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Perceived Versus Actual Disagreement: Which Influences Deliberative Experiences?

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Little is known about whether deliberative experiences are affected by participants' perceptions of disagreement or by what is expressed during deliberation. Drawing on participants in online deliberations, we find that (a) it is perceived disagreement that is strongly related to experiences such as interest/enjoyment, (b) medium levels of objective disagreement attenuate confusion, and (c) these associations depend on the topic discussed and are subject to some critical thresholds. These results have both theoretical and practical implications. They suggest that (a) perceptions of disagreement, although not clearly indicative of what transpires in deliberation, are consequential, (b) objective disagreement exerts nuanced effects that do not always parallel those of perceived disagreement, and (c) disagreement should be assessed in an issue-specific manner.

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Few concepts have been as fashionable in recent communication and political science research as deliberation. In turn, few concepts have been as important to the scholarship on deliberation as political disagreement, which is seen as a "specific necessary criterion" (Thompson, 2008, p. 513) and "a core requirement" in deliberative settings (Mutz, 2008, p. 535). Disagreement is said to influence individual interactions with others and to drive various democratically consequential outcomes—from greater understanding to political participation to attitude change (see Jacobs et al., 2009). These claims raise a central question, however. Because scholars tend to use self-reported disagreement measures as a proxy for what occurs during deliberation or political talk (e.g., Mutz, 2002a, 2002b; Wojcieszak & Price, 2010), it is unknown whether it is participants' perceptions or actual disagreement that more strongly affects how people evaluate their experience and also their attitudes and behaviors.

Assessing this issue is theoretically and practically important. In a prior study (Wojcieszak & Price, in press), we found only a weak correspondence between

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perceived and objective disagreement measures. This not only challenges the presumption that perceived interpersonal dissent reliably indicates the disagreement a person has encountered during deliberation, but also opens a debate as to which measures should be used. Naturally, this debate can be advanced by testing whether various outcomes are better predicted by perceived or objective disagreement.

Here, we focus on individual subjective experiences during deliberation, which seem to have been overshadowed by an emphasis on meeting various criteria required for a discussion to be considered deliberative. That is, practitioners aim to approximate the numerous theoretical requirements (offer information, assure civility, and so forth); critics scrutinize whether or not a discussion qualifies as deliberation according to these criteria; and empirical researchers tend to treat deliberation as a ''black box'' (Mutz, 2008, p. 530), testing aggregate pre- to postchanges and attributing them to deliberation or disagreement. Less attention is given to citizen experiences, that are essential to the overall success of the deliberative project and which are affected by political disagreement (Gastil, Black, Deess, & Leighter, 2008; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009).

This study aimed to speak to these issues. It juxtaposed self-reported and objective disagreement measures from discussion transcripts to test which predicts the quality of participants' deliberative experience. To do so, we drew on a sample of participants engaged in online group discussions about political issues ranging from gun control to Internet voting.

We posit that a key underexamined issue in the extant scholarship on deliberation and political discussion is the correspondence (or lack thereof) between perceived and objective disagreement. By perceived disagreement, we mean that which is inferred from respondents' self-reports, rather than from actual discussion dynamics. For example, surveys on political talk ask people whether their friends, family, or acquaintances prefer an opposing candidate, have different party affiliation, or hold dissimilar views (McClurg, 2006; Mutz, 2002a, 2002b). Studies on group discussions, in turn, inquire about how much disagreement participants encountered or how often they disagreed with the views expressed by others (e.g., Wojcieszak & Price, 2010).

Answers to these questions may reflect various states, such as emotional engagement when an issue is central to individual identity and deeply held beliefs, or personal characteristics, such as the tendency toward defensive motivation versus open-mindedness (see MacCoun, 1998, for a related discussion).[1] Thus, although perceptual measures may not be directly related to actual disagreement, scholars often rely on them as a proxy for what actually occurs during deliberation or political talk. While this reliance may be partly motivated by some tangible benefits offered by self-reported measures (see Mutz, 2002b), it primarily results from the fact that data which allow constructing objective disagreement measures are rarely available.

Objective disagreement measures are, by contrast, based on recordings of what occurs during political discussions. In social network studies, these could be captured by follow-up interviews that ask the named friends, family, or acquaintances about their views or ideology and by juxtaposing these data with the main respondent's

perceptions (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Granted, these studies are not based on group discussions; nor does talking politics with dissimilar associates necessarily entail exposure to dissimilar views. A limited number of studies have begun to address this issue by coding discussion transcripts for expressions that either signal disagreement with what a prior speaker has said (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009) or that reflect a distribution of group opinions on a given policy (Barabas, 2004).

The expectation is that self-reports can reliably substitute for such objective measures. This expectation may be unfounded, however, inasmuch as the correspondence between perceived and objective disagreement seems limited. Elsewhere (Wojcieszak & Price, in press), we show that actual disagreement—assessed as individual exposure to counterattitudinal opinions from other group members during online discussions—generally did not predict the disagreement that participants subsequently reported. Only on such controversial and value-laden topics as gun control, the death penalty, and the disputed 2000 U.S. Presidential election outcome did exposure to opinions challenging one's own individual positions lead participants to report that their positions were indeed challenged. On less intense and policy-oriented topics, such as campaign funding and Internet voting, encountering counterattitudinal views did not predict perceived disagreement.

