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Introduction

The process of selecting the forty-fourth president of the United States began in the State of Iowa. On January 3, 2008, tens of thousands of Iowans braved the below-zero cold of winter, and took time away from their jobs and families, to gather in town halls and school gymnasiums to express their preference for the nominees of the Democratic and Republican parties. At the end of the caucuses, Senator Barack Obama of Illinois emerged as the Democratic Party's winner, with 38 percent of the vote. In doing so, Senator Obama beat out two better-known candidates: John Edwards, former senator from North Carolina and vice presidential candidate in 2004, and Hillary Clinton, senator from New York and former first lady of the United States.

Senator Obama's victory in the 2008 Iowa caucuses was an extraordinary achievement. Despite the legacy of slavery and a history of contentious race relations in the United States, a state with a white population of more than 90 percent chose to give a plurality of its votes to an African American candidate. Moreover, Obama entered the 2008 race for the presidency as a relatively outsider candidate. A poll taken in Iowa in March 2007 by the University of Iowa showed Obama to be running a distant third behind Clinton and Edwards. Even on the eve of the caucuses, a poll taken in the State of Iowa by the American Research Group

showed Obama losing to Clinton—at that time the presumptive Democratic Party nominee—by 9 percentage points. Nonetheless, Obama came out on top in Iowa.

On their own, the Iowa caucuses did not secure Barack Obama's place in history as the first-ever African American president of the United States. They were, however, a significant critical juncture in the 2008 elections. Winning in Iowa gave Obama the electoral credibility, media exposure, and campaign funds that he desperately needed to continue to compete throughout the rest of the country against his more favored opponents. While we will never know what would have happened if Obama had lost the Iowa caucuses, suffice it to say that the victory propelled him toward the White House.

How did this extraordinary moment in history occur? The story of Rex Boyd gives us insight into how Senator Obama overcame such steep odds in Iowa on his road to the presidency.[1] Rex went with his wife, Nell, to his local caucus expecting to cast his vote for Senator Clinton. However, after chatting with people from his community about the candidates, he switched his support to Senator Obama. Had Rex lived in a state with a primary election system instead of a caucus, he probably would have cast his vote for Senator Clinton, as he had originally intended. Instead, by participating in the caucus, he was exposed to the views of the people in his community. These interactions with his fellow citizens caused Rex to switch his support to Senator Obama and, as a consequence, helped shift the course of the 2008 presidential election.

Rex Boyd's experience at the 2008 Iowa caucuses is what this book is about: the influence that citizens have on each other and on the political system when they discuss politics and current events. I call these types of discussions "civic talk." In the chapters that follow, I use a number of unique sources of data to show how and why civic talk affects how we participate in civil society and, as such, how civic talk plays a central role in maintaining the strength of participatory democracy. In this chapter, I lay down the foundation of this argument by showing how our understanding of the relationship between civic talk and civic participation can be made clearer with new sources of evidence. I then preview the results that will be presented in subsequent chapters.

[1]For the full version of this story, see Zeleny 2008.

A Research Agenda Focused on the Individual

Without civic participation there is no democracy. Popular sovereignty is based on the ability of citizens to freely express their wishes to the government and, if necessary, prevent that government from committing acts of tyranny. Along with protecting popular sovereignty, civic participation facilitates democratic governance. Citizens who are active in the public sphere demand, and subsequently tend to receive, better governance from elected officials and political institutions.

Because the active involvement of citizens in the processes of governance is so essential to the survival of democracy, civic participation has been heavily studied. Most of what political scientists know about whether an individual chooses to enter the public sphere is based on studies of individual-level characteristics. Arguably, one of the best examples of this brand of scholarship is Verba and colleagues' (1995) seminal volume *Voice and Equality*. Of the myriad factors that might influence an individual to participate in civic activities, Verba and his colleagues focus their attention on resources (i.e., one's available free time, income, and civic skills) and civic engagement (i.e., one's interest in politics and current events).[2] Using survey data collected in the United States, they show that individuals with more resources and higher levels of engagement with politics and current events are more likely to participate in civic activities. Resources and engagement function in this manner because they make civic participation less costly and more beneficial. For example, the more money one has, the less costly it is to make a donation to an interest group or political candidate. Or the more interested one is in politics, the more enjoyable it is to participate in that process.

