



## Part III: Deliberation Among Citizens

# Studying ‘Everyday Political Talk’ in the Deliberative System

Pamela Johnston Conover and Donald D. Searing

Department of Political Science, University of North Carolina, Campus Box 3265, 363 Hamilton Hall, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3265, USA.

E-mail: conover@email.unc.edu

‘Everyday political talk’ is an increasingly important part of what Jane Mansbridge characterizes as ‘deliberative systems’ in industrialized democracies. However, how is it practiced by ordinary people? And how does their practice affect democracy and citizenship? Our paper addresses four questions: (1) How should everyday political talk be conceptualized as a component of the ‘deliberative system’? (2) What can and cannot be learned by studying normative topics like deliberation empirically? (3) How can we investigate such everyday talk using the methodologies of survey research, focus groups and content analysis? (4) What have we learned in our own research programs from each methodological approach?

*Acta Politica* (2005) 40, 269–283. doi:10.1057/palgrave.ap.5500113

**Keywords:** deliberation; deliberative system; deliberative democracy; citizens; citizenship

---

## Introduction

‘Everyday political talk’ is central to democratic citizenship. It is an increasingly important part of what Jane Mansbridge (1999) characterizes as ‘deliberative systems’ in industrialized democracies. However, how is it practiced by ordinary people? And how does their practice affect democracy and citizenship? For unlike political elites, or even political activists, average citizens have few opportunities to deliberate rigorously in formal institutional settings. Most of their political discussions are therefore quite unstructured. And yet these exchanges both constrain and contribute to the evolution of political ideas and policy proposals. They are also said to provide a civic education that teaches desirable democratic attitudes and practices.

Our paper addresses four questions: (1) How should everyday political talk be conceptualized as a component of the ‘deliberative system’? (2) What can and cannot be learned by studying normative topics like deliberation empirically? (3) How can we investigate such everyday talk using the methodologies of survey research, focus groups and content analysis? (4)



What have we learned in our own research programs from each methodological approach?

### **Everyday Political Talk in the Deliberative System**

The deliberative turn in democratic theory illuminated public deliberations that seek common ground and that might strengthen the culture and practice of citizenship (Dryzek, 2000). This enlarged our focus to encompass not just the aggregation of preferences but also the processes by which preferences and the broader values that shape them are formed (Shapiro, 2003). Many liberal theorists and empirical researchers have recently joined the enterprise. However, they have frequently focused on deliberations in institutional settings, where exchanges are likely to be more genuinely deliberative, rather than on the everyday political talk of average citizens (Schauer, 1999). Indeed, many have pushed ordinary citizens out of the picture because their talk is often unstructured and not directed at producing publicly binding decisions (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). Yet it is difficult to model how democracies think without including the demos.

Hence, other theorists (e.g. Fearon, 1998; Dryzek, 2000) have recently brought ordinary citizens back into our discussions of deliberation by focusing attention on their political communications. Everyday political talk educates, constructs, filters, adopts, applies, and discards political ideas (Habermas, 1989; Mansbridge, 1999; Walsh, 2004). At the core of the deliberative system, according to Mansbridge, are the structured deliberations that occur within institutions like national courts, parliaments, and civil service departments. Around the core and linked with it are conversations between constituents and government officials, and conversations in political parties, interest groups, and the media. The model's third ring consists of the still less deliberative everyday discussions among political activists, attentive publics and general publics, a form of political talk that is essential to the system's democratic character. Those who depreciate the everyday political talk of ordinary citizens, are concerned that the differences between this talk and structured deliberations may be more differences of kind than of degree (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). Moreover, they suggest that if the structure of everyday talk differs so fundamentally from genuine deliberations, it is also likely to have fundamentally different consequences for democratic citizenship. It might, for instance, drive people apart rather than together (Shapiro, 2003; Sunstein, 2003). And it simply might not produce the many desirable consequences that are expected from ideally structured deliberations (Schauer, 1999).