Reliance on self-reports also tells us little about whether it is perceived or actual disagreement that affects deliberative experiences. On the one hand, for disagreement to have an effect, it has to be noticed (Mutz, 2002b). Yet it is the actual conditions of deliberation that are the subject of normative pronouncements by most deliberative theory. Moreover, scholars tend to attribute various effects to exposure to dissimilar views, not to individual (mis)perceptions. Because studies do not systematically account for disagreement or base their conclusions only on self-reports, and insofar as self-reports may not have a solid grounding in deliberative reality, we cannot confidently conclude that people do not like having their views challenged or view deliberation as uncomfortable (e.g., Eliasoph, 1998; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002).

We advance the debate on the correspondence between perceived and objective disagreement measures by assessing their relative impact on enjoyment, interest, confusion, and self-expression; deliberative experiences that have important democratic consequences. Positive group atmosphere is central to deliberation (Mansbridge, Hartz-Karp, Amengual, & Gastil, 2006), partly because it promotes desirable attitudes and behaviors. For example, enthusiasm leads moderates to join political actions after deliberations (Wojcieszak, Baek, & Delli Carpini, 2010), and satisfaction affects trust (Gastil et al., 2008), perceived legitimacy and intentions to deliberate in the future (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). Open self-expression, in turn, is "both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable" because it gives the group more information (Mansbridge et al., 2006, p. 13) and enhances citizen confidence that they can understand and participate in the political system (see Morrell, 2005). Lastly, scholars invest substantial resources to provide informational materials and assure that experts are present to clarify doubts (e.g., Fishkin, 1995), with the hope that deliberation will lower confusion and produce "enlightened understanding" (Dahl, 1989, p. 105).

Importantly, these deliberative experiences are affected by disagreement. With regard to enjoyment and interest, social psychology suggests that exposure to counterattitudinal views can generate negative reactions such as anger, annoyance, or irritation (see Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). In turn, deliberative studies find that viewpoint diversity perceived during deliberation—a proxy for disagreement—may enhance enthusiasm among moderates and weak ideologues while evoking anxiety among weak and strong ideologues (Wojcieszak et al., 2010). By contrast, explicit disagreement (based on coded discussion transcripts) does not seem to affect satisfaction (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009).

Disagreement also affects self-expression. As research on the spiral of silence reveals, people are reluctant to express their views when perceiving these views to be in a minority, that is, when thinking that others disagree with them (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997). That is, fearing isolation, people silence themselves in a "hostile" environment and speak up when they perceive that their ideas have public support (see Scheufele & Moy, 2001). Studies that assess the actual opinion distribution in discussion groups also find that those in the minority are less likely to voice their privately held opinions (McDevitt, Kiousis, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2003).

With regard to confusion, participating in public forums may increase factual knowledge (e.g., Fishkin, 1995) and also contribute to integrated and differentiated views as well as to attenuated uncertainty (i.e., "do not know" responses) (Gastil & Dillard, 1999). Yet, perceived disagreement also augments people's ability to generate reasons why others might disagree with their own views (Mutz, 2002a; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002), which also leads to less consistent evaluations (Barker & Hansen, 2005) and to uncertainty and ambivalence toward political candidates (Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Mutz, 2002b).

While the literature indicates, then, that disagreement can shape the deliberative experience, it remains unclear whether the experience is shaped by what people "perceive" or by what actually arises during deliberation. This study aimed to fill this gap by addressing the following question: How does disagreement perceived during online deliberations, as compared with disagreement that was actually observed (i.e., counterattitudinal opinions that each participant heard on each issue) influence interest and enjoyment, self-expression and confusion?

Method

The data for this study come from the "Electronic Dialogue" project, which involved a multiwave, multigroup panel design, lasting roughly 1 year during the 2000 U.S. Presidential elections. All data gathering was conducted online. The core of the project consisted of 60 groups of citizens who engaged in a series of monthly, real-time online discussions about issues facing the country and the unfolding campaign. Respondents came from a nationally representative panel maintained by Knowledge Networks, Inc. (see Price & Cappella, 2002).[2]

Two baseline surveys ($N = 1,684$) yielded information on participants' attitudes, behaviors, and demographic and personality variables. Respondents were randomly

assigned to one of three panels: discussion panel, all-survey-only control panel, and baseline-final-survey-only control panel. We focus here only on those in the discussion panel ($N = 915$), who were invited to attend eight monthly, hour-long, structured, and moderated online discussions in small groups, from April through December 2000. Our analyses center on the third, fourth, and eighth discussions, after which questionnaires tapped perceived disagreement. While the entire discussion panel was invited to each of these rounds, only a subset, generally about a third, participated in each case.

During round three (6/24–6/29), participants debated gun control, the death penalty, and crime regulation. The discussion lasted an hour and each topic was addressed for about 13 minutes, following a prompt from the moderators. Three hundred and forty participants took part in this round, with the average number of participants in each group being 6.19, and with a vast majority (78%, $N = 266$) completing both pre- and postevent surveys. Round four (8/7–8/13) focused on campaign funding, Internet voting, electoral behavior (i.e., whether candidates keep campaign promises and say what they believe), and the U.S. electoral system (i.e., whether it is effective and generates qualified candidates). Three hundred and fifty-eight participants attended, discussing each topic for roughly 10 minutes. The average group size was 6.46, and 84% of participants ($N = 299$) completed both surveys. Finally, round eight (12/4–12/10) focused on the Electoral College, election media coverage, and the candidate conduct after the 2000 Election.[3] Two hundred and fifty-three participants joined this round, each topic lasted about 10 minutes, the average group size was 5.08, and 94% ($N = 237$) completed both pre- and postevent surveys.

