The Social Communication of Political Expertise

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The ability of citizens to make discriminating judgments regarding the political expertise of other individuals is centrally related to the potential for deliberative democracy. If people are *unable* to render such judgments—if the communication of political expertise is, for example, fundamentally compromised by political bias—then the purposeful basis of political communication and deliberation among citizens is called into question. This article focuses on (1) the criteria that people employ in making judgments with respect to the political competence of other individuals, (2) the consequences of these judgments for the pattern and frequency of political communication, and (3) the implications for the effectiveness of collective deliberation among citizens. The database is taken from a study of political communication in the 1996 election, built on interviews with registered voters and their discussants in the Indianapolis and St. Louis metropolitan areas.

The ability of citizens to identify political expertise and knowledge among others lies near the core of the political communication process at both individual and collective levels. If one individual recognizes the presence (or absence) of expertise among other citizens, the potential is created for the enhancement of political capacity within the electorate. The whole might indeed become greater than the sum of its parts, and social communication would provide one element of a solution to the public opinion paradox—individual citizens who appear woefully uninformed compared to an aggregate electorate that behaves in a predictable and sensible manner (Converse 1964; Page and Shapiro 1992; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991).

Indeed, to the extent that one citizen obtains political information and guidance from other citizens who are relatively more knowledgeable and informed, an asymmetrical process of social communication creates a multiplier effect on the distribution of expertise within the electorate. Those who employ socially communicated expertise may or may not become more politically expert themselves. The important point is that they might act on the basis of shared expertise obtained through countless social exchanges (see Katz 1957). In short, social communication creates the potential for modest amounts of political expertise to go a long way in enhancing the performance of democratic politics.

But are people able to render valid judgments regarding the expertise of others? Do they discriminate among associates based on individual levels of expertise? Or is the social communication of political expertise swamped by other considerations, most particularly by the presence or absence of shared political perspectives between individuals? What are the implications for political deliberation and for the enhancement of political capacity on the part of individuals and electorates?

This article focuses on (1) the criteria that people employ in making judgments with respect to the political competence of other individuals, (2) the consequences of these judgments for the frequency of political discussion with particular individuals, and (3) the resulting implications for the

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effectiveness of collective deliberation among citizens. The analysis is based on a study of political communication during the 1996 election that includes interviews with both halves of discussion dyads occurring naturally during the campaign.

Citizen Expertise and Democratic Politics

Political discussion among citizens is a central feature of democratic politics, and a defining ingredient of a concerned citizen is the willingness to enter into a process of collective deliberation with other citizens. Actively engaged citizens do not go it alone—they do not engage in the political process as isolated individuals. They communicate, they argue, and they accumulate political information through an ongoing process of social interaction (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). But what are the consequences of this collectively deliberative process? And are these consequences beneficial to the informed exercise of citizenship and to the functioning of democratic politics?

The civic potential of collective deliberation is jointly contingent on: (1) the ability of citizens to make discriminating judgments regarding the political expertise of other individuals, and (2) the use of political expertise as a selection criterion in the communication of political information. If citizens do not know an expert informant from an ignorant one, they would be unable to sort out credible analyses and analysts from incredible ones, and hence the effect of political discussion on collective levels of information and expertise would be compromised. Even if citizens *do* recognize political expertise among others, this recognition can have little consequence unless it becomes a criterion in the selection of political discussants. The underlying problem is thus twofold: the extent to which people actually recognize the presence of knowledge and expertise among others; and the extent to which they seek out information and informants based on perceived levels of expertise.

If people *are* able to recognize a worthy political analyst when they encounter one, the political capacity of the electorate might be enhanced by collectively efficient patterns of deliberation and communication—by the purposefully constructed patterns of interdependence that exist among citizens. For example, Downs (1957) argued that political discussion is an efficient way to minimize the information costs of political engagement. Rather than undertaking extensive and exhaustive research regarding every political issue, individuals quite reasonably acquire such information on the cheap by collecting it from politically knowledgeable individuals who hold compatible political biases. Thus, according to Downs (p. 229), sensible people search out *well-informed* associates who possess *compatible* political orientations, with the consequence that citizens become efficiently informed—both individually and collectively.

What are the alternative selection criteria that individuals might invoke? First, and in partial contrast to Downs, Calvert (1985) argues that information can be more useful if it is acquired from someone with whom the recipient *disagrees*. Taking account of this alternative viewpoint, a crucial condition may be the recognition of the informant's political bias, regardless of whether the informant holds an agreeable or disagreeable viewpoint (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). And the relationship between agreement and the expected utility of political information becomes an open question.

Second, citizens may choose to discuss politics with people who are politically agreeable, *not* based on the expected utility of communicated information, but rather based on a preference for agreeable social exchange (see Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, chapter 7). Such an explanation fits quite well within a cognitive dissonance interpretation of political communication (Festinger 1957). To the extent that politically inspired disagreement is dissonance producing, people are likely to avoid encounters that produce disagreement, and the political implications are quite important. If people avoid disagreement, the vitality of political deliberation is compromised, and the diffusion of political information is truncated. Rather than a full airing of issues and perspectives, political communication and deliberation produces informational inbreeding among politically like-minded citizens (see Lodge, Taber, and Galonsky 1999).

Finally, and as Downs suggests, citizens may communicate with others based (at least in part) on perceived levels of political expertise. The underlying and persistent problem relates to the prior question of whether individuals know an expert when they see one! People may respond to the discomfort of disagreement by overestimating the political expertise of those with whom they agree, and underestimating the political expertise of those with whom they disagree (Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979; Lodge, Taber, and Galonsky 1999). Once again, the implications for democratic politics are not encouraging. While people may encounter disagreement, they dismiss alternative views by rationalizing disagreement on the basis of a discussant who is imputed to be politically ignorant.

