



Talking about Politics Boosts Civic Participation

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Democratic government depends on active, well-informed citizens. But why and how do citizens become more engaged with community and political life? This question has long interested social scientists – and the traditional research approach has been to look at how various individual characteristics either encourage or discourage participation in politics. Researchers have established, for instance, that people are more likely to vote if they have higher incomes, more years of education, and strong partisan preferences.

Another approach goes beyond individual traits to probe the role of social ties and contexts in shaping civic participation. Using innovative methods, I advance this agenda by asking whether civic engagement is increased by everyday discussions among friends, family members, and other acquaintances. Simply stated, the answer is yes. When people are exposed to discussions of politics in their immediate daily environment, they are likely to become more active civically. Talking about politics encourages people to become more active citizens.

Figuring Out What Causes What

Although it seems self-evident that the way people think and act is influenced by others around them, it is not easy to prove that political discussion boosts participation. Maybe talking about politics causes people to become more active civically – but the opposite could just as well be true, if participating in civic activities leads to people talking more about politics. Another problem is something scholars call “selection bias,” the idea that “birds of a feather flock together.” In the case of political talk and civic participation, it might be that individuals who like to talk about and participate in politics run in the same social circles. People might choose their friends in ways that make it look like political discussion and participation go hand in hand. Finally, even if talk and participation seem related among people who have not chosen one another as longtime friends, maybe other factors could be at work to cause political discussion and civic participation to vary in relation to one another.

Ideally, scholars would like to do a controlled experiment. In that kind of test, the researcher would randomly assign people to new social circles, some of which are allowed to talk about politics and others of which are prohibited from engaging in political discussions. To see if discussion promotes participation, the researcher would compare the behavior of the people who were and were not allowed to talk about politics.

But unless a researcher happens to be a reality TV show producer, this ideal is unattainable. Researchers cannot play God with people’s lives. So I pondered what the next-best research design might be. Is there some natural social setting that looks like the ideal experiment just described? The first-year experience at college is a good approximation – particularly at a college where incoming students are randomly assigned to dorm rooms, to live with roommates they do not already know. My undergraduate alma mater, the University of Wisconsin at Madison, works this way, and I was fortunate to gain the college’s cooperation for my research.

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Over the past ten years I have repeatedly surveyed the students in the Madison entering class of 2003. These men and women are now in their mid-twenties, full-fledged citizens years removed from their college experience. In my research, I know which students were randomly assigned to the same dorms and rooms as others – in short, which new social settings each of them was told to join. I also know how much political talk happened in those different freshmen social settings, and I can track each person’s political behavior over subsequent months and years. Using this unique combination of information, I have produced some of the most persuasive evidence of social influences on citizen participation that any scholar has managed to find to date.

Those College Bull Sessions Matter!

My basic research finding is quite striking: students who were assigned to dorms in 2003 where they were exposed to political discussion by their randomly-assigned roommate became more likely to join civic-minded student organizations such as student government, partisan political organizations, and community volunteer organizations. This effect lasted throughout their four years of college. More recently, I surveyed these same individuals during the 2012 election, and my newly collected data reveal that study participants who were exposed to political discussion as first-year college students are still more likely to be active civically nearly ten years later.

Why does the relationship between discussion and participation last for so long? Civic participation, like any other behavior, is habitual. This is why voter turnout increases with age. The more frequently someone votes, the more likely he or she is to do it again in the future. My study participants probably do not think back to conversations they had with their freshman roommate when they are contemplating whether to participate in new civic activities. But even without their conscious realization, the boost in participation that many students experienced from discussing politics with their roommates put them on a pathway in life that includes repeated willingness to get involved in community life and politics.

The Power and Limits of Discussion

Not everyone in my study became more active after exposure to political discussion. Only the young people who were in some sense predisposed to participate in civic activities increased their participation after being exposed to political talk. From the perspective of society as a whole, this means that dialogue is not a magic bullet. Discussion alone will not ameliorate participatory gaps between well-heeled and less advantaged Americans. I also learned that individuals are more likely to be influenced by similar people whom they trust. Although political conversations can encourage associates to take action – even when people are tossed together like new roommates – discussion alone cannot overcome deep disagreements or cause everyone to have an open mind.

Many factors influence why and how people become active in civic life. No single theory has a monopoly on the truth. But there is no question that social interactions – including everyday discussions – have a strong impact. Humans are social animals, and we experience politics with and through our peers.

Read more in Casey A. Klofstad, *Civic Talk: Peers, Politics, and the Future of Democracy* (Temple University Press, 2011).