Sernekos, 1991; Steinberger, 1984; Vedlitz & Veblen, 1980).

A focus on the community is warranted as political power in the United States has become more decentralized over the past two decades. Congressional action has called for decision making to be transferred from the federal to the state level, which in turn is transferred to the local level. Related to the notion of an active citizenry is the fact that while citizens can participate on various levels (e.g., national or regional) and in various forms (traditional or nontraditional), the actual act of participation always occurs at the local level (i.e., in the community).

Steinberger (1984) observes that “the precise reasons for the presumed link between community and political participation are not entirely clear” (p. 5). He offers three possible explanations, the first of which is that participation stems from the desire to protect social and cultural values (see also Gans, 1962). Second, participation may be viewed as a civic responsibility and may result from concern about others in the community. Verba et al. (1995) have used the term “networks of recruitment” to refer to interpersonal networks and their impact on political participation. Interpersonal networks serve to promote participatory behavior both by conveying important mobilizing information and by conveying a sense of citizen duty and obligation toward one’s community. Third, and somewhat related, participation may be a function of various resources such as networks and information, including that obtained from the mass media or through interpersonal discussion.⁴

Research Hypotheses

In formulating hypotheses for this study, we focused on the communication variables in the model and their impact on participation. The relationships among the variables preceding mass and interpersonal communication have been documented by McLeod et al. (1996).

Hypotheses concerning the communication variables are divided into two groups: those relating the communication variables to each other and those associating communication with political knowledge, political efficacy, and local political participation.

In the first domain, given the complementary nature of television and newspapers, we hypothesize a reciprocal path between use of each medium for hard news. However, as modern technology gives television an advantage in that viewers get up-to-the-minute news, and given the time and space constraints of the audiovisual medium, it is reasonable to expect that individuals use television news for initial awareness of any particular public affairs issue and turn to newspapers for a more detailed explanation. Thus, although a reciprocal relationship exists, the path from television hard news use to newspaper hard news use should be stronger than the reverse.

Hypothesis 1: Use of television hard news drives use of newspaper hard news more strongly than the reverse.

Research in the uses and gratifications arena (for overviews, see Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985; Rayburn, 1996) allows us to hypothesize a relationship between mass media use and interpersonal communication. Specifically, data have shown that respondents turn to the media to obtain information for use in discussion with others (McDonald & Glynn, 1985; McLeod & Becker, 1974). As noted by Chaffee and Mutz

(1988), "mass media often provide grist for the conversation mill and stimulate informal discussions that might not otherwise take place" (p. 21).

Hypothesis 2: The greater the use of mass media, the greater the interpersonal discussion of local issues.

The second set of hypotheses focuses on the effects of communication on political knowledge, efficacy, and participation. Regarding learning from the media, conventional wisdom maintains that newspapers are superior to television (e.g., Patterson & McClure, 1976; Robinson & Levy, 1986, 1996). This pessimistic view of television is grounded in charges that the viewer has less control over the pace at which information is digested (e.g., Singer, 1980), that television news provides little more than a headline service (Tuchman, 1978), that the visual element serves to distract the viewer from substantive information (Robinson & Levy, 1986), and that the sheer amount of information carried in television news is considerably less than that of a daily newspaper (Graber, 1997; Gunter, 1991).

Newspapers and television are not the only conduits of political information. Early research during the limited effects period of mass communication research (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) highlighted how interpersonal sources (opinion leaders) filtered information from the media to others. Robinson and Levy (1986) concluded that "interpersonal discussion of news may be at least as powerful a predictor of comprehension as exposure to news media" (p. 234). However, given the fact that political information is transmitted primarily by the mass media, we put forth the following hypothesis regarding communication and knowledge:

Hypothesis 3: Television hard news use, newspaper hard news use, and interpersonal discussion about political issues are positively and directly related to local political knowledge. However, television and newspaper use have different indirect effects.⁵

Differences in presentation and format across the two media lead us to expect differential effects of each on political efficacy. With its "episodic" framing of news, television presents the political world as fragmented, thereby impeding viewers from drawing connections between issues (Iyengar, 1991). On the other hand, newspapers, with their dominant inverted pyramid structure, offer readers a structured format by which to acquire political information. Moreover, the space allotted each story allows for greater contextualization (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). Such "thematic" framing, per Iyengar (1991), would lead readers to see connections between issues and learn about the government, which are more difficult to do with the fragmented coverage of television.

