

Civic Talk and Civic Participation

The Moderating Effect of Individual Predispositions

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Individuals who discuss politics and current events in their social network also participate in civic activities. However, analytical biases make it difficult to show a causal relationship between these two phenomena. To obtain a more accurate measurement of the effect that civic talk has on civic participation, data were collected through a panel study conducted on students who were randomly assigned to their college dormitory roommates. These data show that engaging in civic talk causes civic participation. The evidence also shows that the civic talk effect is mitigated for individuals who are not already predisposed to participate in civic activities.

Keywords: *social networks; civic participation; political predispositions; political discussion; matching methods; political participation*

A growing number of political scientists are concerned with the influence that a person's social context has on his or her participation in civil society. For example, many studies have documented the positive relationship between discussing politics and current events in one's social network—hereafter referred to as “civic talk”—and participating in civic activities (e.g., Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991, 1995; Kenny, 1992, 1994; Klofstad, 2007; Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; McClurg, 2003, 2004; Mutz, 2002). However, existing data sources on discussion networks are not able

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to show a definitive causal relationship between civic talk and civic participation (e.g., Klofstad, 2007; Laver, 2005; Nickerson, 2008). Consequently, a number of questions about the influence that political discussion networks have on their members have remained understudied. One such question is whether the effect of civic talk varies based on the individual's predisposition to participate in civic activities.

To answer this question, a more accurate estimate of the relationship between civic talk and civic participation is needed. To derive such a measurement, data were collected from a panel of undergraduate students at a large public university in the Midwestern United States. This study allows for a more systematic examination of civic talk because it resembles a controlled experiment. The study is quasi-experimental because the students who participated in it were randomly assigned to their first year dormitory roommates.

The results generated from these data show that there is a meaningful causal relationship between civic talk and civic participation. After engaging in civic talk with his or her roommate, the average study participant increased his or her participation in voluntary civic organizations by 38%. Moreover, the data presented in this article show that subjects who were unwilling or unable to participate in civic activities before engaging in civic talk—those with weak “civic predispositions”—were not influenced to participate in civic activities after engaging in civic talk.

Social-Level Antecedents of Civic Participation

A number of different lines of research in political science assert that the individuals in our social environment have an effect on our political opinions and behaviors. For example, research on households suggests that people living under the same roof can influence each other to vote (Nickerson, 2008). The literature on public deliberation shows that individuals become more informed about politics through the process of formulating policy solutions with other citizens (Barabas, 2004; Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Mendelberg, 2002; Page & Shapiro, 1992). Works on social capital and interpersonal cooperation illustrate that interacting with fellow citizens causes individuals to have a greater affective attachment to their community, which subsequently leads to more frequent participation in civic activities (Dawes, van de Kragt, & Orbell, 1990; Putnam, 2000; Sally, 1995). Research on political communication, public opinion, the mass media, and political socialization shows that the individuals around us influence how we learn about politics. This occurs because civically

engaged individuals provide the rest of us with information (Barker, 1998; Dawson, Prewitt, & Dawson, 1977; Downs, 1957; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1968; Silbiger, 1977; Stimson, 1990; Zaller, 1992).

With regard to civic talk—the specific focus of this article—the growing political science literature on social networks suggests that talking about politics with the people in our immediate social environment leads us to participate in civic activities (e.g., Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Huckfeldt et al., 1995; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991, 1995; Kenny, 1992, 1994; Klofstad, 2007; Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; McClurg, 2003, 2004; Mutz, 2002). For example, using a national social survey, Lake and Huckfeldt (1998) show that the amount of political discussion occurring in an individual's social network correlates with his or her level of political participation. Similar findings have been made with local-level survey data. For example, data from the seminal South Bend, Indiana, study conducted by Huckfeldt and Sprague (1985) suggest that talking about politics has a meaningful impact on how individuals evaluate candidates and participate in elections (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991, 1995).

More recent political science research on social networks has also identified the mechanisms by which individuals translate discussion into action (Klofstad, 2007; McClurg, 2003). For example, in an analysis of Huckfeldt and Sprague's seminal South Bend, Indiana, social network data set (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1985), McClurg (2003) shows that social networks are an important source of information on politics and current events. Information motivates participation because it increases civic competence (the ability to participate) and civic engagement (having an interest in participating in the first place). In a more recent study, Klofstad (2007) comes to a similar conclusion on the role of information in an analysis of a panel study of undergraduate college students. This study also shows that civic talk leads individuals to be recruited by their social network to participate in civic activities. Otherwise stated, when individuals engage in civic talk they are likely to be asked to participate in civic activities. All else equal, these recruitment attempts increase the likelihood that an individual will choose to become civically active.

The Moderating Effect of Individual Predispositions

Although there is a growing political science literature on civic talk in social networks, a question that has remained understudied is whether one's personal characteristics have a moderating effect on the relationship between

civic talk and civic participation. More specifically, do civic predispositions— one's willingness and ability to participate in civic activities—mitigate or enhance the effect of engaging in civic talk? The extant political science literature on civic participation shows that individuals with weak civic predispositions are generally less civically active than are those with strong predispositions. Consequently, it is logical to hypothesize that individuals with weak civic predispositions will experience a smaller increase in civic participation as a consequence of engaging in civic talk compared with the effect experienced by individuals with stronger predispositions.