While political scientists' focus on individual-level characteristics has significantly increased our understanding of how and why citizens choose to engage in civic activity, we are nonetheless left with many questions about this form of human behavior. One of the best examples of why civic participation continues to be a mysterious phenomenon is the relationship between educational attainment and civic participation. On an individual level, there is an extremely tight correlation between education and civic

[2]Verba and his colleagues do include recruitment—being asked by someone else to participate—as a third component of their model of civic participation. However, this factor is given tertiary status in their analysis. As they state it, recruitment "plays an important role, but participation can, and does, take place in the absence of specific requests for activity" (Verba et al. 1995, 270).

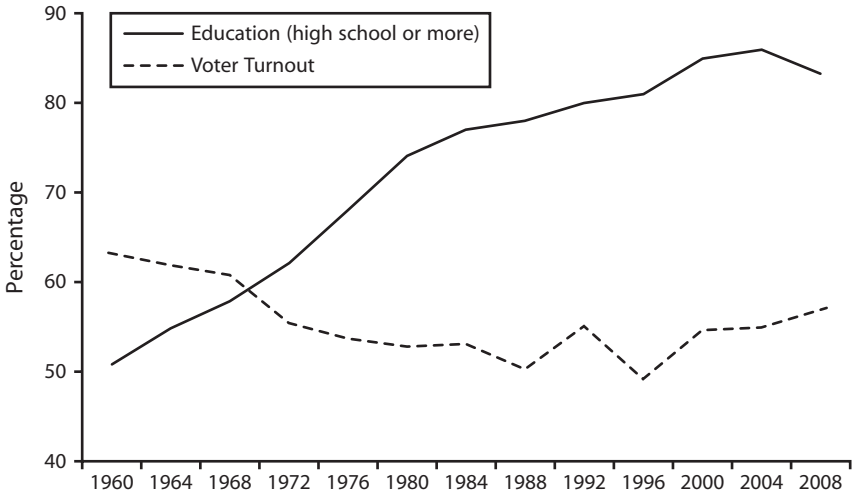

FIGURE 1.1 Education and voter turnout over time in the United States

Sources: Education was measured with data from the American National Election Studies Time Series Study. Voter turnout is calculated as the number of voters divided by the voting age population. Turnout figures were compiled from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission and the U.S. Election Project.

participation; the better educated you are, the more likely you are to participate in civil society. Like income, education is a resource that makes participation in civic activities easier for the individual. For example, the better educated you are, the more you know about the political system and the easier it is for you to become involved in that system.

However, while the "positive relationship between education and political participation is one of the most reliable results in empirical social science" (Lake and Huckfeldt 1998, 567), the data in Figure 1.1 show that this relationship is not nearly as clear-cut on the aggregate level. As documented by many scholars, citizens' involvement in civil society has been in decline over the past half-century (see, e.g., Putnam 2000). As an example, Figure 1.1 shows that voter turnout in the United States has been in a steady decline since 1960 (albeit with a recent rebound in the 2000s). However, Figure 1.1 also shows that the American public's mean level of educational attainment has increased over the same time period. If an individual's level of education is one of the best predictors of whether he or she will participate in civil society, then why has civic participation declined over time as the level of education in the general public has increased?

In this book I show that, to solve puzzles like this, we need to include social-level variables such as civic talk in our study of participatory democracy. The data I present show how, why, and under what circumstances civic talk causes individuals to participate more actively in civil society. However, to make these findings, a number of analytical pitfalls needed to be overcome.

Shifting the Agenda to Include Social-Level Variables: The Need for New Evidence

Despite the fact that focusing on individual-level variables has left political scientists with an incomplete understanding of why people choose (or do not choose) to participate in civic activities, social-level variables such as civic talk have been overlooked by most political scientists. Sociological studies of participatory democracy have been relegated to the background of the field because it is difficult to determine whether the people in our social environment influence us, or whether our own patterns of behavior influence how we choose and act with the people around us (see, e.g., Klofstad 2007; Laver 2005; Nickerson 2008).