Moreover, content analyses conducted by Iyengar (1991) prior to his experimental work on framing reveal that episodic and thematic framing differ with respect to how each encourages attribution of responsibility. Episodic framing tends to lead to audience members attributing responsibility for the problem and corresponding treatment to the individuals who experience the problem. In contrast, thematic framing is more conducive to audience members seeing society or the government as responsible for both causing and treating the problem.

If the government and political figures are implicated only through thematic framing, we would expect the media to be differentially related to external political efficacy. This is consistent with previous research in this area. O'Keefe and Mendelsohn (1978) reported a negative relationship between newspaper use and reasons for nonvoting. They asserted that "print media do provide greater depth and insight into the complexities of politics" (p. 283). Becker and Whitney (1980) found dependency on television for local issues to be negatively related to levels of trust and perceived comprehension of

government. Overall, O'Keefe (1980) found a stronger impact of newspaper reliance on feelings of disaffection toward the political system than for television reliance. Based on these findings, we put forth the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Use of newspaper hard news is related to feelings of external political efficacy.⁶

Finally, research on communication influences on political participation has favored newspapers. An analysis of longitudinal data led Smith (1986) to conclude that the relationship between newspaper reading and political participation is a constant and positive one. Also, Wattenberg (1984) found that the politically inactive avoid using media or, if they do use the media at all, use only television. Given these conclusions, we hypothesize the following relationship between media use and local political participation.

Hypothesis 5: Use of newspaper hard news is related to local political participation.⁷

We also expected a relationship between interpersonal discussion and political participation. After all, discussion of local issues is done with interpersonal sources, and interpersonal communication has been conceptualized as reinforcing, rather than competing with, mass communication (Chaffee, 1982). The reinforcing role of interpersonal communication strengthens the total impact of the media on social action (Chaffee & Mutz, 1988). This impact presumably is expressed through political participation.

Hypothesis 6: Interpersonal discussion will increase local political participation.

Our hypotheses do not differentiate the process by which different forms of communication are expected to affect various forms of local political participation. The research question thus becomes: Is there a difference between the two types of media? Both newspaper hard news use and television hard news use are expected to play some role, either directly or indirectly, in predicting processes of local political participation; however, newspaper use is expected to play a key role.

Method

This study is based on survey data collected in fall 1993. Telephone interviews were conducted with a probability sample of 389 adults in Madison, Wisconsin, and its contiguous cities, townships, and villages, with random digit-dialing techniques employed in order to gain access to unlisted telephone numbers. The response rate was approximately 60%.⁸

Measures

McLeod et al. (1996) predicted various dimensions of local political participation on the basis of demographics, structural variables, media use, and dimensions of community integration. Their findings showed that all of those variables play an important role in predicting levels of participation. Because of the different focus of our research, and in order to achieve more parsimonious models, we did not incorporate all of those variables into our models. Rather, all variables in our models were residualized for age ($M = 41.37$ years), gender (46.5% male), years of formal education ($M = 14.72$), household income ($M = \$39,600$), and a variable called "structural anchoring." Structural anchoring was a single factor that emerged from factor analysis (principal components with oblique rotation) of four items (likelihood of moving, length of residency in the community and at the current address, and home ownership). Regressing each variable in the model on all structural and demographic variables allowed us to control for the effects of structural and demographic antecedents outside the specified model.

The variables included in the models can be categorized into three groups: (a) exogenous variables that are not influenced by other variables in the model, (b) "antecedent" endogenous variables that influence and are influenced by other variables, and (c) "consequence" endogenous variables.

Two variables served as exogenous variables. They were labeled "social networks" and "city versus neighborhood," both of which were explicated earlier. They were two of five factors that emerged from a factor analysis of 15 indicators measuring community integration. The social networks factor referred to the connectedness of individuals to active local primary groups. The city versus neighborhood factor identified respondents who are oriented toward the larger community rather than identifying with or sharing ideas with their more immediate neighborhood.