## How Deliberative is Everyday Political Talk?

The first steps that we must take in studying everyday political talk or deliberation empirically are conceptual and theoretical. We begin by comparing the concepts of ‘deliberation’ and ‘everyday talk.’ Deliberation entails listening very carefully to the views of others, explaining to them one’s own views, and taking time together to think over a matter thoroughly. Thus, deliberation is an exercise in rational ‘reason giving.’ This exercise, which is how most political philosophers and theorists conceptualize democratic deliberation, is certainly much more rigorous than is the everyday informal discussion about public affairs practiced by the British and American citizens in our research (Conover *et al.*, 2001; see also Burkhalter *et al.*, 2002; Walsh, 2004). We can best characterize what these ordinary citizens actually do, and what our research programs can therefore investigate, as ‘discussions’ or ‘everyday talks,’ occasionally deliberative but more typically unstructured, spontaneous, and without clear goals (see Walzer, 1990; Conover *et al.*, 2001). Such discussions involve a wide variety of communicative forms — ‘argument, rhetoric, emotion, testimony or storytelling, and gossip’ — rather than being limited to the rational exchange of reasons (Dryzek, 2000). These are the varieties of everyday political talk that we have been investigating empirically, the varieties of everyday talk that citizens practice in private as well as public contexts.

## What Can We Learn by Studying Normative Models of Deliberation?

Normative models generate hypotheses about deliberation that have often been presented by political theorists more as ideals to be approximated than as descriptions of empirical reality (Schauer, 1999). Such ideals, however, carry with them assumptions about feasibility and claims about causality. To judge what might be feasible, we need to explore empirically where things stand at present and how far we will need to travel to reach these goals. In doing so, the distinction between deliberation and discussion becomes important because political philosophers expect the most efficacious results to flow from deliberation rather than from the discussions of everyday political talk. What we propose to investigate instead then is whether this weaker practice of everyday political discussion is associated with anything like the same effects that normative theorists have attributed to the stronger regimen of deliberation.

However, what standards should we use in judging the democratic character of this everyday talk and its consequences for democratic citizenship. Political theorists vary in the standards that they offer for assessing the democratic



character of deliberations, though most include some version of four essential characteristics: reciprocity, publicity, non-tyranny, and equality.

‘Reciprocity’ concerns the mutual respect that citizens should display toward one another by the manner in which they offer reasons and respond to the arguments of others (see Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). The criterion of ‘publicity’ requires that access be open, and that citizens offer public reasons for their preferences. The standard of ‘non-tyranny’ deals with both the processes and outcomes of deliberations, and it requires that discussions and agreements cannot be coerced or reflect the undue influence of powerful groups (Dahl, 1989; Bohman, 1996). Thus, deliberations should admit and examine different viewpoints and be open to contestation. Finally, democratic deliberations should meet a standard of ‘political equality’ (Fishkin, 1991, 29–34; Bohman, 1996; Knight and Johnson, 1997; Sanders, 1997). That is, procedurally, citizens should have equal access to deliberative arenas, and substantively they should have equal opportunities to influence the deliberation (Bohman, 1996, 107–149; Knight and Johnson, 1997).

In developing these standards, political theorists have typically focused on formal institutional settings where political elites deliberate, rather than on the public discussions of ordinary citizens, and particularly not on their private ‘everyday talk.’ Nonetheless, Mansbridge (1999) argues — and we agree with her — that less formal exchanges within the deliberative system should be judged by the same standards, provided that they are applied more loosely as we move from formal public deliberations to the more informal discussions that constitute everyday talk. However, even with these more relaxed standards, the exchanges that ordinary citizens have with one another may not be very democratic in nature. In fact, our empirical analyses suggest that everyday talk serves multiple functions for citizens, some of which are actually at odds with the normative goals of democratic deliberation.

