Japanese Journal of Political Science 1 (2) 171–195 Printed in the United Kingdom © Cambridge University Press 2000

# Political Expertise, Interdependent Citizens, and the Value Added Problem in Democratic Politics

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**Abstract** In this paper we are primarily concerned with political expertise, interest, and agreement as factors that might accelerate the flow of information between citizens. We examine dyadic exchanges of information as a function of two primary sets of factors: the characteristics of the citizens in the dyadic relationship and the characteristics of the larger network within which the dyad is located. Moreover, we compare political communication within dyads across several different national contexts: Germany, Japan, and the United States. We assume that citizens are more likely to obtain information from people they trust, but why do they trust some individuals more than others? Is the frequency of communication predicated on shared political preferences? Or is it based on one citizen's assessment regarding the political expertise of another? The answers to these questions have important implications for whether social communication and social capital create added value in the collective deliberations of democratic politics.

A primary building block of social communication in politics is the dyadic relationship between two citizens. To the extent that information is conveyed through political discussion, these dyadic exchanges form an important link that

The authors wish to acknowledge the very helpful comments of John Campbell and the other participants at the 'Losing Faith in Politics' conference held in Quebec City on 5–8 August, 2000. This conference was made possible by the generous support of the Center for Global Partnership of the Japan Foundation and the Pacific Basin Research Center. We are also grateful to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for financing the German study, to the Suntory Foundation for the support of the 1998 Tokyo study, and to the National Science Foundation of the United States for its support of the American studies.

serves to educate and inform the electorate regarding politics. But not all relationships are important to all citizens, and some relationships are more important than others. In this paper we are primarily concerned with interest, expertise, and agreement as factors that might accelerate the flow of information between individuals. We examine these dyadic exchanges of information as a function of two primary sets of factors: the characteristics of the citizens in the dyadic relationship and the characteristics of the larger network within which the dyad is located. Moreover, we understand and compare political communication within dyads across several different national contexts: Germany, Japan, and the United States.

We are particularly interested in the extent to which politically expert citizens assume influential roles in the communication of public opinion. Within this context, several questions motivate the analysis. What are the characteristics of citizens and social relationships that encourage higher levels of political communication among and between citizens? In particular, how important are individual levels of political interest and expertise in stimulating higher levels of political discussion within dyads? How important is the presence or absence of shared political preferences? Are politically expert discussion partners more or less influential depending on the political expertise of other discussion partners? Finally, are there important cross-national differences in the level and structure of political communication within citizens' social networks?

Our analysis is based on election studies conducted in Germany, Japan, and the United States during the 1990s. Most American analyses and all German analyses are based on studies conducted as part of the Cross-National Election Project. The American study was conducted following the 1992 presidential election campaign, and the German study was conducted during the course of the 1990 election campaign. Because this was the first pan-German election following reunification, we treat the West German and East German samples as arising from separate national contexts. Most Japanese analyses are based on a Tokyo study conducted in 1998, but we make some comparisons to a 1993 Japanese national study that was also conducted as part of the Cross-National Election Study. The 1998 Tokyo study is particularly helpful because, unlike the 1993 Japanese national study, it includes information on the political knowledge of discussion partners. Thus, in terms of cross-national comparison, we carry out the analyses separately for four different national contexts: East Germany, West Germany, Japan, and the United States.

## Does social capital create added value in democratic politics?

In his path-breaking analysis of Italian politics, Robert Putnam (1993) directs our attention to the importance of social capital for the production of civic capacity. Building on the work of Coleman (1988), he defines social capital in terms of the 'horizontal networks' of social communication that occur among citizens. And he traces the successes and failures of Italian political institutions to locally based

organizations that encourage and sustain democratic governance by bringing democratic citizens into recurrent and persistent relationships with one another.

Putnam's work has stimulated intense levels of intellectual and scholarly activity, but most of the work has focused on locally based organizations and institutions that are seen as being crucial to the creation of social capital – to the creation of these horizontal networks of association. Hence, in his most recent work, Putnam (2000) focuses on the very important empirical issue of whether these institutions and organizations are declining, and hence whether American citizens are more likely to be 'bowling alone'. Putnam's work has stimulated comparative analyses of other political systems to see whether there is a more general decline in the institutions that are thought to be responsible for the creation of social capital. Interestingly, analyses of the British (Hall 1999) and Japanese cases (Inoguchi 2000) are not uniformly supportive of the thesis.

Rather than focusing on the institutions and organizations that are thought to sustain social capital, this paper's analysis is directly focused on the underlying networks of social relations among citizens, and the potential of these networks for enhancing the political capacity of electorates. In placing the focus on social networks, we are invoking an analytic tradition that traces to the work of Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). More recent manifestations of this analytic tradition appear in the work of Granovetter (1973, 1985), Burt (1992), Lauman and Pappi (1976), Knoke (1990), Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995), Ikeda (1997), and perhaps most importantly in the contributions of Coleman (1988). We set aside the question of whether the institutions that encourage and sustain social capital are in decline, focusing instead on the circumstances under which horizontal networks of relations among citizens should be expected to create added value in the deliberations of democratic politics.

Why might these horizontal networks of relationships be so important to the enhancement of civic capacity? According to Coleman (1988), structured patterns of social interaction convert social capital into human capital by taking the resources and skills present within larger social collectivities and making them available to the individual members of these collectivities. Within the context of democratic politics, individuals are able to draw on the available social capital in paying the costs of democratic citizenship. Coleman's work focuses on various forms of social capital, two of which – information and trust – are particularly important within the context of citizen decision making.

A vital ingredient of democratic politics is the fact that citizens act interdependently in reaching political decisions and forming political judgments (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). In particular, they obtain information regarding political choices and probable outcomes from one another, but within the boundaries of environmental availability, they are discrimi-

nating in the selection of information sources (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). In this way, the social flow of information within electorates occurs through relationships that are anchored in political trust. One citizen obtains information from another citizen, and she places some value on that information. To the extent that citizens trust their associates' opinions and judgments, they are more likely to engage in political communication, and they are more likely to take the socially transmitted opinions seriously.

But what are the conditions that give rise to political trust among citizens? And do these conditions create value added as a consequence of socially communicated information within democratic electorates? The answers to these questions are not obvious, but they are extremely important.

Depending on the criteria that citizens impose on the selection of political discussion partners, we might expect to see very little in the way of enhanced civic capacity. If citizens are unable to tolerate disagreement – if they do not trust individuals who hold views different from their own – we would expect individuals to be clustered in cozy groups of politically agreeable and homogeneous soul mates. Situations such as these are poorly suited for introducing individuals to new and different information (Granovetter 1973; Burt 1992), and hence they are perhaps poorly suited for creating enhanced civic capacity. In contrast, if individuals are motivated to seek out others who are politically expert, but with whom they need not necessarily agree politically, then we might expect political influence to be predicated on expertise, and the potential for added value as a consequence of social communication is correspondingly heightened. Indeed, the most influential citizens would be those individuals who are, within the constraints of a particular local setting, better equipped and better prepared to comment on politics and public affairs.

