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Opening the Black Box of Political Discussion

It's December 4, nearly a month after a contentious election, and Joe is just beginning a typical Thursday. Living in a big city means he can take public transit to work, and that's what he's doing at 8:37 this morning. Climbing into the bus, he quickly scans the open seats and chooses to sit next to a woman holding a backpack on her lap that appears to be blissfully free of political buttons and patches. As he settles in for the twelve-minute ride, he pulls out his copy of the local newspaper, but before he even cracks it open, his seatmate pipes up with a snarky comment about the legitimacy of the election results. Joe feels trapped; his heart is racing, and his palms feel sweaty. He instantly regrets his decision to read the paper instead of listening to a podcast, where his headphones could shield him from the unwanted political commentary of others. He thinks it would be rude to get up and move away, but the last thing he wants to do before his first cup of coffee is have a debate about the election. He attempts a throwaway comment to derail the conversation and buries his nose in the paper, hoping his seatmate will take the hint.

The office, at long last. Joe peels off his winter layers and walks into the office lounge where his colleagues are chatting. Joe knew as soon as he saw them that he was going to be roped into a conversation. His apprehension isn't based on a lack of interest – one of the articles he read that morning was on a related subject – and it's not based on the absence of an opinion. But he dreads the delicate dance of navigating these office talks. He knows that his boss agrees with him, but the new program assistant probably does not, based on the campaign buttons that adorn his cubicle. Joe is acutely aware of how uncomfortable the new program assistant must be,

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having been in his shoes before, and does his best to steer the conversation toward safer waters. Football. Movies. The holidays. Their kids' dance recitals. Your grandmother's bunion removal. Anything but politics.

Joe's day continues. At lunch, he overhears people at the table next to him talking about the latest economic news. It sounds like the most talkative member of the group is sharing more opinion than fact, even though he's billing it as objective reality. Joe finishes his workday and takes the bus home, remembering to use his headphones to avoid more unwelcome political encounters. Thursday nights are dinners with his in-laws; he gave up years ago trying to impress them, but he still makes an effort not to antagonize them. While "not antagonizing them" used to be simple enough, their constant political commentary has complicated things. They always have something to say, typically motivated by the cable news programs that monopolize their television. Joe never knows if they want him to reply or not, but because they seem well-informed, he never feels like he has much to contribute. He is always grateful when his wife takes one for the team, and even though this conversation is the longest one he's had all day about politics, he does not actually say anything.

As Joe falls asleep that night, he rehashes in his mind all the close calls he had during the day, where he narrowly avoided getting drawn into an unpleasant situation talking about politics. The evasion is exhausting, but necessary. When he thinks back to the occasions where he has not steered clear of contentious conversations – with strangers, with his coworkers, and with his family – he cringes. Those negative memories are what motivates him to work so hard to avoid offending others and minimize his own discomfort.

WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW ABOUT POLITICAL DISCUSSION COULD FILL A BOOK

Joe – a narrative composite built on the anecdotes shared with us by hundreds of research subjects in open-ended questions – could be thought of as the prototypical American when it comes to political discussion. In what ways does Joe personify what is known about the discussion behavior of the American public? And what is left unmeasured from Joe's experience using the standard techniques deployed in research on political discussion?

We begin with the *if and when* of conversation: How do social scientists measure whether Joe talked about politics? Imagine that Joe was

randomly selected to participate in the American National Election Study (ANES). When asked if he has ever discussed politics with family and friends, the answer is straightforward: yes. Joe, like the vast majority of Americans, would probably report that he does talk about politics. Perhaps to no surprise given the wording of the question, more than 70 percent of Americans from 1984 to 2016 report that they have discussed politics at least once with their close social ties. While this question is fairly direct, other questions about the frequency of political discussion behavior might be harder to answer. Using the cumulative ANES dataset, on average, Americans report that they discuss politics about 2.4 days per week, although there is considerable variation over time.[1] When asked how many days in the past week Joe discussed politics, how would he respond? He never initiated these interactions, but Joe faced multiple opportunities to express his opinions if he desired. Does he count the interaction on the bus or just the longer conversation with his in-laws? Another question used to assess overall discussion behavior assesses whether people try to avoid political discussions, enjoy them, or fall somewhere in between. Joe is certain that he avoids them, but he would have no way to tell the surveyor that he is not usually successful in doing so.