To illustrate why weak predispositions should have a mitigating effect on the relationship between civic talk and civic participation, it is useful to consider how individuals make decisions on how to behave. From the simplest of perspectives, individuals weigh the costs and benefits associated with taking action. Only when costs are low and benefits are high do we choose to act (e.g., Downs, 1957; Olson, 1965; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Otherwise stated, if a person feels that the costs of engaging in civic participation are too high, or that the benefits are too low—that is, if he or she has weak civic predispositions—being exposed to civic talk should have a weaker effect on his or her patterns of civic participation.

The extensive body of political science literature on civic participation offers evidence in favor of this expectation. This research shows that individuals are not automatically equipped to participate in civil society. Instead, one needs a number of different resources and motivations in order to participate in civic activities. Arguably the best summary of this body of research is found in a study of the antecedents of civic participation conducted by Verba et al. (1995). In this extensive analysis of survey data gathered in the United States, Verba and colleagues show that individuals find the costs of participating low enough, and the benefits high enough, when they are equipped with resources (i.e., time, money, and civic skills), have a sense of psychological engagement with politics and current events, and have been recruited by someone in their environment to participate (e.g., a member of their social network). Verba and colleagues show, however, that of these three factors, resources and engagement are the most important in determining whether the benefits of civic participation outweigh the costs. As they state it, “. . . participation can, and does, take place in the absence of specific requests for activity. In contrast, it is hard to imagine activity without at least a modicum of resources and some political engagement” (p. 270). Otherwise stated, this and other studies of civic participation suggest that if individuals are not predisposed to engage in civic activity, no amount of civic talk will cajole them into participating in civic activities.

McClurg (2003) addresses the question of how individual predispositions influence the civic talk effect more directly through an analysis of the Huckfeldt and Sprague (1985) South Bend, Indiana, social network data set. McClurg hypothesizes that individuals with lower levels of education will benefit more from engaging in civic talk than their more well-educated counterparts. As he states it, “. . . social interaction should make up the absence of personal resources and we should see a meaningful increase in the propensity to participate among low status individuals who discuss politics” (p. 457). However, the South Bend data suggest the opposite conclusion. Less well-educated individuals actually participated in fewer civic activities as a consequence of engaging in civic talk than their more well-educated counterparts. In fact, McClurg finds that the civic participation gap between the well- and poorly educated increases as both groups engage in civic talk (p. 459, table 4). Again, this study suggests that individuals with weak civic predispositions will not benefit as much from engaging in civic talk compared with individuals with strong predispositions.

Data and Method

The Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project (C-SNIP)

To examine the potentially moderating effect of civic predispositions on the relationship between civic talk and civic participation, new data are needed. New evidence is needed because extant scholarship struggles to produce definitive evidence of a causal relationship between civic talk and civic participation. This is the case because it is difficult to determine if our social network influences us or if our own patterns of behavior influence how we select and interact with our peers (e.g., Klofstad, 2007; Laver, 2005; Nickerson, 2008). For example, a central argument made in this literature is that talking about politics and current events in our social network leads us to become more active in civil society. However, an equally plausible explanation is that being civically active causes you to talk about politics in your social network (reciprocal causation). Individuals who are more active in politics may also explicitly choose to associate with peers who are more interested in talking about politics (selection bias). Finally, some factor that has not been accounted for could be causing people to both have political discussions in their social network and to participate in civic activities (endogeneity or omitted variable bias).

Traditionally, nonrecursive (i.e., “two-stage”) regression models are used to overcome these analytical biases. In such specifications, the independent

variable of interest (in this case, engaging in civic talk) is modeled with instrumental variables that do not correlate with the outcome variable being predicted (in this case, the amount of civic participation an individual engages in). This form of analysis is inappropriate for assessing the relationship between civic talk and civic participation, however, because it is difficult to conceive of any variable that could reliably predict the level of civic talk occurring in an individual's social network, yet not be correlated with how civically active he or she is. Instrumental variables like these have not been identified.¹

Given that the traditional method for overcoming the analytical biases that plague social network research are ineffective, how can this analytical problem be ameliorated? An ideal solution would be to randomly assign one group of individuals to be exposed to civic talk (the treatment group), and another group of like individuals to not be exposed to civic talk (the control group). Under random assignment, treated and untreated subjects are identical to one another, save that one is exposed to the treatment whereas the other is not. This process would allow us to be confident that the outcomes of the study are actually being caused by civic talk instead of any other observed or unobserved factors.²

With this ideal research design in mind, data were collected from first year college students who lived in university housing at the University of Wisconsin–Madison during the 2003–2004 academic school year. This study is hereafter referred to as the Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project Panel Study (C-SNIP). Random assignment is incorporated into the C-SNIP design because study participants were assigned to their first year college dormitory roommate based on a lottery. Incoming first year dormitory residents ranked the 16 dormitories in order of where they wanted to live. Subjects were then randomly sorted by a computer to determine the order in which they would be assigned to dormitories. If space was available in the student's first housing choice at the time that his or her name is reached in the randomly sorted list, the student was placed in a room in that dormitory. If space was not available, an attempt was made to place the student with a roommate in his or her second choice dormitory, and so on.