Some readers may find this discussion to be somewhat curious – why would it not be obvious that citizens place a higher value on information obtained from people who know more about the subject area? The answer to this question *is* less than obvious, primarily because we have come to accept, perhaps without critical evaluation, the overriding importance of cognitive dissonance in patterns of political communication among citizens (Festinger 1957). If the most important goal of citizens is to reduce dissonance, then we might expect them to avoid political disagreement at all costs, with the expertise of the political informant relegated to a secondary consideration.

Just as important, an interpretation anchored in cognitive dissonance calls into question the ability of one citizen to make judgments regarding the political expertise of another. One way to avoid dissonance is to avoid disagreement, but avoiding disagreement is sometimes impossible or impractical. In these situations, another powerful tool for resolving dissonance is to call into question the expertise of the person who is offering the disagreeable preference or judgment. Hence, judgments regarding the expertise of others become rationalizations for the presence or absence of agreeable viewpoints – it becomes easier to tolerate a coworker's disagreeable

viewpoints if he is judged to be politically incompetent. On this basis, social scientists have frequently questioned the ability of citizens to recognize expertise when they encounter it.

In summary, the basis of political trust among interdependent citizens is an open question. We assume that citizens are more likely to obtain and place value on information if it comes from people they trust, but why do they trust some individuals more than others? Is trust predicated on shared political preferences? Or is it based on a candid assessment of political expertise? Unless we arrive at answers to these questions, it remains unclear whether social communication and social capital create added value in the collective deliberations of democratic politics. We examine these questions in the context of citizen efforts aimed at reducing the costs of political information.

### Political Information and social communication

Political information is expensive, and becoming informed requires a significant investment of personal resources (Downs 1957). Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the primary cost of meaningful involvement in democratic politics is the cost of obtaining and making sense of relevant information. The complexities and nuances of politics and policy elude even the most sophisticated analysts of public affairs. Viewed in the context of individual obligation and responsibility, the burden might quite easily become overwhelming (Teixeira 1992). Fortunately for the health and vitality of democratic politics, citizens possess individually efficient means, both cognitive (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989) and social (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948), for coping with these demands. Our concern is with these latter social mechanisms for obtaining and processing information, and particularly with political discussion as a device for becoming informed.

The genius of social communication as a means for obtaining political information is that it transforms a sometimes daunting challenge into an occasion for social exchanges that are frequently pleasant and beneficial for both parties. Politics becomes a medium of exchange in much the same way as baseball, soccer, or automobiles serve as topics of lively, recreational discussion (Fiorina 1990). Hence the 'costs' of obtaining information are not only reduced but quite frequently transformed into benefits.

The enjoyable aspects of political discussion should not disguise its instrumental basis, however. First, not all people enjoy talking politics. Second, even among those people who do enjoy political communication, no one enjoys talking politics with everyone – some people's views are best avoided. Third, some people enjoy enormous opportunity for social communication regarding politics, while others have more difficulty finding suitable information sources (Finifter 1974; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Finally, the give-and-take of political communication is perhaps not easily accommodated within all cultural and social settings, and hence the utility of social communication for becoming politically informed might vary as well. As a conse-

quence, the flow of political information within a population is highly non-random, responding to the purposes of citizens and the opportunities and constraints imposed by particular settings.

### Expertise, information, and interdependence

The focus of this paper is on one aspect of these non-random information flows – the role played by uneven distributions of political expertise among citizens in affecting dyadic exchanges of political information. We are primarily interested in whether the political whole is more than the sum of its individual parts – particularly whether political interdependence among citizens enhances the quality of the collective deliberations of democracy. As a consequence, the analysis of this paper focuses on the relationships that exist among political interest, political expertise, political communication, and social interdependence within the electorate.

Individual citizens realize individual efficiencies of scale by depending on other citizens as sources of political information. Rather than studying the newspaper reports regarding politics and policy, they obtain useful encapsulations from other individuals, thereby reducing the time and effort that would otherwise be required to collect and analyze the information themselves. Indeed, these efficiencies have become even more important in the context of other changes that are taking place in modern democratic societies. As the alignment between political parties and social groups is attenuated (Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1984), the individual guidance received from party labels and group loyalties is reduced as well. For example, as the alignment between the working class and parties of the left is reduced, the political information and guidance conveyed either by a party label or by working-class membership is also reduced. In a similar way, the development of professional norms in the news media typically means that these sources of political information become less partisan and more evenhanded in their coverage of the news. In so doing, they often become less useful to the average citizen for the simple reason that the information being conveyed is divorced from an easily recognized bias. While objectively rendered information is certainly valuable for some purposes, it may also be more difficult to process and integrate within an individual citizen's own set of biases and values. (For comparison, see Lodge and Hamill 1986.) And therein may lie the attraction of 'talk radio' and other manifestations of the de-professionalization of media news.

As a consequence, socially communicated political information is perhaps even more important in the modern age for the simple reason that it is personalized and hence carries with it a recognizable bias. This bias makes it easier for citizens to classify and integrate the information, and thus social communication is an entirely efficient source of political guidance. At the same time, however, what is efficient for the individual citizen is not necessarily efficient for the aggregate practice of democratic politics. In other words, whether the quality of a collective decision is enhanced by interdependence among citizens is an open question that depends on the criteria invoked by citizens when they select social sources of political informa-

tion. In particular, to the extent that citizens turn to knowledgeable informants who demonstrate higher levels of political expertise, we might expect the collective deliberations of democracy to be enhanced. Our fundamental question thus becomes, do interdependent citizens produce collective decisions that are superior to the collective decisions that would be reached if they were independent actors?

## Political discussion in four national contexts

We explore the utility and practice of political discussion in four different democratic contexts: among Tokyo residents in the context of 1998 House of Councilors election, among Americans in the context of the 1992 presidential election, and finally among East and West Germans in the context of the 1990 election – the first German national election following unification. Once again, we treat the East and West Germans as residing in two different political contexts for the simple reason that the election occurred so quickly following unification, before the political and social integration of the two separate Germanies had really begun.

The data base for the analysis is built on the efforts of several coordinating research teams that undertook surveys in each of the elections. The Japanese team surveyed 552 Tokyo citizens, the German team surveyed 1,340 West German citizens and 692 East German citizens, and the American team interviewed 1,318 respondents. The American interviews were conducted over the phone using a CATI system, while the German interviews were conducted in person. In the Tokyo study a field worker delivered a questionnaire to the respondent's home, personally asked the respondent to complete it, and returned several days later to pick up the completed questionnaire. We also make brief use of the 1993 Japanese national survey that was based on personal interviews, and the 1996 Indianapolis–St. Louis study that was based on telephone interviews. Most importantly for our purposes, each of the studies used social network 'name generators' that produced information regarding the respondent's range of social contacts.