### **Empirical Investigations of Everyday Political Talk**

In our research, we have employed a variety of methods to study the nature of everyday political talk, both as an experience and with regard to its democratic qualities. The experience concerns how citizens themselves perceive and understand their everyday talk, including their motives for talking or avoiding discussion. The democratic qualities of everyday talk address the character of this discussion and the extent to which it meets the standards for democratic deliberation outlined earlier. To investigate everyday talk in Great Britain and the United States, we have applied the methodologies of focus groups and surveys to six matched research sites in Great Britain and the United States, and one of us (Conover) has applied the methodology of content analysis to



'letters to the editor' in American newspapers. The British and American research sites include: small, stable rural (market/farm) communities in Lincolnshire and Minnesota; urban, predominantly working class communities in Manchester and Philadelphia; and, upper middle class suburban communities in Essex and North Carolina. In each of these communities, we assembled accounts of local history, participant-observation information, aggregate data, transcribed interviews with focus group and community leaders, and face-to-face survey interviews with secondary school students and their parents and teachers, as well as with random samples of adult citizens — approximately 3,000 interviews in all. Each of our methodologies has its strengths and weaknesses, which can best be balanced by triangulating them in the same or parallel research programs.

### **Focus groups**

Market research has made focus groups well known, but their origins are academic, and increasingly social scientists are once again using focus groups in their research (Bloor *et al.*, 2001). From our perspective, the chief academic value of focus groups is found in the research contexts of discovery rather than verification. In particular, focus groups allow researchers to investigate the meaning of concepts, topics and processes as ordinary citizens understand them. They direct us to the language that citizens use to understand these matters, which can then be employed in the formulation of survey items (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1997; Morgan, 1998). Thus, focus groups are an especially useful method for probing the experience of everyday talk to understand better the motivations of citizens. This can help researchers generate specific hypotheses about that experience as well as about how the practice of everyday talk measures up to democratic ideals.

Focus groups use questions and hypothetical dilemmas to stimulate discussions that are not closely controlled. Guided by protocols, they elicit densely concentrated information about the meaning of specific topics (Morgan, 1997). The goal is to encourage the participants to use their own language and categories rather than simply reacting to the questions and language of an interviewer in a one-to-one situation, as is typically the case in a survey. The interactive, group-character of a focus group elicits spontaneous comments from the participants that can reveal much about the topics they are discussing.

Since, individual participants can influence one another, focus groups can also echo the social context within which people discuss public affairs. They are artificial deliberations, and (like deliberative polls) researchers have coded and investigated them as such (Conover *et al.*, 1991, 2004). However, although it is tempting to use focus groups to test hypotheses, we think it is problematic to



do so; because, as the old Yiddish proverb suggests, ‘For example, is no proof’ — and focus groups produce mainly examples. The chief problem with using focus groups to verify hypotheses lies in their weak external validity. Since, the participants in focus groups are typically not representative of any particular population, it can be misleading to generalize confidently from them.

The real strength of focus group methodology is its utility in the research context of discovery where social scientists ask people to reflect upon *the experience* of discussion for purposes of constructing concepts and measure’s, generating hypotheses, suggesting explanations, and interpreting survey data. If we are to understand how citizens think about deliberation, it is essential, at key points in our research programs, to listen carefully to how they themselves talk about it and to analyze the understandings that they themselves put forward. We therefore conducted ‘pre-test’ focus group discussions at the beginning of our research program and then again at the end of the survey work in our six British and American communities.

### Surveys

In contrast to focus groups, which are most useful in exploring the experience of everyday talk, surveys are effective for studying systematically its distribution and democratic qualities. As a result of ‘their standardized questions and language, surveys have limited utility for probing the dynamics of discussion, which varies in subtle ways across individuals and sub-groups. However, these same standardized, close-ended questions are very well suited for describing systematically everyday discussion’s, contents and contexts, and for gauging the extent to which it measures up to normative standards for democratic deliberation.

For example, in our study of citizenship, we assessed the democratic nature of discussion by using survey questions to measure its content, its public character, the degree of contestation, and if the discussions were characterized by political equality. To measure the amount and content of discussion, we first asked British and American citizens to identify the types of political issues that they most frequently discussed with other citizens. Then, based on their responses, we constructed a series of survey questions that directed the respondents’ attention to ‘serious discussions or conversations’ about 14 such issues during a fixed time period. This question format stimulated respondents to recall many examples of such conversations. It also turned their attention toward relatively structured discussions, which resembled genuine deliberations more than the casual exchange of casual remarks.