C-SNIP participants completed two Web-based survey questionnaires: one at the beginning of the 2003–2004 academic year before they were affected by their roommate, and a second at the end of the 2003–2004 school year. During the first wave of the study, students were asked about their patterns of civic participation during high school. During the second wave of the study, students were asked about their patterns of civic participation during their first year of college, as well as about the interactions

that they had with their randomly-assigned roommates. To increase participation from a broad cross-section of the population under study, participants were informed that if they completed the survey they would be entered into a prize drawing for one of fifty \$20 prizes. In addition, three attempts were made by e-mail to recruit subjects to fill out the questionnaire, and these emails were worded in a neutral way to make the prospect of participating in the study appealing to as wide an audience as possible. In total, 23% of the eligible population of 4,358 first year students living in university housing fully completed both questionnaires ($N = 999$). Just under 24% of the eligible population completed at least some portion of both questionnaires ($N = 1,044$; see appendix).³

Variables

Dependent variable: Civic participation. The measure of civic participation used in this analysis is based on how active each student reported being in voluntary civic organizations. In total, seven different types of group affiliations are accounted for: charitable and voluntary service, leadership and civic training, groups that “take stands on political issues or current events,” partisan groups, student government, student publications (e.g., newspaper), and speech clubs and teams (e.g., forensics, debate). For each organization, students were asked to rate how active they were on a four-point scale, ranging from “not at all active” to “very active.” Civic participation is operationalized as the total amount of organizational activity that each student engaged in, that is, the sum of the seven 4-point scales.

Independent variable: Civic talk. The independent variable of interest in this analysis is the amount of civic talk that occurred between college roommates. Specifically, in the C-SNIP questionnaire each student was asked, “When you talk with your roommate, how often do you discuss politics and current events: often, sometimes, rarely, or never?”

Two aspects of this measure are necessary to explain in greater detail. First, although use of self-reports is standard practice in studies of social networks (e.g., Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Huckfeldt et al., 1995; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991, 1995; Kenny, 1992, 1994; Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; McClurg, 2003, 2004; Mutz, 2002), an alternative approach would be to use a more exogenous measure, the report supplied by each subject’s roommate. This strategy depends on correctly identifying roommate pairs. Based on the small number of subjects who were willing to report their dormitory address, however, only 84 roommate pairs were able to be identified.

Unfortunately, this is not a large enough sample size to conduct a thorough investigation of the relationship between civic talk and civic participation. That said, this small amount of data shows that roommates agreed about the amount of civic talk that they engaged in ($t = -1.14, p = .16$). As such, in this population self reports of civic talk behavior are likely to be observationally equivalent to an exogenous measure of civic talk.

Second, one might question what types of conversations the participants in this study recalled when asked to report how often they discussed “politics and current events.” This question was worded broadly to prompt study participants to report on a wide variety of civically relevant discussions. For example, if the C-SNIP questionnaire were to have only asked for a report of conversations about “politics,” study participants may not have been cued to recall conversations about events on campus that motivated them to participate in campus-based voluntary civic organizations. Moreover, focus group data that were collected from the 2007–2008 cohort of first year students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison⁴ give greater insight into what types of conversations are recalled when subjects are asked to think about discussions they had about “politics and current events.” Although a full presentation of these data is not possible in a journal article format, in short, these data show what we might expect to see, that the majority of conversations about “politics and current events” are centered on discussing civically relevant events that are happening on campus and that are covered in the news.

Individual predispositions. A number of measures are used in this analysis to assess an individual’s predisposition to engage in civic activity. Two variables capture prior civically relevant experiences. Prior experience with civic participation is measured as the level of civic participation subjects engaged in during high school, before they were exposed to civic talk during their first year of college. This measure is constructed in the same way as the dependent variable described above. Prior experience engaging in civic talk is measured based on the survey question which asked, “How often did you discuss politics and current events at home with your family during high school, often, sometimes, or rarely/never?”⁵

Along with prior experience, the effect of civic engagement—the psychological predisposition to participate in civic activities—before exposure to civic talk is also examined (Verba et al., 1995). This predisposition is measured as one’s level of interest in politics and current events, based on the survey question which asked, “How interested were you in politics and current events during high school: very interested, somewhat interested, not very interested, or not at all interested?”

The final measure of civic predispositions examined in this analysis captures the participant's strength of political preferences. Strength of political preferences is based on the survey question which asked, "We also hear a lot about conservatives and liberals in politics these days. What were you during high school: very conservative, somewhat conservative, moderate, somewhat liberal, or very liberal?" The ideological strength variable was created by "folding" the 5-point ideology scale into a 3-point scale, running from moderate to very ideological.

Data Preprocessing

Although the process of assigning C-SNIP participants to dormitory roommates was random, subjects were allowed to discuss politics and current events with their roommate as much as they wished. Because of this deviation from random assignment, exogenous factors could be affecting both the treatment (the amount of civic talk each student was exposed to) and the outcome of interest (civic participation) in this study (e.g., Achen, 1986; Dunning, 2008). This feature of the C-SNIP study can be accounted for, however, by preprocessing the data with a "matching" procedure (e.g., Dunning, 2008; Ho, Imai, King, & Stuart, 2007a, 2007b). Under this procedure the effect of civic talk is measured by comparing the civic participation habits of subjects who are similar to one another, save the fact that one engaged in civic talk with their roommate and the other did not. By comparing the participatory habits of similar subjects who were and were not exposed to civic talk, we can be confident that any observed difference in civic participation between them is unrelated to the factors that the subjects were matched on, and as such is a consequence of civic talk.