Respondents in the American and German studies were asked for the first names of as many as four other people with whom they discussed 'important matters' (Pappi 1996). Many respondents were also asked for the name of one other person with whom they discussed politics. And thus an egocentric social network is defined that might include as many as five different individuals. In the American survey, all respondents were asked the name of a political discussant even if they were unable to provide the name of *any* 'important matters' discussants. In contrast, the East German field staff only asked for the name of a political discussant if the respondent had provided the names of four important matters discussants. In the Tokyo study, respondents were asked to provide the information on their spouse and three additional contacts. Thus, in order to increase comparability for the purposes of this paper, we eliminate the fifth named, explicitly political discussants in the German and American studies. Please note, however, that *any* of the discussants are potential sources of political information, and the goal of this paper

is to consider the circumstances that enhance the political roles of particular discussants.

After providing a list of discussant names, the main respondents were asked a battery of questions regarding each of the discussants. Included in this list of questions was: how often the main respondents discussed politics with each of the discussants, main respondent perceptions regarding how much each of the discussants knew about politics, the nature of main respondent relationships to the discussants, and more. The answers to these questions provide the raw material for our analysis, and thus the analysis rests on the main respondent perceptions of these discussants. Such perceptions are, of course, subject to distortion based on the characteristics and contexts of the main respondents (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). At the same time, and for purposes of this paper, these perceptions form the reality that is perhaps most important – reality as it is perceived and experienced by the main respondents.

Our primary unit of observation is the dyadic relationship between the main respondent and the discussant, and thus information regarding a main respondent will be included in multiple observations – in each discussant relationship reported by the main respondent. At the same time, we examine the dyads at several levels of analysis. First, we consider the combined network of dyadic relationships for each main respondent. Second, we consider the relationships as independent dyads within the context of various main respondent and discussant characteristics. Third, we examine them within the contexts of the main respondents' entire discussion networks. And, finally, we analyze the dyads within each of the national political contexts. This sort of multi-level methodological approach poses some interesting challenges that will be addressed in the analyses that follow.

## Cross-national comparisons of networks

An important set of preliminary issues to our analysis is related to the cross-national comparability of the networks within which citizens are imbedded. That is, can the results of the network name generators provide information on patterns of social relationships that can be compared across national boundaries? We believe that they can, but we also believe that analysts and readers must be cautious in their efforts and interpretations.

In the 1990 German studies, the 1992 American study, and the 1993 Japanese study, respondents were asked for the first names of the people with whom they discuss 'important matters.' On the basis of this initial probe, as many as four discussants were recorded, and Table 1 shows the number of discussants identified by respondents in each of these national samples. Quite clearly, the number of discussants identified by the respondents varies quite dramatically. The American sample appears to be extremely social, and the Japanese sample appears to be composed of social isolates, with the German samples falling somewhere between. Indeed, the Japanese sample includes a very high percentage of respondents who

**Table 1.** *Numbers of discussants named by respondents*

| Numbers of discussants | 1990 West Germany | 1990 East Germany | 1993 Japan | 1998 Tokyo | 1992 United States | 1996 Indianapolis/ St. Louis |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **0** | 16.0 | 20.4 | 33.6 | 7.8 | 8.6 | 20.0% |
| **1** | 22.7 | 15.9 | 34.7 | 16.3 | 17.7 | 13.7 |
| **2** | 23.6 | 22.1 | 17.1 | 5.4 | 15.3 | 17.6 |
| **3** | 18.9 | 18.1 | 8.0 | 22.1 | 18.7 | 14.8 |
| **4** | 18.9 | 23.6 | 6.7 | 48.4 | 39.7 | 34.0 |
| *N* | 1,340 | 692 | 1,333 | 552 | 1,318 | 2,174 |
| **Mean number** | 2.0 | 2.1 | 1.2 | 2.8 | 2.6 | 2.3 |
| **Mean number for those naming 1 or more** | 2.4 | 2.6 | 1.8 | 3.1 | 2.9 | 2.9 |

*Note:* In this and following tables, analyses are based on the first four discussants named by the main respondent. For purposes of this table, main respondents who named five discussants are treated as having named four.

name no one at all, and among those Japanese respondents who do name at least one discussant, the mean number of discussants is much lower.

In addition to this obvious interpretation, two other interpretations for the Japanese results must also be considered. The Japanese results may be due to the social psychology of the survey response, where Japanese are less willing to provide information to interviewers and where Americans may be the most willing. Alternatively, these results may be due to the field procedures adopted by the survey research units that undertook the studies. In order to address these alternatives, we consider two other studies in Table 1 – the 1998 Tokyo study and the 1996 Indianapolis–St. Louis study.

In the 1998 Tokyo study, a random half of the sample were asked about spouses and the three people with whom they have most frequent contact. The other half of the sample were asked about spouses and the three people with whom they are most intimate. In each of the other studies in Table 1, respondents were *not* asked to provide any particular number of discussants, and hence the Tokyo study is unique among these studies in this regard. What are the consequences of asking for a specific number of discussants? Perhaps not surprisingly, the respondents make an attempt to comply, and thus the Tokyo sample provides the *highest* number of mean discussants for any of the studies considered in Table 1. (In analyses not shown here, we see no difference in the number of discussants provided in response to the two different name generators, intimates and frequent contacts, used in the Tokyo study.) In summary, these data do not support interpretations which suggest that the Japanese are social isolates or that they are unwilling to cooperate with survey interviewers.

How should we interpret the high levels of sociability among respondents to the 1992 American study? For purposes of comparison, the final column of Table 1 shows the numbers of discussants provided by respondents to a 1996 election study undertaken in Indianapolis and St. Louis. Here we see that the percentage of respondents providing no names is much higher, lying close to the levels of the 1990 German studies. In contrast, the mean number of discussants provided among respondents who named at least one discussant is very similar across *all* the studies with the exception of the Japanese national study. Half of the respondents in Indianapolis and St. Louis were asked for the names of important matters discussants, and the other half was asked about the people with whom they discuss government, elections, and politics. The numbers of discussants were slightly smaller for the politics name generator, but the differences are not profound. What are we to make of these results? Are residents of Indianapolis and St. Louis less sociable than the country as a whole? Did American sociability decline precipitously between 1992 and 1996?

Most of these results are due to the field procedures adopted by the particular survey research organization. While the 1992 American national study was conducted by the same organization that conducted the 1996 Indianapolis–St. Louis study, interviewers were trained to be less aggressive in obtaining answers in the 1996 study, and hence it is not surprising that the numbers of discussants declines between the two studies. In short, while network size is often an important variable among the respondents to a particular study, it is does not provide a useful point of comparison between the studies. In short, caution is appropriate in the analysis of cross-national data on social networks, particularly when differences are observed in patterns of relationships among countries. In most of what is to come, however, similarities overwhelm differences.

## Knowledge and discussion

As a first step in the analysis of political expertise, we examine the simple relationship between knowledge and discussion within each dyad for each national sample. We are interested in the extent to which political discussion occurs more frequently within dyads where the main respondent believes that the discussant is politically expert. Indeed, this relationship provides the key to our analysis because it speaks directly to the value-added question of social communication in politics. If the frequency of political discussion with particular associates occurs randomly with respect to political knowledge and expertise, then the value added to the political expertise of individual citizens through the medium of social communication is likely to be reduced. Alternatively, if citizens pursue political discussion more vigorously with associates whom they believe to be politically expert, then the knowledge base of democratic politics is enhanced as a direct consequence of the interdependence that exists among citizens.