Hence, if citizens do not recognize political expertise, or if rates of political communication are independent from perceived levels of political expertise, political

communication among citizens is less likely to enhance the political capacities of the electorate, either individually or in the aggregate. Conversely, if individuals are more likely to talk about politics with those whom they judge to be politically expert, *and* if these judgments are an adequate reflection of reality, the political conversation and communication that occurs among citizens might indeed sustain a process of genuine deliberation—a discussion of politics on its merits, informed by countless conversations among citizens, and weighted by the acknowledged political capabilities of expert informants (Barber 1984; Fishkin 1991). None of this disputes the modest incidence of knowledgeable individuals within the electorate (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Rather, it suggests the conditions of individual interdependence that might yield a collective enhancement in citizenship capacity—the conditions under which a modest amount of knowledge might go a relatively long way in guiding the actions of citizens.

Data and Research Design

In order to address these issues empirically, the analysis employs information on: individual citizens, their discussion networks, their judgments regarding the political expertise of the individual discussants who make up these networks, the frequency with which they perceive discussing politics with particular discussants, and objective measures regarding the political expertise of these discussants—measures obtained by interviewing the individuals who make up the networks. These data are taken from a 1996 election study conducted by the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University. The study includes two separate samples: a sample of main respondents (N = 2,174) drawn from lists of registered voters, combined with a one-stage snowball sample of these main respondents' discussants (N = 1,475). The main respondent sample is drawn from the voter registration lists of two study sites: (1) the Indianapolis metropolitan area defined as Marion County, Indiana; and (2) the St. Louis metropolitan area defined as the independent city of St. Louis combined with the surrounding (and mostly suburban) St. Louis County, Missouri.

Interviews were conducted over the course of the campaign, beginning in March of 1996 and ending in January of 1997. The pre-election main respondent sampling plan was to complete interviews with approximately forty main respondents each week before the election, equally divided between the two study sites. After the election, an additional 830 respondents were interviewed, once again divided between the St. Louis and Indianapolis metropolitan areas. Discussant interviews were completed at a rate of approximately thirty interviews each week during the pre-election period, with an additional 639 interviews conducted after the election. For the pre-election main respondent interviews, the associated discussant interviews were completed within two subsequent interview weeks of the main respondent interview. After the election, both main respondent and discussant interviews were completed as rapidly as possible.

Every respondent to the survey was asked to provide the first names of not more than five discussion partners. A random half of the sample was asked to name people with whom they discuss "important matters"; the other half was asked to name people with whom they discuss "government, elections, and politics" (Burt 1986; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt et al. 1998b). After compiling a list of first names for not more than five discussants, the interviewers asked a battery of questions about each discussant. At the end of the interview, we asked the main respondents for identifying information that might be used to contact and interview their discussants. Based on their responses we completed 1,475 discussant interviews, employing a survey instrument that was very similar to the instrument used in the main respondent interview. [1]

The main respondents were asked to judge each discussant's level of political expertise: "Generally speaking, how much do you think (first name of discussant) knows about politics? A great deal, an average amount, or not much at all." The answers to these questions serve as the measures of *perceived* political expertise regarding particular discussants. One part of our analysis is primarily devoted to understanding the factors that influence these evaluations, and a natural place to begin is with a battery of questions designed to measure *objectively defined* levels of political knowledge on the part of individual discussants (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993). The analysis employs an introductory statement followed by a three-question battery that is administered to both main respondents and discussants at the end of their respective interviews:

- We are interested in knowing how well the media and the schools help people in understanding what's going on in politics. To help us do that, we'd like to ask you some questions about politics. Many people don't know the answers to these questions, so if there are some you don't know, just tell me and we'll go on.

[1] Additional information regarding the sample design and response rates can be found in Huckfeldt, Sprague, and Levine 2000.

- Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not? Is it the President, the Congress, or the Supreme Court?
- Next, what are the first ten amendments in the Constitution called?
- How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto?

In addition to these knowledge questions, the analysis employs a range of information about both the main respondents and the discussants, based on the main respondents' perceptions of the discussants, as well as the self-reports of main respondents and discussants.

Judgments Regarding Political Expertise

What are the conditions that give rise to the communication of political expertise, and to what extent are citizens able to recognize the presence of expertise among others? An important argument suggesting that we should *not* trust individual judgments regarding the expertise of others is anchored in cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957). Consider the situation in which Tom correctly recognizes that his discussant, Dick, holds an opinion different from his own. One alternative would be for Tom to form a negative assessment of Dick's expertise that would, in turn, allow him to disregard Dick's opinion. Thus, even though Tom correctly recognizes that Dick disagrees, he forms a negative evaluation of Dick's expertise, driven by the fact that Dick is not smart enough to adopt Tom's own (presumably) correct views!

This argument is quite compelling, particularly in light of the fact that disagreement is perceived to occur quite frequently within communication networks. At the end of the campaign, after the election was over, 38 percent of the dyads in the post-election sample involved a main respondent who did not perceive agreement with the discussant. The likelihood that any given individual would have at least one associate with whom they disagree is correspondingly higher. In situations such as these, where people frequently recognize the presence of disagreement, one might expect individuals to construct explanations that account for the divergence of political preferences among others (Ross, Bierbrauer, and Hoffman 1976), and imputed ignorance is an eminently plausible candidate. Hence, two explanatory variables are included in the ordered logit models of Table 1 to address whether the communication of political expertise depends on agreement between the main respondent and the discussant. One dummy variable measures *objectively defined* agreement between the self-reported presidential candidate preferences of the main respondent and the discussant, and a second measures the main respondent's *perception* that the discussant holds the same candidate preference.

In addition to disagreement, a range of other explanatory factors that might be prime suspects in attenuating or enhancing the social communication and recognition of political expertise are addressed in Table 1. The obvious and perhaps naïve hypothesis is that perceptions of political knowledge and expertise are, in fact, driven by political knowledge and expertise! But this raises the issue of how expertise should be measured.