Our models included a total of seven endogenous antecedent variables. *Local political interest* was measured by a single 10-point item ("not at all interested" to "very interested"). *Exposure and attention to newspaper hard news* was an additive scale of two 10-point items for exposure and attention to "news about politics, economy, and social issues in the Madison area" ($M = 6.07$, $r = .78$, $p < .01$). Its television counterpart comprised only one variable, attention to *local television hard news* ($M = 6.25$).⁹ *Interpersonal communication* was an index of two 10-point scales measuring the frequency of interpersonal discussion "about things happening in your neighborhood" and "problems in the Madison area" ($M = 11.36$, $r = .62$, $p < .01$). *Local political knowledge* was assessed by four local knowledge items. A principal-components factor analysis (oblique rotation) of these items produced a single factor for local political knowledge. The final antecedent endogenous variable, *external political efficacy*, emerged from a factor analysis (principal components with oblique rotation) of four 10-point scales ("strongly agree" to "strongly disagree").¹⁰

Fourteen 10-point items for *local political participation* were combined into three factors (principal components solution with oblique rotation). For the consequence endogenous variables, we contrasted two dimensions in our models, labeled "institutionalized activities" and "intention to attend and participate in a local forum" (for the items in the respective dimensions, see the Appendix).

Institutional participation and participation in a public forum are conceptually distinct ways of participating in political processes. Institutionalized forms of participation such as voting and contacting public officials have been examined rather thoroughly (for an overview, see Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995). The processes leading to participation in community forums have not been fully explicated and tested. These nontraditional forms of communication are especially relevant as they are "the focus of a number of attempts by media and other organizations to stimulate political discussion and activities in the community (sometimes called civic journalism)" (McLeod et al., 1996, p. 204). Participation in a local forum, in this study, was measured as respondents' willingness to participate in and speak out at a public forum on local issues. More specifically, we asked respondents to nominate issues that they considered most important for Madison as a community. We then measured respondents' willingness to participate in a public forum and speak out at that forum on the issue that they had nominated as the most important one.¹¹ It is important to note that public forums on community issues have been held repeatedly in Madison (e.g., as part of the "We the People" civic journalism project; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1997).¹²

Rather than merely examining the strength of relationships between antecedents of participation and the two dependent variables, this study addressed the question of *how*

use of newspaper hard news and television hard news in combination with interpersonal communication can affect local political participation. While research has documented relationships between communication and participation, it lacks a thorough explanation of the causal ordering of variables and the processes leading to different forms of local political participation. An examination of these processes requires methods that go beyond, or at least supplement, traditional regression techniques.¹³

A model generating approach using LISREL as suggested by Jöreskog (1993) is the most appropriate method to test both direct paths and indirect relationships between variables. It overcomes the limitations of OLS regression in two respects. Structural equation modeling allowed us not only to examine the causal ordering of variables more closely but also to describe both direct and indirect paths among variables (i.e., the processes leading to local political participation). Direct relationships are defined as links between variables that are not mediated or moderated by other any variables in the model. Indirect links involve mediation by other variables; variable *A* affects variable *B* through a third variable *C* that is directly linked to both *A* and *B*. The total effect of one variable on another is defined as the sum of its direct and indirect effects.

Causal relationships between variables, of course, cannot be inferred on the basis of recursive structural models in single cross-sectional data sets. Based on a theorized core model, however, structural models enable us to test whether freeing or fixing additional paths improves the overall fit of the model to the data set under study. In effect, Asher (1991) argues, "one makes inferences that a causal relationship exists on the basis of patterns observed in one's data and assumptions made about the relationships among one's variables; causation is not demonstrated directly" (p. 12).

Results

We present the results of our analyses in two steps. In the first step, we describe the impact that community integration variables and interest in local politics have on causally subsequent variables. In the second step, we examine the ways in which different forms of communication relate to each other and their role in predicting different forms of local political participation. Both models fit the data exceptionally well. The model for institutionalized participation fit with a value of χ^2 (17, $N = 389$) = 12.24, $p = .79$, Goodness-of-Fit index (GFI) = .99, and Adjusted GFI (AGFI) = .98. The model fit for participation in a forum was similar, χ^2 (19, $N = 389$) = 13.74, $p = .80$, GFI = .99, and AGFI = .98.¹⁴

The relationships among the exogenous variables were consistent across models for both institutional and forum participation (see Table 1). An orientation toward the larger community was positively related to an interest in local politics ($\gamma = .20$). For participation in public forums, we also found a direct positive influence on a respondent's orientation toward the larger community rather than his or her immediate neighborhood. Having well-developed interpersonal networks showed a somewhat weaker, but still positive, relationship with local political interest ($\gamma = .13$). There was a positive impact of social networks on interpersonal discussion. This relationship worked both directly ($\gamma = .21$) and indirectly through interest in local politics. Similarly, interpersonal networks had a direct negative impact on newspaper hard news use ($\gamma = -.11$) as well as an indirect one through interest in politics. Both models also showed strong direct paths from interest in local politics to participation ($\beta = .21$), with standardized total effects of .36 for institutionalized participation and .30 for participation in a forum. Moreover, for