The simple cross-tabulation of political discussion frequency by the political

**Table 2.** *Frequency of political discussion by perceived expertise of discussant*

| | West Germany knowledge | | | East Germany knowledge | | | Tokyo knowledge | | United States knowledge | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | low | medium | high | low | medium | high | no | yes | low | medium | high |
| **Most frequent** | 3.7 | 10.7 | 32.7 | 29.4 | 45.9 | 64.4 | 3.6 | 21.0 | 8.5 | 12.5 | 40.1 |
| | 23.6 | 53.2 | 50.4 | 41.2 | 45.5 | 29.7 | 25.9 | 45.8 | 35.3 | 55.0 | 44.4 |
| | 39.6 | 28.5 | 14.3 | 21.2 | 8.5 | 5.0 | – | – | 45.1 | 28.8 | 12.6 |
| **Least frequent** | 33.1 | 7.6 | 2.6 | 8.2 | 0.1 | 1.0 | 70.5 | 33.2 | 11.2 | 3.7 | 3.0 |
| *N* | 381 | 1,525 | 721 | 85 | 802 | 522 | 891 | 609 | 224 | 1,874 | 841 |

knowledge of the discussant is shown for each of the four samples in Table 2. We need to be quite clear regarding what these two variables measure. For each discussant named by a main respondent, the interviewer asked the main respondent a series of perceptual questions. One question asked the main respondents, when they got together with each of the discussants, how frequently they talked about politics. Another question asked for the main respondent's perception regarding how much the discussant knows about politics. Thus Table 2 shows the relationship between two different main respondent perceptions, and in this instance the perception provides the important focus of attention. We want to know whether political discussion is purposeful in the sense that citizens choose to discuss politics more frequently with people whose opinions they respect. In this substantive context, even if we had an objective measure of political expertise, it is more meaningful to ask whether the main respondents engage in political discussion with people whom they *perceive* to be politically expert. An alternative question in this regard is, of course, whether the main respondent's perception of the discussant's expertise survives a reality check, and we will address this question below.

As Table 2 shows, discussion is more frequent with politically expert discussants in all four national contexts, and the relationship is uniformly strong. In West Germany and the United States, there is more than a ten-fold increase in the rate at which people report frequent political discussion between the lowest and highest levels of discussant knowledge. And in all four national contexts, the most frequent category of discussion increases by approximately 30 per cent across the knowledge categories.

The increase is smaller in Tokyo, primarily because the Tokyo respondents were simply asked whether or not the discussant was politically knowledgeable, producing a two-point rather than a three-point scale. Similarly, the frequency of political discussion question for the Tokyo respondents is based on a three-point scale rather than a four-point scale. Important differences appear in the frequency of political discussion, even with this truncation in the range of the political knowledge variable. The most frequent category of discussion increases by approximately 17 per cent as a function of political knowledge.

The biggest *difference* across the four samples occurs in the marginal distributions for discussion frequency. While there is little aggregate difference in the main

respondents' assessments of their discussants' expertise levels across the national contexts, there is a substantial difference in the distribution of discussion frequency, particularly with respect to the former East Germany. Consider the percentage reporting the highest frequency of political discussion with the most expert discussant. This varies from 21 per cent among the Tokyo respondents to 64 per cent among the East German respondents. Indeed, more than half of all the East German main respondents report the highest frequency of political discussion, while the highest frequency is only reported by 11 per cent of the main respondents in Tokyo, 16 per cent of the main respondents in the former West Germany, and by 20 per cent of the Americans.

How can we account for the higher frequency of discussion among the East Germans? Again, the difference may simply be the consequence of variations in field procedures. Whenever there is a cross-national difference in marginal frequencies, one must entertain the possibility that it is due to measurement variation. In this instance, however, the East and West German survey instruments were virtually identical, even though different field organizations carried out the surveys.

A second explanation for different levels of discussion frequency is temporal variation in the political environment of the former East Germany. Recall the time and context of this survey – the first pan-German election following the fall of the Wall and the unification of Germany in 1989. The magnitude of political change taking place in East Germany might serve as an explanation for these high levels of political communication. But the problem with such an explanation is, of course, that the same high level of communication is not reported in West Germany, even though the changes being realized in the West were also quite profound.

A final explanation is that higher levels of political communication were anchored in the political environment of the former East Germany. In a socialist system, where government and politics are crucial elements in virtually every aspect of social and economic life, it might come as no surprise that many more discussions would be perceived to be political in content. Thus, one of the major differences between the East and West Germans would have been the boundaries that divided politics from the rest of daily life, and this difference is reflected quite vividly in the everyday social interaction patterns of the respondents. Quite interestingly, however, these differences in the reported frequency of discussion appear to have little consequence for the *relationship* between expertise and discussion frequency. Regardless of the overall level of discussion, citizens discuss more frequently with people whom they view to be politically knowledgeable.

### Alternative explanations for discussion frequency

Political expertise is not, of course, the only factor that explains the choice of a political discussion partner, and it is not the only factor that enhances the frequency of political discussion within dyads. A number of other factors might either inhibit or encourage the social flow of political information between associates. First, some

**Table 3**. *Frequency of political discussion by perceived political agreement*

| | West Germany agreement? | | East Germany agreement? | | Tokyo agreement? | | United States agreement? | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | no | yes | no | yes | no | yes | no | yes |
| **Most frequent** | 13.6 | 19.8 | 48.2 | 58.9 | 6.5 | 25.0 | 15.2 | 25.3 |
| | 46.9 | 50.2 | 41.9 | 33.8 | 29.1 | 47.3 | 48.5 | 52.0 |
| | 27.5 | 24.0 | 8.8 | 6.7 | – | – | 29.5 | 20.5 |
| **Least frequent** | 12.1 | 6.0 | 1.1 | .6 | 64.4 | 27.7 | 6.7 | 2.2 |
| *N* | 1,692 | 973 | 945 | 491 | 923 | 220 | 1,568 | 1,392 |
| **Percentage of dyads where agreement is is perceived** | 36.5% | | 34.2% | | 27.7% | | 47.0% | |

citizens are engaged by politics in ways that stimulate political discussion and communication quite apart from the actual or perceived characteristics of potential discussion partners. Indeed, a good definition of a 'political junky' is someone who discusses politics frequently with anyone who happens to be nearby, regardless of the potential discussant's level of political expertise.

Second, a number of social and cultural factors may also be responsible for enhanced or diminished levels of political communication. Some evidence suggests that politics tends to be defined culturally as a male domain, and social communication regarding politics tends to be male dominated (Brickell, Huckfeldt, and Sprague 1995). Other evidence suggests that the spouse may be an especially important source of political information and discussion, and there is some disagreement regarding the relative importance of intimate versus non-intimate associates as sources of political information and discussion (Huckfeldt *et al*. 1995).