Three discussant expertise measures are included in the analysis: the number of correct answers the discussant scored on the three-item political knowledge battery, the discussant's level of education, and the discussant's reported level of interest in the election campaign.[2] The knowledge battery provides the most obvious measure of political expertise, but factual knowledge is perhaps only one element of expertise, broadly defined. If political expertise is to be perceived in the context of political discussion, communication skills may be equally important, and the discussant's educational level provides a measure of these skills. Moreover, even well-educated citizens who are knowledgeable about the formal institutions and structures of government might demonstrate higher levels of expertise to the extent that they are engaged by the political process—to the extent that they are interested in politics and public affairs.

Two other discussant measures are included in the model: a measure of the discussant's (self-reported) partisan extremity and the discussant's network location. First, partisan opinions communicate more clearly and hence perhaps more knowledgeably than moderate ones (Huckfeldt et al. 1998a). Second, a dummy variable is included to index the location of a discussant within an explicitly defined political network. Recall that a random half of the main respondent sample was asked with whom they discuss "important matters," and the other half was asked with whom they discuss "government, elections, and politics." To the extent that political discussion is an activity that takes place within substantively specialized networks of interaction, we might see higher levels of imputed expertise to be associated with the discussants located in these networks.

[2] The question is, "Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you? Are you very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in the 1996 political campaigns?"

TABLE 1 The Main Respondent's Perception of the Discussant's Political Knowledge by the Discussant's Objectively Defined Knowledge, Interest, Education, and Partisan Extremity, and by Various Other Factors

(Ordered logit models. T-values for coefficients and standard errors for cutting point thresholds are shown in parentheses.)

	With Interactions	Without Interactions
objectively defined discussant knowledge	.37 (2.53)	.36 (5.08)
discussant interest	.75 (3.94)	.74 (8.05)
discussant education	.11 (3.75)	.11 (3.75)
discussant partisan extremity	.14 (2.22)	.14 (2.21)
objectively defined main respondent knowledge	.02 (.14)	.01 (.17)
main respondent interest	.06 (.31)	.04 (.48)
main respondent education	–.004 (.13)	–.004 (.14)
main respondent partisan extremity	.02 (.30)	.02 (.30)
perceived agreement by main respondent	.31 (2.18)	.31 (2.18)
objectively defined agreement	.29 (2.06)	.29 (2.06)
political network name generator	.02 (.21)	.02 (.21)
main respondent interest X discussant interest	–.01 (.09)	
main respondent objective knowledge X discussant objective knowledge	–.005 (.08)	
threshold (1)	1.08 (s=.60)	1.04 (s=.49)
threshold (2)	4.88 (s=.62)	4.84 (s=.51)
N =	1310	1310
chi^2/df/p =	222/13/.00	222/13/.00
pseudo R^2 =	.10	.10

Perceived discussant knowledge: main respondent's judgment regarding how much the discussant knows about politics; 1=not much at all, 2=an average amount, 3=a great deal

Objectively defined knowledge: number of correct answers to political knowledge battery (range is 0–3)

Education: years of school based on self-report (range is 6–10)

Interest: 0 = "not much interested" in the 1996 campaign; 1="somewhat interested;" 2= "very much interested"

Partisan extremity: 0=independent or non-partisan; 1=independent leaning toward Democrats or Republicans; 2="not strong" Democrat or Republican; 3=strong Democrat or Republican

Perceived agreement by main respondent: 1=main respondent perceives that the discussant supports the same presidential candidate as the main respondent; 0=absence of perceived agreement

Objectively defined agreement: agreement regarding candidate preference where 1=agreement based on self-reports, 0=absence of agreement

Political network name generator: 1=respondents asked for the first names of people with whom they discuss "government, elections, and politics"; 0=respondents asked for the first names of people with whom they discuss "important matters"

Finally, any simple effect due to discussant expertise may be, in fact, the spurious consequence of (1) a pattern of association in which politically expert individuals tend to cluster together and (2) a tendency of politically expert individuals to infer expertise among others. Hence, several characteristics of main respondents are included as explanatory variables as well: the political knowledge of the main respondents, as well as their education, political interest, and partisan extremity. In addition, two interaction variables are included to evaluate whether the perception of expertise is *jointly* contingent on the objectively defined expertise of *both* the main respondent *and* the discussant. The first is the multiplicative product of main respondent and discussant interest, and the second is the product of main respondent and discussant knowledge.

What does the analysis show? As the first column model of Table 1 indicates, all three discussant expertise measures, as well as the measure of discussant partisan extremity, produce statistically discernible coefficients. [3] The measure of objectively defined agreement and the measure of perceived agreement both produce discernible coefficients. In contrast, none of the main respondent characteristics produce discernible coefficients, and neither do the interaction measures or the measure for location within an explicitly defined political network. Even though the interaction variables do not produce discernible coefficients, they are highly correlated with both discussant and main respondent measures for interest and knowledge. Hence, we reestimate the model absent the interaction variables in the second column of Table 1. The reestimated model does not produce any substantial change in interpretation, although the t-values for discussant knowledge and interest are substantially increased.

Thus, after *objective* measures of discussant expertise are taken into account, there is little evidence here to suggest that political communication networks are differentiated from more generalized communication networks on the basis of *perceived* expertise. Moreover, politically expert main respondents are not any more or less likely to recognize expertise among others. In contrast, the main respondents *are* more likely to perceive that a particular discussant is politically knowledgeable if: the discussant scores higher on the political knowledge battery; the discussant has a higher level of education; the discussant is more interested in the election campaign; the discussant is a more extreme partisan; the main respondent perceives agreement regarding the candidates; and both the main respondent and the discussant actually share the same candidate preference.[4]

How important are these various effects? Based on the second column model estimates of Table 1, we sequentially vary regressors one at a time to predict the probability that the main respondent perceives the discussant to know "a great deal" about politics, while we hold the other regressors constant at mean or typical values.[5] Perceived agreement, objectively defined agreement, interest, objectively defined knowledge, and partisan extremity are varied across the their entire observed ranges, while education is varied between twelve years of school (a high school graduate) and eighteen years of school (a masters degree).[6] The approximate effects on the probability of perceiving the highest level of discussant knowledge are thirty-one points for political interest, twenty-two points for objectively defined discussant knowledge and fourteen points for education. In contrast, the combined effect for actual and perceived agreement is twelve points, and the effect for partisan extremity is nine points. Thus, *each* of the discussant expertise measures demonstrates an impact that either surpasses or approximates the combined effect of actual and perceived agreement.

