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The Effect of Political Discussion in Producing Informed Citizens: The Roles of Information, Motivation, and Elaboration

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Recent studies have demonstrated a strong empirical relationship between political discussion and political knowledge. However, as of yet there has been no clear discussion or demonstration of how political discussion translates into increased political knowledge. The present study proposes three explanations—exposure (similar to the two step flow), anticipatory elaboration (linking work on uses and gratifications and news information processing), and discussion-generated elaboration (focusing on how discussion itself can influence information processing)—for this observed empirical relationship. In order to test these three explanations, data from the 2000 ANES and a local community survey during the 1996 presidential election were employed. Findings suggest that the direct relationship between discussion and knowledge may be mediated through motivations and information processing behaviors. These findings support the anticipatory elaboration and discussion-generated elaboration explanations while questioning the exposure explanation, and link well with recent findings on the cognitive mediation model.

Keywords communicatory utility, deliberation, interpersonal, political knowledge, uses and gratifications

Theory

The acquisition and retention of political information has important consequences for individuals' ability to express opinions and make decisions in a representative democracy (see Althaus, 1998; Bartels, 1996). It is the role of the news media to provide the information that enables the public to make relatively informed decisions about candidates, politicians, and issues. However, research suggests that the normative ideal of an informed citizenry is not an empirical reality, at least in the United States. A considerable body of research suggests that the American public is poorly informed about basic civics, political, and current events information. Despite increases in education (which is strongly correlated with political information holding) and the availability of political

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information on television and the World Wide Web over the past 50 years, the average level of political knowledge among the U.S. public remains stagnated at a disappointingly low level (Bennett, 1989; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Part of the explanation for this situation is that, even with exposure, the public learns relatively little from the news media. For example, one study demonstrated that the average respondent can recall only about 1 of 20 stories from a television newscast within three hours after viewing it (Neuman, 1976).

This article examines the role of interpersonal political communication in promoting political knowledge. Although significant research has demonstrated the role of traditional mass-mediated news sources such as television news and newspapers in political learning, relatively few studies have addressed the role of political discussion in political knowledge gain. Even more dramatic is the paucity of theoretical development when discussing the role of interpersonal communication in political learning—and how this may be related to media use—and so this will be a particular area of focus in the present article. Finally, fresh empirical data from two separate studies will be brought to bear on the question of the roles of interpersonal communication in political knowledge.

Discussion of Politics and Political Knowledge

Lenart (1994, p. 63) notes that "research on the political impact of interpersonal communication has lacked the breadth and depth of work on the media." Although in recent years this has been changing, it remains true for the relationship between interpersonal communication about politics and political knowledge. There is surprisingly little evidence about this relationship, but the evidence that does exist suggests that the two are strongly related. In fact, some research indicates that discussion of news and politics may be more strongly related to holding political information than exposure to that political information in the mass media.

Robinson and Levy (1986) demonstrated in both regional and national samples that, holding various demographic and media variables constant, discussion about the news was a significant predictor of news comprehension. They point out:

> The extent of discussion of the news seems to be at least twice as powerful a predictor of comprehension as the extent of news media exposure, and in the more generalizable national sample, such discussion was associated with almost twice as much spread in news comprehension as was media exposure. (Robinson & Levy, 1986, p. 171)

Recent studies have begun to confirm the presence of such a relationship between discussion of news or politics and political knowledge (Bennett, Flickinger, & Rhine, 2000; Lenart, 1994; Scheufele, 2000, 2002; for an exception, see de Boer & Velthuijsen, 2001), most even after controls for news media use. However, what has been missing from this area of research is a thorough discussion of the theoretical reasons why discussion might influence political knowledge. To date, what exists is primarily a demonstration of an empirical regularity. What is needed now, in addition to the accumulation of more evidence to bolster claims of this relationship, is the development of theory regarding why this relationship exists.

I propose that there are at least three possible explanations why discussion of news content could cause political knowledge: (a) the exposure explanation, (b) the anticipatory elaboration explanation, and (c) the discussion-generated elaboration explanation.

These explanations are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, are likely all contributory reasons for the relationship found between discussion of news and politics and knowledge of the same.

