

Talking Politics:
Influences on Interpersonal Political Conversation
During the 2000 Election
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Abstract

Political conversation is a central component of effective deliberative democracy, but theorists have presented differing views about the factors that influence people to talk politics. The theory of the public sphere holds that people's news-media usage fuels political conversation (Habermas, 1991), while spiral of silence theory maintains that political conversation is affected by whether people perceive they are in the majority opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1977). Data from the 2000 National Election Study (n = 1,556) were used to test the hypotheses that (a) news media consumption is directly related to the frequency of talking politics, and (b) the degree of perceived friendliness of the public opinion climate is directly related to the frequency of talking politics. The analysis tested four measures of media usage, including separate variables measuring exposure to election information on the Internet and to political talk radio, and measures of the perceived public opinion climate on both the interpersonal and the national level. Variables measuring political participation, partisanship, ideological placement, and six demographic characteristics were also included. The analysis supported the hypothesis that news media consumption and the frequency of political conversation are positively related. Although the hypothesis that the perceived opinion climate and the frequency of political conversation are positively related was modestly supported, alternative explanations could not be ruled out. Not only may individuals not avoid interpersonal political conversations that may lead to conflict, as Noelle-Neumann (1977) suggests, but that they may actually seek them out.

The ideal democratic community is one that resolves its action through free and equal exchange, invites and encourages arguments for all sides, and grants to argument, rather than to coercion, the power to shape collective choices.

—Price, Cappella, and Nir, 2002, p. 96

Deliberative democracy is essentially “discursive democracy” (Dryzek, 1994)—a process whereby individuals freely discuss politics, formulate political opinions, and participate in the political process (Kim, Wyatt, and Katz, 1999). Political conversation increases citizens’ factual political knowledge while causing them to give more consideration to opposing points of view (Schuefele, 2000; Price, Cappella, and Nir, 2002; Schudson, 1997). Further, political talk is “the vehicle through which dominant preferences within the larger community are transmitted to the individuals who are members of that community” (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1991, 123). Because discourse is involved in every step of deliberative democracy, interpersonal political conversation is central to the democratic process. As Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999) argue, “conversation *is* the soul of democracy” (362, emphasis theirs).

Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999, 362) define interpersonal political conversation as “all kinds of political talk, discussion, or argument as long as they are voluntarily carried out by free citizens without any specific purpose or predetermined agenda.” While some scholars (e.g. Schudson, 1997; Schuefele, 2000) distinguish kinds of political conversation by their formality, Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, and Levin (1995) posit that both formal, goal-oriented discussions and casual political conversations are equally important to a functioning deliberative democracy.

Interpersonal political dialogue provides citizens with the opportunity to connect their personal experiences with the external, political world while seeking mutual understanding with others. Most individuals are internally conflicted over political issues: they lack a consistent set of beliefs that apply to a wide range of individual political issues and events (Zaller and Feldman,

1992). This occurs because the person's mind contains conflicting schema, cognitive structures that organize prior information and experiences and influence how the mind will interpret future experiences and information. The tension between two or more conflicting schema is known as cognitive inconsistency (Zaller and Feldman, 1992; Kim, Wyatt, and Katz, 1999). In a study of attitudes toward equality, Hochschild (1981, 238) found that given the opportunity to talk, "people do not make simple statements; they shade, modulate, deny, retract, or just grind to a halt in frustration." Hochschild describes one of her research subjects discussing government income guarantees: "Caught between his desire for equality and his knowledge of existing injustice, on the one hand, and his fear that a guaranteed income will benefit even shirkers, on the other, he remains ambivalent about politics toward the poor" (252). Scholars such as Schudson (1997), Cappella, Price, and Nir (2002), and Zaller and Feldman (1992) posit that people discuss matters of politics and public affairs to resolve these conflicting schema; while they rarely eliminate cognitive inconsistency completely, they can reduce the tension to a more manageable level.

The result of these interpersonal political discussions is the dynamic of public opinion. According to Neolle-Neumann (1977, 143), public opinion was originally defined as "pressure to conform;" however, it can also mean "the judgment, founded on rational discussion, of informed and responsible citizens meting out praise or blame to the government." The latter definition is widely accepted by recent scholars (e.g. Habermas, 1991; Huckfeldt et al., 1995; Glynn and McLeod, 1984; Jeffres, Neundorf, and Atkin, 1999; Tan, 1980). Huckfeldt et al. (1995) posit that people are likely to talk politics with even casual acquaintances, which makes public opinion "more public:" a phenomenon shaped by complex communication patterns. Price, Cappella, and Nir (2002, 95) concur, arguing, "Public opinion is not a mere aggregation of mass attitudes

bearing on political affairs, but instead the emergent product of widespread popular conversation.”

What, then, influences people to talk politics? Scholars have posed a variety of theories as to which factors influence political conversation, and to what degree. Jeffres, Neundorf, and Atkin (1999, 116) found that a person’s “social and demographic characteristics, the nature of the issue, [and] the issue’s salience” can all affect the likelihood of engaging in political talk. Kenny (1993) concurred, positing that people may be reluctant to discuss emotionally charged, personal issues such as abortion with casual acquaintances whose political beliefs are unknown or opposite of their own. While these factors may indeed influence whether individuals engage in political conversations and to what degree, recently, scholars have identified two factors that encourage political conversation: the public sphere, which theorizes about the relationship between the news media and political conversation, opinion formation, and participatory activities; and the spiral of silence, which theorizes about the perceived friendliness of the conversation environment. This research will examine the impacts of these factors on the frequency of political conversation among individuals.

The Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere recognizes the news media as a precursor to political conversation (Kim, Wyatt, and Katz, 1999). As Katz (1992, 80) summarizes, “(a) The newspaper fuels conversation, (b) conversation shapes opinion, and (c) opinion triggers action.” Habermas (1991) defines the public sphere in these terms:

By “public sphere” we mean first of all a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public. ... When

the public is large, this kind of communication requires certain means of dissemination and influence; today, newspapers and periodicals, radio and television are the media of the public sphere (398).

News media serve as a trigger of political dialogue, providing topics of conversation for coffee shops and daily commutes. Katz (1992) argues that when the newspaper developed, it became an agenda-setter not only for government, but also for interpersonal conversation, providing “a menu of social issues that invite attention and discussion. . . . When the same conversation occupies an entire community or nation—thanks to the speed with which the press diffuses its agenda—public opinion crystallizes, and leads to action” (82-3). Robinson and Davis (1990) found that interpersonal communication serves as a catalyst for individuals to process information from the news media. It increases people’s resonance with and retention of the mediated message as well as their overall political competence, if only for a short time. Recent research by other scholars (e.g. Bartels, 1993; Chaffee and Zhao, 1994; Hofstetter and Barker, 1999; Jordan, 1993) has generally supported theories connecting news-media usage to the likelihood of engaging in political conversations.

Nevertheless, acceptance of the public sphere phenomenon is not universal. Owen (1991) found that strong partisans are only marginally influenced by the media but are still likely to engage in political conversation. Moreover, Mondak (1995) argues that the influence of news media on political participation may be overstated. He studied residents of Pittsburgh during the city’s 1992 newspaper strike to assess the impact of local newspapers on interpersonal political discussion. Mondak found the strike had no influence on an individual’s frequency of talking politics. In a panel study of the 1976 presidential campaign, Tan (1980) did not find a casual relationship between interpersonal conversation and TV use, but she did find that “interpersonal discussion *led* to newspaper use” (244, emphasis hers). Tan attributes this to uses and

gratifications theory, positing that citizens who regularly discuss politics use media to keep abreast of the news. Further, interpersonal conversation may pique people's curiosity about current events, motivating them to seek more information from news media.

Based on the theories of Habermas (1991) and Katz (1992) and the empirical findings of scholars such as Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999), I hypothesize a positive relationship between an individual's news-media use and his or her likelihood of talking politics.

H1: The higher the use of news media, the more frequently the individual will discuss politics.

The Spiral of Silence

In her theory of the spiral of silence, Noelle-Neumann (1977) posits that people's willingness to engage in political conversation depends on their perceptions of the public opinion climate. Those who perceive their opinion is the same as that of the majority will be more likely to talk politics than those who perceive they are in the minority opinion. Adopting the definition of public opinion as the "pressure to conform," Noelle-Neumann (1977, 143) outlines a four-step model for the development of public opinion:

1. People fear isolation from their social environment; they strive for popularity and respect from those around them.
2. Individuals look to their environment for cues on appropriate behavior and opinions and adjust their own actions and positions accordingly.
3. Some areas of opinion, such as traditions or customs, are static; others are subject to change. In the latter case, people attempt to determine which opinion position is more acceptable or popular.

4. People who notice their own personal opinion is being adopted by others will confidently voice that opinion in public. Those who observe their opinion as declining in popularity become more guarded about expressing their opinion publicly. Thus, those with the popular opinion talk a substantial amount, while those with the less popular opinion grow silent. This artificially inflates the popularity of the first opinion and deflates that of the second opinion.

As Barker (1998, 270-1) argues, “When an individual surrounds him/herself with others who are hostile to his or her worldview, that individual may become less sure of him/herself and the process itself, thus withdrawing from political activity.” Noelle-Neumann (1977, 143) concludes, “The result is a spiral process which prompts other individuals to perceive the changes in opinion and to follow suit, until one opinion has become established as the prevailing attitude while the other opinion will be pushed back and rejected by everybody with the exception of the hard core that nevertheless sticks to that opinion.”

The results of empirical studies testing spiral of silence theory are conflicting. Research by Barker (1998) and Glynn and McLeod (1984) supports spiral of silence theory. Glynn and McLeod (1984) found that while changes in a community’s overall political climate occur over a long period of time, “during short-term events such as elections, there may be substantial changes in opinion because people are continually receiving new information about political candidates, information that helps them adjust their voting decisions” (731). More recently, Mutz and Martin (2001) found that individuals are more likely to be exposed to dissonant political views via news-media consumption than interpersonal political conversation.

Other scholarship has not supported Noelle-Neumann’s theory. In studying perceptions of O. J. Simpson during his 1995 criminal trial for murder, Jeffres, Neundorf, and Atkin (1999)

found that individuals' likelihood of engaging in a conversation about Simpson's guilt was not related to their perceptions of the conversational environment—whether they believed their conversation partner agreed with them about Simpson's guilt or innocence—nor their perceptions of overall public sentiment. Huckfeldt and Sprague (1991) found that while people use discretion in choosing political discussion partners, i.e. choosing those they believe share their beliefs, ultimately their choices are limited by the availability of such individuals. In a study of exemplars (which describe a problem from the individual's perspective) in news stories within the theoretical framework of the spiral of silence, Perry and Gonzenbach (2000) found that the balance of exemplars, or “the proportion of exemplars representing each given point of view,” did not influence individuals' willingness to express opinions on controversial, morally-loaded issues (268). Finally, Kenny's (1992) analysis of the 1984 South Bend study also contradicted spiral of silence theory: he found substantial ideological and issue-position differences between political discussants.