How does the combined effect of actual and perceived agreement compare to the *cumulative* effect of discussant expertise? For respondents who correctly perceive agreement with a discussant, the combined effect of discussant expertise (interest, objective knowledge, and education) on the probability of perceiving a discussant to be highly knowledgeable is fifty-nine points. In con-

[3]Each discussant appears only once in the resulting matrix of dyads, but some main respondents appear multiple times—1475 discussants and 872 main respondents. In the analyses of this article, a correction for clustering produces minor and inconsequential differences in standard error estimates, and hence the original estimates are used (Rogers 1993).

[4]An alternative explanation for the importance of disagreement focuses on differences in long-term partisan orientations. Adding the party identification of the main respondent and the discussant to the model, along with their multiplicative interaction, failed to produce a pattern of discernible effects. More importantly, it produces a collinearity problem with the measures of candidate agreement, increasing standard errors for coefficients and thereby yielding statistically indiscernible coefficients for all the agreement measures. In short, our data do not allow us to examine whether disagreement is primarily important in terms of longer-term orientations or shorter-term opinions and evaluations.

[5]Discussant and main respondent educational levels are held constant at fifteen years; objectively defined main respondent and discussant knowledge levels are held constant at two correct answers; partisan extremity measures for the discussant and the main respondent are held constant at two or weak partisan; main respondent and discussant interest levels are held constant at one or "somewhat"; perceived and objectively defined candidate agreement are held constant at one or agreement; and the name generator is held constant at one ("government, elections, and politics").

[6]Varying education between twelve and eighteen years keeps us from inflating the effect of education. Less than 3 percent of the discussants report less than a high school education (values 11 and lower), and only 6 percent report doctoral degrees (a value of 19).

trast, when discussants are politically interested, knowledgeable, and well educated, the combined effect of actual and perceived agreement is fourteen points.

In summary, the naïve hypothesis receives the most dramatic support. The best predictors of *perceived* expertise are the measures of *actual* expertise. Discussants with higher levels of interest, knowledge, and education are perceived to be more knowledgeable by their associates, and the cumulative effects tend to swamp the combined effect of actual and perceived agreement.

Expertise and Discussion

Are citizens more likely to discuss politics with people whom they believe to be politically expert? If not, it becomes quite immaterial whether individuals are able to recognize the presence of political expertise among others. After asking respondents how many days each week they talked with the particular discussant, interviewers went on to ask: "When you talk with (discussant first name), do you discuss political matters: often, sometimes, rarely, or never?" This latter question provides a measure of political discussion frequency.

The first-order relationship between the perceived expertise and the reported frequency of political discussion is quite pronounced: 38.6 percent of respondents who believe that their discussants know a great deal report the highest frequency of political discussion, but only 6.4 percent of those who believe their discussants know "not much at all" report the highest frequency. While individuals are more likely to report frequent discussion with discussants whom they believe to be politically expert, the question arises, does this relationship persist when other explanations are taken into account? A variety of other factors might be related both to perceived frequency and to perceived expertise, and hence the relationship may be a spurious consequence of other circumstances and conditions.

First, political partisans are likely to be engaged by the debates and dramas of politics, and hence they are more likely to engage in political discussion. Partisans are *also* more likely to be perceived as being politically knowledgeable, and thus partisanship may help to explain the relationship between perceived expertise and reported frequency of discussion.

A second alternative explanation is that the effect of perceived knowledge is the (familiar) residue of political agreement and shared political orientations. That is, perhaps we talk more with people who share our viewpoints, and perceived expertise is simply the rationalization for this behavior. From the standpoint of reducing cognitive dissonance, it is easier for one person to avoid or dismiss another's disagreeable viewpoints if she believes that the other person does not know much anyway. Thus, once we take account of these shared orientations, the independent effect of perceived expertise may be reduced dramatically.

Finally, if political experts are more likely to talk about politics, the effect of perceived expertise on discussion frequency may be an artifact due to patterns of association, or to the unintended consequences of association with talkative experts, or both. On the one hand, expert main respondents may talk about politics a great deal with everyone, and most of their discussants may also be politically expert. Conversely, the frequent political discussions of expert discussants may mean that main respondents are often engaged in political conversations with these expert discussants, regardless of whether they perceive the discussants to be expert.

These alternative explanations are addressed in the first column model of Table 2, where an ordered-logit model is used to regress political discussion frequency on: the perceived knowledge of the discussants; the knowledge and interest of the main respondents; the extremity of partisanship for the main respondents and the discussants; objectively defined and subjectively perceived agreement regarding presidential candidates; the location of the discussant within an explicitly defined political network; and the mean frequency of political discussion reported by the discussants within *their* discussion networks. What do the results of this model suggest?

First and perhaps most importantly, none of the alternative explanations serves to compromise the relationship between the perceived knowledge of the discussant and the reported frequency of discussion with the discussant. Indeed, the only other factors that produce discernible coefficients are the knowledge and interest of the main respondent; the main respondent's perception of agreement with the discussant regarding presidential candidates; and the discussant's average frequency of discussion.[7] Thus, the analysis suggests that main respondents are more likely to discuss politics with discussants whom

[7]A closely related argument is that discussion frequency might be enhanced only in situations where a politically expert main respondent perceives the discussant to be expert as well. When we include a multiplicative interaction between perceived discussant knowledge and objectively defined main respondent knowledge, the interaction fails to produce a discernible effect, and its strong association with main respondent knowledge serves to render that effect indiscernible. An interaction between perceived discussant knowledge and main respondent interest similarly undermines the effect of main respondent interest without yielding a discernible interaction effect. In neither instance does the interaction serve to compromise the effect of perceived discussant knowledge. Hence, due to the collinearity problems with the measures of main respondent expertise, we do not include these interaction variables.