Table 1
Estimated direct effects among predetermined variables

Variable	City vs. neighborhood ^a	Social networks ^a	Political interest ^b	Newspaper use ^b	TV use ^b	Interpersonal discussion ^b	Political knowledge ^b
Institutional/forum participation							
Political interest	.20	.13					
Newspaper use		-.11	.26		.32	.12	
Television use			.48				
Interpersonal discussion		.21	.35		.14		
Political knowledge				.20	.11		
External efficacy							.22

Note. All coefficients reported are at least 1.96 times larger than their standard error (i.e., significant at an alpha level of .05).

^a γ values.

^b β values.

both models of participation, interest in local politics predicted reading local hard news. For both types of participation, we found a strong path from interest in local politics to local television hard news use ($\beta = .48$) and somewhat weaker paths to interpersonal discussion ($\beta = .35$) and local newspaper hard news use ($\beta = .26$).

The complete set of relationships among the three communication variables was consistent across models. According to Hypothesis 1, television hard news viewing should drive reading of newspaper hard news more strongly than the reverse. In essence, this hypothesis predicts a reciprocal relationship between the two types of hard news use. When a nonrecursive path between newspaper hard news use and television hard news use was freed, the largest eigenvalue of the matrix was greater than one, suggesting that the nonrecursive path was unstable. This contradicts Hypothesis 1. Thus, we worked with only recursive paths between newspaper use and television use. The best model with respect to fit had a path leading from television to newspaper ($\beta = .32$).

As implied in Hypothesis 2, television hard news use was positively related to interpersonal discussion of local issues ($\beta = .14$), which in turn was positively related to newspaper hard news use ($\beta = .12$) (but, given our results regarding Hypothesis 1, there was no path from newspaper use to interpersonal discussion). In addition to the indirect path from television to newspaper use through interpersonal discussion, there was a strong path directly from television to newspaper use ($\beta = .32$), which is consistent with our hypothesis. In both models, knowledge of local politics was predicted by higher levels of newspaper and television hard news use (Hypothesis 3), with the impact of newspaper hard news use being about twice as strong as the path for television ($\beta = .20$ and $\beta = .11$, respectively). Also consistent with Hypothesis 3, the total impact of interpersonal discussion on knowledge was relatively small, with a standardized total effect of .02.

The direct influences on participation were, again, distinctively different for the institutionalized model and the forum model (see Table 2). In the model for institutionalized participation, we found that local newspaper hard news use had the strongest overall impact on institutionalized participation of the three communication variables, as put forth in Hypothesis 5 (standardized total effect = .18). The largest proportion of this effect was accounted for by a direct path from newspaper use to institutionalized participation ($\beta = .14$). But the link was also an indirect one from newspaper use to knowledge ($\beta = .20$), from knowledge to participation ($\beta = .13$), and from knowledge to efficacy ($\beta = .22$) and from there to participation ($\beta = .12$). Consistent with Hypothesis 6, there was an impact of interpersonal discussion on institutionalized participation, but this impact was modest, with a standardized total effect of .18. This relationship works either directly ($\beta = .14$) or mediated through newspaper use, knowledge, and external efficacy. Finally, television had the weakest total effect of .10. More interestingly, there were no direct effects of television on institutionalized participation. Rather, television use was linked positively to newspaper use both directly ($\beta = .3$) and indirectly through interpersonal communication (see Figure 1).