This inventory preceded and thereby provided a psychological frame for gauging the *publicity* of discussions, which we did by asking respondents how often they had serious discussions ‘like these about matters of public concern’



in each of four public contexts: at work, at church, in public meetings, or with neighbors. We then combined responses to these questions to create an additive scale tapping ‘public discussion.’ Likewise, we used identically structured questions to measure how frequently respondents discussed political issues with ‘people with different views from your own,’ which provided the basis for a measure of *contestation* or *non-tyranny*. Finally, we gauged the *political equality* of the discussions by exploring whether politically ‘disadvantaged’ citizens — women, the poor and the old — were equally represented among those citizens who engaged in high levels of discussions.

### **Content analysis**

Content analysis is a third methodological approach that is particularly useful in assessing the nature of discussions and how they meet normative expectations for democratic deliberation. When transcribed discussions are available, for example, researchers can analyze the arguments offered to determine if they meet the standards of ‘public reason.’ Likewise, researchers can study the patterns in speaking and the language involved to determine if discussants had equal opportunities to participate and whether they displayed reciprocity toward one another. Unfortunately, there are relatively few opportunities to use content analysis to study the discussions of ordinary citizens, because unlike the formal discussions of political elites, records are seldom made of this everyday political talk.

However, newspaper ‘letters to the editor’ represent an exception to this pattern. They are a form of public discussion engaged in by everyday citizens, as opposed to political elites. They are written to contribute to public discourse on particular issues. Such letters occupy a middle territory in the deliberative system: they are a step beyond most everyday talk, for they are more public and structured than the non-recorded conversations that make up the bulk of everyday talk, and yet they are distinct from the deliberations that occur among political elites and within institutional settings. With such letters, politically motivated citizens deliberate in their own minds (Goodin, 2003) to work out the reasons why they support or oppose particular issues. And, by publishing their thoughts in newspapers, they contribute to public dialogue on the issue. ‘Letters to the editor’ do not necessarily reflect the frames that political leaders and activists seek to impose on discourse. Consequently, by content analyzing such data, it is possible to see how citizens who stand outside formal political institutions are discussing an issue, and which arguments may be most central to grounding their own understandings of their preferences.

And yet however much ‘letters to the editor’ are constructed via Goodin’s (2003) ‘deliberations within,’ they are not constrained by the interpersonal dialogic exchanges and interactions found within formal political institutions.



They are, instead, mediated discussions that occur in print, which limits their deliberative potential. We usually think about deliberative politics in terms of oral exchanges that occur in real time, rather than printed exchanges that occur over the space of days. In ‘letters to the editor,’ people do deliberative politics through writing (see McLean, 1998), a type of deliberative politics structured by the medium and the institutional nature of mass newspapers. While ‘letters to the editor’ can create a serial discussion as readers engage in back and forth responses to one another’s letters, such exchanges lacks the spontaneity that an interpersonal discussion might have. Still, ‘letters to the editor’ represent an invaluable printed record of the kind of public political discussion among ordinary citizens that emerges from their everyday talk; and by subjecting such letters to content analysis, we can learn a great deal about this sector of the deliberative system.

### **Conclusions: What Have We Learned About Everyday Political Talk from Each Methodological Approach?**

We have used all three methods described above to study the everyday political talk of citizens in Great Britain and the United States. Let us review by way of conclusion some of the key findings that these methods have unearthed about the democratic nature of everyday talk, the experience of it, and its consequences for citizenship.<sup>1</sup>