Finally, and perhaps most important, people may pursue political discussion with some individuals while they avoid it with others. To the extent that individuals seek out discussants with political biases similar to their own (Downs 1957), we would expect higher levels of political homogeneity within political discussion networks. Moreover, and from a different standpoint, if political disagreement is dissonance producing, we might expect individuals to reduce dissonance by avoiding political conversations with individuals who hold divergent political viewpoints (Festinger 1957). These potential effects are particularly important because they are directly related to the potential for a democratic dialogue within each nation. To the extent that citizens resist conversation across the boundaries of political disagreement, the diffusion of information, ideas, and viewpoints becomes severely truncated. Indeed, social communication becomes a means for reinforcing preconceptions rather than a means for becoming informed.

Hence, we give attention to the consequences of political disagreement for discussion frequency in Table 3. For each sample, we see that discussion is more frequent when the main respondent perceives agreement with the discussant

**Table 4**. *Frequency of political discussion with particular discussants by various explanatory variables (Ordered logit models)*

| | West Germany | | East Germany | | Tokyo | | United States | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | coefficient | t-value | coefficient | t-value | coefficient | t-value | coefficient | t-value |
| **Interest** | 0.58 | 11.72 | 0.44 | 7.34 | 0.35 | 6.13 | 0.74 | 11.63 |
| **Partisan extremity** | 0.01 | 0.58 | | | −0.06 | −0.87 | 0.04 | 1.99 |
| **Respondent = male** | 0.16 | 1.81 | 0.12 | 1.03 | 0.11 | 1.30 | 0.10 | 1.24 |
| **Discussant = male** | 0.24 | 2.59 | 0.07 | 0.56 | 0.09 | 0.99 | 0.19 | 2.46 |
| **Spouse** | 0.72 | 5.49 | 0.16 | 0.91 | 0.75 | 6.42 | 0.91 | 7.74 |
| **Non-relative** | 0.16 | 1.48 | 0.11 | 0.74 | −0.15 | −1.53 | 0.11 | 1.19 |
| **Co-worker** | 0.49 | 3.44 | −0.07 | 0.45 | −0.08 | −0.61 | 0.07 | 3.03 |
| **Agree on vote** | 0.33 | 3.67 | 0.33 | 2.70 | 0.58 | 5.73 | 0.42 | 5.58 |
| **Knowledge of discussant** | 1.02 | 6.33 | 0.88 | 2.88 | 0.75 | 5.55 | 1.29 | 6.32 |
| **Residual network knowledge** | 0.23 | 1.38 | −0.02 | 0.06 | 0.05 | 0.28 | 0.28 | 1.38 |
| **Knowledge interaction** | 0.01 | 0.09 | −0.12 | 0.57 | 0.18 | 0.78 | −0.17 | 1.12 |
| **Threshold(1)** | 0.94 | *s*=0.24 | −2.25 | *s*=0.49 | 1.83 | *s*=0.18 | −0.24 | *s*=0.29 |
| **Threshold(2)** | 3.08 | *s*=0.24 | 0.13 | *s*=0.42 | 3.24 | *s*=0.20 | 2.29 | *s*=0.28 |
| **Threshold(3)** | 5.96 | *s*=0.27 | 2.61 | *s*=0.42 | – | – | 4.95 | *s*=0.30 |
| *N* | 2,102 | | 1,290 | | 998 | | 2801 | |
| **chi$^2$/df/p** | 618/11/0.00 | | 149/10/0.00 | | 338/11/0.00 | | 617/11/0.00 | |
| **pseudo R$^2$** | 0.12 | | 0.06 | | 0.19 | | 0.10 | |

regarding vote choice. The size of this effect varies from 6 per cent for the West German sample to nearly 20 per cent for the Tokyo sample. In each case except the Tokyo sample, the simple effect of perceived knowledge is much larger than the simple effect of disagreement, but all these various effects merit joint consideration.

### Discussion frequency within dyads

We examine the importance of these various factors in Table 4, where an ordered probit model is used to regress the frequency of political discussion on a number of explanatory factors for each of the four samples. In order to account for the main respondent's level of political engagement, we include a measure of interest in the relevant election campaign, as well as a measure of partisan attachment for West German, Tokyo, and American respondents. Such a measure has little meaning in the East German context of 1990, where citizens were being introduced to a newly revised menu of partisan choices, and thus no partisanship measure is included for the East German respondents.

A number of other explanatory variables are also included to measure the relationship between the main respondent and the discussant – whether the discussant is a spouse, a non-relative, a co-worker. Two dummy variables measure whether the main respondent and the discussant are males, and an additional dummy variable is included for political agreement. In this context, the dyad is scored as agreeing if the respondent reports a vote preference that is the same as her perception regarding the discussant's preference. The dyad is scored as not agreeing in all other circumstances, including situations where the main respondent is not aware of the discussant's preference.

Finally, we include several political knowledge variables. One of these variables measures the perceived knowledge of the discussant within the dyad, a second measures the mean for the perceived knowledge among the other discussants in the network (the residual network), and a third measures the (multiplicative) interaction between these two variables.

The mean political knowledge in the residual network might be important in one of two different ways. Individuals who are imbedded within networks with high levels of political expertise might be stimulated to discuss politics more frequently with everyone they know, quite independently of the particular discussant's expertise. In other words, the main consequence of expertise may be to stimulate and sustain political engagement in a way that is general across social contacts. Alternatively, to the extent that people instrumentally pursue political discussion with experts, the likelihood that a main respondent will discuss politics with any particular individual might indeed be enhanced in circumstances where the residual network is *less* politically expert. That is, everything else being equal, I may be less likely to talk politics with any one of my associates to the extent that all my other associates are politically expert – to the extent that my network is rich in political information and knowledge. The interaction variable allows us to consider whether the consequence of a particular discussant's expertise depends on the distribution of expertise in the remainder of the network.

The first and most important conclusion to be reached on the basis of Table 4 is that the importance of discussant expertise is maintained even when we take account of these other factors. The second conclusion is that the main respondent's level of political interest and the presence of agreement within the dyad also produce consistently discernible effects in predicting levels of political discussion. While these three effects are general across the four samples, none of the other variables produce consistently discernible effects. Respondents are more likely to report frequent discussion with their spouses, except in East Germany. West Germans are more likely to discuss politics with co-workers, Americans are less likely, and there is no difference among East Germans and residents of Tokyo.

Several other effects are consistently absent across the four samples. Most importantly, no discernible effect is produced by either the mean level of knowledge within the residual network or by the interaction between discussant knowledge and

residual network knowledge. That is, the presence or absence of expertise on the part of one discussant has no effect on the absolute frequency of interaction with any other discussant, and hence the impact of discussant expertise is limited to a particular dyadic relationship.