For the model for participation in a civic forum, the path structure from the communication variables as independent variables to the final dependent variable differed substantially from the model for institutionalized participation. A comparison of the three communication variables reveals that interpersonal discussion was the strongest predictor of participation in a civic forum, with a standardized total effect of .14. Television hard news use had a total effect of .02. The link to participation in a forum, however, worked only through interpersonal discussion. Local newspaper hard news use had no effect on participation in a local forum. The lack of significant links between knowledge

Table 2
Predicting types of participation:
A model generating approach with LISREL

Dependent variable	Predetermined variables	Total effects	Indirect effects	Direct effects	R ²
Institutionalized participation	City vs. neighborhood	.07	.07		.21
	Social networks	.06	.06		
	Political interest	.36	.15	.21	
	Newspaper use	.16	.02	.14	
	Television use	.10	.10		
	Interpersonal discussion	.18	.03	.14	
	Political knowledge	.15	.03	.13	
	External efficacy	.12		.12	
Participation in a public forum	City vs. neighborhood	.19	.06	.13	.14
	Social networks	.07	.07		
	Political interest	.30	.06	.24	
	Newspaper use				
	Television use	.02	.02		
	Interpersonal discussion	.14		.14	
	Political knowledge				
	External efficacy				

Note. For the structural model for institutionalized participation the likelihood-ratio chi-square statistic is χ^2 (17, $N = 389$) = 12.24, $p = .79$, GFI = .99, AGFI = .98. The model fit for participation in a forum has a chi-square of χ^2 (19, $N = 389$) = 13.74, $p = .80$, GFI = .99, AGFI = .98. All coefficients reported are at least 1.96 times larger than their standard error (i.e., significant at an alpha level of .05).

and participation as well as external efficacy and participation precluded any indirect link between local newspaper hard news use and our final endogenous variable.

Although efficacy had no impact on participation in this model, it was predicted by the communication variables in the same way as in the model for institutionalized participation. Contrary to Hypothesis 4, local newspaper hard news use and local television hard news use were similar in their modest impact on external efficacy. The total standardized effect was .04 in both models.

Discussion

This project attempted to explicate more fully the forms of participation in community affairs and the influence of communication in activating citizens. In doing so, we encountered limitations of structural equation models based on a relatively small sample of 389. A replication of the results in multiple OLS regression, however, yielded consistent relationships among variables. As a result of the residualization of the variables used in the structural models, the R^2 values in the regression models were slightly higher, at 29.3 for the institutionalized participation model and 18.0 for the model of participating in a forum. The corresponding squared correlations in LISREL were .21 and .14.

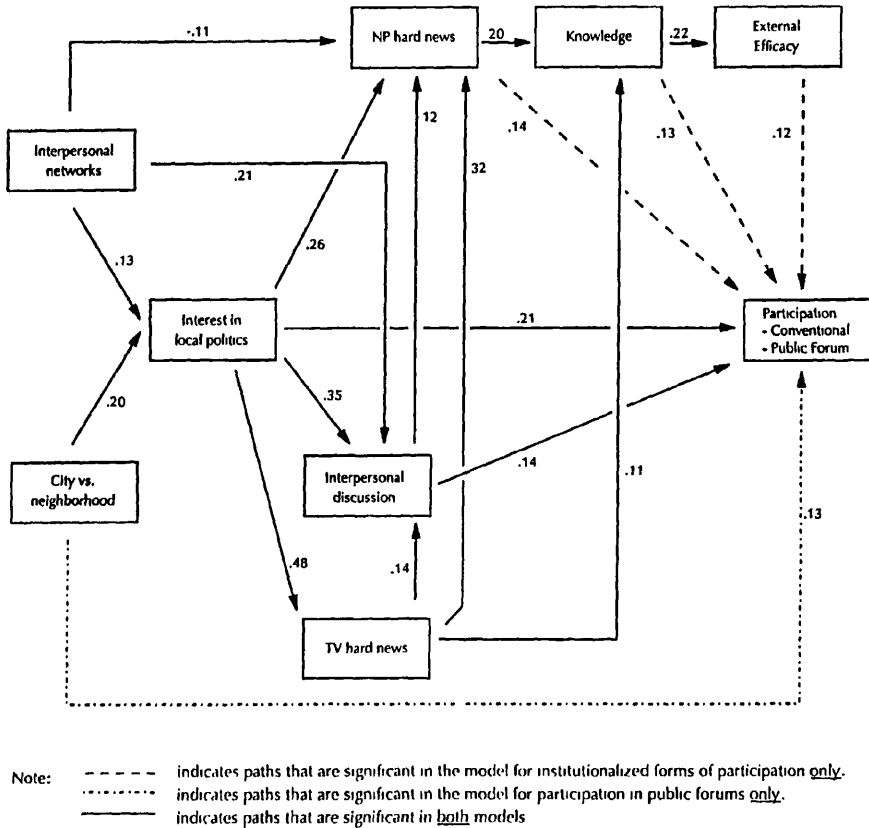


Figure 1. Structural model.