For example, a number of scholars have shown that the amount of civic talk occurring in an individual's social network correlates with his or her level of civic participation, even after controlling for a host of alternative explanations (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1991, 1995; Huckfeldt et al. 1995; Kenny 1992, 1994; Lake and Huckfeldt 1998; McClurg 2003, 2004; Mutz 2002). However, we cannot conclude that civic talk is causing civic participation with this type of evidence. One problem associated with this form of analysis is reciprocal causation; an equally plausible explanation for the relationship between civic talk and civic participation is that being civically active causes an individual to talk about politics and current events with his or her peers. Another problem is selection bias. Individuals who are more active in civic activities might consciously choose to associate with people who are more interested in talking about politics and current events. Finally, some factor that has not been accounted for could be causing people to both talk about politics and participate in civic activities (i.e., endogeneity or omitted variable bias).

How can we overcome these problems and subsequently increase our understanding of participatory democracy? One way would be to randomly assign individuals to new peer groups and then track how their

patterns of behavior change over time in response to interacting with this new set of peers. This ideal research design would allow us to determine causation because it follows the logic of a controlled experiment. First, an individual enters a new randomly assigned social setting. Second, some of these peer groups are randomly selected to engage in civic talk (i.e., to be "treated" with civic talk), while the remainder of the peer groups being studied are not allowed to engage in such discussions. Finally, the effect of being exposed to civic talk on subsequent patterns of behavior is measured by comparing the behaviors of individuals who were exposed with the behaviors of those who were not. Random assignment to treatment allows us to be confident that the outcomes of the study are actually being caused by civic talk and not any other observed or unobserved factors.

I designed the Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project (C-SNIP) in line with this ideal research design. The cornerstone of the study is a panel survey I conducted on the 2003–2004 first-year class of students at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Random assignment is incorporated into the study design because the participants were assigned to their college dormitories based on a lottery. Participants in the C-SNIP Panel Survey initially completed two survey questionnaires over the course of the 2003–2004 school year—one at the beginning of the school year before they engaged in civic talk with their randomly assigned roommate, and a second at the end of the school year after they engaged in civic talk. During the first wave of the study, each student was asked about his or her patterns of civic participation during high school. During the second wave of the study, students were asked about their civic activities in college, as well as about their randomly assigned roommate. These students also completed a follow-up survey during their fourth (and likely final) year of college in 2007.

While most of the evidence I present in this book comes from the C-SNIP Panel Survey, those results are verified with data that I gathered through a series of focus groups conducted on the 2007–2008 first-year class at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. These students, like the 2003–2004 cohort of students who participated in the C-SNIP Panel Survey, were also randomly assigned to their first-year dormitory roommates.

Overview of the Book

The remainder of this book proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 begins my argument for the need to include civic talk in the civic participation research

agenda through an examination of the extant literature. The conclusion reached from this discussion is that new evidence is needed to substantiate and explain the causal relationship between civic talk and civic participation. The C-SNIP Panel Survey and Focus Group Study are presented as a next-best alternative to a fully controlled laboratory experiment because they leverage random assignment to peer groups and document change in behavior over time.

Chapter 3 begins with a descriptive assessment of civic talk. My data show that civic talk is less frequent than other forms of discussion, but it is still pervasive. The data also show that civic talk typically occurs in response to, and with regard to, an election, what issues are being covered in the news, and other such current events. Most important, the C-SNIP data also show that discussing politics and current events has a positive effect on participation in a variety of civic activities. For example, C-SNIP Panel Survey respondents who engaged in civic talk were 38 percent more active in voluntary civic organizations and were 7 percentage points more likely to have voted in the 2004 presidential primary.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to answering why civic talk influences our patterns of civic participation. Talk, in and of itself, cannot be what is causing individuals to take action. So what is it about these conversations that leads us to participate? The answer is recruitment and engagement. When we converse about politics and current events with our peers, they explicitly ask us to get involved. In addition, engaging in civic talk correlates with enhanced interest in politics and current events.