The samples that attended the analyzed discussions are more representative of the American adult population than those observed in many studies on deliberation. Still, their representativeness is inevitably compromised because they are only a subsample of project participants who engaged in a demanding multiwave study. Analyses indicate that the subsamples remain fairly representative of the full "Electronic Dialogue" sample, which in turn matches a random-digit-dial (RDD) sample reasonably well. The full project sample slightly overrepresents males and those interested in politics. Due to selective attendance and attrition, participants in the analyzed rounds are older, more interested in politics, and more Republican and Conservative than the full project sample (see Wojcieszak & Price, in press).

Measures

Perceived disagreement

Throughout the project, disagreement was assessed by three questionnaires administered after the third and the fourth round, and at the end of project in January. Each time, respondents estimated the frequency with which they disagreed with the views expressed by other group members, with responses ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost all the time*) (*D3* $M = 2.52, SD = .75$; *D4* $M = 2.44, SD = .68$; *D8* $M = 2.42, SD = .73$). Whereas the first two surveys asked about disagreement perceived during the preceding rounds, the last survey probed about the discussions *to date*.

Objective Disagreement

All "Electronic Dialogue Project" discussions were recorded and coded for expressed views. Content analysis determined the number of merely valenced statements (i.e., those that were positive or negative in valence without containing any reasons for these feelings) and arguments (i.e., those that gave a reason for a pro or con evaluation) each person made about each issue (see Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2006). These two forms of expression were averaged for the analyses. The coding reliability was assessed by comparing data from two coders evaluating random subsamples of between 200 and 400 statements at a time. Inconsistencies were resolved by discussing the examples and refining the rules. The average Cohen's kappa for chance-corrected intercoder agreement were the *Death Penalty* .73; *Gun Control* .73; *Crime Regulation* .73; *Campaign Funding* .81; *Internet Voting* .77; *Electoral Behavior* .77; *Electoral System* .79; *Election Media Coverage* .80, *Electoral College* .73, and *Postelection Candidate Conduct* .79.

Using these data, we aggregated the individual-level expressions across all sections and discussions, as well as within all the groups. These yielded issue-specific variables that captured the number of pro- and con-issue expressions. We then subtracted each individual's expressions from group-level expressions for each issue across each discussion. These variables captured the group climate that each person experienced, independent of his or her own contribution, that is, individual exposure to others' views without indicating exposure to disagreement. To tap the latter, we relied on pertinent prediscussion opinion items and classified each person as either oppositional toward or supportive of each issue. We then used the following formulas to determine exposure to disagreement:

For *Opponents*: Disagreement = Favorable Group Climate

(sum expressions pro-issue made in group − own expressions pro-issue).

For *Supporters*: Disagreement = Oppositional Group Climate

(sum expressions con-issue made in group − own expressions con-issue)

The final "Objective Disagreement" measures thus represent the number of expressions that opposed the main participant's position. Here, we analyze the issues that were debated during the online discussions that directly preceded the questionnaires that assessed perceived disagreement: the *Death Penalty* ($M = 8.16$, $SD = 5.75$; range 0–45), *Gun Control* ($M = 9.03$, $SD = 7.62$; range 0–34), and *Crime Regulation* ($M = 9.75$, $SD = 6.09$; Range 0–38) (*Disc. 3*); *Campaign Funding* ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 5.93$; range 0–23), *Internet Voting* ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 2.56$; range 0–12), *Electoral Behavior* ($M = 4.88$ $SD = 3.89$; range 0–20), and *Electoral System* ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 6.50$; range 0–33) (*Disc. 4*); and also the *Electoral College* ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 2.90$; range 0–12), *Election Media Coverage* ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 6.06$; range 0–29), and *Postelection Candidate Conduct* ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 3.06$; range 0–16) (*Disc. 8*).[4]

Deliberative experiences

At three points during the project, after the third and fourth discussion and also in January, participants were asked to rate their experiences. Participants indicated how much, on a scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5), they agreed that the discussions were interesting (*D3* $M = 4.27$ $SD = .88$; *D4* $M = 4.24$, $SD = .85$; *D8* $M = 4.24$, $SD = .80$), enjoyable (*D3* $M = 4.26$, $SD = .92$; *D4* $M = 4.25$, $SD = .83$; *D8* $M = 4.22$, $SD = .86$), confusing (*D3* $M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.16$; *D4* $M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.14$; *D8* $M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.06$), and whether participants "had a hard time expressing what they wanted to say" (*D3* $M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.25$; *D4* $M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.29$; *D8* $M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.24$). Because the items assessing interest and enjoyment proved to be strongly correlated at each time point (r's ranging from .70–.78), these were combined into a single interest/enjoyment measure for each of the three periods.

Controls

Because perceived disagreement and deliberative experiences may be related to individual characteristics, we controlled for respondents' age ($M = 53$, $SD = 16$), education ($M = 13.7$ years, $SD = 1.68$), gender (56% male), race (89% White, 5% Black, 1% American Indian, and 4% other), party identification and ideological leanings (*Party-Ideology Index* on which 5 represented "strong liberals-strong Democrats," −5 "strong conservatives-strong Republicans," and 0 moderates-Independents, $M = -.53$, $SD = 3.28$), and also political knowledge (24 questions on the baseline survey about general political and civic issues, the backgrounds of the 2000 presidential candidates, and their issue positions, scored 1 for correct answers and 0 for incorrect answers, and averaged, $M = .62$; $SD = .19$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$).