The regression models are noteworthy for two reasons. First, they show the same or similar patterns for both direct and indirect paths leading to the two forms of participation as the structural models, thus replicating our results. Second, the regression models replicate previous findings linking demographic and structural variables to participation.

In addition to replicating the LISREL results through OLS regression, we increased confidence in our findings in two ways. First, we fit the model for each type of participation on the other type. In both cases, this led to either a substantial decrease in model fit or a complete lack of fit. Using the participation in a forum variable in the model for institutionalized participation led to a decrease in model fit from $\chi^2 (17, N = 389) = 12.24, p = .79$, to $\chi^2 (17, N = 389) = 18.76, p = .34$. When institutionalized participation was fit to the model for participation in public forums, the decrease was even greater and led to a complete lack of model fit [$\chi^2 (19, N = 389) = 13.74, p = .80$, to $\chi^2 (17, N = 389) = 38.34, p = .005$]. Thus, the processes leading to these two types of participation must be seen as qualitatively different.

Second, data from a national survey of political and nonpolitical civic participation in the United States involving 2,517 face-to-face interviews (Verba, Schlozman, Brady, & Nie, 1990) were used to validate many findings of this study. The lack of

measures for nontraditional forms of participation in the national data limited the replication to traditional forms of participation. Not only did the model based on national data display an excellent fit, but patterns of influence were similar (Scheufele & Moy, 1998). Direct and indirect paths among communication variables, as well as paths between communication variables and other variables, were almost identical to those observed in the present study. Such results strengthen further our confidence in our findings.

Communication Variables

Communication plays a critical role in either motivating participation or making it possible. In no model, including those examining the unique effects of newspapers and television and the complete models for both types of media, could we find a direct path from use of television to participation.¹⁵ Rather, the three types of communication are interrelated through a distinctive set of paths. Watching local television hard news is most strongly predicted by local political interest and therefore seems to be the form of communication most often used to fulfill the need for immediate local political information.

In addition, the direct and indirect paths from television use to newspaper use suggest a specific pattern of interplay among the three communication variables. Television provides local political information "as it happens." In other words, television has some impact on awareness of issues or problems and is primarily used for that purpose. The fact that the path from newspaper use to knowledge is almost twice as strong as the path between television and knowledge, however, suggests that local television news provides only a limited amount of information to citizens.

Citizens have two ways of following up on the sparse information about issues that television provides. One option is to try to get additional information from the daily newspaper the following day. Another alternative is to engage in interpersonal discussion of the issue. This discussion might trigger some form of participation itself or lead to an increase in newspaper hard news use, presumably in order to gain more information.

While these processes seem to work well and influence participation either directly or indirectly from interpersonal discussion or newspaper use in the institutionalized participation model, mass-mediated communication does not have a significant impact on participation in a civic forum.¹⁶ This suggests that mass media either fail to convey the potential of civic forums as having an impact on political decision making or fail to provide the necessary knowledge about these forms of participation. In addition, the lack of impact of knowledge and external efficacy suggests that there are other motivations for participating in a civic forum.

One possible explanation is that internal, rather than external, political efficacy plays a major role in this model. In other words, the responsiveness of the political system is of interest but is secondary to the potential impact that the individual perceives himself or herself to have on local political processes in general. The data do not support this assumption, however. Internal efficacy is not predicted by any of the communication variables, nor does it influence forms of participation if entered into either of the models.

Local Political Participation

We tried to identify the similarities and differences between two types of local participation: standard *institutional activities* such as voting in local elections and contacting

local officials and participation in a *community forum*, a less traditional activity akin to those conducted under the rubric of civic journalism.

The two forms of participation in community affairs are clearly related ($r = .34, p < .01$). Those who were already most active in standard civic affairs were likely to be among the 61% of the sample who indicated a willingness to participate in a civic forum on the issue that was most important to them. On the other hand, the association is modest enough to suggest the two forms are by no means identical. Each form of local activity is attractive to a somewhat different set of citizens. The participants for each are similar in some ways and different in others. Institutional participants and prospective forum attendees are most similar in their strong interest in local politics. They share patterns of attentive use of local television news and frequent discussion of local issues.