Next, we consider the *what* of the conversation, or the substance and experience of the political interactions Joe has. Most previous research has not focused too intently on what Joe is likely to discuss. Scholars who study deliberation would likely find Joe's conversations lacking, as the interactions he had fail to meet the criteria for deliberation, such as participation from both people in the conversation (e.g. Thompson 2008).[2] We know that the format of survey questions – asking about discussing "important matters" versus "political matters" – tends to yield similar distributions of discussant preferences (Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe 2009; Sokhey and Djupe 2014). But with a handful of exceptions (Fitzgerald 2013; Settle 2018), researchers do not tend to deeply explore how people interpret the meaning of "political" when they are asked to recount those conversations. Nor do researchers probe deeply into how people feel during the conversation itself. We would systematically miss Joe's negative emotional experience discussing politics by not pushing further on the fact that he says he tries to avoid discussion. While some work sheds light on the emotional motivations for and results of the kinds of discussions Joe might have (Parsons 2010; Lyons and Sokhey 2014), considerably less is known about the considerations inside people's heads during a political conversation.

The bottom line: Questions about the rates and nature of political discussion are difficult to ask and answer. Scholars have wildly different definitions of political discussion (or conversation, talk, deliberation, interaction), and "talking about politics" means different things to different people (Eveland, Morey, and Hutchens 2011; Morey and Eveland 2016). Following points carefully raised by these scholars, we note that the most commonly used political discussion survey items are far too blunt to capture the nuances of the behavior. Analyzing data from full networks, Morey and Eveland (2016) find that dyads tend to agree on whether they had any conversation, but do not agree on whether they discussed *politics*. This suggests that individuals have different conceptualizations of what constitutes a *political* discussion, and these different conceptualizations can make it difficult to measure the existence or frequency of discussion.

Turning toward the *who* of conversations, Joe, like most Americans, would report on a survey that he talks most frequently with those with whom he has a close relationship, such as his wife and in-laws. He also would probably report that most of the people with whom he talks tend to agree with him (Mutz 2006), though disagreement persists in his network (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004). A survey might also pick up that Joe is exposed to more diversity of opinion in the workplace, consistent with findings that coworkers are an important source of cross-cutting discussion (Mutz and Mondak 2006). But these measures would miss several important aspects of the *who* in Joe's political conversation experiences. We would not fully understand the effect of the group context and power dynamic in his water-cooler conversation, both of which have been shown to be important (e.g. Richey 2009). And although we would accurately identify that he encounters disagreement at work, we would likely misattribute to these conversations the ability to influence Joe. Eveland, Morey, and Hutchens (2011) importantly find that political conversations with neighbors and coworkers are more likely to be in the form of small talk, motivated by the desire to pass time, while political conversations with strong ties, such as partners and relatives, are generally motivated by more instrumental factors, for example, trying to form an opinion or inform others. Joe's experience seems to fit this finding, but our standard survey questions would likely miss this nuance and how the nature of his various social relationships affects the tenor of different conversations.

Our understanding of *where* political discussion takes place is often deduced from whom people report as political discussants. As a result, we

assume that most discussion takes place in the workplace and at home (e.g. Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002),[3] where Americans spend most of their time. But discussions take place in other locations as well, such as regular discussion groups that emerge out of civic or community associations (Cramer 2004, 2006, 2008), barbershops (Harris-Lacewell 2010), or in public spaces such as social gatherings and pubs, although these locations facilitate political discussion far less frequently than the workplace (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002). Churches also play an important role as a place for people to exchange political opinions, especially for African Americans.

A major problem with common measures of the if, when, who, and where of political conversation is that they are narrowly focused on conversations with regular discussants. As a result of the survey questions, scholars would miss the multitude of incidental interactions in Joe's day, ranging from the fleeting exchange on the bus, akin to a "snort of derision" in Mansbridge's (1999) terms, to the political talk briefly interwoven into the conversation around the office water cooler. These conversations do not necessarily influence Joe's policy opinions – he is not learning from them or hoping to persuade anyone. But collectively, they are a regular, albeit diverse, feature of his daily life that could help him grasp the political world around him and shape his expectations of what kinds of people tend to believe what kinds of things about politics. While regular political discussants might be more influential on standard political behaviors such as voting, learning, and attitude formation, ignoring the full set of interactions might constrain the scholarly understanding of how conversations can affect broader attitudes toward politics. Relatedly, we have not captured anything about the conversations that Joe could have had but successfully avoided. The active avoidance of political conversation may affect Joe in ways that extend beyond the simple absence of discussion.

Where social scientists might really come up short is in the answers to the questions of *why* and *how*. Why do people talk about politics? The vast majority of Americans do talk about politics, at least sometimes. Many scholars start their inquiry with an assumption about what motivates political discussion, but few have tested these assumptions. The conventional answer is that people communicate about politics to achieve instrumental goals related to decision-making. They communicate in order to learn and to persuade others. Research stemming from this assumption finds evidence that circumstantially supports it: people who are more vested in the political system – those who are more

knowledgeable, more interested in politics, and more attached to their partisan identities – are more likely to report talking about politics more regularly (e.g. Straits 1991; McLeod, Daily, Guo, Eveland, Bayer, Yang, and Wang 1996, p. 196; McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy 1999, p. 324; Huckfeldt 2001, p. 431; Klofstad 2009) .