Results

To provide initial insight into the tested relationships, we correlated perceived and objective disagreement and the deliberative experiences. Were participants' perceptions related to factual exposure to disagreement? The only significant associations emerged for *Gun Control* ($r = .16, p < .05$) and the *Death Penalty* ($r = .26, p < .000$); encountering dissimilar views on the remaining issues did not lead participants to report disagreement. Also, as perceived disagreement increased, participants reported less interest/enjoyment ($r_{D3} = -.18$, $p < .000$; $r_{D4} = -.22$, $p < .000$; $r_{EoP} = -.16$, $p < .05$) and more confusion ($r_{D3} = .16$, $p < .000$; $r_{D4} = .13$, $p < .05$; $r_{EoP} = .11$, $p < .10$). Objective disagreement was related solely to self-expression, and only on several issues. Specifically, exposure to counterattitudinal statements on such nuanced topics as Internet voting ($r = .11$, $p < .10$), electoral behavior ($r = .12$, $p < .05$), and election coverage ($r = .14$, $p < .05$) led participants to report greater problems in expressing their views (see Wojcieszak & Price, in press).

To test thoroughly whether it is perceived or objective disagreement that more strongly relates to these experiences, we constructed multivariate models predicting

each experience (interest/enjoyment, confusion, and problems with self-expression) as reported after rounds three and four and at the end of the project. All the models included sociodemographics, perceived disagreement, and low and high levels of objective disagreement on the issues taken from the round that preceded the questionnaires assessing the tested experiences (we trichotomized the objective disagreement items based on equal percentages in each category; the medium level was a reference category).[5]

To bring about various benefits, deliberation should elicit such positive experiences as interest and enjoyment. As the first columns in Table 1 show, perceived disagreement was the only consistently significant—and *negative*—predictor of these experiences. The pattern for objective disagreement was less clear: Encountering high disagreement on gun control and election media coverage decreased interest/enjoyment relative to moderate disagreement on these issues. In contrast, it was low disagreement on the Electoral College which was a negative predictor. We complement our results by estimating means and their corresponding standard errors over these disagreement levels.[6]

Perceived disagreement mattered most at its highest level. Across all the rounds, participants who reported disagreeing with others "almost always" and "most of the time" (*high* disagreement) expressed *less* interest/enjoyment ($M_{D3} = 3.83$; $M_{D4} = 3.58$; $M_{EoP} = 4.03$) than those who disagreed "almost never" (*low* $M_{D3} = 4.57$, $p < .001$; $M_{D4} = 4.82$, $p < .001$; $M_{EoP} = 4.58$, $p < .10$) and "not much of the time" (*medium–low* $M_{D3} = 4.35$, $p < .05$; $M_{D4} = 4.44$, $p < .000$; $M_{EoP} = 4.42$, $p < .10$). For rounds three and four, those participants also expressed less interest/enjoyment than those who disagreed "about half the time" (*medium–high* $M_{D3} = 4.25$, $p < .05$; $M_{D4} = 4.25$, $p < .001$).

With regard to objective disagreement, those exposed to the highest number of counterattitudinal views on gun control (>11, $M = 4.15$) and the election coverage (>6, $M = 4.16$) also reported *lower* interest/enjoyment than those exposed to moderate disagreement (4–11, $M = 4.37$, $p < .10$; 1–6, $M = 4.47$, $p < .05$, respectively). In contrast, it was the highest disagreement on the Electoral College that enhanced these positive experiences (>5, $M = 4.46$) relative to low disagreement (<2, $M = 4.15$, $p < .05$, an effect undetected in the regression), which—in turn—increased interest/enjoyment relative to medium disagreement (2–5, $M = 4.40$, $p < .05$).

Deliberation should also clarify the discussed issues, and to this end participants would ideally not find the discussions confusing. As Table 1 shows, perceiving disagreement during round three and four was related to *increased* confusion, and the coefficient for the final round was also positive. Estimating the means and standard errors found that it was again those who perceived the highest disagreement who reported *greater* confusion ($M_{D3} = 2.78$; $M_{D4} = 2.71$) than their counterparts who perceived low disagreement ($M_{D3} = 1.36$, $M_{D4} = 1.49$, both $p < .05$), and the differences were marginally significant for round eight (*low* $M = 2.12$ vs *high* $M = 2.75$).

Table 1 Predicting Deliberative Experiences

	Interest/Enjoyment			Confusion			Self-Expression Problems		
	Disc. 3 ($N = 299$)	Disc. 4 ($N = 256$)	Disc. 8 ($N = 209$)	Disc. 3 ($N = 299$)	Disc. 4 ($N = 256$)	Disc. 8 ($N = 208$)	Disc. 3 ($N = 300$)	Disc. 4 ($N = 256$)	Disc. 8 ($N = 208$)
Age	.00	.00**	.00	.01***	.01	.01*	.01	.01***	.01**
	(.00)	*(.00)*	*(.00)*	*(.00)*	*(.00)*	*(.00)*	*(.00)*	*(.00)*	*(.01)*
Gender (male)	.13	.14	−.04	−.14	−.08	.05	−.06	.04	.36**
	(.10)	*(.10)*	(.11)	*(.14)*	*(.16)*	*(.16)*	*(.16)*	*(.17)*	*(.17)*
Race (white)	−.24*	.16	−.13	.11	.47*	.19	.35	−.22	−.01
	(.15)	*(.16)*	*(.20)*	*(.21)*	*(.26)*	*(.28)*	*(.22)*	*(.28)*	*(.31)*
Education	.02	−.02	.02	−.03	−.03	.04	−.01	−.13**	−.04
	(.03)	*(.03)*	*(.03)*	*(.04)*	*(.05)*	*(.05)*	*(.04)*	*(.05)*	*(.05)*
Party-ideology (liberal)	−.00	−.00	−.02	.03	.07***	−.02	.05*	.02	.02
	(.02)	*(.02)*	*(.02)*	*(.02)*	*(.02)*	*(.03)*	*(.02)*	*(.03)*	*(.03)*
Political knowledge	−.53**	.06	−.07	−.33	−.38	−.58	−.74**	−.51	−1.04**
	(.23)	*(.20)*	*(.26)*	*(.31)*	*(.33)*	*(.37)*	*(.34)*	*(.36)*	*(.42)*
Perceived disagreement	−.17**	−.32****	−.15**	.27***	.28**	.15	.13	.29**	−.11
	(.07)	*(.07)*	*(.07)*	*(.09)*	*(.11)*	*(.11)*	*(.10)*	*(.12)*	*(.12)*
Objective disagreement									
Death penalty low	.05			−.03			−.02		
	(.12)			*(.17)*			*(.18)*		
Death penalty high	−.06			−.33**			−.32*		
	(.12)			*(.16)*			*(.18)*		
Gun control low	−.15			.01			−.25		
	(.12)			*(.17)*			*(.19)*		