#### **The democratic nature of everyday talk**

As described earlier, we have examined everyday talk through the lenses of reciprocity, publicity, non-tyranny, and equality. Among these standards of assessment, reciprocity is the most central to judging everyday talk, and requires relatively little ‘loosening’ as we move from formal deliberations to actual discussions among ordinary citizens (Mansbridge, 1999). Mutual respect and listening are at the core of reciprocity, and our focus groups indicate that citizens recognize the importance of both. Indeed, participants in the focus groups stress that they are motivated to listen to other citizens discuss political issues in order to discover, understand, and respect their views (Conover *et al.*, 2001). So reciprocity is a standard that citizens consciously apply to their own discussions. However, in actual discussions of controversial issues, they sometimes find it hard to live up to this standard. Specifically, content analyses of over 400 ‘letters to the editor’ about same-sex marriage reveal that nearly half the letters are characterized by low civility, as measured by disrespect for one’s opponents and a lack of listening. Moreover, displays of contempt and disgust, emotions that are fundamentally disrespectful, exacerbate the incivility



of many of the letter-writers (Conover, 2003). Thus, our research shows that citizens strive for reciprocity, although they sometimes fail to practice it, particularly when they are shielded from face-to-face interactions and are discussing controversial issues.

The standard of publicity, which recommends open access and public reasons, applies to both the content and context of discussion. Some theorists have suggested that publicity is less important outside formal political institutional settings like legislatures, and consequently that we can loosen the standard considerably when applying it to everyday talk (see Hardin, 1999; Mansbridge, 1999). For everyday talk is seldom strongly public in context or content. Specifically, our survey research has enabled us to compare the frequency of discussion in public contexts (work, church, public meetings, pubs, with neighbors) with the frequency of discussion in private contexts (home, large family gatherings, social occasions). And we have found considerably more discussion in the private settings. Likewise, with respect to the content of discussion, our surveys show that relatively few issues are genuine ‘public issues’ in the sense of issues widely discussed at the same time by most citizens.

Moreover, our focus groups reveal that citizens are wary of the kind of reason-giving that is essential to ‘public reason.’ Most of our focus group discussants do not particularly want to hear reasons — either public-minded or self-interested ones — for viewpoints that might seriously challenge their own. Nor do they especially want to justify their own preferences, in part because they seem to believe that preferences need no justification (Conover *et al.*, 2001). Even when ordinary citizens do engage in more public forms of talk (e.g. letter writing), they are likely to state their preferences either without offering reasons, or by giving reasons that appeal narrowly to particular interests (Conover, 2003). Thus, multiple research methods lead us to the same conclusion: ordinary citizens appear to be uncomfortable with publicity in their everyday talk, and they often seek to avoid it.

The standard of non-tyranny requires that political discussions involve contestation, the reasoned consideration of alternative arguments. Our research suggests, not surprisingly, that most citizens prefer their discussions to be civil in tone and mainly informative. They may be curious about other points of view, but they do not like confrontational and justificatory exchanges. Consequently, many of our survey respondents and focus group respondents engage in weakly contested everyday talk — their discussions admit different points of view, but appear to avoid the stronger forms of contestation that employ argumentation, particularly when it is in the service of persuasion (Conover *et al.*, 2001). This dislike of strong contestation might help explain why so little everyday political talk occurs in public contexts. It certainly does not help that, when citizens see others engaging in public forms



of everyday talk like letter writing or televised political exchanges, the tone is often uncivil and the style argumentative (Conover, 2003). Moreover, those citizens who are willing to take the chance and discuss in public settings are usually those who are already discussing controversial matters in private settings, which suggests that these private settings offer an important rehearsal or socialization function for public discussion.

Finally, the standard of political equality recommends equal access to discussions and equal opportunities to discuss within them. While institutions can control access to formal deliberations, entry into the informal discussions of everyday talk is determined socially by the availability of willing discussion partners.

Consequently, when applied to everyday talk, it makes sense to interpret the standard of equality as a recommendation that disadvantaged citizens should not be excluded systematically from discussions. However, meeting even this relaxed standard seems problematic in the more public forms of everyday talk. Through our survey research, we find that in both Great Britain and the United States systematic group biases work to exclude the old and especially women from public discussions. Likewise, content analyses of 'letters to the editor' show that gays and lesbians are discouraged from openly participating in such exchanges. It is very important to observe, however, that private forms of everyday talk are more immune to these biases, and thus considerably more equal in their nature.