Unlike existing cross-sectional surveys, the C-SNIP data set is tailor-made to the matching process because respondents were surveyed extensively about their civically relevant characteristics *before* they engaged in civic talk with their college roommate. This allows participants to be matched to one another based on characteristics that could not have possibly been biased by the independent variable of interest in this analysis. In total, 109 of these "pretreatment" variables were used in the matching procedure. This set of variables included measures of patterns of civic participation in high school, measures housing preferences students had before being placed into their dormitories, indicators of which dorm each participant was eventually placed into, information about the participant's roommate and dormitory, demographics, measures of home life before coming to college, and civically relevant attitudes and characteristics.

For this analysis a “full matching” procedure was used (Gu & Rosenbaum, 1993; Hansen 2004; Ho et al., 2007a, 2007b; Rosenbaum, 1991).⁶ Full matching is a hybrid of “subclassification” and “optimal matching” (Hansen, 2004; Ho et al., 2007a, 2007b). Subclassification of the C-SNIP data set entailed matching a group of subjects who did not engage in civic talk (“untreated” subjects) to each subject who did engage in civic talk (a “treated” subject).⁷ Specifically, the variables included in the matching procedure were used to create a score of one’s propensity to engage in civic talk (Hansen, 2004; Ho et al., 2007a, 2007b). A group of untreated subjects was then matched to a treated case based on how close the group’s mean propensity score was to the treated case’s score.⁸ This process of creating subclasses was “optimal” because after a subject was initially matched it could be moved to a different subclass in order to improve the overall similarity between treated and untreated subjects in the data set.

Results

Civic Talk Causes Civic Participation

To test whether weak civic predispositions mitigate the effect of engaging in civic talk, it is first necessary to obtain an accurate estimate of the civic talk effect. Based on the unique design of the C-SNIP data set, in concert with the matching data preprocessing procedure, this question is able to be answered through an analysis how active the C-SNIP population was in voluntary civic organizations during their first year of college. The results of a multivariate regression analysis of participation in voluntary civic organizations are presented in Table 1. The table presents results for both the matched and unmatched data sets. To increase the precision of the analysis, each model controls for how civically active each subject was before they were exposed to the civic talk treatment (a lag of the dependent variable) as well as for how the dormitory assignment process was executed by the university (a dichotomous indicator variable for each dormitory).

The results in Table 1 show that subjects who engaged in civic talk when interacting with their roommate were more likely to participate in voluntary civic organizations during their first year of college. In the first column of the table, the unmatched data set shows that subjects who did not engage in civic talk participated at a rate of 2.0 on the 21-point civic participation scale, whereas those who did engage in civic talk participated at a rate of 2.9 on the same scale.⁹ This amounts to a 45% increase in participation due to engaging

Table 1
The Effect of Civic Talk on Civic Participation (Regression Analysis)

Independent Variable	Data Set	
	Unmatched	Matched
Civic talk among roommates	0.86*** (.18)	0.81** (.30)
Participation in voluntary civic organizations in high school	0.25*** (.02)	0.22*** (.03)
Dormitory 1	0.48 (1.95)	-0.32 (2.38)
Dormitory 2	0.38 (1.26)	-1.04 (1.88)
Dormitory 3	0.35 (1.24)	-0.30 (1.83)
Dormitory 4	-1.11 (1.39)	-1.66 (1.86)
Dormitory 5	-1.00 (1.23)	-1.44 (1.80)
Dormitory 6	-0.17 (1.22)	-0.88 (1.73)
Dormitory 7	0.33 (1.23)	-0.14 (1.72)
Dormitory 8	-0.39 (1.23)	-0.79 (1.75)
Dormitory 9	-0.27 (1.25)	-0.87 (1.71)
Dormitory 10	-0.69 (1.24)	-1.20 (1.77)
Dormitory 11	-0.61 (1.27)	-1.22 (1.90)
Dormitory 12	-0.85 (1.25)	-1.60 (1.75)
Dormitory 13	-1.64 (2.22)	-2.44 (9.40)
Dormitory 14	-0.93 (1.22)	-1.44 (1.72)
Dormitory 15	-0.63 (1.23)	-1.51 (1.73)
Intercept	0.78 (1.20)	1.67 (1.76)
<i>N</i>	1,044	1,044
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.18	.13

Note: Coefficients are unstandardized ordinary least squares regression values (Imai, King, & Lau, 2007b); standard errors are given in parentheses.

Source: Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project Panel Study.

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

in civic talk. The results for the matched data set in the second column of Table 1 show that subjects who did not engage in civic talk participated at a rate of 2.1 on the 21-point civic participation scale, whereas those who did engage in civic talk participated at a value of 2.9 on the same scale. This amounts to a 38% increase in participation due to engaging in civic talk. Subsequently, comparison of these two sets of results shows that the civic talk effect would have been (slightly) overestimated if the matched data had not been used. Moreover, closer comparison of the civic talk coefficients in Table 1 shows that the matched data set produced a larger standard error. This suggests that the matched data set produced a less certain, and therefore a more “honest,” estimate of the civic talk effect.