(*continued overleaf*)

Table 1 (*Continued*)

	Interest/Enjoyment			Confusion			Self-Expression Problems		
	Disc. 3 ($N = 299$)	Disc. 4 ($N = 256$)	Disc. 8 ($N = 209$)	Disc. 3 ($N = 299$)	Disc. 4 ($N = 256$)	Disc. 8 ($N = 208$)	Disc. 3 ($N = 300$)	Disc. 4 ($N = 256$)	Disc. 8 ($N = 208$)
Gun control high	−.22*			.04			−.04		
	(.12)			*(.16)*			*(.18)*		
Crime regulation low	−.01			.41**			.02		
	(.12)			*(.16)*			*(.18)*		
Crime regulation high	.08			.32**			.19		
	(.12)			*(.16)*			*(.18)*		
Campaign funding low		.04			.00			.16	
		(.11)			*(.18)*			*(.20)*	
Campaign funding high		.01			.01			−.17	
		(.12)			*(.19)*			*(.21)*	
Internet voting low		−.06			.16			.09	
		(.12)			*(.19)*			*(.20)*	
Internet voting high		−.01			.20			.31	
		(.11)			*(.18)*			*(.20)*	
Electoral behavior low		.03			.16			.18	
		(.11)			*(.18)*			*(.20)*	
Electoral behavior high		−.00			.49**			.32	
		(.12)			*(.19)*			*(.20)*	
Electoral system low**		.01			.20			.34*	
		(.11)			*(.19)*			*(.20)*	
Electoral system high**		.02			.30			.34	
		(.12)			*(.21)*			*(.23)*	

(*continued overleaf*)

Table 1 (*Continued*)

	Interest/Enjoyment			Confusion			Self-Expression Problems		
	Disc. 3 ($N = 299$)	Disc. 4 ($N = 256$)	Disc. 8 ($N = 209$)	Disc. 3 ($N = 299$)	Disc. 4 ($N = 256$)	Disc. 8 ($N = 208$)	Disc. 3 ($N = 300$)	Disc. 4 ($N = 256$)	Disc. 8 ($N = 208$)
Electoral college low			−.22*			.26			.07
			(.12)			*(.18)*			*(.20)*
Electoral college high			.16			.31			.17
			(.14)			*(.20)*			*(.23)*
Media coverage low**			−.02			.31*			.10
			(.13)			*(.19)*			*(.21)*
Media coverage high**			−.32**			.34*			.58***
			(.14)			*(.20)*			*(.22)*
Candidate conduct low**			.08			−.36*			.11
			(.13)			*(.19)*			*(.21)*
Candidate conduct high**			.09			−.09			−.00
			(.14)			*(.21)*			*(.23)*
R^2 (%)	8%	13%	9%	11%	12%	8%	7%	13%	12%

Note: Entries are standardized OLS regression coefficients with *SE* in parentheses.
$^{***}p \leq 0.001$, $^{**}p \leq .01$, $^{*}p \leq .05$, $^{\dagger}p \leq .10$.

In turn, the coefficients for objective items indicate that moderate disagreement during deliberations may *attenuate* confusion. Exposure to *some* disagreement on crime regulation during round three (7–11 counterattitudinal statements, $M = 1.86$), and also on election media coverage (4–11, $M = 2.05$), and the Electoral College during round eight (2–5, $M = 2.03$) *decreased* confusion relative to both low (Crime <7, $M = 2.29$, $p < .05$; Media Coverage <4, $M = 2.39$, $p < .10$; Electoral College <2, $M = 2.34$, $p < .05$), and high disagreement (>11 $M = 2.19$, $p < .05$; >11, $M = 2.37$, $p < .10$; >5, $M = 2.45$, $p < .10$, respectively), with the effect for the Electoral College undetected in the regression. Similarly, it was those who encountered *moderate* disagreement on electoral behavior during Round 4 who reported lower confusion (5–10, $M = 1.95$) than participants exposed to its highest levels (>10, $M = 2.41$, $p < .05$).

Different effects emerged for the two controversial issues: It was the highest disagreement on the death penalty (>10, $M = 1.91$) that decreased confusion relative to moderate disagreement (5–10, $M = 2.23$, $p < .05$), and low disagreement on candidate conduct during the final round (<1, $M = 2.07$) that served to clarify issues more than moderate disagreement (1–3, $M = 2.43$, $p < .10$).