Exposure Explanation

The first explanation, which I will call the exposure explanation, is probably the most common explanation implicitly assumed in prior research, and it fits nicely with the classic notion of diffusion of news generally (Chaffee, 1975; Larsen & Hill, 1954; Rogers, 2000) and the two-step flow of communication specifically (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). This explanation suggests that individuals glean information from their discussion partner in much the same way that they would gain information from the news media directly. That is, during political conversations or conversations about the news, information that one discussion partner obtained from a news media source is recounted as part of the conversation. Thus, in the context of this explanation, discussion is merely an additional opportunity for exposure to the information of interest in addition to, or independent of, news media exposure. Discussion can then contribute to knowledge for those who do not use news media (by providing access to information the individual would have never been exposed to) as well as those who do (by providing an additional opportunity for exposure similar to rereading the paper).

However, there are some criticisms of this standard explanation. First, not all information obtained during political conversations is likely to be accurate. For instance, Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995, p. 111) found that more than half of their respondents reported discussion partners to have only an average amount of knowledge. Given the average amount of political knowledge is quite low—Delli Carpini and Keeter (1992) claim that "knowledge of basic facts about issues, partisan alignments, and names of politicians are the province of only a minority" (p. 32)—this suggests that most discussions would have an absence of factual political information, or at worst considerable misinformation. Indeed, for the person who has an average (i.e., objectively low) level of political information to begin with, a random encounter could just as easily lead to getting information from someone equally uninformed, rather than more informed, than the self.

The model under which Robinson and Levy (1986) operated in their study demonstrating the importance of interpersonal discussion of news "assumes that information is often, but not always, characterized by a 'horizontal' flow between reasonably well-informed and interested individuals" (p. 161). But information in interpersonal discussions, particularly information from those who are less well informed, is likely to contain a number of inaccuracies or merely the absence of meaningful political information. For instance, Lenart (1994, p. 78) concluded from both survey and experimental findings that "information gained from the media can be distorted by other information gathered interpersonally." If this is the case, some interpersonal discussion of news and politics could actually lead to a decline in knowledge of one of the discussion partners due to the transmission of inaccurate or misleading information, or at least the absence of meaningful learning. Therefore, it is important to remain cognizant that all information communicated in interpersonal discussions will not necessarily be accurate information. The likelihood of any individual gaining knowledge from an interpersonal discussion through the exposure explanation should be increased when discussion partners are well informed, whereas it is likely to be decreased by poorly informed discussion partners.

Anticipatory Elaboration Explanation

The second explanation for the observed relationship between discussion and knowledge might be called the anticipatory elaboration explanation. This explanation suggests that the expectation of an impending discussion is an internal motivation that then increases cognitive elaboration on news content. This increased elaboration would take place primarily during exposure, but it may potentially occur any time before the actual conversation takes place. That is, individuals expecting to engage in discussion of a political topic will invest more heavily in processing the information upon first being exposed to it because they want to be prepared to engage in later discussion of this information (see Scheufele, 2002, for a similar argument). Early work on "cognitive tuning" by Zajonc (1960) also examined how the expectation of discussion could influence information processing.

The uses and gratifications approach in mass communication has identified a number of reasons why individuals engage in news media use behaviors (Wenner, 1985). Among these motivations is what has been termed "anticipated communication" (McLeod & Becker, 1974), "anticipated utility" (McLeod & Becker, 1981), or "communicatory utility" (McDonald, 1990), which is the term to be used here. McDonald (1990) defines communicatory utility as "use of the media to obtain information to use in discussions with others" (p. 15). These concepts refer to the use of media in anticipation of using what was seen or learned from exposure in later conversations. A prototypical example might be that an individual would watch the televised presidential debates in anticipation of water cooler conversations the next morning that would surely center around events taking place in the debates.

Recent research has connected motivations for news use to how that news is processed during and after exposure as part of a "cognitive mediation model" (Eveland, 2001, 2002). An individual expecting to discuss the content of the evening news is likely to devote more effort to thinking about the content—deciding how it is relevant to the self or conversation partners, noticing important issues raised, and so forth—and so it is likely that those with communicatory utility motivations will engage in more cognitive elaboration of news content than others with different motives, such as to pass the time or for entertainment. Furthermore, the cognitive mediation model suggests that elaboration on news information is an important factor determining whether or not news information will actually be learned (Eveland, 2001, 2002). Indeed, merely thinking about news after exposure can lead to better scores on a knowledge test two days after than immediately after exposure (Wicks, 1992).