Several caveats are in order with respect to the impact of the residual network. First, we are including any dyad in the analysis for which the main respondent has two or more dyadic relationships, and thus the residual network sometimes consists of only one discussant. If the analysis is restricted to larger networks, where the respondent has at least four discussants, we see a very different pattern of effects for the American sample. The perceived knowledge of *both* the particular discussant *and* the residual network produce positive effects on political discussion frequency, and the interaction produces a statistically discernible negative effect. This suggests that, at least in large American networks, the positive impact of discussant knowledge is attenuated as the level of expertise in the residual network is enhanced. Second, we are considering the *absolute* frequency of political discussion in Table 4, but as we will see, the analysis is substantially transformed when we consider the *relative* frequency of discussion with each discussant in the network.

### Magnitudes of effects

Thus, the three factors that yield consistently discernible effects across the four national samples are the expertise of the individual discussant, the presence or absence of agreement within the dyad, and the interest of the main respondent. The magnitudes of these effects on political discussion frequency are seen best in Figures 1 and 2. In Figure 1 we hold the main respondent and discussant preferences constant at agreement to consider the joint effects of discussant knowledge and respondent interest. In Figure 2 we hold interest constant at the sample mean to consider the joint effects of agreement and discussant expertise. All other explanatory factors, which show generally mixed effects across the four national settings, are held constant in drawing these figures: partisan attachment is set to the sample mean, discussant and main respondent gender are set to male, the relationship between the main respondent and the discussant is set to non-spouse, non-relative, and non-coworker. In each part of the figure, we consider the the probability that political discussion lies in the most frequent category.

As Figure 1 shows, both main respondent interest and discussant expertise produce substantial effects on the frequency of political discussion. Quite independently of the discussant's imputed expertise, the main respondent's own level of political interest produces an important effect on levels of political discussion. But discussant expertise also produces important variation in levels of communication. The main respondents report higher levels of political discussion with discussants whom they believe to be politically knowledgeable, and this effect is present in all four national settings.

The pattern of effects is very similar for West Germany, Tokyo, and the United

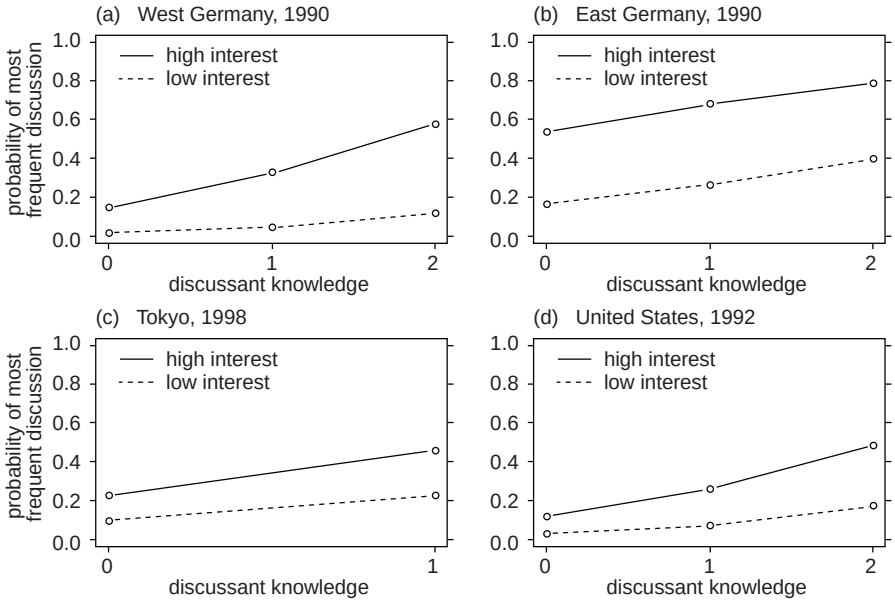


**Figure 1** Predicted probability of frequent political discussion within dyad, by respondent interest and discussant expertise.
Source: Table 4 estimates.

States. With all other factors held constant at typical values, discussion is much more likely to be frequent if the respondent both (1) reports a high level of personal interest and (2) perceives that the discussant is politically knowledgeable. If either of these conditions is absent, the frequency drops off precipitously.

The exception to this pattern of effects is the East German case. Among the East Germans, respondent interest is somewhat more important than discussant expertise. And the overall level of discussion is, as we have seen before, substantially higher.

Figure 2 shows that only modest effects arise due to political agreement across the four samples. The agreement effects are largest for the Tokyo sample, but even here the differences are relatively insubstantial, reaching a maximum of only 12 per cent. In contrast, the maximum difference among the Tokyo dyads due to political expertise is 20 points for those dyads in which agreement is perceived. In summary, the respondent's perception regarding the discussant's expertise is more important than the respondent's perception regarding the discussant's political preference. Respondents are more likely to discuss politics with disagreeable experts than with agreeable discussants who are politically inexpert.

Even after we take account of these various factors, important differences continue to persist in levels of political discussion across the four samples. In particular, the East German sample continues to show the highest frequency of political discussion, but cross-national variation in levels of communication do not alter the importance of either expertise or interest within national settings. Just as

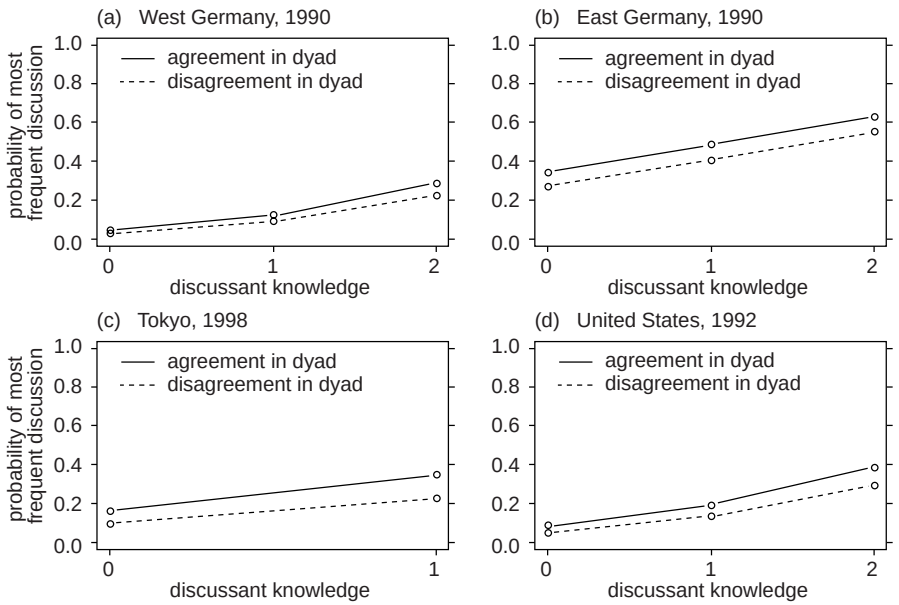


**Figure 2** Predicted probability of frequent political discussion within dyad, by political agreement and discussant expertise.
Source: Table 4 estimates.

important, there is no evidence in *any* of these settings to suggest that citizens are unwilling to discuss politics with associates holding divergent viewpoints. In short, the social flow of political information is not seriously truncated by political disagreement, and hence social communication regarding politics does not overwhelmingly depend on the political preferences of a potential discussant. Rather, the frequency of discussion *is* contingent on the perceived expertise of the potential discussant, and this enhances the likelihood that social communication regarding politics produces a more informed citizenry, as citizens upgrade their own levels of information and expertise by turning to informants whom they judge to be politically expert.