Chapters 5 and 6 dig more deeply into the C-SNIP data sets by examining the factors that might enhance or mitigate the positive relationship between civic talk and civic participation. Chapter 5 focuses on the characteristics of the individual who is engaging in civic talk. Evidence from the C-SNIP studies shows that not all individuals get the same participatory boost from discussing politics and current events. Instead, those of us who are already predisposed to participate in civil society—for example, those with prior participatory experience—get the most out of engaging in civic talk. Consequently, when asking who among us gains from engaging in civic talk, the answer is that only the politically savvy among us do.

Chapter 6 shifts focus from the individual's characteristics to the characteristics of his or her peers. One hypothesis tested is whether peer groups with greater levels of political knowledge and interest ("civic expertise") are better equipped to motivate individuals to participate in civic activities. The C-SNIP data show that this is the case; individuals are more

likely to participate in civic activities when they engage in civic talk with people who have civic expertise. This chapter also engages the unresolved debate on whether political disagreement among peers depresses civic participation (see, e.g., Huckfeldt et al. 2004; Mutz 2006). The C-SNIP data show that individuals who agree with their peers get more of a participatory boost out of engaging in civic talk compared with those who disagree with their peers. However, the data also show that exposure to disagreement does not depress civic participation. In conclusion, Chapter 6 shows that social intimacy increases the effect of civic talk. For example, the more you trust your peers, the more influence they have over you when engaging in civic talk.

Chapter 7 answers three additional questions about the effect of civic talk on participatory democracy. First, given the extant literature's focus on individual-level antecedents of civic participation, how does the effect of civic talk compare with the effect of one's individual characteristics? The C-SNIP Panel Survey data show that the effect of civic talk is typically equal to or greater than the effect of individual-level antecedents of civic participation. Second, while civic talk has a significant effect on civic participation, does it have an effect on other attitudes and behaviors? The C-SNIP Panel Survey data show that civic talk has a significant effect on other civically relevant attitudes and behaviors, such as knowledge about and psychological engagement with politics. Finally, does the effect of civic talk last beyond the initial point of exposure? The third and final wave of the C-SNIP Panel Survey is used to answer this question. These data show that the effect of civic talk lasts beyond the initial point of exposure—in this case, three years into the future. Further analysis shows that the boost in civic participation initially after engaging in civic talk is the mechanism by which the effect of civic talk lasts into the future. In whole, this final set of results further illustrates the significant and lasting effect that conversations about politics and current events have on participatory democracy.

Chapter 8 concludes this examination of civic talk with an assessment of the normative implications of the relationship between civic talk and civic participation, as well as a discussion of the future agenda of researchers of and practitioners in civil society. The main conclusion reached from this discussion is that, while civic talk cannot answer all of the questions researchers and practitioners face, this form of social influence has a powerful effect on participatory democracy and is thus worthy of our continued attention.

Conclusion

Because civic participation is so integral to the performance of democracy, the question of what causes a person to step out of his or her private life and enter the public sphere has been a subject of constant study in the social sciences. Of the numerous explanations that have been generated for why and how individuals choose to participate in the processes of democratic governance, no one theory has a monopoly on the truth. One thing we do know, however, is that the people around us have a place on this list of explanations. Just like Rex Boyd at the 2008 Iowa caucuses, we experience politics with and through the individuals in our social environment.

Against this seemingly logical presumption, research on civic participation has been dominated by theories and research that negate sociological factors and instead focus on individual-level characteristics to explain civic behavior. This said, a growing number of studies assert that social context can have a meaningful impact on how we participate in civil society. More specifically, many have suggested that civic talk can cause people to participate in civic activities. However, political scientists have heavily criticized this line of argument because we have been unable to accurately measure the causal relationship between civic talk and civic participation. Consequently, the question of how civic talk and participatory democracy are related to each other has remained unresolved. In the pages that follow I provide an answer to this question.