Following this line of reasoning, increased elaboration on news content due to the expectation of future discussion of that content should lead to improved political knowledge. It is important to note that *the anticipatory elaboration explanation for the relationship between discussion and knowledge does not actually require the expected discussion to ever take place*. The increased learning in this explanation is due entirely to information processing taking place prior to future interpersonal communication.

Discussion-Generated Elaboration Explanation

The third explanation for the connection between political discussion and political knowledge could be called the discussion-generated elaboration explanation. This explanation is similar to the anticipatory elaboration explanation in the process envisioned for linking discussion and knowledge. It suggests that the act of engaging in discussion forces meaningful information processing—elaboration as described above—and thus increases learning due to an influence on information processing *during* discussion. Some preliminary

evidence exists that supports a relationship between discussion of political issues and elaboration on news content (McLeod, Scheufele, Moy, Horowitz, et al., 1999). Further evidence exists in the context of discussion effects on attitude change, in which greater attitude change has been found to occur when one must reformulate a written argument and give it verbally than if one merely reads the argument aloud or reads it passively to oneself (Janis & King, 1954; King & Janis, 1956; see also work on self-persuasion and the cognitive response mechanism in persuasion, e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1981).

Elaboration in the context of the discussion-generated elaboration explanation can be encouraged in two ways: self-generated and conversation-partner generated. The assumption of self-generated elaboration is that the nature of engaging in a discussion requires an individual to reprocess information as it is recalled from memory. In order to make sense of this information during the process of meaning construction that takes place in interpersonal discussions, an individual might have to express information in memory from a news broadcast in a new light compared to how it was processed during exposure. This additional processing forced by the need to communicate creates additional connections between the news information and the larger knowledge structure—that is, elaboration. This elaboration, as already discussed, increases learning and later recall. It is important to note that in self-generated elaboration, elaboration is stimulated by the need of the communicator to formulate and deliver a message to the discussion partner. It is by this means that a conversation between a very informed person, such as a professor, and a relatively uninformed person, such as a student, could lead to increased knowledge for the very informed person.

The second means by which discussion itself can increase elaboration—conversation-partner generated elaboration—is when a conversation partner sparks new connections between ideas already held in memory. As Gastil and Dillard (1999) note, face to face deliberation can lead to people "making novel inferences about the ideological linkages among political beliefs based on what they hear during deliberation" (p. 5). It is easy to imagine a situation in which Person 1 makes a statement and Person 2 responds, "You know, that makes me think of. . . ." This facilitation of elaboration by the discussion partner can take place either during the conversation itself or as an individual thinks about the conversation after it has finished. But it is important to note that, in this case, it is the conversation partner who sparks the elaboration through communication. However, it is quite different from the exposure explanation because what is operational here is not additional exposure to the original information, but instead help making connections between news information and something else.

Given this discussion of the existing research on the relationship between discussion and political knowledge, and considering the three theoretical explanations for this expected relationship, several hypotheses can be offered. First, all three explanations suggest that we should find a relationship between the overall frequency of political discussion and political knowledge. Thus, the following prediction was made:

> *H1*: Frequency of political discussion will be positively related to political knowledge.

The exposure explanation suggests that the relationship between discussion and knowledge should be strong and positive when discussion partners are well informed. When discussion partners are poorly informed, the relationship between discussion frequency and knowledge could potentially be negative due to the communication of misinformation. Thus, based on the exposure explanation, we would expect there to be a statistical

interaction between the frequency of discussion of politics and the level of knowledge held by one's discussion partner such that the relationship between frequency of discussion with a given partner and knowledge would be stronger when that discussion partner was knowledgeable than when that partner was not knowledgeable, controlling for the overall frequency of discussion Thus, the following prediction was made:

> *H2*: Controlling the overall frequency of interpersonal discussion of politics, there will be a significant interaction between frequency of discussion with a given partner and the level of knowledge of that partner.

The anticipatory elaboration explanation suggests that a motivation to use news content to gather information for later discussion—the communicatory utility motivation —will produce increased cognitive elaboration on that news content both during and after exposure to prepare for the expected discussions. Thus, the following prediction was advanced:

> *H3*: A communicatory utility motivation for using news will be positively related to elaboration on news content.