### Dyads in the context of other network ties

An additional issue with respect to this analysis is the frame of reference within which citizens judge the political competence of their associates. If all my associates are comparative literature professors whom I judge to be politically incompetent, it may be particularly consequential if I come to know someone whom I judge to be politically knowledgeable. If, on the other hand, all my associates are journalism professors whom I judge to be politically expert, then one more knowledgeable associate may not greatly add to my storehouse of political expertise. In short, a knowledgeable associate may be more valuable to the extent that *other* associates are *not* knowledgeable. Hence the *relative* frequency of political discussion with any

particular individual may be affected not only by the knowledge of that individual, but also by the mean knowledge level that exists among all associates.

This issue underlines the importance of multiple levels of observation: dyadic relationships in the context of participant characteristics, as well as the larger network of relationships within which the respondent is imbedded. For these particular purposes we are less interested in the network as a system of social relationships than we are in the network as a compositional context (Eulau 1986) – a context that circumscribes the main respondent's opportunities for social interaction. Main respondents who are imbedded in networks with very few politically expert individuals have correspondingly fewer opportunities for obtaining useful information than individuals located in networks with higher levels of political expertise. And hence one expectation is that informationally impoverished networks should indirectly heighten an individual's reliance on a politically expert associate.

The role of the larger network for the *absolute* frequency of political discussion was considered in Table 4, with little evidence to support its importance. In this section we switch our focus to the *relative* frequency of discussion. In particular, consider the case of an egocentric network with two discussants. The effect of any discussant's expertise is assumed to be the same across the network – indeed across all networks – and hence, in simplified form

$$D_i = a + bE_i,$$

and

$$D_j = a + bE_j,$$

where:

$D_i$ = the absolute frequency of discussion with the $i$th discussant

$E_i$ = the perceived knowledge of the $i$th discussant

$a$ = mean level of political discussion with a particular discussant, absent expertise

$b$ = the effect of discussant knowledge on the absolute frequency of discussion.

Correspondingly, the frequency of discussion with the $i$th discussant, relative to the frequency of discussion with the $j$th discussant, is

$$D_i - D_j = aE_i - aE_j.$$

Similarly for a larger network, the frequency of discussion with the $i$th discussant relative to the residual network is

$$D_i - [\Sigma D_k/K] = aE_i - a[\Sigma E_k/K],$$

where:

K = the number of discussants in the residual network.

In short, this algebraic exercise portrays symmetrical effects with reversed signs arising as a consequence of (1) the single discussant's level of expertise and (2) the mean level of expertise within the residual network.

There is nothing mysterious about any of this. Once we agree that political communication within dyads is enhanced by the imputed expertise of discussants, it follows quite directly that the relative importance of any discussant is contingent on

the general level of expertise within a citizen's *entire* network of social contacts. Hence, the effect of political expertise on the part of any individual discussant is generally symmetric and in an opposite direction to the effect of mean expertise in the remaining network. These informational symmetries arise due to the logic of interdependence within citizens' communication networks.

Thus, in the analysis of Table 5, we focus on the frequency of interaction with a particular discussant *relative* to other discussants in the network. In all other respects, Table 5 replicates the analysis of Table 4. As before, the models measure the distribution of knowledge within the dyad and the network as (1) the perceived knowledge of the particular discussion partner as well as (2) the mean level of perceived knowledge in the residual network. This revised model shows strong and nearly symmetric effects in the expected direction, both for the discussant's knowledge and for the mean level of knowledge among the members of the residual network. In each instance, the relative frequency of discussion with a particular discussant is enhanced by that discussant's knowledge and attenuated by the mean level of knowledge in the residual network. As expected, the effects are roughly symmetrical, where the magnitude of the effect due to the discussant's knowledge is comparable in size to the absolute value of the effect due to mean knowledge in the residual network. Indeed, if we eliminate the multiplicative interaction between the knowledge of the discussant and mean knowledge in the residual network, the effects are almost exactly symmetric.

Recall once again that the relative frequency of political discussion with a particular discussant is centered around the network mean – it is measured as a deviation from the network mean. As a consequence, individual level predictors of political discussion for the main respondent disappear as consequential factors; neither partisanship nor interest nor main respondent gender show any effect on discussion frequency because the mean frequency of discussion in each main respondent's network is taken into account in the construction of the measure. Characteristics idiosyncratic to the discussant and the relationship continue to be important, however, and thus we see that political discussion is relatively more frequent with spouses and male discussants on a consistent basis across all four samples.

### Can we trust citizen judgments?

Before concluding, it is important to address one last question. Are citizens able to recognize political expertise when they see it? We have seen that respondents are more likely to engage in frequent political discussion with individuals whom they judge to be politically expert. But can we trust their judgments? Or are these judgments seriously biased and distorted by factors related to the participants in the relationship?

The most obvious source of concern with respect to perceptual bias is related to the presence of agreement and disagreement. In particular, one dissonance reduction

**Table 5**. *Relative frequency of political discussion with particular discussants by various explanatory variables (Least squares models)*

| | West Germany | | East Germany | | Tokyo | | United States | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | coefficient | t-value | coefficient | t-value | coefficient | t-value | coefficient | t-value |
| **Interest** | −0.01 | 0.56 | 0.00 | 0.06 | −0.03 | 1.29 | −0.002 | 0.10 |
| **Partisan extremity** | −0.004 | 0.46 | | | −0.03 | 0.92 | −0.01 | 1.24 |
| **Respondent = male** | −0.04 | 1.28 | −0.03 | 1.11 | −0.03 | 0.77 | −0.01 | 0.44 |
| **Discussant = male** | 0.09 | 2.82 | 0.10 | 3.52 | 0.02 | 0.41 | 0.07 | 2.65 |
| **Spouse** | 0.32 | 7.48 | 0.12 | 2.96 | 0.55 | 9.43 | 0.45 | 10.75 |
| **Non-relative** | 0.04 | 1.12 | 0.05 | 1.41 | −0.03 | 0.56 | 0.06 | 1.91 |
| **Co-worker** | 0.11 | 2.42 | −0.06 | 1.68 | 0.11 | 1.73 | −0.03 | 3.16 |
| **Agree on vote** | 0.06 | 2.23 | 0.05 | 1.78 | 0.24 | 4.63 | 0.09 | 3.35 |
| **Knowledge of discussant** | 0.33 | 6.33 | 0.26 | 3.71 | 0.39 | 5.87 | 0.37 | 5.14 |
| **Residual network knowledge** | −0.32 | 5.89 | −0.20 | 2.70 | −0.37 | 4.78 | −0.36 | 4.85 |
| **Knowledge interaction** | 0.01 | 0.18 | −0.02 | 0.45 | −0.03 | 0.26 | −0.01 | 0.16 |
| **Constant** | −0.15 | 1.96 | −0.14 | 1.37 | −0.05 | 0.70 | −0.14 | 1.34 |
| *N* | 2100 | | 1290 | | 998 | | 2801 | |
| **Standard error** | 0.64 | | 0.47 | | 0.33 | | 0.70 | |
| **$R^2$** | 0.15 | | 0.11 | | 0.22 | | 0.15 | |

interpretation suggests that political disagreement may cause psychic distress for the individuals who experience it. Hence, in order to avoid this distress, they may impute low levels of knowledge and expertise to people with whom they disagree and high levels to those with whom they agree. The relationship between perceived expertise and discussion frequency might be a spurious consequence of the more important relationship between agreement and positive judgments regarding discussant expertise.