Weak Civic Predispositions Mitigate the Civic Talk Effect

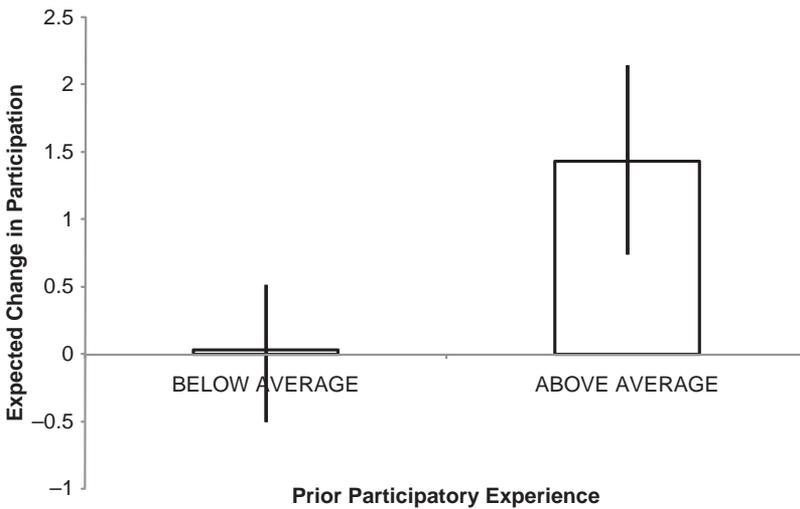
Past experience with civic participation and civic talk. Do weak civic predispositions mitigate the effect of engaging in civic talk? A useful place to begin answering this question is with an analysis of how active C-SNIP subjects were in civic activities before being exposed to the civic talk treatment. Extant research shows that individuals with a strong record of past participatory experience are more active in civil society than the rest of us (e.g., Fowler, 2006; Gerber, Green, & Shachar, 2003; Plutzer, 2002). The C-SNIP data also show that subjects who participated in civic activities at an above average rate in high school were more civically active during their first year of college ($t = -10.58, p < .01$). As such, past experience might have a moderating effect on social network influence. To test this proposition, the C-SNIP sample was split into two groups based on how civically active each subject was in high school: above or below average. The matched data set regression analysis presented in Table 1 was then conducted separately on each of the two subsets of subjects. This procedure allows for an estimation of social network influence for individuals with different levels of prior experience participating in civic activities, all other factors equal.

The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 1. The data show that prior participatory experience enhances the relationship between civic talk and civic participation. All else equal, the expected change in civic participation due to being exposed to civic talk increases as the individual's level of prior experience increases. In fact, the treatment effect only reaches the 95% threshold for statistical significance when the subject has an above average level of prior experience participating in civic activities.

Another window into individuals' prior experience with politics and current events is their upbringing. Specifically, a number of studies show that individuals who discussed politics and current events with their parents during their youth are more civically active and engaged as adults (see McIntosh, Hart, & Youniss, 2007 for a summary of this literature). Data from the C-SNIP study corroborate these findings. Subjects who were exposed to above average levels of civic talk in their home during high school were more civically active during their first year of college ($t = 4.29, p < .01$).

Using the same procedure that was used to assess the moderating effect of prior participatory experience, Figure 2 presents the effect that previous exposure to civic talk has on the relationship between civic talk and civic participation in college. These data show that the effect of being exposed to civic talk increases as prior exposure to civic talk increases. Although the error bars about the two estimated treatment effects overlap, only subjects who discussed politics and current events at an above average level prior to

Figure 1
The Moderating Effect of Prior Participatory Experience on the Relationship Between Civic Talk and Civic Participation



Note: The line on each bar represents the 95% confidence interval about the estimate. Figures are based on the matched data regression analysis presented in Table 1. The first difference is calculated between treated and untreated subjects, all other factors held at their means.

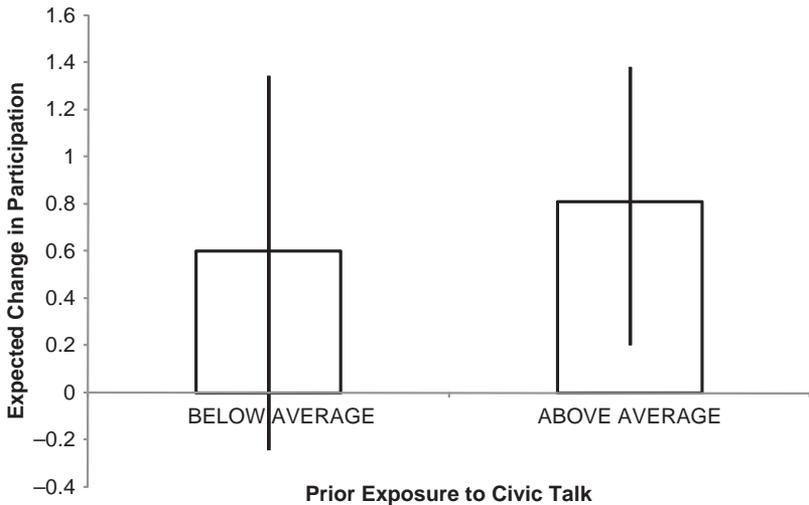
Source: Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project Panel Study.

treatment experienced a statistically significant increase in civic participation due to engaging in civic talk with their randomly assigned roommate.¹⁰

Civic engagement. As with prior experience, civic engagement also increases the likelihood that an individual will choose to be civically active. For example, individuals who are interested in politics and current events are also more likely to participate in civic activities (e.g. Verba et al., 1995). Data from the C-SNIP study also show this; subjects with above average levels of civic engagement during high school were more civically active during their first year of college ($t = 8.80, p < .01$).

