

The Dynamics of Public Deliberation and Political Participation: Talking Together and Acting Together

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Ongoing Debate about Participation and Engagement of Citizens

- Warnings that Americans are retreating from the public arena:
 - General trend of low voting turnout
 - Decline in civic engagement and social capital ("Bowling Alone")
 - Low levels of trust in government
- Dissenting voices drowned out



The Discursive Turn: Deliberation and the Revival of Democracy

- Seven edited volumes in last decade celebrate, foster, and investigate deliberation as a way to revive democracy
- Cass Sunstein: “Design institutions that promote citizen discussion and debate.”

Table1a

Theoretical Dimensions of Public Deliberation

- Universal
- Inclusive
- Reason Based
- Agreement Oriented
- Strengthens
democracy

Table1

Theoretical Dimensions of Public Deliberation

·DEMOCRATIC TENDENCIES	·DIMENSIONS	·UNDEMOCRATIC TENDENCIES
·Universal	Access	·Elitist
·Inclusive	Voice	·Exclusive
·Reason Based	Type of Discourse	·Emotion and coercion based
·Agreement Oriented	Effect on Cohesion	·Disagreement oriented
·Strengthens democracy	Effect on Politics	·No or negative effect on democracy



From Theory to Practice: Researching Deliberation

- Need to know much more about whether and how citizens participate in public talking
- Need a framework for mapping citizen deliberation



Place deliberation in the more general context of “discursive participation”

- Discursive participation has five traits:
 - 1-discourse with other citizens
 - 2-takes place in a variety of settings
 - 3-takes place in a variety of formats
 - 4-focuses on local, national, international issues of public concern
 - 5-form of participation that contributes to politics/policymaking



A Survey of Discursive Participation in America

- N of respondents=1501
 - Random sample of 1001
 - Over sample of 500 of what we call “face-to-face deliberators”
- Geared to study the extent and types of discussions that individuals engage in when discussing local, national, or international issues



Interviews asked about six different types of discursive participation

- One-to-one talking about public issues
- One-to-one discussions on internet via email
- Internet deliberation via chat rooms, message boards, etc.
- Formal or informal meetings organized by religious, social, civic, govt., or political groups
- Attempts to persuade re. public issue
- Attempts to persuade re. voting



Address three questions

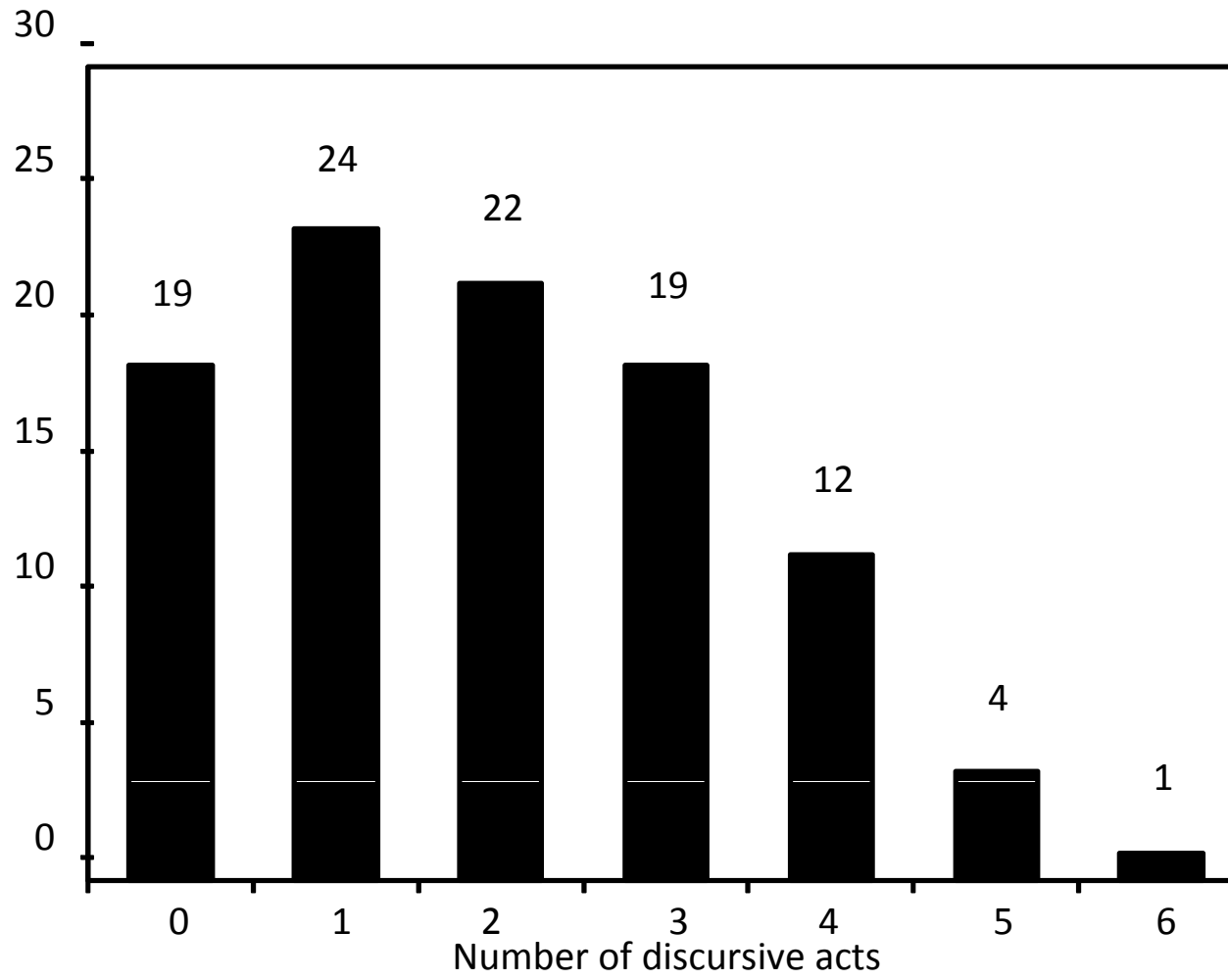
- To what extent do citizens engage in discursive participation? Only a small percent? Or more widespread?
- Who engages in discursive participation? Is it only those who have high SES or is it more widespread?
- What are the civic and political effects of discursive participation?