Based on Noelle-Neumann's theory, I hypothesize that perceptions of both the conversational environment and the overall opinion climate influence the frequency of interpersonal political conversation.

H2: The more friendly the individual perceives the public opinion climate, the more frequently s/he will discuss politics.

Data and Methods

The 2000 National Election Study (NES) surveyed 1,556 U.S. citizens during the two months prior to and six weeks following the 2000 election.¹ The survey provides data on voting,

¹ The 2000 National Election Studies pre-election survey was administered to 1,807 people Sept. 5-Nov. 6, 2000; 1,556 people were re-interviewed Nov. 8-Dec. 18, 2000 in the post-election survey. This research relies on data

political participation, and public opinion, among other fields (see Burns et al., 2001). NES is useful for this analysis because, in addition to being readily available, it includes a series of questions regarding media usage and talking politics that provide a valid test of the hypotheses. The data will be analyzed with multiple regression statistics.

Dependent Variable

Frequency of political conversation. NES respondents were asked during the post-interview the number of days in the past week they had discussed politics, ranging from a code of 1 for “one day” to 7 for “every day.” Those indicating they had not discussed politics at all were coded 0.

Independent Variables

News-media use. Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999) operationalized news-media use as individuals’ self-reported frequency of newspaper reading and viewing of national network television news over the course of one week. While useful, this does not take into consideration exposure to political media such as campaign advertisements and the presidential debates. Based on the theoretical distinctions between political media and mass media, two additive indices of media usage were created.² The first, mass media usage, is the sum of the number of days the person (a) read a daily newspaper; (b) watched the national nightly news; (c) watched the early local news; (d) watched the late local news. Scores range from 0 to 28. The second, political media exposure, measures the amount of exposure to political advertisements, the presidential

from both interviews. Eligible participants must be of voting age on or before Election Day 2000 and reside in the continental 48 states. See Burns et al., 2001.

² The decision to distinguish “traditional” mass media from political media was supported by a factor analysis of the original eight media variables, which yielded two factors of media usage.

debates, television programs about the election, and radio speeches or discussions about the election.³

An analysis of media consumption habits should also consider the role of new media such as the Internet and talk radio (Lawrence and Bennett, 2000). The Internet has become an increasingly more popular means of obtaining political information, whether through news-media websites or candidate pages (Davis, 1999). Tewksbury (2003) found differences in media consumption habits between Internet news users and non-users, suggesting that this analysis may benefit from distinguishing the two groups. A third media usage variable asks whether the individual has seen election information on the Internet, coded 1 for yes and 0 for no.⁴

Additionally, talk-radio programs such as Rush Limbaugh have drawn interest from political communication scholars of late (e.g. Bolce, de Maio, and Muzzio, 1996; Barker, 1998; Hofstetter and Barker, 1999). Identifying talk-radio listeners as a growing voting bloc, Bolce, de Maio, and Muzzio (1996, 478) argue, “Those who consider talk radio to have a salutary effect on American politics and government see the medium as a ‘forum for discussion and dissent’—the modern equivalent of the soapbox, committees of correspondence, the bully pulpit, the village square, and the town hall.” A fourth media usage variable asks whether the individual listens to political talk radio, coded 1 for yes and 0 for no.⁵

Perception of public opinion. Two measures of the individual’s perceptions about public opinion were considered: one attempting to measure the person’s perception of the conversational environment between him/herself and those with whom he/she indicates

³ Scores for the variable political media exposure range from 0 to 16, depending on the magnitude of exposure to each medium. Respondents received three points each for indicating they had political ads watched the presidential debates. Exposure to television programs and radio speeches/discussions was scored based on the number of programs the person indicated seeing/hearing: 0, “None;” 1, “Just one or two;” 3, “Several;” or 5, “A great many.”

⁴ NES did not break down the amount of Internet media usage nor ask where the respondent saw election information, i.e. from online news sources or candidate websites.

discussing politics, labeled interpersonal conversation environment; the second, the person's perception of the public opinion climate as a whole, labeled perceived opinion climate.

NES respondents were able to name up to four political discussants and were asked a series of questions about them, including how the person thinks each discussant voted in the election. The variable of the interpersonal conversation environment is the difference between how the respondent voted and arithmetic mean of how the respondent's political discussants were perceived to have voted. Scores range from -1 to +1, with higher values indicating a more friendly perceived conversation environment. Higher values indicate a more positive conversation.⁶ Based on the hypothesis derived from the spiral of silence theory, the higher the value of the conversation environment variable, the more frequently the individual will talk politics.

The individual's perceived opinion climate was calculated by first multiplying who the individual predicted (in the pre-election survey) would win the presidential election and for whom the individual actually voted. The data were then recoded into a three-point scale measuring perceived opinion climate. If the respondent did not vote, the variable was coded as 0. If the respondent predicted someone other than the candidate they voted for would win, it was coded as 1. If the respondent predicted the candidate they voted for would win, it was coded as

⁵ Because only 36 percent of those surveyed indicated listening to talk radio, the amount of exposure was not broken down further.