Lastly, for deliberation to be successful, participants should freely voice their opinions. The more disagreement participants perceived during round four on the nuanced policy-oriented issues the *more* problems they had expressing their views, and substantial differences emerged between those who reported the highest ($M = 3.10$) and the lowest disagreement ($M = 1.75$, $p < .001$). The same pattern emerged for round three despite the insignificant regression coefficient: High perceived disagreement was related to more problems with self-expression than low disagreement ($M = 2.52$ vs $M = 1.79$, $p < .05$).

Objective disagreement also appeared to thwart self-expression, at least on some issues. Participants exposed to most counterattitudinal statements on the election media coverage during the final round (>6, $M = 2.80$) had *greater* problems expressing themselves than those exposed to the lowest disagreement (<1, $M = 2.32$, $p < .05$). The same effect—undetected in the regression—emerged for disagreement on electoral behavior during Round 4: Its high levels led deliberators to report more problems voicing their views relative to low levels (>10, $M = 2.73$ vs <5, $M = 2.25$, $p < .05$). The additional estimations did not confirm the marginal differences for low disagreement on the electoral system during this round. Contrary to this pattern, those exposed to the highest disagreement on the death penalty had *fewer* problems expressing themselves ($M = 2.13$) than those exposed to low ($M = 2.47$, $p < .10$) and moderate ($M = 2.44$, $p < .10$) disagreement on this issue.[7]

The failure of objective measures of disagreement to exert consistent influence might conceivably have stemmed from restricted variability in the opinions of group members on the issues discussed, or from a limited correspondence between the views people held coming into the sessions and what they expressed in discussion. For the experience to be deliberative, there should be some division within a group with regard to members' preferences prior to deliberation (Barabas, 2004; Thompson,

2008). Hence, to complement our results and test whether such group disagreement differently affects deliberative experiences, we created additional measures that account for the prediscussion group opinion distribution. These measures reflect the proportional support and opposition toward the discussed issues before deliberation, independently of what was said. They range from 0 to .5, where 0 indicates that all members in a group were for or against a given policy (truly homogeneous groups), .5 indicates there was an even split in opinion (truly heterogeneous groups), and values in between represent mixed groups. We retested all our models with these group opinion disagreement measures.

The differences that emerged suggest that the prior opinion distribution within a group does not always lead to corresponding patterns of opinion expression, and that it is the expression itself that shapes participants' deliberative experiences. With regard to interest/enjoyment, the prediscussion group opinion distribution on gun control and the election media coverage did not matter, while actual exposure to counterattitudinal expressions on these issues decreased these positive experiences. Both measures yielded the same results for the Electoral College. Similarly, whereas taking part in groups divided in their opinions was unrelated to confusion, encountering moderate disagreement on several issues helped to attenuate confusion. Also recall that actual exposure to counterattitudinal expressions led participants to problems expressing their views. And, although both actual disagreement on electoral behavior (Round 4) as well as divisions in group opinion distribution on this issue thwarted self-expression, joining groups that were divided on the death penalty (Round 3) and the election media coverage (Round 8) did not exert similar effects, unlike in the original models.

Discussion

Is it what one *thinks* is occurring in a deliberation, or the actual *exposure* to dissimilar views, that influences a participant's experience and enhances or thwarts self-expression? Inasmuch as there is a disconnect between individual perceptions and objectively expressed disagreement, this issue is consequential for deliberative theory and practice.

Our analyses, which addressed this issue, reveal several notable patterns. First, deliberative experiences were more strongly related to the disagreement participants perceived than to what they actually encountered during the discussions. These relationships, moreover, were generally negative *vis-à-vis* experiences viewed as productive for deliberation. Those participants who perceived deliberations as contentious also judged them as less interesting, less enjoyable and more confusing than those who thought there was less disagreement.

Second, the effects exerted by objective disagreement depend on the topic discussed and—similarly to perceived disagreement—are subject to some critical thresholds. *Moderate* exposure to counterattitudinal views did not seem to undercut participants' positive experiences. In some cases, encountering high disagreement

did diminish reported interest and enjoyment; but in others, as when the Electoral College was discussed, disagreement actually enhanced these experiences, perhaps because this topic was relevant to the vote recount a month earlier. Alternatively, disagreement on some complicated issues may generate interest, and heated debates on otherwise nonappealing policies could be judged as fun and engaging. Given that a similar effect did not emerge on the other policy-oriented issues, however, it may be incidental, especially given that the final survey tapped participants' experiences "to date" rather than during the session when the Electoral College was debated.

Third, the findings suggest that *some* disagreement can serve to clarify issues and increase understanding. This effect, which emerged for various topics, may suggest benefits to moderate disagreement as compared with a mere "echo chamber," where people have limited opportunity to gather new information. High disagreement, in turn, may overwhelm people with new perspectives or lead them to counterargue, rather than encourage attention to new arguments. Again, because this effect was not uniform, we should be cautious not to overinterpret the findings. Still, the pattern is intriguing.

Fourth and finally, the more disagreement participants perceived, the harder it was for them to voice their opinions. This suggests that people are encouraged to express themselves when they think that others share their views, and may be more reticent when perceiving opposition (somewhat in line with the spiral of silence theory, although falling short of any strong "silencing" effect). It is worth noting that this pattern was especially pronounced during round four, which focused on specific policies related to the electoral system. Similarly, actual exposure to disagreement on some issues also appeared to discourage deliberators from voicing their views, suggesting that both perceptions and actual dynamics influence people's willingness to take an active part in discussion.