The difference between the anticipatory elaboration and discussion-generated elaboration explanations is that the communicatory utility motivation is expected to drive elaboration in the anticipatory elaboration explanation, whereas actual discussion is expected to drive elaboration in the discussion-generated elaboration explanation. Based on the discussion-generated elaboration explanation, the following prediction was made:

> *H4*: Discussion of the presidential campaign will be positively related to elaboration on news content.

Both the anticipatory elaboration and discussion-generated elaboration explanations predict that elaboration on news content will be positively related to political knowledge. Therefore, consistent with both elaboration explanations, the final hypothesis was offered.

> *H5*: Elaboration on news content will be positively related to political knowledge.

Study 1

Method

Sample. Data for Study 1 were collected as part of the 2000 American National Election Study (ANES). This study employed a panel design, with 1,807 interviews conducted in the preelection wave, which began data collection on September 5, 2000. The postelection wave of data collection began the day after the election and continued until December 21, 2000. The preelection wave achieved a response rate of 61%, and the postelection wave obtained a reinterview rate of 86%, leaving a final sample size of 1,555. The sample size for particular analyses in the present article varies somewhat as a result of item nonresponse.

Measurement. Three main categories of variables were of importance in the present study. First, various demographic control variables were employed. Second, various forms

of communication were examined as independent variables. Finally, political knowledge was tapped as the key dependent variable.

Four demographic control variables were utilized in this study. Age (M = 47.21, SD = 16.96) was initially measured by asking respondents their date of birth and then calculating age. The measurement of gender indicated a slight bias in favor of females (56.3%) in the sample. Household income was measured with 22 categories ranging from "none or less than $4,999" through "$200,000 and over," with the median category being 6 (A$35,000 to $39,999") and a mean of 6.76 (SD = 3.75). Education (M = 4.29, SD = 1.62) was classified into one of seven categories ranging from 8 or fewer years of formal education through advanced degree. The median category for education was "4" (more than 12 years of education but no higher degree).

Four political communication behaviors—two of which were mass mediated, and two interpersonal—were the focus of this study. News media use was measured in the preelection wave of the panel. National television news viewing was measured as the number of days in the past week the respondent watched national network news on television (M = 3.29, SD = 2.80). Newspaper reading was measured as the number of days in the past week the respondent read a daily newspaper (M = 3.44, SD = 2.92). Normally, it would be useful to include measures of attention in conjunction with measures of exposure to news media. However, the measures of attention included in the 2000 ANES refer specifically to election news, whereas the knowledge measures employed in this study (as described below) are not all election related. Thus, the available attention measures are not appropriate for these analyses.

Overall frequency of political discussion was assessed during the postelection wave of the panel. It was measured as the number of days in the past week the respondent talked about politics with family or friends (M = 4.13, SD = 2.83).

In order to tap the knowledge of specific discussion partners, we employed several questions posed in the postelection wave. Respondents were asked to name up to four individuals with whom they discussed "government, elections, and politics." For each person they named, they indicated the frequency with which they discussed politics on a scale from zero to three with labels "never," "rarely," "sometimes," and "often." In addition, for each of the up to four discussion partners described, respondents rated the individual on a scale from one to three as knowing "not much at all," "an average amount," or "a great deal" about politics.[1] Since the first mentioned discussion partner was not only the most frequent discussion partner, but also perceived to be the most knowledgeable, we employed only the data regarding the first discussion partner (frequency M = 1.58, SD = 1.11; knowledge M = 2.33, SD = 0.64).

Political knowledge was measured in the postelection wave of the panel using various techniques common to the measurement of this concept. These various forms of political knowledge were selected as bits of information that could have been gleaned from media information, including news. The focus of this study will be on a measure of overall political knowledge created by combining the separate measures.

Four questions tapped whether or not respondents were familiar with prominent political figures in the news. They were asked to identify the job or political office held by Trent Lott (Senate majority leader), William Rehnquist (Supreme Court chief justice), Tony Blair (British prime minister), and Janet Reno (U.S. attorney general). Respondents received a score of one if they were able to accurately identify the office held by a given individual. Those who were unable to accurately identify the figure, or who answered "don't know," were scored zero.

Two additional indicators tapped the respondents' ability to recall the names of candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives in their district, with one given for correct responses and zero given for incorrect and don't know responses.