Table 2

Reported Levels of discursive participation in the United States

TYPE OF DISCURSIVE PARTICIPATION	%
Public deliberation	
"Face to face deliberation" about a public issue	25%
"Internet deliberation" (communication via Internet chat rooms, message boards, or other online discussion groups about a public issue)	4%
Informal public talk	
"Traditional talking" (phone or in-person conversation about a public issue)	68%
"Internet talking" (e-mail or instant messaging about issues of public concern)	24%
Political persuasion	
Persuade someone about your view on a public issue	47%
Persuade someone about whom to vote for	31%
Source: Discursive Participation Survey. Total sample: N=1,501 (weighted general population sample).	

Figure 1



Note: Additive index of the six forms of discursive participation (see text for more details).
Source: Discursive Participation Survey. Total Sample N=1501 (weighted general population sample).



Who deliberates?

- Four sets of independent variables measure the competing explanations for political and civic participation:
 - SES/demographic characteristics: education, income, gender, age, race
 - Political characteristics: party ID, ideology
 - Political capital: political interest, efficacy, knowledge, attention
 - Social capital: organizational membership, length of residence in community, religious attendance

Table 3

Differences Across Individuals by Education in Discursive Participation

	< HS	HS Degree	Some College	College Degree	Post Grad
Whole Sample	10 %	37 %	28 %	16 %	9 %
Face to Face Deliberators	5	26	30	22	17
Internet Deliberators	15	5	38	19	23
Internet Talkers	5	23	35	22	16
Traditional Talkers	5	32	32	19	12
Persuaders on Issue	7	27	33	20	13
Persuaders on Vote	6	28	32	21	13



Does SES alone tell us who deliberates? The SES Model

- Citizens across all demographic characteristics are engaged in discursive participation.
- However, two consistent variations"
 - The better educated are over represented.
 - Those in lowest income groups tend to be less discursively active but differences are not as great as by education.



Beyond the SES Model: Social & Political Capital Model of Political Participation

- Organizational membership has strong effect on 5 of 6 forms of discursive participation
- Some political attitudes are also important -- political interest, political efficacy
- Role of SES is greatly diminished when social capital (org. membership) and political capital are in the model predicting the different types of discursive participation



Effect of face-to-face deliberation on political behavior?