TABLE 2 The Main Respondent's Reported Frequency of Political Discussion with the Discussant by the Perceived Expertise of the Discussant and by Various Other Factors

(Ordered logit models. T-values for coefficients and standard errors for cutting point thresholds are shown in parentheses.)

	Perceived Expertise of Discussant Based on: simple report of main respondent	perception instruments
perceived discussant knowledge	1.04 (9.63)	—
perceived knowledge instrument	—	1.26 (3.85)
residual perception instrument	—	1.03 (9.16)
discussant partisan extremity	−.05 (.76)	−.05 (.76)
main respondent knowledge	.13 (2.15)	.11 (1.88)
main respondent interest	.51 (5.79)	.53 (5.88)
main respondent partisan extremity	−.01 (.17)	−.02 (.28)
perceived agreement by main respondent	.41 (2.92)	.42 (3.01)
objectively defined agreement	.13 (.98)	.12 (.91)
political network name generator	.08 (.70)	.09 (.81)
discussant's frequency of discussion	.36 (3.52)	.34 (3.18)
threshold (1)	.84 (s=.41)	1.25 (s=.71)
threshold (2)	3.43 (s=.39)	3.84 (s=.70)
threshold (3)	6.22 (s=.42)	6.64 (s=.72)
N =	1203	1198
chi^2/df/p =	237/9/.00	239/10/.00
pseudo R^2 =	.09	.09

Frequency of political discussion: main respondent's frequency of political discussion with discussant; 4=often, 3=rarely, 2=sometimes, 1=never.

Perceived knowledge instrument: predicted perception of discussant expertise based only on Table 1B estimates and objectively defined discussant expertise – knowledge, interest, education.

Residual perception instrument: residual perception of knowledge, absent objective predictors, calculated as the reported perception minus the perceived knowledge instrument.

Discussant's frequency of discussion: mean frequency of political discussion reported by the discussant in his or her own network of association

they perceive to be politically knowledgeable and agreeable. And the frequency of discussion is further enhanced if the main respondents are knowledgeable and interested and if the discussants report more frequent political discussion within their own discussion networks. Before examining the magnitudes of various effects, we consider sources of bias in perceptions of expertise.

Subjective Filters on Objective Expertise

One citizen cannot act on the basis of another's expertise unless he or she correctly perceives that expertise to exist. But as we saw in Table 1, perceptions of political expertise are not *wholly* driven by the political engagement, knowledge, and education of the discussant. Hence we confront a problem that is rooted in processes of social and political cognition. And the question arises, how important is the discussant's objectively defined expertise once it is subjectively filtered through main respondent perceptions? This question is addressed by creating a *perceived knowledge instrument* that measures the unbiased portion of the respondent's perception—a measure of respondent perception that is driven by the objectively defined expertise of the discussant and purged of any other effects. This measure is based on the second column estimates of Table 1, with discussant education, interest, and knowledge set to the actual levels of the particular discussant and all other explanatory variables held constant at mean values. Hence, this resulting instrument is wholly defined in terms of discussant interest, education, and knowledge, based on the Table 1 model.[8]

In addition, a *residual perception instrument* is also constructed by subtracting the perceived knowledge instrument from the main respondent's actual perception. The residual difference is that part of the perception that is driven by all factors other than knowledge, interest, and education. It is perhaps an oversimplification to infer that the entire residual basis of judgment is misperceived—main respondents may have alternative means for forming judgments regarding the expertise of their associates that are entirely valid. But these measurement procedures provide a useful way to separate out the systematic and objective components of expertise perceptions from the biased, subjective, and idiosyncratic components.

These two instruments replace the simple measure of perceived knowledge in the second column model of Table 2, and both measures produce statistically discernible coefficients that lie in the expected direction. The second column model produces a pattern of results that closely parallels those of the first column model. Our primary concern is with the systematic component of the perception, and our goal is to compare the magnitudes of effects that arise due to the systematic component with the magnitudes of effects that arise due to the reported perception.

Magnitudes of effects in the two models are compared in Figure 1 by focusing on predicted probabilities of frequent discussion across the observed range of perceived discussant expertise, main respondent interest, and perceived agreement.[9] In Parts A and B, perceived expertise is based on the main respondent's report. In Parts C and D, perceived expertise is based on the instrument that measures that part of the reported perception that is driven by the knowledge, interest, and education of the discussant.