The two types of participation differ markedly in that participation in institutional activities is predicted more strongly overall (R^2 of 29.3% vs. 17.9% of variance explained) and is largely a function of stronger demographic influences (R^2 of 10.3% vs. 3.0% of variance explained). Older, well-educated residents are more active in traditional forms of participation, while forum participants have a broader demographic base, distinctive only in being likely to be slightly older than the average. The lack of status differences should be considered good news to proponents of civic journalism programs who seek to address a broad cross section of the community.

At the same time, the pathway from orientations toward the larger community to participation in forums but not to traditional forms of participation suggests that some of the traditional forms of participation are fairly local in their focus and oriented toward the more immediate neighborhood. Participation in public forums, however, seems to be more centralized and focused on the larger community. This might be, at least in part, a function of the coverage of these forums on local television and in newspapers. Some of the forums were directly broadcast to the larger community, thus preventing a focus of these forums on issues of more local or even neighborhood interest.

Individuals partaking of institutional activities also differ from those who are interested in civic forums in the former's attentive reading of hard local news. These local reading patterns lead institutional participants to become more knowledgeable about local politics and to accord to the local political system a higher level of efficacy. Forum attendees are not distinctive in knowledge or efficacy, and while that may reflect the broad appeal of forums, it also suggests that infusions of relevant information may be critical to the success of civic journalism initiatives.

The lack of influence from knowledge and efficacy in the forum participation model is open to another interpretation, however. The series of questions about community forums was asked in connection with the local issue that was nominated as being most salient by the respondent. Our knowledge questions covered a broad set of issues rather than a specific issue. They also may have been focused inadvertently on mainstream topics that already were featured in local political debates. If the knowledge questions had addressed each citizen's nominated issue (an obvious impossibility), a significant path to forum attendance might have been obtained. Similarly, our efficacy questions concerned the responsiveness of the local government. If we had included questions about the efficacy of deliberations of average citizens, we quite likely would have been able to connect this form of efficacy with participation in forums.

Overall, it is clear that communication plays a central role in stimulating and enabling local political participation. The processes through which various forms of communication affect participation differ for institutionalized forms of participation and for participation in civic forums, with significant implications for processes of local democracy.

Notes

1. The ambiguity in results stems not only from varying conceptualizations and operationalizations of community integration and participation, with the multidimensionality of each assumed rather than tested, but also from inadequate measurement of the communication concepts. Often, media use is assessed by self-report measures such as frequency of use or the amount of exposure to certain types of media (e.g., Jeffres, Dobos, & Lee, 1988; Viswanath et al., 1990) or by subscription rates (Neuwirth et al., 1989). Interpersonal discussion of local issues is omitted from most approaches.

2. The inconsistency is reflected in the terminological differences among a number of studies. Emig (1995), Jeffres et al. (1988), Stamm (1985), and Viswanath et al. (1990) talk about "community ties"; Rothenbuhler (1991) uses the term "community involvement"; Steinberger (1984) speaks of "communality"; and McLeod et al. (1996), Neuwirth et al. (1989), and Stamm and Weis (1986) refer to the phenomenon as "community integration."

3. The five factors were "psychological attachment," "interpersonal networks," "city versus group," "local versus cosmopolitan," and "city versus neighborhood." Because not all of the factors are relevant to our research, we do not describe the factors at length here. For a more complete overview, see McLeod et al. (1996, pp. 186–187).

4. Having a financial or other economic stake in the community, such as owning a house or having lived in the community for some time, might be another direct reason for participating in order to protect this investment. This hypothesis holds considerable intuitive appeal. Our data, however, show relationships that hold *beyond* mere economic interests. Specifically, all variables were residualized for demographic variables as well as a variable called "structural anchoring." Structural anchoring included variables measuring an economic investment in the community, such as length of residency, likelihood of moving, and ownership of residence.

5. These indirect effects are specified in subsequent hypotheses.

6. We do *not* expect television hard news use to be related to political efficacy. This hypothesis, of course, cannot be formally tested.

7. We do *not* expect television hard news use to be related to local political participation. This hypothesis, of course, cannot be formally tested.

8. The 40% nonresponse rate includes refusals, broken appointments, and non-response after at least three callbacks.

9. It is important to note that both types of media use are measured as (a) local and (b) public affairs media use. The operationalization of these concepts on a "local" level is necessary as most variables in our model focus on democratic processes in the community. In particular, the hypothesized links to local political knowledge and to the dependent variable "participation in a civic forum on local issues" require these types of measures. Similarly, the focus on public affairs media use ("news about politics, economy, and social issues in the Madison area") is important with respect to our hypotheses regarding an impact of these types of media use on knowledge, efficacy, and participation.