⁶ The variables were recoded so that both how the respondent voted and how each of the discussants were thought to have voted were parallel: -1 = voted for Gore; 0 = did not vote, ineligible to vote, or voted for someone other than Gore or Bush; 1 = voted for Bush. The arithmetic mean voting score of the discussants was calculated by adding the votes of each discussant and dividing by the total number of discussants named, discarding those whose vote choice was unknown by the respondent. If four political discussants were named, with three voting for Gore and one voting for Bush, the variable would receive a score of $-.75$. The conversation environment score was then calculated by multiplying the discussant score by how the respondent voted. If, for example, the respondent voted for Gore (coded -1) and the discussant score was $-.75$, the interpersonal conversation environment score would be $.75$, indicating the respondent viewed the interpersonal conversation environment as largely friendly.

2.⁷ People may be willing to vote for a candidate they do not think will win the election; however, if the spiral of silence theory is correct, people will talk politics less frequently in that situation than if their candidate of choice and the candidate they predict will win the election are the same person (Noelle-Neumann, 1977).⁸ Thus, the hypothesis predicts that respondents with a higher score on the perceived opinion climate variable will talk politics more frequently than those with a lower score.

Control Variables

Political participation. A person with a high level of political participation is by nature interested in government, politics, and/or elections (Kim, Wyatt, and Katz, 1999; Davis, 1999; Tan, 1980; Pinkleton, 1999). Politically interested people are likely to consume more news media, pay more attention to political news, and engage in a political conversation—even in a conversational environment perceived as hostile—than those who profess little or no interest in the subject matter (e.g. Bolce, de Maio, and Muzzio, 1996; Chaffee and Zhao, 1994; Hofstetter and Barker, 1999; Lin, 1999). The variable of political participation is a score from a factor analysis of six elements of political participation: whether the person (a) tried to influence how someone else voted; (b) displayed or wore a campaign/political bumper sticker, button, or yard sign; (c) attended a political meeting or rally; (d) did any work on a campaign; (e) contacted a

⁷ How the respondent voted and who the respondent predicted will win were recoded to be parallel (1 = voted for Gore; 3 = voted for Bush; 5 = voted for someone else), with respondents who did not vote coded 0. The two variables were multiplied together, yielding seven possible scores: 0 (respondent did not vote); 1 (respondent voted for Gore and predicts he will win); 3 (respondent voted for Bush but predicts Gore will win, or vice versa); 5 (respondent voted for someone other than Bush or Gore but predicts Gore will win, or vice versa); 9 (respondent voted for Bush and predicts he will win); 15 (respondent voted for someone other than Bush or Gore but predicts Bush will win, or vice versa); and 25 (the respondent voted for someone other than Bush or Gore and predicts that candidate will win). The variable was then recoded as follows: 0 → 0 (respondent did not vote); 3, 5, and 15 → 1 (respondent's vote choice and predicted winner differ); and 1, 9, and 25 → 2 (respondent's vote choice and predicted winner are the same).

public official to express his/her views in the last year; and (f) is a member of an organization that tries to influence government.⁹

Partisanship and ideological placement. Partisanship will be measured on a seven-point scale ranging from “strong Democrat” (0) to “strong Republican” (6). A second measure of partisanship is whether the individual is a strong partisan, as research has shown those individuals are more likely to engage in political conversation (e.g. Owen, 1991). Those who identified themselves as a “strong Democrat” or a “strong Republican” were labeled strong partisans (coded 1; not strong partisans were coded 0). Political ideology was measured on a three-point scale: liberal (coded 1); moderate (3); and conservative (5).

Demographics. The analysis will control for the following demographic variables: age; gender (0 = male, 1 = female); marital status (0 = not married, 1 = married); race (0 = nonwhite, 1 = white); income, measured in household annual gross (22-point ordinal scale ranging from less than \$5,000 to \$200,000 or higher); education, measured as the last level completed (7-point scale ranging from 8 grades or less to an advanced degree); and whether they live in the South (0 = no, 1 = yes).

Results

The data support the hypothesis that higher media usage is significantly correlated with a higher frequency of political conversations. The data marginally support the hypothesis that a perceived friendly public opinion climate is significantly correlated with a higher frequency of political conversations. Table 1 presents the results of two multiple regressions. Model 1, which

⁸ This operationalization does not take into consideration the political opinion climate of individual states, which may have a larger effect on respondents from states that vote consistently for one party than the political climate of the nation as a whole.

⁹ See appendix for the component matrix of the factor analysis.

includes only the control variables, has an adjusted R squared of .167. Model 2 includes both the independent and control variables and has an adjusted R squared of .273. The coefficient for each of the four variables measuring news-media usage was in the hypothesized direction and was statistically significant at the .05 level or better. Of all the variables tested, exposure to political media accounted for the largest variance in the frequency of talking politics ($\beta = .222$). With regard to the perception of public opinion, the variable measuring interpersonal

Table 1

Multiple linear regression predicting frequency of talking politics
from media usage and perceived political opinion climate