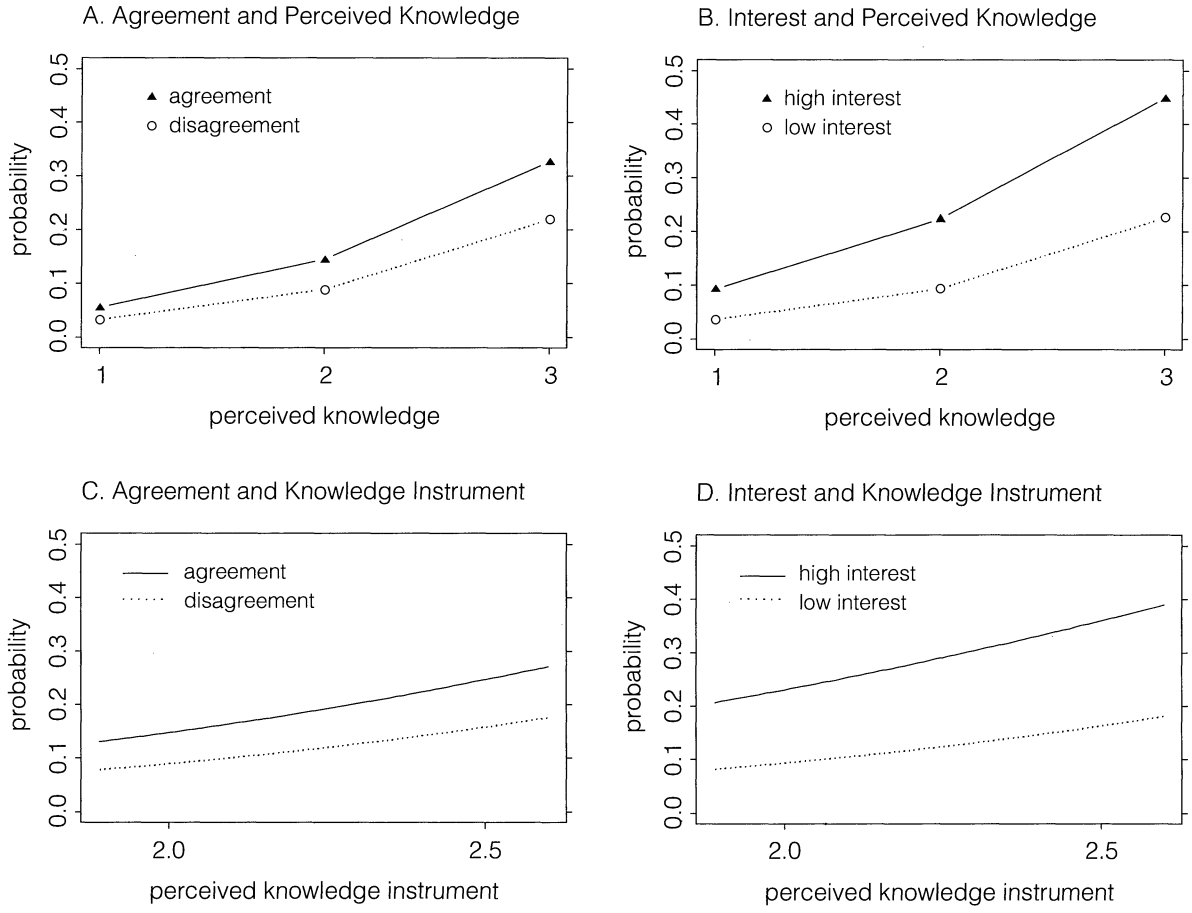
Not surprisingly, the effects of perceived expertise are reduced by employing the instrument rather than the main respondent's own perception, but the effects remain substantial. In Part C of the figure, the perceived knowledge instrument produces effects that are approximately 50 percent larger than the effects due to agreement. In Part D of the figure, the perceived knowledge instrument produces effects that are comparable to the effects that arise due to the political interest of the main respondent. In short, even when perceptions of expertise are defined wholly in terms of objectively defined expertise measures, the perceived expertise of the discussant continues to be an important factor in determining the frequency of political discussion between main respondents and discussants.

If people seek out experts as political discussants, how is it that nonexperts are able to find experts with whom to communicate? Part of the answer would seem to be that the experts end up talking more frequently in *all* their relationships. Does this mean that the pattern of effects in Table 2 and Figure 1 are circumstantial rather than intentional? That is, people with higher levels of political expertise are more likely to talk about politics, and thus we may find ourselves quite frequently and unintentionally talking politics with our expert associates.

[8] A respondent's score on the new measure is the sum of each alternative evaluation regarding discussant knowledge (1 = not much at all, 2 = an average amount, 3 = a great deal) multiplied by the probability that the respondent chooses that evaluation. A linear regression of the new measure on discussant education, interest, and knowledge produces an R^2 of .999.

[9] Main respondent interest takes on values of 0 (not much) and 2 (very much). Perceived agreement takes on values of 1 for agreement and 0 otherwise. Perceived discussant knowledge is 1 (not much) and 3 (great deal). The perceived expertise instrument varies from 1.66 to 2.63, but to avoid exaggerating its effect, this distribution is truncated in Figure 1 by approximately 2.5 percent on both tails, leaving a range of 1.89 to 2.60.

FIGURE 1 Predicted Probability That the Main Respondent "Often" Discusses Politics with the Discussant as a Function of Perceived Discussant Knowledge, Agreement Regarding Presidential Candidates, Main Respondent Interest in Politics, and Perceived Knowledge Instrument



Source: Parts A and B are taken from the first column estimates of Table 2; Parts C and D are taken from second column estimates of Table 3. In all parts of the figure, main respondent knowledge is held constant at 2; main respondent and discussant partisanship are held constant at 2; the name generator is held constant at 1 ("government, elections, and politics"); and the discussant's mean frequency of political discussion is held constant at 3 ("sometimes"). In Parts A and C, main respondent interest is held constant at 1. In Parts B and C, perceived and objective agreement are held constant at 1. The perceived knowledge instrument is estimated on the basis of the column 2 estimates in Table 1, with discussant interest, education, and knowledge varied according to discussant attributes, and all other factors held constant at mean sample values.

This is a compelling argument that speaks to the pervasive effects of political expertise, but the impact of perceived expertise persists even when a control is included for the average frequency of political discussion reported by the discussants. Hence, it may very well be that increased overall frequencies of discussion with political experts are the products of both circumstance and intention. At the same time, it would be difficult to argue that these increased frequencies are the products of circumstance alone. Moreover, an interpretation based on circumstance does not fundamentally alter the implications of the present analysis, even though it might suggest a partial shift from purpose and intent to an agent-based explanation dependent on setting and context (Axelrod 1997).