To test whether civic engagement enhances the effect of civic talk in the same way that prior experience does, the mode of analysis presented in Figures 1 and 2 was replicated to account for each subject's level of political interest before being exposed to civic talk. The results presented in Figure 3 show that the higher the subject's level of interest in politics and current

Figure 2
The Moderating Effect of Prior Exposure to Civic Talk on the Relationship Between Civic Talk and Civic Participation



Note: The line on each bar represents the 95% confidence interval about the estimate. Figures are based on the matched data regression analysis presented in Table 1. The first difference is calculated between treated and untreated subjects, all other factors held at their means.

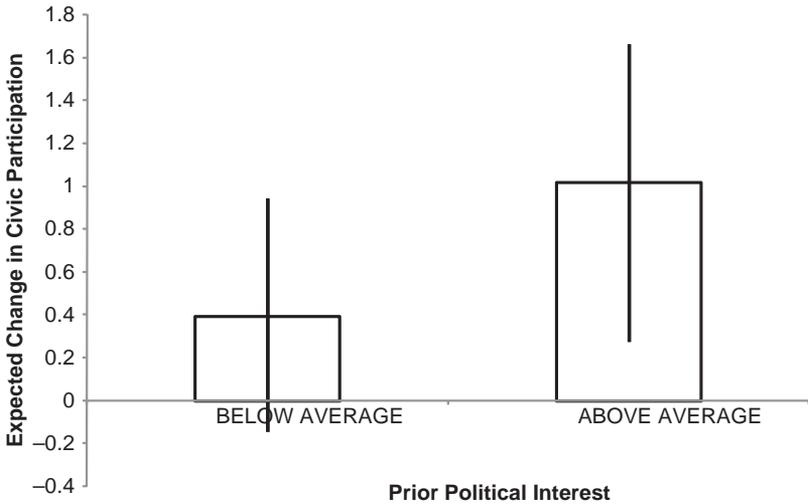
Source: Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project Panel Study.

events was before being exposed to civic talk, the larger the treatment effect is. Although the error bars about the two treatment effect estimates overlap, the treatment effect for individuals with below average levels of civic engagement is not statistically significant.

Strength of political preferences. The strength of one's political preferences is also an indicator of a person's predilection to participate in civil society (e.g. Verba et al., 1995). This is the case because individuals with stronger political preferences are more likely to have the desire, and feel the psychological or instrumental need, to participate in civil society. Data from the C-SNIP corroborate this. Subjects who reported stronger ideological preferences in high school were more active in civic activities during their first year of college ($t = -2.37, p = .02$).

In the same mode of the previous analyses, Figure 4 presents the moderating effect of ideological strength on the relationship between civic talk and civic participation. The data show that the strength of one's political preferences

Figure 3
The Moderating Effect of Prior Interest in Politics and Current Events on the Relationship Between Civic Talk and Civic Participation



Note: The line on each bar represents the 95% confidence interval about the estimate. Figures are based on the matched data regression analysis presented in Table 1. The first difference is calculated between treated and untreated subjects, all other factors held at their means.

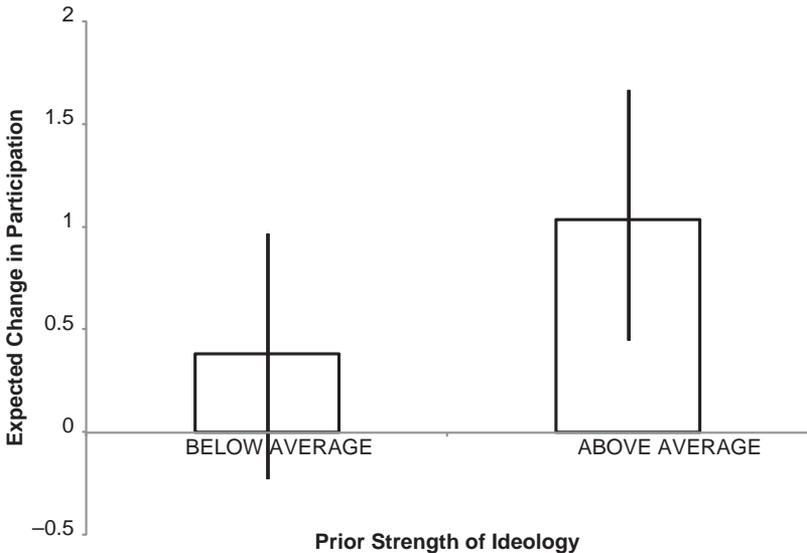
Source: Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project Panel Study.

enhances the effect of civic talk. Again, although the error about the treatment effect estimates overlap, the relationship between civic talk and civic participation is not statistically significant for individuals who adhered to weak political preferences before being exposed to civic talk.¹¹

Discussion and Conclusion

This article began with the observation that it is difficult to estimate the causal effect that discussing politics and current events in one’s social network has on how civically active a person chooses to be. Existing works struggle to produce definitive results because it is difficult to determine if our social network influences us or if our own patterns of behavior affect how we select and interact with our peers. As a consequence, many secondary questions in this line of research have been understudied. Of specific interest in this

Figure 4
The Moderating Effect of Prior Strength of Ideology on the Relationship Between Civic Talk and Civic Participation



Note: The line on each bar represents the 95% confidence interval about the estimate. Figures are based on the matched data regression analysis presented in Table 1. The first difference is calculated between treated and untreated subjects, all other factors held at their means.