	<u>Model 1</u>		<u>Model 2</u>	
	b	β	b	β
Constant	1.802***		.880**	
Mass media usage			.040***	.108
Political media exposure			.169***	.222
Talk radio			.411**	.071
Internet election information			.659***	.109
Interpersonal conversation environment			.176	.032
Perceived opinion climate			.284**	.082
Political participation	.609***	.221	.390***	.143
Political ideology	.021	.013	-.027	-.017
Party identification	.039	.029	.071*	.053
Strong partisan	.747***	.125	.317**	.053
Age	-.050	-.030	-.014**	-.082
Gender	-.010	-.002	.199	.035
Marital status	.694***	.124	.496***	.089
Education level	.224***	.128	.076	.043
Income	.089**	.100	.061**	.068
Race	.376**	.054	.362**	.052
From the South	.287*	.049	.236*	.041
<i>Adjusted R²</i>	.167		.273	
<i>n</i>	1335		1258	

* $p \leq .10$; ** $p \leq .05$; *** $p < .001$.

conversation environment was in the hypothesized direction but was not statistically significant ($p = .216$). However, the individual's perceived opinion climate was associated with the frequency of political conversation ($b = .284$, $p < .05$). Interestingly, the individual's education level was not associated with the frequency of political conversation, but higher income level was. Gender was not a factor in talking politics, either. Older respondents discussed politics less frequently than younger respondents, although the difference was negligible ($b = -.014$).

Several secondary analyses were conducted to determine the effects of media usage and perceptions of public opinion on talking politics within subgroups of the population.¹⁰ Table 2 presents the results of multiple regressions among strong partisans ($n = 410$) and nonwhites ($n = 252$). Among strong partisans, mass media and political media usage were again related to the frequency of political discussions, but the factors were not as strong as in the original model ($\beta = .121$ and $.198$, respectively). Also, listening to talk radio and seeing election information on the Internet were not statistically significant factors in strong partisans' frequency of political conversation. The interpersonal conversation environment had the predicted effect and was statistically significant at the .10 level ($b = .388$; $p = .089$). Among strong partisans, marital status, race, income, and geographic region did not affect frequency of political talk.

Among nonwhites, the model predicted 35 percent of the variance in political conversations. Exposure to mass media, political media, and talk radio and the individual's perceived opinion climate had the hypothesized effect and were statistically significant. The highest β value in the model was $.189$, which occurred for both political participation and political media exposure. Listening to talk radio had a much larger effect on nonwhites than the population as a whole, with a b -value of $.892$ and a β weight of $.155$. Additionally, as Table 3 illustrates, 46.5 percent of conservatives reported listening to talk radio, compared to 30.5

percent of liberals and 29.9 percent of moderates. Furthermore, among moderates and liberals, a higher percentage of nonwhites than whites listened to talk radio; percentage-wise, nonwhite moderates represent the second-largest bloc of talk radio listeners, behind only conservative whites. Income did not play a factor; however, education level was significant in both magnitude ($b = .284$; $\beta = .162$) and statistical significance ($p = .012$). Female nonwhites discussed politics

Table 2

Multiple linear regressions predicting frequency of talking politics among strong partisans and among nonwhites

	<u>Strong partisans</u>		<u>Nonwhites</u>	
	b	β	b	β
Constant	2.318**		.029	
Mass media usage	.043**	.121	.070**	.179
Political media exposure	.146***	.198	.160**	.189
Talk radio	.168	.031	.892**	.155
Internet election information	.408	.073	.119	.019
Interpersonal conversation environment	.388*	.078	.016	.003
Perceived opinion climate	.438**	.117	.382**	.123
Political participation	.405***	.183	.577**	.189
Political ideology	-.073	-.051	-.074	-.046
Party identification	.130**	.145	.013	.008
Strong partisan			.582	.101
Age	-.022**	-.134	-.027**	-.153
Gender	-.112	-.021	.820**	.147
Marital status	.268	.051	.666**	.119
Education level	.138	.085	.284**	.162
Income	-.017	-.023	.071	.064
Race	.149	.023		
From the South	-.054	-.051	-.044**	-.008
<i>Adjusted R</i> ²	.235		.347	
<i>n</i>	410		252	

* $p \leq .10$; ** $p \leq .05$; *** $p < .001$.

¹⁰ See appendix for additional tables not reported in the analysis.

Table 3

Relationship between listening to talk radio and political ideology

	<u>Liberals</u>			<u>Moderates</u>			<u>Conservatives</u>		
	Whites	Non-whites	Total	Whites	Non-whites	Total	Whites	Non-whites	Total
Listens to talk radio	29.7%	31.8%	30.5%	26.4%	41.6%	29.9%	47.9%	37.5%	46.5%
Does not listen	70.3%	68.2%	69.5%	73.6%	58.4%	70.1%	52.1%	62.5%	53.5%
<i>n</i>	310	107	417	333	89	422	537	80	617

more frequently than males ($b = .820$), while nonwhites living in the South discussed politics slightly less often than those living elsewhere ($b = -.044$).

There were significant differences between those who identified themselves as liberals, moderates, and conservatives (Table 4). Among liberals ($n = 351$), exposure to political media had a much smaller effect compared to other groups, with a b-value of only .092 and a β weight of .120, and listening to talk radio was not a significant factor. Individuals who had seen election information on the Internet talked politics 16 percent more frequently; Internet usage was the largest predictor of the dependent variable ($\beta = .201$). Liberals were also more affected by their level of political participation than other groups, with a b-value of .596. Marital status did not predict the frequency of political conversation. Among moderates ($n = 339$), political participation was not a significant factor in the frequency of talking politics, nor was seeing election information on the Internet. Exposure to political media had a larger effect on moderates than other groups, with a b-value of .233 and a β weight of .298. Compared to other groups, conservatives had larger b-values in four fields: perceived opinion climate ($b = .476$), marital status ($b = .713$), race ($b = .710$) and whether they lived in the South ($b = .553$). Exposure to

political media and political participation were slightly less significant in predicting political discussion among conservatives than among the sample as a whole.