Discussant Expertise and Communication Effectiveness

What difference does all this make for the quality of political deliberation? This analysis is concerned with the extent to which communication is predicated on the ba-

TABLE 3 Accuracy of Main Respondent's Judgement Regarding Discussant's Vote Preference as a Function of Discussant's Political Expertise, and by Various Other Factors

(Logit model. T-values for coefficients are shown parentheses.)

	coefficient	(t-value)
constant	–5.31	(6.51)
discussant:		
expertise index	.37	(2.45)
partisan extremity	.32	(3.21)
partisan accessibility	–.02	(.61)
candidate evaluation extremity	.27	(3.59)
main respondent:		
expertise index	.29	(1.86)
partisan extremity	.09	(.89)
partisan accessibility	–.09	(2.44)
candidate evaluation extremity	–.002	(.03)
objectively defined agreement	1.05	(5.31)
network agreement with discussant	1.82	(6.82)
perceived discussion frequency	.21	(1.72)
political network name generator	.37	(2.14)
campaign week	.05	(2.98)
primary season (dummy coded)	.68	(1.68)
discussant is:		
main respondent's spouse (dummy coded)	.68	(1.91)
some other relative (dummy coded)	.32	(1.38)
non-relative close friend (dummy coded)	.04	(.16)
	N = 994	
	chi^2/df/p = 356/19/.00	
	pseudo R^2 = .29	

Expertise index: sum of knowledge, education, and interest, where each component item is linearly transformed to a scale of 0 to 1

Partisan accessibility: response time in the metric of seconds to party identification question, with precision to hundredths of seconds

Candidate evaluation extremity: absolute value of difference between Clinton evaluation and Dole evaluation, where each evaluation ranges from 5(most favorable) to 1 (least favorable)

Network agreement with discussant: proportion of remaining network perceived by main respondent to hold the same candidate preference reported by discussant

Campaign week: week of interview, where 1 is the first week of March and 36 is the week of the election or later

Primary season: 1=interview occurred before the first week of July; 0=other

sis of expertise, thereby enhancing the capacity of citizens as it increases the effectiveness of political communication. How might the effectiveness of communication be conceived? One measure of effectiveness is the accuracy with which political messages are communicated. If Tom and Dick talk about politics at work, and Tom believes that Dick supports Clinton when he actually favors Dole, then political deliberation has quite clearly misfired. The question thus becomes, are the preferences of politically expert discussants more likely to be perceived accurately? Does discussant expertise serve to increase communication effectiveness?

A logit model is employed in Table 3 to assess the accuracy of the main respondent's perception regarding the discussant's vote choice. In addition to scales measuring the objectively defined expertise of the discussant and the main respondent,[10] a number of explanatory variables are

[10]Discussant and main-respondent expertise measures are formed as the sum of education, interest, and knowledge where each component item is linearly transformed to a scale of 0 to 1. The range of the resulting measures is from .08 to 3 for both main respondents and discussants. The item correlations for the discussant scale are .60 for education, .72 for interest, and .76 for knowledge. Corresponding correlations for the main respondent scale are .63, .72, and .75.

included that have been shown to predict communication accuracy and effectiveness in other analyses (Huckfeldt, Sprague, and Levine 2000). First, and in keeping with this earlier work, the results show that the extremity of the discussant's partisanship and candidate evaluations serve to increase accuracy, as does the accessibility of the main respondent's partisanship.[11] Second, accuracy is increased by the presence of agreement between the main respondent and the discussant, and it is also increased when the discussant holds a preference that is perceived by the main respondent to be more widespread in the remainder of her social network. Third, main respondents are more likely to perceive preferences accurately as the campaign progresses.[12] Fourth, accuracy is enhanced when discussants are located in explicitly defined political discussion networks. A number of other explanatory factors produce marginally discernible effects on accuracy, including the expertise of the main respondent, discussants who are married to the main respondent, the reported frequency of political discussion, and a time of interview that occurred during the primary season.

Finally, in an extension of the earlier work, these results show that accuracy is increased by discussant expertise—Tom is more likely to understand the political message Dick is conveying to the extent that Dick is politically expert.[13] In contrast, the measure of main respondent expertise produces an effect that lies in the expected direction but is only marginally discernible.

Quite clearly, the expertise of the discussant is not the only factor driving communication effectiveness, and thus it becomes important to compare magnitudes of effects among various factors. With other explanatory variables held constant at mean or typical values, the probability of accurate perception increases by twenty points across the range of discussant expertise. In contrast, agreement between the main respondent and discussant regarding candidate preferences increases the probability by twenty-two points; and the combined effect of agreement between the main respondent and the discussant, as well as between the discussant and the main respondent's perception regarding the remainder of the main respondent's network, increases the probability by fifty-five points. Finally, being a strong partisan rather than an independent increases the probability by twenty-three points; and the combined effect of both partisan extremity and candidate evaluation extremity is forty-seven points.[14]

Does discussant expertise increase the effectiveness of communication? Yes. Is it the most important factor? Certainly it is not, and in the context of well-known and well-documented communication biases, this is not surprising. At the same time, discussants can have little direct influence if their preferences are misperceived (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Thus, by engaging in political communication with politically expert discussants who make their preferences clearly understood, citizens increase the likelihood that their opinions and viewpoints will be influenced. And in this way the preferences of politically expert discussants are weighted more heavily in the collective deliberations of democratic politics.

The important result is thus three-fold. First, citizen judgments regarding the political expertise of others are based in reality, driven primarily by actual levels of expertise. Second, citizens communicate more frequently with those whom they judge to be politically expert. Third, this asymmetrical quality of communication, in which people rely more heavily on locally defined experts, increases the effectiveness of communication as well as the influence of politically expert citizens.

Conclusion

The analysis suggests that political communication within networks of social relations serves to enhance the individual and collective capacities of citizens to play meaningful roles in democratic politics. First, citizens are

[11]The accessibility of partisanship is based on the main respondent's response time to the party identification question. See Huckfeldt, Sprague, and Levine (2000).

[12]The campaign week ranges from 1 to 36, beginning with the first week of interviewing in early March of 1996 and culminating at the week of the election. All post-election interviews are also assigned the value of 36. The dummy variable is included for the primary season (ending in June of 1996). Because candidates were not fully determined during this period, interviewers asked main respondents which party's candidate their discussant would support.