Importantly, a threshold has to be crossed for these effects to emerge: It was only when people perceived *high* disagreement and when others expressed *many* statements that challenged what a person believed that an adverse impact on self-expression was observed (see also Barabas, 2004). Even so, the effect was not uniform. In at least one case—debates over the death penalty—greater expressed disagreement led people to speak up, perhaps because this issue involves moral values and touches on individual identity, leading people to defend their position.

As with any study, ours comes with several limitations. First, our analyses are essentially associational, and since our independent variables were not manipulated, we must be cautious in advancing causal interpretations. This problem is particularly acute for perceived disagreement, which was assessed together with the deliberative experiences. Those who do not enjoy political talk have problems understanding others or fear voicing their views may also be prone to perceive attacks on their positions. The concerns about the bidirectional nature of the tested patterns do not pertain to objective disagreement measures, which are based on individual prior views and on the opinions participants actually encountered during the discussion and before reporting their experiences. Still, in the absence of experimental manipulation,

we cannot say with certainty that observed outcomes are not attributable to other, unmeasured variables.

Second, the discussions took place online, and it is unclear whether the same effects would emerge face-to-face. Studies that compare various experiences reported during face-to-face and online deliberation indicate that the former elicits more positive emotions and evaluations (Wojcieszak, Baek, & Delli Carpini, 2009); that knowledge gain appears to be lower following online talk; and that opinions homogenize more and group polarization is greater face-to-face (Luskin, Fishkin, & Iyengar, 2006). Future studies should thus examine whether and how communication mode influences perceived and expressed disagreement, and whether this produces differential effects.

Third, the analyzed discussions met many but not all normative standards for deliberation. The topics were public in nature, participants received information, and moderators sometimes asked for clarifications and intervened when someone was uncivil or silent. Analyses also find that discussants were actively exchanging their views and backing them up with justifications: Only a single person (.3%) failed to voice his or her views during Round 3; six (1.7%) did not talk during Round 4, and everyone expressed themselves during Round 8. Participants provided, on average, 17 statements (with 11 arguments) during Round 3; 22 statements (10 arguments) during Round 4; and 38 statements (13 arguments) during Round 8. Nevertheless, the meetings were relatively informal and not as heavily moderated as deliberative exercises aimed at achieving group consensus. More formal, heavily structured deliberations may differentially affect citizens' perceptions and expressions, which may differently influence deliberative experiences, an issue that should be examined.

Perhaps most importantly, we operationalized disagreement as the total number of counterattitudinal expressions a person encountered, without examining whether they explicitly signaled opposition with cues as "I disagree," or "but" (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). It is possible that some issues elicited more or fewer explicit disagreement cues, which in turn influenced the detected patterns. It is also plausible that the disagreement signaled by such cues, by clarifying information, would affect the tested outcomes more strongly and consistently.

Our examination of preexisting opinion differences within each group aimed to shed some light on this issue. Results clearly show that hearing others express dissimilar views matters more to deliberative experiences than a difference of opinion within the group, which may or may not be verbalized. The fact that group composition did not show effects beyond those attributable to recorded statements suggests that participants did not seem to be detecting subtle cues. Our results, therefore, may be a conservative estimate of the effects of disagreement and, had we analyzed expressions that explicitly signaled opposition, the detected patterns might well have been stronger. Testing whether the various ways in which disagreement is voiced generate differential effects would certainly contribute to the scholarship. So would examining the impact of perceived and actual disagreement, along with deliberative experiences, on various attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, such as knowledge, political participation, attitude change, or attitude polarization.

Despite its limitations, this study offers a complex portrait of deliberative encounters with several important implications. Deliberative experiences seem to be influenced by what participants *think* is happening to a greater extent than by what actually occurs. Given that the perception of disagreement is related to outcomes judged as counterproductive to the deliberative project, scholars and practitioners may wish to minimize such perceptions. This might be done, for example, by periodically reiterating that—whatever their differences—the assembled participants are committed to the same broad, democratic values.

Similarly, given that both perceived and actual disagreement appear to inhibit self-expression, deliberation organizers might do well to assure that disagreement is voiced in civil ways, and to urge participants to make it clear when they agree with others in a group. This might help ensure that opinion differences are expressed in a way that brings about their benefits, such as increased understanding, while minimizing negative side effects. All in all, because assembling forums where diverse people voice dissimilar views may be thwarted by individual tendency to adhere to politeness standards, finding that perceptions of deliberation are highly consequential may aid deliberative practice.

Our finding that the actual discussion dynamics do not affect the deliberative experience as strongly as participants' perceptions has a variety of theoretical and methodological implications as well. Scholars see individual self-reports as representing reality and advocate that people express opinion differences in deliberative settings. Yet our results may conceivably challenge the tendency to attribute various outcomes to such expressions. These results may also encourage continued reliance on self-reported disagreement measures and come as a relief to those employing them, especially because coding discussion transcripts is a daunting task.

Detecting differentiated effects of objective disagreement should also encourage scholars to measure disagreement as issue-specific. Inasmuch as its effects depend on the topic discussed such distinctions may reveal important nuances. However, the presented patterns are complex and so defy any straightforward interpretation that either perceived or objective disagreement measure "works" better. Rather, since the principal aim of deliberative planners is to construct settings permitting citizens to air their differences, our findings should prompt further study of when expressed disagreement and its perception diverge, and when they lead to differentiated outcomes. Such efforts will be needed to move us closer toward understanding the deliberative "black box" and its importance to the democratic process.