Residents of the South differed significantly from the general population in several areas, with the results of the multiple regression presented in Table 5. The perceived friendliness of the interpersonal conversation environment was significantly associated with the frequency of talking politics in the hypothesized direction ($b = .673$, $\beta = .114$, $p = .007$). However, the other

Table 4

Multiple linear regressions predicting frequency of talking politics among liberals, moderates, and conservatives

	<u>Liberals</u>		<u>Moderates</u>		<u>Conservatives</u>	
	b	β	b	β	b	β
Constant	1.765**		.247		.506	
Mass media usage	.041**	.113	.045**	.123	.037**	.104
Political media exposure	.092**	.120	.233***	.298	.143***	.190
Talk radio	.293	.049	.592*	.097	.455**	.084
Internet election information	1.121***	.201	.211	.032	.471†	.082
Interpersonal conversation environment	.335	.65	.102	.017	-.025	-.005
Perceived opinion climate	.284	.087	-.012	-.004	.476**	.122
Political participation	.596***	.119	.201	.056	.303**	.121
Party identification	-.090	-.053	.067	.040	.155**	.112
Strong partisan	.147	.026	.187	.027	.198	.035
Age	-.010	-.062	-.011	-.072	-.018**	-.102
Gender	.283	.052	.342	.061	.083	.015
Marital status	.077	.014	.654**	.118	.713**	.127
Education level	.048	.029	.136	.074	.054	.030
Income	.040	.038	.113**	.114	.040	.053
Race	.576*	.093	-.119	-.018	.710**	.086
From the South	-.313	-.053	.292	.050	.553**	.099
<i>Adjusted R</i> ²	.260		.209		.263	
<i>n</i>	351		339		506	

* $p \leq .10$; ** $p \leq .05$; *** $p < .001$; † $p = .051$.

measure of perception of public opinion, the perceived opinion climate, was not statistically significant ($p = .397$). Southerners who identified themselves as strong partisans did not discuss politics any more or less frequently than those were not strong partisans. Females talked politics more frequently than men ($b = .604$, $p = .012$), while income level had the second highest β value in the model (.164).

Table 5

Multiple linear regression predicting frequency of talking politics
among residents of the South

	b	<u>Model</u> β
Constant	.592	
Mass media usage	.028*	.076
Political media exposure	.198***	.263
Talk radio	.436*	.073
Internet election information	.576	.095
Interpersonal conversation environment	.673**	.114
Perceived opinion climate	.130	.037
Political participation	.433***	.152
Party identification	-.040	-.030
Strong partisan	-.068	-.011
Age	-.016	-.092
Gender	.604**	.106
Marital status	.553**	.098
Education level	.050	.029
Income	.160	.164
Race	.490*	.076
<i>Adjusted R²</i>	.326	
<i>n</i>	448	

* $p \leq .10$; ** $p \leq .05$; *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

This research attempted to test empirically two theories about the factors influencing how often individuals talk politics. In general, these findings support the hypothesis that individuals with higher levels of news-media use have political conversations more frequently; there is only marginal support for the hypothesis that the perceived friendliness of the public opinion climate is directly related to the frequency of political conversations.

News-media use. The amount of mass media use and exposure to political media was closely associated with the frequency of political conversation. With two exceptions, both the primary and secondary analyses found that exposure to political media—political advertisements, the presidential debate, television programs about the election, and radio speeches or discussions—accounted for the largest variance in the dependent variable. Among nonwhites, political participation and exposure to political media had an equal β weight, while among liberals, seeing election information on the Internet was a better predictor of political conversation ($\beta = .201$).

As a whole, exposure to the election on the Internet led to an increase in the frequency of talking politics, but it did not significantly affect several subgroups, notably strong partisans, nonwhites, Southerners, and those who classify themselves as political moderates. Since the data asks only whether the individual saw election information on the Internet, and not the type of information (e.g. a candidate's press release, a news article, etc.) or where it was seen (e.g. a candidate's homepage, an online news website, etc.), it is difficult to determine why some groups were more influenced by Internet information than others. Whether and the extent to which individuals use the Internet in general may specify the relationship between Internet campaign exposure and frequency of political conversation.

As predicted, individuals who reported listening to talk radio discussed politics more frequently than non-listeners. Frequency of political discussion among nonwhites was especially associated with listening to talk radio ($b = .892$; $\beta = .155$). However, there was no relationship between the two variables among strong partisans or liberals. Since talk radio is largely considered a conservative medium—a “bedlam of conservative yakkers,” in the words of Bolce, de Maio, and Muzzio (1996, 457)—it would be reasonable to conclude that few liberals listen to talk radio. However, as Table 5 illustrates, many of the assumptions about the composition of talk-radio audiences may be incorrect. Although talk-radio listeners still comprise less than 40 percent of the overall population, exposure to the medium is a significant predictor of the variance in political discussions.