[13]Note that this effect is independent of discussion frequency, and an interaction between discussion frequency and discussant expertise fails to produce a discernible effect ($t = .08$). If the control for discussion frequency is eliminated, the magnitude of the effect due to discussant expertise is only slightly enhanced. Hence, the effect of discussant expertise can be seen as operating primarily through the clarity rather than the frequency of the political message.

[14]In calculating the range of discussant expertise, I eliminate approximately 2.5 percent at either tail in a conservative effort to avoid overstating its effects. The resulting range is from .79 to 2.95. The range of partisan extremity is 0–3; and the range of candidate evaluation extremity is 0–4. The values for the presence or absence of disagreement between the main respondent and the discussant is 0 or 1; and the range on the proportion of the remaining network perceived to hold the discussant's self reported preference is 0–1. The mean or typical values are: 2.13 for discussant expertise; 2.08 for main respondent expertise; 2 for the partisan extremity measures; 2 for candidate evaluation extremity measures; 2.0 for the partisan accessibility measures; 1 for perceived discussion frequency; 25 for campaign week; 0 for primary season; and 0 for the spouse, other relative, and close friend dummy variables.

more likely to talk with others whom they believe to be politically expert, quite independently from either the reality or the perception of political disagreement. Indeed, the effect of perceived discussant expertise on the frequency of political communication is much more substantial than the effect of perceived agreement. Second, when citizens judge their discussants to be politically expert, objectively defined characteristics of the informants are likely to be driving their assessments, with important consequences arising due to the discussants' political knowledge, education, and partisan extremity. In contrast, the perception of political disagreement produces a relatively minor and inconsequential effect on the perception of expertise. Hence, patterns of discussion and social communication are motivated by the reality-based judgments of participants regarding the informational value of alternative informants, and hence the political relationships between and among citizens are inherently asymmetric with respect to political expertise.[15]

What are the substantive implications of the analysis for democratic politics? First, at the level of collective electorates, the whole really *is* more than the sum of its parts. Or to anchor this argument in its Durkheimian roots: "... the group formed by associated individuals has a reality of a different sort from each individual considered singly" ([1897]1951, 320). Hence, one of the reasons that "democracy works" is that its citizens do indeed rely on "horizontal networks of relations" for meaningful political engagement (Putnam 1993). In a political society where individuals are isolated and cut off from one another, democratic politics will either operate suboptimally or it will cease to function at all (Mondak and Gearing 1998). The intellectual corollary for political science runs along similar lines: a scholarly treatment of citizenship that focuses solely on isolated individuals ignores the collective potential of democratic politics; and it underestimates the capacity of citizens who are located in complex networks of political interdependence (Axelrod 1997).

Second, the capacities of individuals to render meaningful judgments regarding the expertise of alternative information sources is quite striking. People are not lost in a cloud of misperception when they engage in social communication about politics, and neither is the information they obtain simply a mirror of their own preferences. Rather, they recognize a valuable source of political information when they encounter one, and they proceed to utilize it more fully, quite independently of whether they share the source's political bias.

Finally, what does the analysis suggest for the nature and consequence of political disagreement among and between citizens? The comparative informational value of political communication within and between groups holding different preferences is a complex and perhaps not fully resolved question (Downs 1957; Calvert 1985), and hence any empirical expectation is correspondingly clouded. Some people in some settings may seek out political discussants holding compatible political biases. Other people in other settings—and perhaps the *same* people in other settings—may very well seek out discussants with divergent political biases, particularly if these individuals are judged to be politically expert. In short, the empirical effect demonstrated here—a modestly positive relationship between perceived agreement and reported frequency of discussion—may indeed be a net effect that summarizes heterogeneous responses and strategies of information acquisition.

Moreover, the modest and positive effect of agreement on perceived expertise does not necessarily reflect a response anchored in dissonance reduction. Rather, it may reflect an individual's quite reasonable (or at least comprehensible) assessment regarding a discussant who is judged to make faulty political judgments. In short, one need not assume that *any* effect arising due to disagreement is necessarily a response to the psychic discomfort of political disagreement, and there is little evidence of such psychic discomfort anywhere in this analysis. The perception of disagreement is relatively widespread; the presence of disagreement does not extinguish political communication; and judgments regarding expertise are primarily driven on the merits of the particular case, with only a minor effect due to disagreement.

Thus, political disagreement among and between citizens may not be particularly important in the production of cognitive dissonance. As Ross and his colleagues (1976) suggest, motivated conformity is most powerful when disagreement is most difficult to explain. In terms of the Asch experiments, the subjects who were unaware of the experimental manipulation had no plausible explanation for the seemingly faulty judgments of those individuals who reported that the long line was shorter than the short line. In contrast, a multitude of possible explanations is available to account for a discussant's wrong-headed political viewpoints, thereby rendering the existence of political disagreement entirely comprehensible and not particularly troubling. Joe likes Clinton because he is a Democrat. Sally likes Gingrich because she is a conservative, or because she is from Georgia, or because she likes outspoken people. In short, disagreement is more easily accommodated when it can

[15] In keeping with these asymmetries, other analyses demonstrate a perhaps surprising level of nonreciprocity among the members of similarly defined political discussion dyads (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, 167–168), where only 15 percent of nonrelative discussants and 21 percent of nonspouse relative discussants name the main respondent as *their* discussant.

be explained, and in the day-to-day world of democratic politics, disagreements based on subjective judgments of issues and candidates may frequently approach the point of infinite explicability.

The evidence presented here sustains the role of socially interdependent deliberation for the vitality of democratic politics. Not only do people exchange biased viewpoints through a process of social interaction, but they also acquire information and expertise. None of this is intended to deny the crucial role of political bias within patterns of political communication, but the focus on bias should not obscure the individually and collectively enhanced capacity of citizens that is produced through horizontal patterns of social communication.

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