- Face-to-face discussions in formal and informal meetings comes closest to most formal definitions of deliberation.
- Two views of the effects of deliberation:
 - Cynics downgrade it as “just talk” and say it has no effects.
 - Optimists believe it has a positive impact on civic and political engagement

Figure 2

Hypothesized effects of discursive participation

Policy	Issue-specific engagement	General engagement	Political capital	Shared meanings
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Impact on policy agenda and outcomes	Increased political (e.g., voting, contacting) and civic (e.g., volunteering) participation around specific issue (e.g., crime)	Increased political (e.g., voting, contacting) and civic (e.g., volunteering) participation in general	Increased motivation (e.g., political interest) and ability (e.g., political knowledge) to participate	Greater agreement on foundational issues (e.g., what constitutes the public interest, community, citizenship).
Direct effects		Indirect effects		

The diagram features a horizontal double-headed arrow. The left arrowhead points towards the text 'Direct effects', and the right arrowhead points towards the text 'Indirect effects'. The arrow is positioned below the bottom row of the table, spanning across the columns for 'Direct effects' and 'Indirect effects'.

Figure 3. A heuristic model of the impact of discursive participation

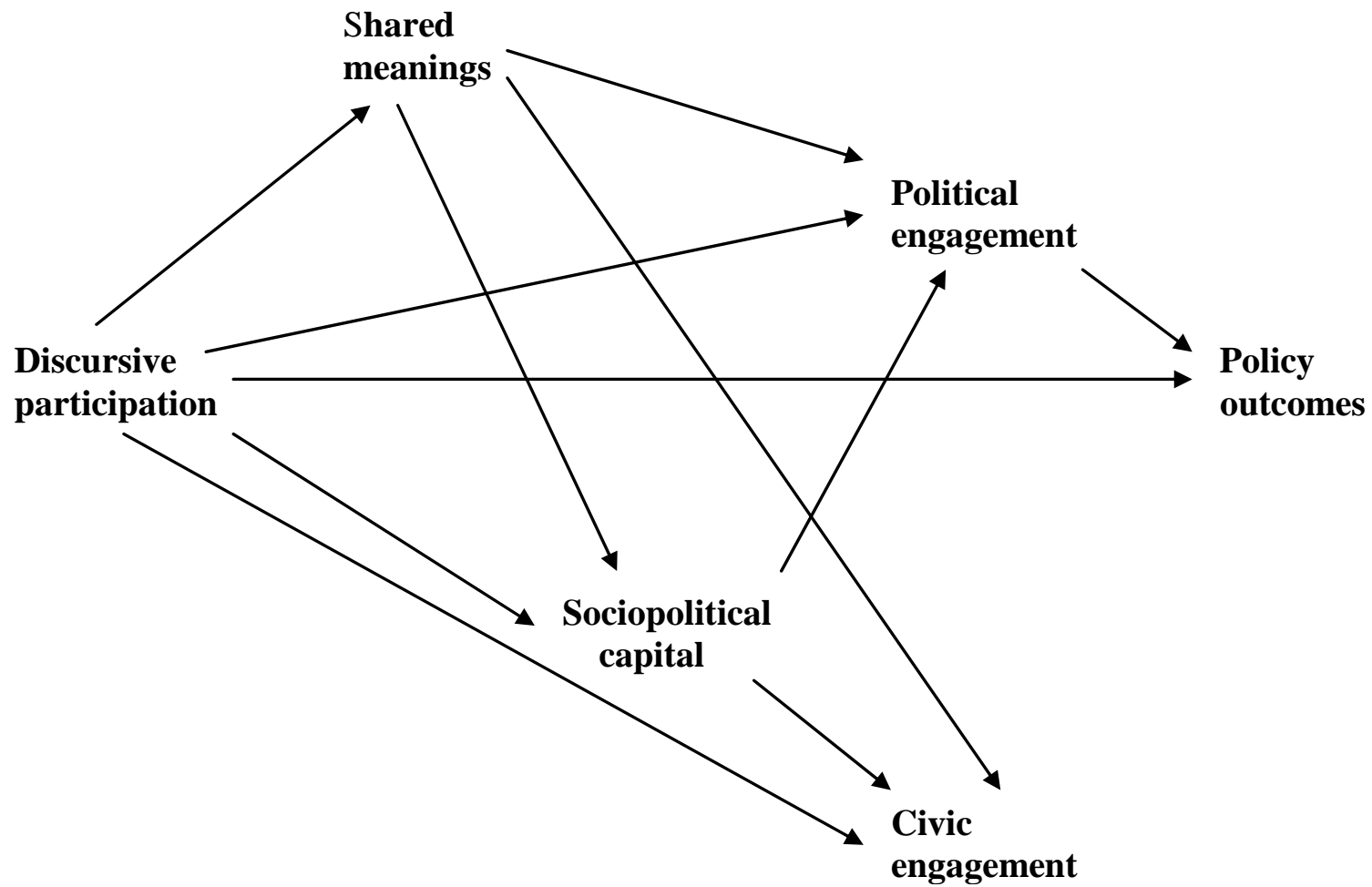


Figure 4. A reduced model of the impact of discursive participation

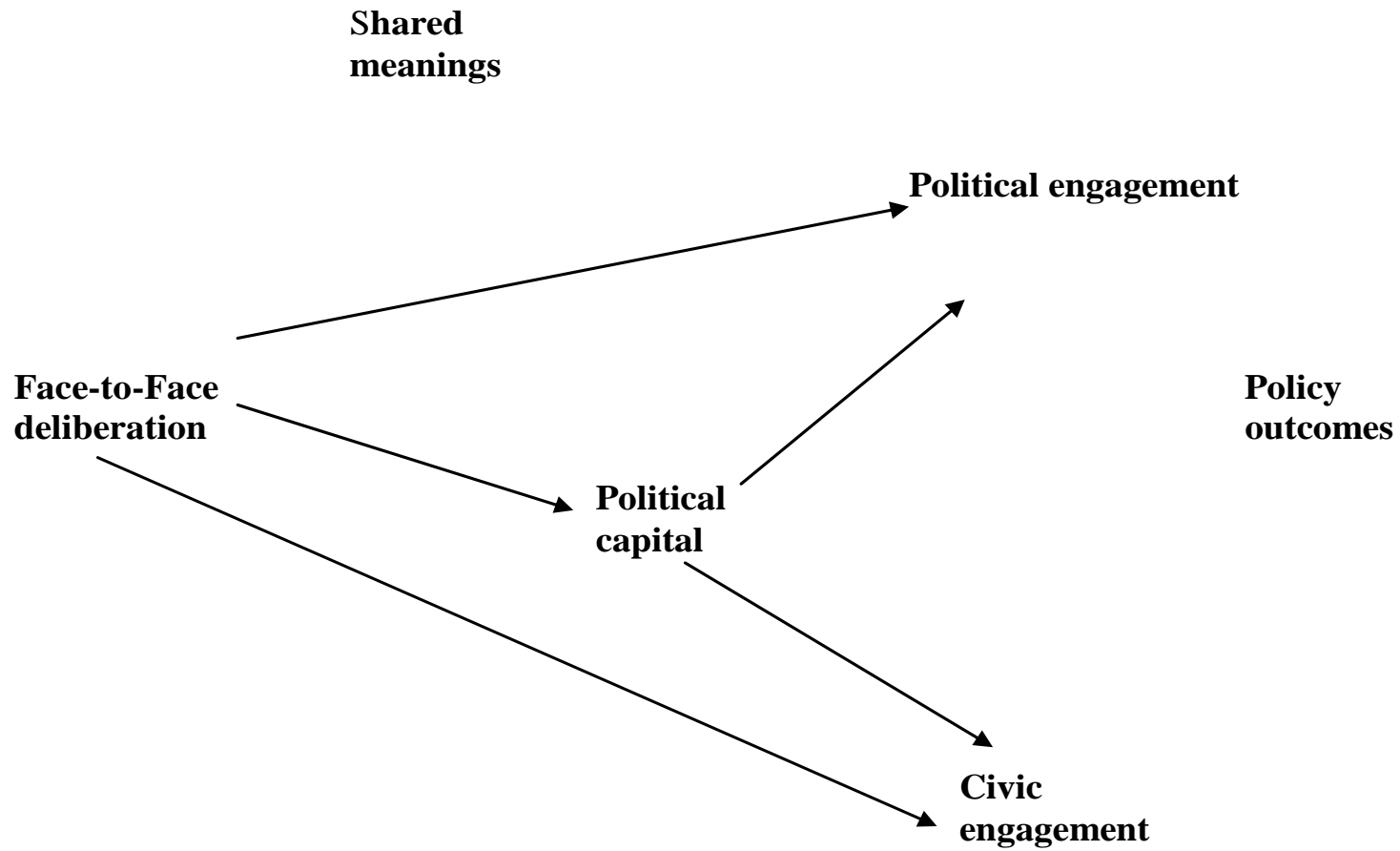
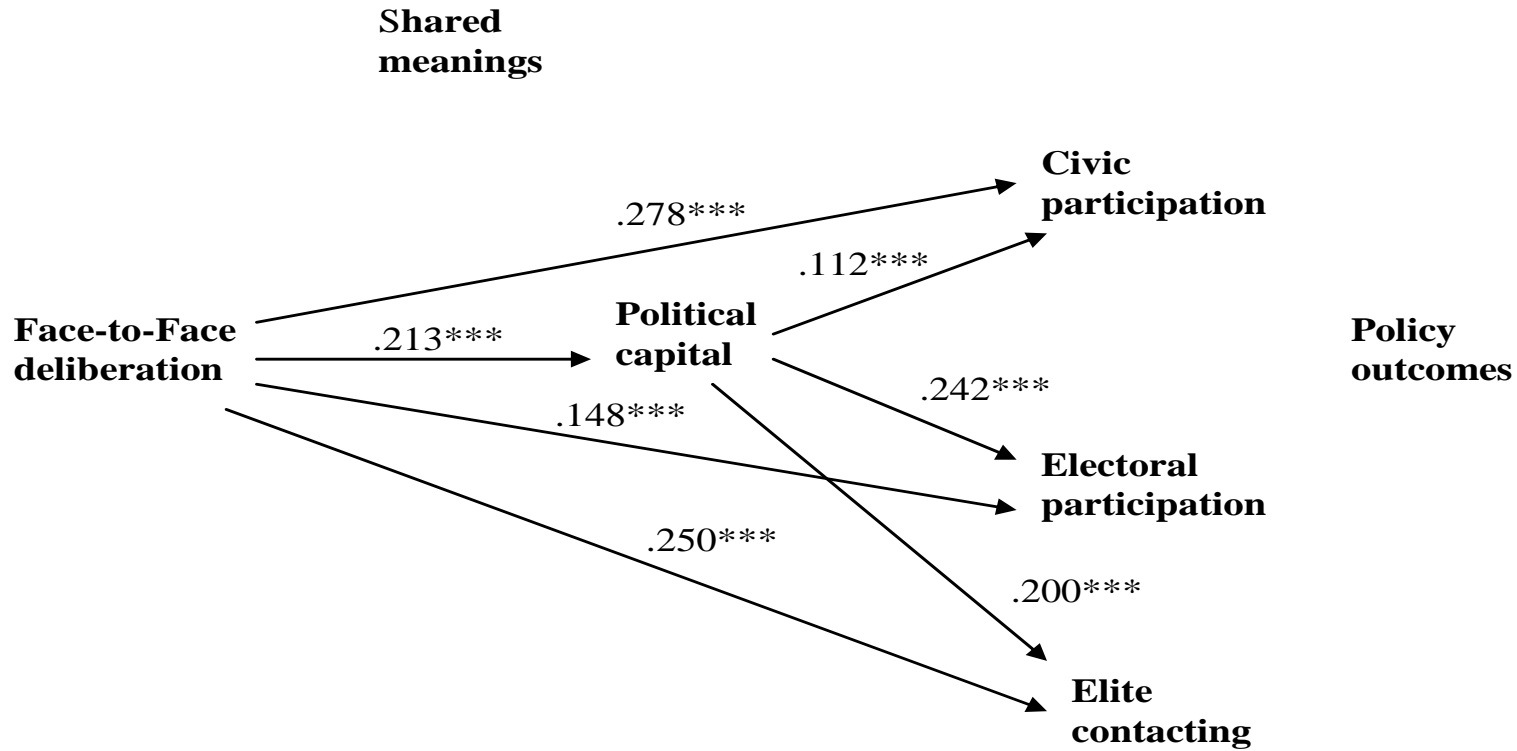