Source: Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project Panel Study.

article is the role that one's own predispositions have in either mitigating or enhancing the relationship between civic talk and civic participation. The extant literature suggests that individuals with weak civic predispositions—that is, individuals who are less willing and able to participate in civic activities—are less likely to be civically active. As such, it was hypothesized that individuals with weak predispositions would be less affected by engaging in civic talk when compared with those with stronger predispositions.

Due to the analytical biases that plague this line of research, however, new data were needed to obtain an accurate estimate of the civic talk effect before testing this hypothesis. By making use of a quasi-experimental panel study, in concert with a matching data preprocessing procedure and controlling for a lag of the dependent variable in the analysis, the data presented in this article provide a more accurate estimate of the causal effect that civic talk has on civic participation. Based on this estimate, the moderating effect

of individual predispositions was then able to be more precisely assessed. The data presented in this article show that individuals who are predisposed to participate in civil society, prior to being exposed to civic talk, experience a larger increase in civic participation as a consequence of being exposed to civic talk. Conversely, the effect of being exposed to civic talk is positive, but not statistically significant, among those individuals who are not predisposed to participate in civic activities.

On a normative level, these results should serve as a cautionary example to both scholars of civic participation and practitioners in civil society. In this current era of civic disengagement in the United States, some have argued that increased social connectedness may be a means with which to revive civil society. For example, Putnam (1994, 2000) finds that communities with higher levels of social connectedness have higher levels of citizen involvement in public affairs. In a similar vein, in a “get out the vote” field experiment, Gerber and Green (2000) find that face-to-face canvassing efforts are more effective at generating voter turnout than less sociable forms of persuasion such as phone calls and direct mail. The evidence presented in this article also shows that there is a link between interpersonal interaction and civic participation.

The necessary question to ask, however, is “Who among us reaps the benefits of engaging in civic talk?” The data presented in this article show that those who are already likely to participate in civil society do so. Moreover, those of us with strong civic predispositions also tend to be socioeconomically advantaged (e.g., Verba et al., 1995). Otherwise stated, this article has shown that although civic talk does encourage civic participation, these types of discussions are not a sufficient method on their own to bring a larger and more representative set of citizens into the processes of democratic governance. This said, the evidence presented in this article does point to one idea for how to effectively harness the power of civic talk. Because individuals are only responsive to civic talk when they have the means to participate in civil society, we need to help the public develop these predispositions. Moreover, because civic participation is a habitual behavior (e.g., Fowler, 2006; Gerber et al., 2003; Plutzer, 2002), a logical suggestion is to focus resources and energy on encouraging young people to become civically engaged as early in life as possible. Models of such efforts already exist, specifically service learning programs that are often required of young people during high school.

With regard to the methodological implications of these findings, it is important to consider future directions for research on social networks, civic talk, and civic participation. In designing future studies, the costs and

benefits associated with the research design presented in this article should be considered. The quasi-experimental design of the panel study date examined in this article allows for more accurate measurement and assessment of the relationship between civic talk and civic participation. As such, future studies should continue to make use of methods that allow for more effective study of complex causal relationships, such as experiments (e.g., Nickerson, 2008), participant observation (e.g., Eliasoph, 1998; Harris-Lacewell, 2004; Walsh, 2004), focus groups (e.g., Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995), and agent-based modeling (e.g., Johnson & Huckfeldt, 2004).

In considering future venues in which to study civic talk, it is also worth noting that the case examined in this article—college—is a uniquely useful setting in which to study civic talk because it represents a “crucial” case of social network influence (e.g., Eckstein, 1975; Gerring, 2001). College is a crucial case because it is a “most likely” case of social network influence (Gerring, 2001). When a young person leaves his or her family to begin life as an independent adult, peers are likely to become highly influential in his or her life (Beck, 1977; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). Otherwise stated, college is a crucial case to study because if we do not find evidence of a causal relationship between civic talk and civic participation in this environment, we are less likely to find it in other contexts where social networks may be less influential. A person’s first year of college is also a crucial case because it is a “paradigmatic” case of social network influence (Gerring, 2001). The paradigm case is one that illustrates the theoretical importance of the phenomena being studied. Collegiate peers define what social network influence is because peers are such a central facet of the individual’s life as he or she begins adulthood. Moreover, collegiate peers illustrate the importance of social network influence because they are likely to influence the patterns of civic participation that young people carry with them through the rest of their lives. This said, it is important to underscore that the data used in this study come from one group of college students at one university. These results should be verified in other contexts.