Yet, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that people are not all that interested in talking about politics, despite the fact that they do report conversing. For example, Ulbig and Funk (1999) find that only 35 percent of their respondents reported enjoying political discussions. When we asked the same question in 2016, only 26 percent of our respondents reported enjoying political discussions. Despite the fact that most people report that they talk about politics with at least some regularity, it does not appear to be an enjoyable experience for many of them. A particularly telling example is a recent study focused on conversations that happen at Thanksgiving dinner tables (Chen and Rhola 2018). The authors found that political disagreement shortens the duration of holiday gatherings, a scholarly acknowledgment of the common wisdom that holiday dinner conversations can be incredibly stressful.[4] In fact, just after the 2016 election, Pew Research Center reported that "with the holidays approaching, 39% of U.S. adults say their families avoid conversations about politics" (Oliphant and Smith 2016).[5] This suggests that individuals might engage in political discussions with less instrumental – and perhaps more social – motivations. Eveland, Morey, and Hutchens (2011) find that the most commonly reported motivations for political discussion are indeed social: to pass the time or stimulate an interesting debate. Learning, informing, and persuading were the least common motivations for engaging in a political discussion.

What most quantitative approaches to studying political discussion would miss completely is how Joe's desire to avoid political conversation affects his decision-making with respect to when he does talk and what he says. Thus, a better framing of the questions about the *why* and *how* of political discussion would be: How do people's motivations for political discussion affect the way they navigate those conversations?

Navigating Political Discussion

What motivates some people to drive straight into political discussion and others to pump (or slam on) the brakes to avoid it? Once in a political discussion, how do people steer around – or crash into – obstacles such as conflict, lack of knowledge, or social pressures? Quantitatively driven

answers to these foundational questions are surprisingly hard to come by, but a close read of several important texts in the field reveals convergence on a proposed explanation: political discussion is driven more by social than instrumental motivations. Many people do not want to talk about politics because of the social and psychological costs involved in doing so.

At the micro level, political scientists focusing on the psychology underpinning political discussion have zeroed in on the role of personality and other individual traits. For example, Hibbing, Ritchie, and Anderson (2011) argue that "psychological predispositions captured by individual personality traits play an important role in shaping the kinds of conversations citizens engage in, the setting for those conversations, and the influence discussion may or may not have on the individual . . . Individuals can differ in their reactions to political discussions based on their own personalities" (p. 602). Research on the Big Five personality traits and political discussion suggests that individuals who are more extraverted, more open to experience, and more conscientious discuss politics more often (e.g. Mondak and Halperin 2008). Those who are more extraverted and more open to experience have larger discussion networks with more disagreement, while those who are higher in agreeableness tend to be exposed to less disagreement (e.g. Mondak et al. 2010; Gerber et al. 2012). A similar vein in the literature highlights the role of conflict avoidance, demonstrating that conflict-avoidant people talk about politics less frequently (Ulbig and Funk 1999). Relatedly, Mutz's use of the notion of civil orientation to conflict (2002, 2006) captures the idea that some people emphasize social harmony while expressing dissenting views.

Expanding a bit more reveals another thread: social considerations are an important part of the mystery of why people do and do not want to talk about politics. Cramer (2004) writes that "much of political behavior is rooted in social rather than political processes" (p. 8) and argues that recognition and activation of shared social identities help people make sense of the political world, facilitating political discussion in the process. Conover and Searing (2005) write that "social motives may be much more important than we have assumed" (p. 278–279) based on their focus group research. Mutz (2006) suggests that social accountability – or the idea that being held accountable to multiple, conflicting constituencies makes people uncomfortable and causes them anxiety because it threatens social relationships (p. 106) – explains the adverse effect of crosscutting exposure on voter turnout.

The scholars who have probed deeply into the role of social considerations – Cramer, Eliasoph, Noelle-Neumann, Mutz, and

Conover and colleagues – have developed compelling explanations from their mostly qualitative work, but they have not integrated those insights into rigorous tests of the psychological and social mechanisms that underpin discussion more generally. Mutz's work incorporates the importance of social accountability and social harmony, but her empirical tests do not focus on how these concepts affect the emergence of conversation or what happens in the conversation itself. Scholars are thus left with the suggestion of an answer – psychological and social considerations are important factors motivating political discussion, perhaps more important than instrumental motivations – but no quantitative analysis that explores how such considerations affect the decisions people make about when and how to discuss politics.