As a whole, overall media usage has a larger influence on the frequency of political discussion among nonwhites than whites, and there is a particularly significant gap between talk radio listeners and non-listeners. When combined, these findings suggest that among nonwhites, whether individuals listen to talk radio may predict not only the frequency of engaging in political discussions, but also such factors as political participation, political efficacy, and overall interest in and attitude toward government and politics.

Since NES did not collect data on media usage or political conversation during both the pre-election and post-election surveys, it is difficult to establish a casual direction. However, historically scholars such as Habermas (1991), Katz (1992), and Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999) have argued that media use comes before political talk, a position that has been supported in empirical studies (e.g. Koch, 1994; Robinson and Davis, 1990; for a counter-example, see Tan, 1980).

Perceived opinion climate. The perception of public opinion was somewhat related to people's frequency of political discussion. The variable measuring interpersonal conversation environment was only statistically significant among strong partisans and respondents from the South. The variable of perceived opinion climate, which compared respondents' choice of presidential candidate with who they thought would win the election, was significantly related to the frequency of talking politics in the hypothesized direction, but the magnitude of the relationship was small. Those who predicted that the winning presidential candidate was the same person for whom they had voted discussed politics only 4 percent more frequently than those who voted for someone they did not think would win. The relationship between perceived opinion climate and frequency of talking politics was not significant for liberals, moderates, or southerners. The effect of this variable on political conversation was almost twice as large among strong partisans and conservatives as it was among the population as a whole. However, spiral of silence theory held that "the hard core" would not be deterred from political conversation if the political discussant was perceived to hold opposing views (Noelle-Neumann, 1977, 143). Moreover, empirical evidence has shown that the political attitudes and behaviors of strong partisans are less affected by external factors such as media (see Owen, 1991).

The two variables used may not be valid means for testing spiral of silence theory. With regard to the interpersonal conversation environment, respondents who did not vote, who voted for someone other than Al Gore or George W. Bush, or who named no political discussants all received a score of 0. During the calculation process, both NES respondents and their political discussants who voted for someone other than Gore or Bush were coded 0, or neutral. A valid argument could be made for coding supporters of Pat Buchanan higher than +1, the score for Bush, and for coding supporters of Ralph Nader lower than -1, the score for Gore, or between 0

and -1; however, it was difficult to assess a valid code for these candidates in relation to the two major-party candidates, and only a small percentage of respondents or discussants voted for minor-party candidates. But more importantly, this operationalization does not measure the effects of spiral of silence theory on nonvoters. The variables of how the respondent voted and the arithmetic mean of how the respondents' discussants voted were multiplied together to calculate interpersonal conversation environment. Because nonvoters were coded as 0 in the variable of presidential vote choice, their scores in interpersonal conversation environment were always 0, regardless of how their discussants voted.

With regard to perceived opinion climate, the variable does not take into consideration the public opinion at the local or even state level. As currently operationalized, the variable would predict a higher frequency of political discussions when people's vote choice and predicted winner are the same candidate. However, it may not matter who people think will win the national election so much as the degree of friendliness or hostility they perceive in the local opinion climate. Individuals who live in states that are Republican or Democrat strongholds are likely to be more affected by the local political climate than those who live in swing states. For instance, a hardcore Democrat from a state that consistently votes for the Republican presidential candidate may think that the Democratic candidate will win the national election, but he/she might still talk politics less frequently regardless of who he/she predicts will win the election because of the local opinion climate. Additionally, the perceived opinion climate may be measured more accurately by examining both the respondents' and political discussants' views on political issues in local elections or on policy issues such as government spending, gun control, and environmental regulation. Matters of public policy may have greater salience among citizens than the outcome of a national election, as might local or even statewide elections. Thus,

looking only at perceptions of the presidential election may not fully capture the concept of perceived opinion climate upon which the spiral of silence theory is based.

Beyond the validity of the measures of perceived opinion climate, the spiral of silence theory may not be accurate. Assuming their operationalizations are valid, both variables measuring perceived opinion climate had a significant effect on the frequency of political talk among strong partisans. This suggests that not only may individuals not avoid interpersonal political conversations that may lead to conflict, but that *they may actually seek them out*. As Price, Cappella, and Nir (2002) theorize,

Why is disagreement so vital? The reason is that it forces more careful consideration by challenging points of view—hence, those who deliberate form better reasoned opinions. Moreover, deliberation expands the repertoire of considerations and arguments, and thus it fosters understanding, among participants, of multiple points of view (96).

Empirical evidence from both Perry and Gozenbach (2000) and Kenny (1992) support this theory. This analysis lends only modest support to spiral of silence theory, and neither the null hypothesis nor the rival explanation can be ruled out.

Political participation. As predicted, there is a positive association between levels of political participation and the frequency of talking politics. The b-value of the political participation almost doubled among nonwhites (from .390 among the entire sample to .577) and liberals ($b = .596$), indicating that levels of political participation have a greater influence on political conversation among these two groups. Interestingly, however, the relationship between political participation and the frequency of talking politics was not statistically significant among moderates, which suggests that there are other factors at play within this population segment.