In sum, using multiple methods, our research reveals that the everyday talk of ordinary citizens falls short of deliberative ideals. Although citizens are committed to reciprocity in principle, in practice they sometimes find it difficult to respect their fellow citizens. Public discussions occur infrequently, for most everyday talk is relatively private in nature. Finally, while everyday talk typically involves weak contestation, it also reflects inequalities in society, particularly when political discussion becomes more public.

### **The experience and consequences of everyday talk**

Our research has revealed a great deal about the experience and consequences of political discussion. In particular, our methodologies have enabled us to appreciate the complexity of political discussion as an experience, and probe the significance of that experience for making good citizens. With respect to the experience of discussion, our empirical investigations have made clear that everyday talk simultaneously serves several purposes in citizen's lives, as reflected by the multiple motives that encourage discussion. In our focus groups, we asked participants to talk about the experience of political discussion: why people do it; why they avoid it; when and where it feels comfortable and uncomfortable.



Most treatments of deliberation focus solely on its dialogic nature, and therefore assume that citizens are motivated to discuss by particular political desires and informational needs: to gain political information, to express their issue positions and candidate preferences, and to persuade others. In fact, in many of our focus groups in Great Britain and the United States, citizens did mention these motives, thereby supporting the view that discussion serves dialogic functions for citizens.

However, it is quite apparent in these data that other motives also seem to strongly stimulate everyday talk. Many participants were interested in the information they gained less for instrumental political purposes than to learn about the lives of others and to seek common ground. Hence, social motives may be much more important than we have assumed. Likewise, the content analyses of ‘letters to the editor’ suggest that such letters are more than dialogic exchanges; they can also be a form of contentious pluralism (see Guidry and Sawyer, 2003) through which subordinate groups pursue ideological and institutional change, and dominant groups respond by defending their privileges. In effect, such talk is one way that subordinate groups seek to challenge rhetorically the hegemony of the understandings favored by dominant groups in society.

Finally, both our focus groups and content analyses make clear that everyday talk serves a narrative function that is central to identity politics. Thus, political discussion is not only an opportunity for citizens rationally to exchange arguments about an issue, to construct social relationships, or to engage in rhetorical subversion (or reinforcement) of the dominant views about an issue, it is also an opportunity for determined citizens to present themselves to the public — to reveal their identities. In effect, political discussion can be an act of self-expression through which citizens express ‘constitutive’ preferences that are central to their understandings of who they are.

Since everyday political talk in democracies offers so much more than simple dialogic exchange, its potential for deliberative rigor can be checked or undercut by these alternative functions, as evidenced by the explanations that people give for *avoiding* everyday talk. To be sure, our focus groups suggest that some people avoid discussions because they perceive that they lack the information or the skill necessary to contribute to rigorous deliberation, but many others avoid it for reasons associated with the other functions that everyday talk fulfills — social, rhetorical, and narrative. Citizens choose not to engage in such talk for variety of important reasons: to escape negative judgments, to avoid alienating friends and disrupting social relations, to demonstrate mutual respect when it is clear that there is no common ground to sustain a civil discussion, and to adhere to social norms. For example, many of the women in our focus groups claim that they



do not participate because they are systematically discouraged from doing so. They are socialized to avoid such discussions, and when they do participate, they feel that men do not give them mutual respect or take their views very seriously.

Finally, with regard to the consequences of deliberation for good citizenship, we have found that, un-rigorous as everyday political talk may be, it nevertheless manages to promote four principal conditions that normative models associate with genuine deliberation: autonomous citizens, political legitimacy, good representation, and democratic communities. The first condition suggests that democratic deliberation helps to educate autonomous citizens by inculcating independence and internal efficacy (Mill, 1956; Held, 1987; Cohen, 1990, 1998). The more that citizens encounter different points of view, face to face, the more they are likely to examine their own views and thereby develop the autonomy essential for effective citizenship. The second suggests that democratic deliberation builds political legitimacy for democratic institutions by drawing citizens toward consensus on fundamental values and rules of the game (Ackerman, 1980, 1989; Habermas, 1987; Fishkin, 1991; Benhabib, 1992; Cohen, 1997, 1998).