10. Consistent with Abramson's (1983) conceptualization, two dimensions emerged from our factor analysis. For reasons described in greater detail later, we used only the external dimension for our models (see the Appendix for wording).

11. Ideally, participation in public forums should be measured retrospectively (i.e., as real behavior). As findings by the Pew Center (1997) show, however, programs like "We the People" in Madison often manage to recruit as few as 1% of the population for participation in forums they organize. Since there are few empirical data on real participation in public journalism forums or similar meetings, we decided to measure participation in these forums in a hypothetical setting. Participation in public forums was measured as respondents' willingness to participate in forums on the issue that they had nominated in an earlier question as the most important one and to express their opinions—even if others at the meeting held different opinions. It can be argued, of course, that respondents who nominate different issues also differ with respect to their willingness to participate in public forums on these issues and speak out at these forums. In other words, the

nature of the issue may influence the level of controversy surrounding such forums and therefore their mobilizing power. In more recent analyses (McLeod et al., 1998), however, we found no substantive differences between models predicting nontraditional forms of participation for different issues.

12. The "We the People" project is a civic journalism project that aims to reconnect citizens with public life through town hall meetings, candidate forums, and citizen-based reporting.

13. In this study, OLS regression refers to a hierarchical model in which the exogenous variables are entered first. Based on their assumed causal order, subsequent steps include ideology, income, local political interest, local political participation, and, finally, local newspaper and television use together. This approach allows variables entered in one step to account only for the variance they do not share with variables entered in previous steps.

14. The logic of significance testing in structural modeling is distinctly different from that of more usual testing, such as an F test in multiple ordinary least squares regression. In the latter case, the null hypothesis runs counter to the original research hypothesis. In contrast, for structural equation models, the observed probability level is the "probability of obtaining a χ^2 value larger than the value obtained if H_0 is correct. The higher the probability of the χ^2 , the closer is the fit of H_0 to the perfect fit" (Bollen, 1989, p. 266). In other words, a good fit is indicated when we cannot reject H_0 at a given alpha level.

15. This is also the case for alternative models tested. Although these models showed consistently lower coefficients for model fit, the impact that television had on other variables including the final dependent variables did not change significantly.

16. It is important to note that the hypothetical measure of "participation in a civic forum" referred to civic forums that were organized by community groups in the Madison area on a number of issues, including schools and crime. These issues were highly publicized and were actually taking place.

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Appendix: Overview of Measures Used

Community versus Neighborhood

1. Do you identify more closely with . . . your neighborhood or local community?
2. National and international events are important largely because of the way they affect Madison as a community.
3. To what extent do you have the same concerns as other people in the area?

Interpersonal Networks

1. Do you have much to do with the people in your neighborhood?
2. What percentage of your friends live in your neighborhood?

Local Political Interest

1. Interest in local politics.

Newspaper Hard News Use

1. Exposure to news about politics, economy, and social issues in the Madison area.
2. Attention to news about politics, economy, and social issues in the Madison area.

Television Hard News Use

1. Attention to news about politics, economy, and social issues in the Madison area.

Interpersonal Communication

1. Frequency of discussion about things happening in your neighborhood.
2. Frequency of discussion about problems in the Madison area.

Local Political Knowledge

1. The name of the mayor of Madison.
2. The name of the Dane county executive.
3. The name of the highway whose proposed widening is controversial.
4. The location of the proposed convention center.

Political Efficacy

Internal:

1. Every vote counts in an election, including yours and mine.
2. In Madison, everyone who wants to has a voice in what the government does.

External:

3. Sometimes, local politics and government are so complicated that people like me can't really understand what's going on.
4. Generally speaking, we'd be better off if all the government worked like a small town government.

Participation

Institutional:

1. Have you attended a neighborhood meeting,
2. written a letter to the local editor or called in to a radio station,
3. circulated a petition for a local candidate or issue,
4. voted for a locally elected official,
5. worked for a political campaign locally,
6. contacted a local public official?

Public forum on an important issue:

1. How likely would it be for you to speak up at the meeting?
2. How likely would it be for you to express an opinion that is different from those of others at the meeting?
3. How likely would it be for you to volunteer to work on the issue with other people?