Partisanship and ideological placement. The only measure of partisanship and ideological placement that consistently had a significant effect on the frequency of talking politics was whether the individual identified him/herself as a “strong Republican” or a “strong

Democrat.” Whether individuals identified themselves as liberals, moderates, or conservatives or how they placed themselves on the seven-point Democrat-Republican partisanship scale did not have a significant effect. Strong partisans do discuss politics more frequently than others, but the difference is less than 5 percent. Among nonwhites and southerners, strength of partisanship was not related to their frequency of political conversation. The analysis suggests that while those who identify strongly with either the Democratic or Republican party do indeed discuss politics more frequently, individuals’ partisanship and ideological placement do not play a substantial role in influencing the frequency of political talk.

Demographics. In general, individuals’ age, marital status, income, and race all affected the frequency of political discussion. The single best demographic predictor of the frequency of talking politics is marital status, with married respondents talking politics approximately 7 percent more frequently than respondents who were not married. However, the relationship was not significant among strong partisans and liberals. In all analyses, the older the respondent, the less frequently he/she discussed politics, although the magnitude of change was negligible, and the results were not always statistically significant. In the original model, each one year increase in age was associated with a .2 percent decrease in the frequency of political conversation. Income had only a minor association with political conversation among the entire population and a slightly larger effect among moderates. Citizens’ level of education was only a factor among nonwhites, for which it had a substantial effect ($b = .284$, $\beta = .162$). Whether the individual was white was significant at the .10 level for the entire population, liberals, and southerners but was substantially significant among conservatives ($b = .710$, $\beta = .086$). This suggests that generally, race does not play a role in determining the frequency of political conversation except in predicting the behavior of conservatives. Females talked politics more frequently than men only

if they lived in the South ($b = .710$) or were nonwhite ($b = .820$). Whether the respondent lives in the South was significant for the entire population at the .10 level. Nonwhites who live in the South talked politics slightly less often than the population as a whole ($b = -.044$), while conservatives living in the South talked more frequently than those who lived elsewhere ($b = .553$). Taken together, these variables indicate that demographic differences among individuals do not play a substantial role in predicting the frequency of their political conversations.

Finally, although this analysis uses data from both the pre-election and post-election NES surveys, the data do not indicate change over time; therefore, issues of causality cannot be determined.

Conclusion

This research was an empirical test of the effects of the public sphere and the spiral of silence on the frequency of individuals talking politics. The hypothesis predicting a direct relationship between news-media use and the frequency of political conversation was supported. While there was modest support of the hypothesis predicting a direct relationship between the perceived opinion climate and talking politics, alternative explanations cannot be ruled out. Future research should examine more thoroughly alternative ways to measure the perceived opinion climate and, more broadly, to empirically test spiral of silence theory. In a “discursive democracy” (Dryzek, 1994), the free exchange of ideas and opinions is essential to the formulation of public opinion and, with it, public policy (Schuefele, 2000; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1991; Kim, Wyatt, and Katz, 1999). Considering its central role in the political process, conversation—“the soul of democracy” (Kim, Wyatt, and Katz, 1999, 362)—is well-suited for further study.

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Appendix

Table A1

Correlation matrix of respondents' political participation factors

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Component Score</u>
Tried to influence how someone else voted?	.569
Displayed a button/sticker/yard sign?	.634
Attend a political meeting or rally?	.650
Volunteer for a political campaign?	.581
Contacted a public official in the last year?	.456
Member of an organization that tries to influence government?	.475

Table A2

Multiple linear regressions predicting frequency of talking politics
among men versus women

	<u>Men</u>	β	<u>Women</u>	β
	b		b	
Constant	.527		1.346**	
Mass media usage	.033**	.088	.043**	.118
Political media exposure	.153***	.204	.182**	.233
Talk radio	.570**	.103	.287	.047
Internet election information	.703**	.122	.607	.095
Interpersonal conversation environment	.036	.006	.281	.052
Perceived opinion climate	.315**	.090	.258**	.077
Political participation	.353***	.142	.443***	.150
Political ideology	-.049	-.031	-.014	-.009
Party identification	.086	.170	.061	.045
Strong partisan	.397*	.068	.253	.042
Age	-.084	-.048	-.018**	-.108
Marital status	.691**	.124	.350*	.062
Education level	.090	.053	.060	.033
Income	.033	.023	.093**	.082
Race	.714	.102	.126	.018
From the South	.051	.009	.375*	.064
<i>Adjusted R²</i>	.275		.261	
<i>n</i>	562		695	

* $p \leq .10$; ** $p \leq .05$; *** $p < .001$.

Table A3

Multiple linear regressions predicting frequency of talking politics
among married versus not married respondents

	<u>Married</u>		<u>Not married</u>	
	b	β	b	β
Constant	.629		1.502**	
Mass media usage	.047**	.131	.031**	.085
Political media exposure	.189***	.262	.141**	.179
Talk radio	.428**	.078	.437*	.073
Internet election information	.618**	.109	.727**	.116
Interpersonal conversation environment	.036	.025	.221	.038
Perceived opinion climate	.324**	.092	.237	.073
Political participation	.326***	.136	.533***	.171
Political ideology	.017	.007	-.080	-.050
Party identification	.099*	.079	.549**	.090
Strong partisan	.041	.007	.253	.042
Age	-.027	-.015	-.021	-.138
Gender	.041	.007	.435**	.076
Education level	.097	.058	.060	.033
Income	.039	.048	.098**	.097
Race	.189	.026	.530**	.080
From the South	.374*	.067	.043	.007
<i>Adjusted R²</i>	.282		.217	
<i>n</i>	656		601	

* $p \leq .10$; ** $p \leq .05$; *** $p < .001$.