The third condition turns to electoral contexts to link democratic deliberation with good representation. It suggests that such discussion improves the knowledge and skills needed to evaluate candidates and issues intelligently, and that the experience of discussing public affairs with other citizens strengthens one's desire to participate in electoral activity (Galston, 1988; Holden, 1988; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). Finally, the strongest normative claims focus on the democratic community to argue that participation in the deliberative system through everyday talk should be regarded as a fundamental act of citizenship, (Arendt, 1958; Barber, 1984; Cohen, 1990; Spragens, 1990) because it fosters the mutual understanding, tolerance, and public spiritedness that citizens require to live and work together successfully.

In the survey component of our research program, we extracted from these four conditions 12 hypotheses for empirical investigation. Using multiple measures for each, we have found that eight of the 12 hypotheses achieve strong support or some support in our British and American communities (Searing *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, our findings suggest that even political discussions among teenagers in these communities produce positive effects like tolerance and political legitimacy (Conover and Searing, 2000). Thus, despite the structural shortcomings of everyday political talk compared to other discussions in the deliberative system, it nevertheless appears to promote many of the desirable consequences for good citizenship that are attributed to rigorous deliberative practices.



## Conclusion

Everyday political talk may not be rigorously deliberative, but without it we cannot understand the democratic character of deliberative systems. It is an essential part of these systems; and it is well worth our efforts to apply multiple methods to analyze its sources, dynamics, and consequences. Moreover, it would be premature to dismiss altogether the dialogic function of everyday political talk. Rigorous it is not. However, we have seen that everyday political talk in private settings, which is the predominant context in which such talk occurs, helps citizens to work out their preferences, try out justifications for them, and develop confidence about performing in the public arena. We also need to remember that when citizens engage in such political discussions, they do so as much for social, rhetorical, and narrative reasons as for gaining information and expressing preferences (cf. Walsh, 2004). These non-deliberative motivations, which can weaken the deliberative character of everyday political talk may, at the same time, perform critical functions in the evolution of perspectives and opinions throughout the deliberative systems of democratic states. Through both private and public discussions, ordinary citizens make significant 'bottom-up' contributions to the frames and understandings that political activists and leaders assign political issues, and that structure publicly binding decisions in our formal governmental institutions.

## References

- Ackerman, B. (1989) 'Why dialogue?' *Journal of Philosophy* 86: 5–22.
- Ackerman, B. (1980) *Social Justice in the Liberal State*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Barber, B. (1984) *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Benhabib, S. (1992) 'Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition and Jürgen Habermas', in C. Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M. and Robson, K. (2001) *Focus Groups in Social Research*, London: Sage.
- Bohman, J. (1996) *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity and Democracy*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Burkhalter, S., Gastil, J. and Kelshaw, T. (2002) 'A conceptual definition and theoretical model of public deliberation in small face-to-face groups.', *Communication Theory* 12: 398–422.
- Cohen, J. (1990) 'Discourse Ethics and Civil Society', in D. Rasmussen (ed.) *Universalism and Communitarianism*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Cohen, J. (1997) 'Deliberation and Political Legitimacy', in J. Bohman and W. Rehg (eds.) *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Cohen, J. (1998) 'Democracy and Liberty', in J. Elster (ed.) *Deliberative Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 185–231.
- Conover, P.J. (2003) *Identity, emotion and reason in the same-sex marriage debates*, Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA.