In considering avenues for future research it is also important to acknowledge that this article has focused on the relationship between an individual and his or her college roommate. In other words, this study examined “dyads,” networks comprised of two, and in this case same-sex, individuals. Although this research design has yielded significant results, most individuals are embedded in much larger and more complex social networks. Consequently, future studies should add more discussion partners into the research design. Ideally, this would entail mapping out the complete social network of a specific set of individuals who live or congregate

in the same geographic space (e.g., a neighborhood, a church, a school, and the like). This method of data collection is laborious and expensive because it entails tracing all of the social connections between each person in a given social environment. However, sociologists have been using the full network research design with great success for many years, and have developed a number of tools and analytical methods for collecting and assessing such data (e.g., Wasserman & Faust 1994). Political scientists should learn from their experience and apply this knowledge to the study of politically relevant social networks. Given that the study of dyads presented in this article shows that even one person in your social environment can have a significant effect on your behavior, it will be intriguing to see how larger and more complex discussion networks affect their members.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that there is a great amount of concern in our field over the strength of participatory democracy, largely because of declines in civic participation that have occurred over the past half of a century (e.g., Putnam, 2000; but, also see McDonald & Popkin, 2001). As such, it is incumbent on political scientists to continue to examine why individuals choose to participate in the processes of democratic governance. The results presented in this article show that social networks and civic talk deserve a meaningful place in this research agenda.

Appendix Descriptive Statistics

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Civic talk among roommates					
Full scale	-0.55	4.26	1.40	0.89	1,044
Dichotomous treatment coding	0.00	1.00	0.47	0.50	1,044
Civic participation					
High school	-0.76	19.00	6.60	3.96	1,044
First year of college	-6.54	21.00	2.43	2.91	1,044
Dormitory assignment					
Dormitory 1	0.00	1.00	0.002	0.05	1,044
Dormitory 2	0.00	1.00	0.06	0.23	1,044
Dormitory 3	0.00	1.00	0.09	0.28	1,044
Dormitory 4	0.00	1.00	0.02	0.12	1,044
Dormitory 5	0.00	1.00	0.08	0.26	1,044
Dormitory 6	0.00	1.00	0.11	0.32	1,044
Dormitory 7	0.00	1.00	0.10	0.30	1,044
Dormitory 8	0.00	1.00	0.10	0.30	1,044

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Dormitory 9	0.00	1.00	0.07	0.25	1,044
Dormitory 10	0.00	1.00	0.07	0.26	1,044
Dormitory 11	0.00	1.00	0.04	0.21	1,044
Dormitory 12	0.00	1.00	0.06	0.23	1,044
Dormitory 13	0.00	1.00	0.001	0.04	1,044
Dormitory 14	0.00	1.00	0.11	0.32	1,044
Dormitory 15	0.00	1.00	0.09	0.29	1,044
Individual predispositions					
Civic participation in high school	-0.76	19.00	6.60	3.96	1,044
Civic talk at home during high school	0.42	3.34	1.99	0.74	1,044
Interest in politics and current events	1.00	4.00	2.69	0.91	1,044
Strength of ideology	1.00	3.00	1.90	0.75	1,044

Note: The values presented in this table are means calculated from five imputed data sets. The minimums of some variables are negative because a range prior was not specified for ordinal variables.

Source: Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project Panel Study

Notes

1. Nonrecursive models, however, have been able to be used when the independent variable of interest is behavior (e.g., vote choice) instead of discussion (e.g., Kenny, 1992).

2. Nickerson (2008) uses this type of research design to test whether individuals living in the same household influence each other to vote. However, this study does not examine whether civic talk is the causal agent behind civic participation.

3. These participation figures exclude subjects who moved from the dormitory room they were initially assigned to, subjects who chose their own roommate, and subjects who had no roommates. To account for missing data, the data were preprocessed using the Amelia II multiple imputation package for R (Honaker, King, & Blackwell, 2007; King, Honaker, Joseph, & Scheve, 2001). The data set was imputed five times. To aid in the imputation process, the tolerance level was set to .001, and a range prior of 5% of the cases in the data set was used. All dichotomous variables were imputed using the nominal transformation; no other transformations were used.

4. With regard to case comparability with the C-SNIP panel survey data, the focus group participants were randomly assigned to their dormitories and the study was conducted during a residential primary election season.

5. The "rarely" and "never" categories were grouped together due to a survey programming error.

6. This procedure was conducted using the MatchIt package for R (Ho et al., 2007a, 2007b), which makes use of the "optmatch" package (Hansen, 2004).

7. Or vice-versa (i.e., a group of treated subjects could be matched to a single untreated subject). To classify subjects as either "treated" or "untreated," the civic talk scale was dichotomized. Subjects scoring above the mean were considered to have been "treated" with civic talk, resulting in the classification of 490 treated subjects and 544 untreated subjects.

8. Each untreated subject was only matched to one treated subject, and vice-versa (i.e., matching without replacement).

9. Substantive interpretations of regression coefficients presented in this article were calculated with the “setx” and “sim” procedures in the Zelig package for R (Imai, King, & Lau, 2007, 2008), all other factors in the model held at their means.

10. The same results appear in an analysis of the moderating effect of how civically active and interested one’s parents were while the subject was in high school.

11. The same results appear in an examination of the moderating effect of how partisan the subject was during high school.

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