In order to evaluate this argument, we need information on the actual levels of political knowledge among discussants in order to validate the respondent perceptions. In the 1996 Indianapolis–St. Louis study, we interviewed a sample of discussants and administered a political knowledge battery consisting of three factual questions regarding American government. Thus we are able to compare the effects of objectively defined expertise and perceived political disagreement on the respondent's perception of the discussant's expertise.

As Table 6 shows, respondent perceptions regarding the political expertise of discussion partners are predicted quite well by actual expertise. Respondents who believe that the discussant has the highest level of knowledge increase by approxi-

**Table 6**. *Percent of main respondents who perceive that the discussant has a high level of political knowledge by the actual knowledge of the discussant and perceived agreement regarding vote*

| | Number of correct answers by discussant on political knowledge battery | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Does respondent perceive agreement?** | **0** | **1** | **2** | **3** |
| **No** | 8.3% | 14.4% | 28.6% | 39.3% |
| | *n*=36 | *n*=97 | *n*=178 | *n*=298 |
| **Yes** | 21.4% | 23.6% | 43.1% | 51.1% |
| | *n*=70 | *n*=123 | *n*=276 | *n*=495 |

*Source:* 1996 Indianapolis–St. Louis Study.

mately 30 percentage points based on objectively defined knowledge. In comparison, differences based on agreement range from less than 10 per cent to about 15 per cent. Other analyses of these data show that perceptions regarding discussant knowledge are enhanced by the education and political interest of the discussant as well, with relatively minor effects due to actual and perceived disagreement (Huckfeldt forthcoming). In summary, the best predictors of perceptions regarding discussant expertise are related to the actual expertise of the discussant. The relationship between discussion frequency and discussant expertise is not a spurious consequence of disagreement, and hence it would appear that political communication among citizens generates added value in citizen capacity across democratic political systems.

## Conclusion

The dyadic exchange of information between citizens is a crucial element in democratic politics. Through these exchanges, a democratic discourse is produced which enables citizens to participate in politics while keeping the informational costs of participation within tolerable bounds. While these individual efficiencies of social communication are certainly important, we have been more centrally concerned with the *collective* efficiencies (or inefficiencies) that are generated through interdependence among citizens within democratic electorates. In particular, does the social communication of political information produce added value in the form of a more politically expert electorate? Most analysts would probably agree that citizens who read a newspaper come away better equipped to exercise citizenship. Can we say the same thing about citizens who discuss politics with other citizens?

This value-added question was first addressed by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) in the 'two-step flow' of communication during election campaigns. Their argument, which continues to be enhanced and elaborated (Katz 1957; Weimann 1982), was that news from media sources is passed on to citizens through the vehicle of social communication by way of politically expert interpreters. We have addressed a similar question in this paper: are citizens more likely to discuss

politics with people whom they view to be politically expert? Hence, in much the same manner as the early Columbia studies, we are interested in the flow of political information within dyads, and the manner in which these dyadic exchanges enhance the collective deliberations of democratic politics.

Our study also differs from the Columbia studies in some important ways. We make no effort to estimate the extent to which particular discussants are seen as being influential. Instead, we measure both the perceived knowledge of discussants and the perceived frequency of discussion. Rather than seeing direct efforts at persuasion as the consequence of leadership activity, we only suppose that people will change their opinions or preferences as a natural process of discussion and information diffusion (Ikeda 1997), and we explore whether the distribution of knowledge affects the structure of the diffusion process. These modest presuppositions reveal an essential mechanism of democratic deliberation through which value is added to civic capacity as a natural byproduct of the relationship between political expertise and communication frequency.

In all four national contexts, citizens are more likely to discuss politics with other citizens whom they judge to be politically knowledgeable. Indeed, the effect of discussant expertise is comparable across all four settings – West Germany, East Germany, Tokyo, and the United States – even though the levels of discussion are higher in East Germany. This means, in turn, that the main respondent's *relative* frequency of discussion with any single discussant is enhanced to the extent that the discussant is viewed as being politically expert, but diminished to the extent that the main respondent views other discussants to be expert as well. Viewed in a different light, this result suggests that the relative importance of a single information source is contingent on the full constellation of alternative information sources. The politically expert discussant is most influential in an otherwise impoverished informational setting, and even an acknowledged expert recedes into the background among other acknowledged experts. In short, and in a different vocabulary, any single 'two-step flow' of political information is best seen in the context of all the other two-step flows that a citizen experiences.

In summary, the same pattern of effects between expertise and communication persists within dyads across all four separate national settings, even though overall levels of political communication are sensitive to particular times and places. The good news is thus twofold. First, value *is* added to the social capital of democratic politics by virtue of the simple fact that citizens communicate more frequently with other citizens whom they view to be politically expert (Putnam 1993). Second, the value added logic means that relatively small amounts of expertise may often go a long way in enhancing the civic capacity of individual citizens because the performance of democratic politics depends on shared expertise among interdependent citizens.

Finally, a major problem in the study of democratic politics revolves around the fundamental issue of whether individuals are up to the task of democratic citizenship.

Indeed, this issue consumed the intellectual energies of many political analysts during a major part of the twentieth century, and perhaps the most important statement of the problem occurs in the work of Philip Converse (1964). According to Paul Sniderman (1993), the unresolved issue in this literature is, given that voters are so informationally impoverished, how are they so frequently able to make such reasonable decisions (Page and Shapiro 1992)? There are a variety of different explanations for this puzzle. Sniderman and his colleagues (1991) point to the use of heuristic devices; Lodge and Hamill (1986) and Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh (1989) point to the role of on-line information processing; and Hinich and Munger (1994) emphasize ideology as a socially shared heuristic to classify policy signals of political parties.

Our own analysis points to the importance of political interdependence among citizens, and the potential that democratic citizens are more capable in the aggregate than as individuals. Such collective potential is realized only if socially deliberative democracy produces value added in the capacity of democratic electorates, and we have seen that the distribution of expertise among citizens goes a long way in explaining the social flow of political information. Indeed, the flow of information within Putnam's (1993: 175) horizontal networks of civic engagement is weighted heavily in favor of politically expert citizens, thereby enhancing the impact of expertise on the collective deliberations of democratic politics.

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