Figure 5. A reduced model of the impact of discursive participation



Source: Discursive Participation Survey. National Adult Sample. N=1501 (unweighted sample).

Method: OLS Regression. Table reports standardized beta coefficients. The model includes controls for the demographic and social capital variables that were used in our earlier analyses; they are not presented.

Notes: + = p < .10; * = p < .05; ** = p < .01; *** = p < .001.



Face-to-face deliberation is more than “just talk”

- It can be an important aspect of democratic citizenship
- It can:
 - *stimulate and facilitate further political and civic action
 - *increase citizens' store of political capital which in turn increases their resources to act in the political world



Conclusion: Discursive Participation and the Rejuvenation of Democratic Life

- Assessments of the health of American democracy divide into extremes.
- An attempt at a measured assessment:
 - Discursive participation is not universal; nonetheless, it is extensive. More than 80% engage in some form of it.
 - Discursive participation is not totally inclusive; there are SES differences. Nonetheless, it is not “owned” by the better off, and organizational membership and political capital were the strongest indicators of discursive participation.



The conditions for expanded deliberation

- Building infrastructure and diffusing skills
- Instilling deliberation
- Creating a public space for independent community talking

The Future of Public Deliberation



- Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign capitalized on the Internet and online public talking.
- But it is not clear if these and other forms of public deliberation can lead to a more open style of governing.
- What *is* clear is that an era of public deliberation has arrived. The challenge is to study how it is used and for what purpose.