- Conover, P.J. and Searing, D.D. (2000) 'The Democratic Purposes of Education: A Political Socialization perspective', in L.M. McDonnell, R.M. Timpane and R. Benjamin (eds.) *Rediscovering the Democratic Purposes of Education*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.
- Conover, P., Crewe, I. and Searing, D.D. (1998) *Does democratic deliberation make better citizens?*, Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA.
- Conover, P.J., Searing, D.D. and Crewe, I. (1991) 'The nature of citizenship in the United States and Great Britain: empirical comments on theoretical themes.', *Journal of Politics* 53: 800–832.
- Conover, P.J., Searing, D.D. and Crewe, I. (2001) 'The deliberative potential of political discussion', *British Journal of Political Science*. 31: 21–62.
- Conover, P.J., Searing, D.D. and Crewe, I. (2004) 'The elusive ideal of equal citizenship: political theory and political psychology in the United States and Great Britain', *Journal of Politics* 66: 1036–1038.
- Dahl, R.A. 1989 *Democracy and Its Critics*, New Haven: Yale.
- Dryzek, J. (2000) *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fearon, J.D. (1998) 'Deliberation as Discussion.', in J. Elster (ed.) *Deliberative Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 44–68.
- Fishkin, J.S. (1991) *Democracy and Deliberation*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Galston, W. (1988) 'Liberal virtues', *American Political Science Review* 82: 1277–1290.
- Goodin, R.E. (2003) 'Democratic Deliberation Within', In J.S. Fishkin and P. Laslett (eds.) *Debating Deliberative Democracy*, Oxford: Blackwell, 54–79.
- Guidry, J.A. and Sawyer, M. (2003) 'Contentious pluralism: the public sphere and democracy', *Perspectives on Politics* 1: 273–289.
- Gutmann, A. and Thompson, D. (1996) *Democracy and Disagreement*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1987) *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2 Boston: Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J. (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hardin, R. (1999) 'Deliberation: Method, Not Theory', In S. Macedo (ed.) *Deliberative Politics. Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*, New York: Oxford, 103–119.
- Held, D. (1987) *Models of Democracy*, Oxford: Polity Press.
- Holden, B. (1988) *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, Hemel Hempstead: Philip Allen.
- Knight, J. and Johnson, J. (1997) 'What Sort of Equality Does Deliberative Democracy Require?', in J. Bohman and W. Rehg (eds.) *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 279–320.
- Krueger, R.A. (1988) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Practical Research.*, Newbury Park, California: Sage.
- Mansbridge, J. (1999) 'Everyday Talk in the Deliberative System.', in S. Macedo (ed.) *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*, Oxford, 211–242.
- McLean, P. (1998) 'A frame analysis of favor seeking in the renaissance: agency, networks and political culture.', *American Journal of Sociology* 104: 51–91.
- Mill, J.S. (1956) *On Liberty*, New York: Bobbs Merrill [1859].
- Morgan, D.L. (1997) *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Morgan, D.L. (1998) *The Focus Book Guidebook*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Sanders, L. (1997) 'Against deliberation.', *Political Theory* 25: 347–376.
- Schauer, F. (1999) in S. Macedo (ed.) *Deliberative Politics; Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*, New York: Oxford University Press, 17–28.
- Searing, D.D., Conover, P.J., Crewe, I. and Solt, F. (2004) *Does democratic deliberation make better citizens?*, Annual Meetings of the International Society of Political Psychology, Lund, Sweden.
- Shapiro, I. (2003) *The State of Democratic Theory*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.



- Spragens, T.A. (1990) *Reason and Democracy*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Sunstein, C.R. (2003) 'The Law of Group Polarization', in J.S. Fishkin and P. Laslett (eds.) *Debating Deliberative Democracy*, Oxford: Blackwell, 80–101.
- Walsh, K.C. (2004) *Talking About Politics. Informal Groups and Social Identity in American Life*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Walzer, M. (1990) 'A Critique of Philosophical Conversation', in M. Kelly (ed.) *Hermeneutics and Critical Theory in Ethics and Politics*, Cambridge: MIT Press.

## Note

1 The primary body of research discussed here includes Conover (2003) (content analyses); Conover and Searing (2000) (surveys); Conover, Searing, and Crewe (2001) (surveys and focus groups); and Conover, Crewe and Searing (1998) (surveys).