Notes

1 Partly speaking to this issue, our prior study (Wojcieszak & Price, in press) found that holding extreme positions on the issues discussed did not affect perceived disagreement, and political knowledge exerted only limited effects. Still, both opinion extremity and knowledge did—on some issues—increase sensitivity to opposing views when they were actually expressed in discussion.

2 The Knowledge Networks panel was recruited through RDD methods with a response rate of 52%, and of these recruits 57% connected their WebTVs and completed a panel profile survey. In recruiting panelists to complete both baseline surveys and agree to participate in the year-long election study, the *Electronic Dialogue* project experienced a cooperation rate of 43%. Thus, calculated progressively from the original RDD sample used to build the Knowledge Networks panel, the overall response rate for the baseline samples was rather low, at 12%. Even so, comparisons to census data and other RDD telephone surveys conducted over the same period indicate that characteristics of the obtained baseline sample were generally quite similar (see Wojcieszak & Price, in press; Price et al., 2002).
3 During round eight participants also debated the voting process. There were no prediscussion opinion measures on this issue, and thus we exclude it from our analyses.
4 The *Electoral System*, *Election Media Coverage* and *Candidate Conduct* items were positively skewed. Because violating the normality assumption can increase the likelihood that models overestimate or underestimate relationships, we applied logarithmic transformation (base 10), suggested where there are extremes of range base (Cleveland, 1984), and used the logged items.
5 Although categorizing continuous measures, in general, loses their empirical power and precision, doing so accounted for detected nonlinearities between objective disagreement and the outcomes, and found results consistent with the additional mean and standard error estimates.
6 We recoded perceived disagreement into four categories, combining those who reported that they disagreed with other group participants "most of the time" and "almost always."
7 Additional analyses tested whether perceived disagreement mediates the effects of objective disagreement. We found this not to be the case.

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Le désaccord perçu ou le désaccord réel : lequel influence les expériences délibératives?

On sait peu si les expériences délibératives sont affectées par les perceptions de désaccord des participants ou par ce qui est exprimé lors de la délibération. En nous référant à des participants à des délibérations en ligne, nous concluons que (a) c'est la perception de désaccord qui est fortement associée à des expériences comme l'intérêt et le plaisir, (b) des niveaux moyens de désaccord objectif atténuent la confusion et (c) ces associations dépendent du sujet discuté et dépendent de certains seuils critiques. Ces résultats ont des conséquences tant théoriques que pratiques. Ils suggèrent que (a) les perceptions de désaccord, même si elles ne sont pas clairement signes de ce qui apparaît dans la délibération, ont des conséquences; (b) un désaccord objectif a des effets nuancés qui n'égalent pas toujours ceux de la perception de désaccord, et (c) le désaccord devrait être évalué d'une manière spécifique à un enjeu.

Mots clés : délibération, désaccord politique, expériences de délibération, perceptions, discussions en ligne, perception de désaccord, désaccord objectif

Wahrgenommene versus tatsächliche Meinungsverschiedenheit: Welche von beiden beeinflusst deliberative Erfahrungen?

Bislang ist wenig darüber bekannt, ob deliberative Erfahrungen durch die Wahrnehmung von Meinungsverschiedenheiten oder durch das, was gesagt wird, beeinflusst werden. Basierend auf den Aussagen von Teilnehmern in Online-Deliberationssituationen, fanden wir heraus, dass (a) wahrgenommene Meinungsverschiedenheiten eng mit Erfahrungen wie Interesse/Enjoyment verbunden sind, dass (b) ein mittleres Maß an objektiver Meinungsverschiedenheit zur Verwirrung beiträgt und c) diese Zusammenhänge vom Diskussionsthema abhängen und es gewisse kritische Schwellenwerte gibt. Diese Ergebnisse haben sowohl theoretische als auch praktische Implikationen. Zum einen kann man daraus ableiten, dass a) die Wahrnehmung von Meinungsverschiedenheiten, auch wenn sie nicht bezeichnend dafür sind, was Deliberation ausmacht, doch Konsequenzen hat, b) objektive Meinungsverschiedenheit bestimmte Wirkungen entfaltet, die nicht immer parallel zu denen von wahrgenommener Meinungsverschiedenheit verlaufen und c) Meinungsverschiedenheit themenspezifisch erfasst werden sollte.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Deliberation, politische Meinungsverschiedenheit, deliberative Erfahrungen, Wahrnehmungen, Onlinediskussionen, wahrgenommene Meinungsverschiedenheit, objektive Uneinigkeit.

La Percepción Versus el Desacuerdo Actual: Qué Influencia las Experiencias Deliberativas?

Resumen

Poco se sabe si las experiencias deliberativas son afectadas por las percepciones del desacuerdo de los participantes o lo que es expresado durante la deliberación. Tomando participantes de unas deliberaciones online, encontramos que a) es la percepción del desacuerdo que está asociada fuertemente con las experiencias tales como el interés/el placer, b) los niveles de desacuerdo objetivo atenúan la confusión, y c) estas asociaciones dependen del tema discutido y están sujetas a algunos límites críticos. Estos resultados tienen implicancias teóricas y prácticas. Sugerimos que a) las percepciones del desacuerdo, aunque no claramente indicativas de lo que transpira en la deliberación, son importantes; b) el desacuerdo objetivo influencia los efectos de las matices que no siempre son análogos a los desacuerdos percibidos; y c) los desacuerdos deberían ser evaluados de manera específica a un asunto.

Palabras claves: Deliberación, Desacuerdo político, Experiencias deliberativas, Percepciones, Discusiones online, Desacuerdo Percibido, Desacuerdo objetivo