As a field, our theorization about political discussion has centered on instrumental, politically oriented outcomes, such as the effects of discussion on information transmission and participation. But when quantitative work glosses over or assumes away the very social and psychological features that make discussion a unique form of political behavior, we lose the forest through the trees. Decades of foundational qualitative work tell us that political discussion is a *social* process: It is complicated, nuanced, and potentially costly. Political discussion is not entirely driven by instrumental political goals, and thus we should expect that it affects more than just vote choice, public opinion, and political engagement. Discussion has the power to fundamentally shape social relationships and how individuals think about each other. But without a unifying framework to bring together the contributions of instrumental and social considerations, our field will struggle to adequately engage these social and psychological dynamics and incorporate them meaningfully into future research.

Our Contribution

Our book addresses this missing piece in our understanding of interpersonal political interaction, a behavior some consider to be the lifeblood of democracy. Why, despite high rates of reported political discussion, do so many Americans dislike talking about politics? And how do these considerations affect the way that people communicate? We argue that we need to consider the psychological experience of political discussion as navigating a *social process* that is rife with potential challenges to one's sense of self and one's relationships with others. Our argument emphasizes two features of political discussion. The first is that political discussion is an inherently *social* behavior. As such, we follow seminal research before us

and argue that without assessing the social factors influencing the decision to talk about politics, we cannot fully understand who talks about politics, with whom, under what conditions, and with what consequence. Variation in the cognitive resources of political conversation, such as interest in politics or political knowledge, or in instrumental goals related to learning and persuasion cannot fully explain people's motivation to seek or avoid discussion, although considerations related to information certainly are part of the story.

The second is that political discussion is a *process*. Previous research on the causes and consequences of political discussion tends to focus rigidly on the inputs and outputs of discussion, but not the mechanisms of the relationship between them. For example, dozens of quantitative empirical studies examine properties of political discussion networks, such as the amount of disagreement, to assess the effects of political discussion, such as political knowledge, political engagement, or vote choice. These studies rarely measure the actual experience of discussion: who is available to discuss politics, how people scan their environment to find (or avoid) discussants, how these factors affect the probability that politics emerges in discussion and whether people decide to engage, the group dynamics in the conversations that do occur, and what opinions people actually express. Those studies that do focus on discussion itself – such as who discusses politics, when, and with whom (e.g. Minozzi et al. 2020) – do not always capture the iterative nature of discussion, or how people's experience in one political discussion affects their decision-making in the next one.

This book is an effort to open the lid on the processes that lead up to a political discussion and the implications of the conversations that do happen. Our approach is to build on what we already know about political discussion, focusing on the gaps in our knowledge as a field, resulting from untested assumptions and limited methodologies in previous work. We apply new measurement techniques in order to better study the decision-making processes that lead to the initiation of discussion, the nuances of the interactions that do occur, and the consequences of those conversations on a wide set of political and social outcomes. We view our contribution in three parts.

First, we provide a new framework, the 4D Framework, for conceptualizing the feedback cycle of interpersonal political interactions. It models political discussion as a process motivated by people's pursuit of the goals that have been shown to motivate other forms of interpersonal behavior: accuracy, affirmation, and affiliation. Previous work focuses on the inputs

and outputs of political discussion, such as how the partisan composition of a person's discussion network affects her level of tolerance, but it deemphasizes the mechanism of the discussion process. Our contribution is to provide a unifying framework that synthesizes the qualitative work emphasizing social considerations with the quantitative work that narrowly focuses on the precursors and outcomes of discussion.

This framework incorporates a wider aperture on both the behavior we seek to explain and the consequences of that behavior. What do we mean when we talk about "interpersonal political interaction"? For our purposes, we focus on instances where two or more people communicate face-to-face[6] about topics that relate to politics, policy, policymakers, or about topics that reveal the political opinions or identities of the discussants. We will use the terms "political discussion," "political conversation," and "political interaction" interchangeably in this book to refer to these interactions.[7] Importantly, we consider interactions with both regular discussants and incidental discussants. We explore conversations that individuals were unsuccessful in escaping. We also study those interactions that do not happen but could have – the discussion opportunities that fail to materialize because a person actively avoids them. We note that the conversations that *do not* happen may be just as important for understanding downstream consequences as the conversations that do. The 4D Framework also incorporates the effect of people's discussion behavior on a wider range of outcomes than those that have been studied before. Instead of thinking about political discussion as a political behavior that narrowly affects political outcomes – such as learning, tolerance, trust, and voting – we think of political discussion as a social behavior that should broadly affect social outcomes, such as social estrangement[8] and psychological forms of polarization.

Our second major contribution is an emphasis on exploring the factors that shape the countless choices individuals make during the cycle of political discussion – both in terms of which conversations to pursue and how to engage in the discussions that result. We separate and study four distinct stages of discussion in our 4D Framework: Detection, Decision, Discussion, and Determination. At each of these four stages, people make choices about their behavior after weighing considerations of potential costs and benefits. Some of these choices are active and deliberate, while others happen so quickly that people might not be consciously aware of them, especially if they have formed behavioral habits guiding how they typically engage in political discussion. We expect variation in not only the decisions people make when faced with