Two additional items were used in combination to assess knowledge of the ideological placement of the two major party candidates for president. Respondents rated Albert Gore and George W. Bush on separate seven-point scales from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative." Since assessing the accuracy of category placement is difficult if not impossible (e.g., Is Albert Gore extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, or moderate?), a relative accuracy criterion was used, following common practice in this area of research (e.g., Eveland & Scheufele, 2000). If respondents rated Gore as more liberal than Bush—regardless of the specific placement of the individual candidates—they were given a score of one and considered to have accurate knowledge of the ideological placement of candidates. If they rated the candidates in the same category or rated Bush as more liberal than Gore—or answered "don't know" for either candidate—respondents were given a score of zero and considered to not have accurate knowledge of the ideological placement of candidates.

In order to create the overall measure of political knowledge, these separate dichotomous (0 for incorrect, 1 for correct) items were combined into a scale ($\alpha = .71$) by averaging, and then the result was multiplied by 100 to produce a scale with a theoretical range from 0 to 100 ($M = 32.30$, $SD = 25.83$).

Results

H1 predicted that there would be a relationship between the overall frequency of political discussion and political knowledge. As shown in Table 1, there was considerable support for this hypothesis. Controlling for four demographic variables plus both television news viewing and newspaper readership, the overall frequency of political discussion was a significant positive predictor of overall political knowledge ($\beta = .11$, $p < .01$). Thus, as demonstrated in several prior studies, discussion of politics and issues in the news appears to be positively related to being informed about political matters of all sorts, both at the state and national level.[2] Of course, it is not possible to draw strong causal inferences regarding the direction of this relationship using cross-sectional survey data, but the existence of the relationship is consistent with the hypothesis.

The support for this hypothesis maintains the viability of each of the three explanations for the relationship between discussion and knowledge, but it is unable to distinguish among them. This is consistent with the existing prior research that has not provided any evidence to help understand *why* discussion and knowledge are related. Based on the exposure explanation, H2 predicted that, controlling overall discussion frequency, there would be an interaction between the frequency of discussions with a given partner and the level of knowledge held by that partner. This hypothesis was not supported (Table 1).[3] Although both the frequency of discussion with the first mentioned partner ($\beta = .09$, $p < .01$) and the level of perceived knowledge of that partner ($\beta = .07$, $p < .05$) made unique significant contributions to the model, the interaction between them was not significant.[4]

Study 2

Study 1 was able to provide evidence of the relationship between discussion and political knowledge, but was unable to demonstrate direct support for a hypothesis derived

Table 1
OLS regression results predicting overall political knowledge (2000 ANES)

	Overall political knowledge					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	b (*SE*)	β	*b* (*SE*)	β	*b* (*SE*)	β
Age	.208 (.049)	.13**	.205 (.049)	.13**	.204 (.049)	.12**
Education	6.057 (.496)	.36**	5.780 (.496)	.34**	5.773 (.495)	.34**
Income	.691 (.200)	.10**	.685 (.199)	.10**	.679 (.199)	.10**
Gender (F)	–7.930 (1.403)	–.15**	–8.076 (1.396)	–.16**	–8.070 (1.396)	–.16**
TV news viewing	.644 (.275)	.07*	.577 (.274)	.06*	.584 (.247)	.06*
Newspaper reading	1.227 (.265)	.14**	1.180 (.263)	.13**	1.196 (.263)	.13**
Overall discussion	1.193 (.294)	.11**	.841 (.304)	.08**	.851 (.304)	.08**
Frequency of disc. w/partner			3.556 (1.229)	.09**	3.569 (1.229)	.09**
Knowledge of disc. partner			1.675 (.736)	.07*	1.187 (.840)	.05
Frequency × knowledge					1.259 (1.040)	.04
Adjusted R^2	.311		.324		.324	
SE of estimate	21.46		21.26		21.25	

Note. *b* = unstandardized regression coefficient; β = standardized regression coefficient (beta).
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

from the exposure explanation that implied that discussion with well-informed partners would be more predictive of political knowledge than discussion with poorly informed partners. However, the data from Study 1 did not permit any conclusions regarding the validity of the other two explanations. The measures available in Study 2 are able to more directly address the anticipatory elaboration and discussion-generated elaboration explanations, although they remain unable to distinguish between them.

Method

Sample. Data for Study 2 were obtained for secondary analysis from an academic research center in the Midwest. Data were collected in the weeks preceding the 1996 presidential election as part of two separate surveys employing the same population but different samples. In the first survey, telephone interviews were used to obtain cross-sectional data from 210 respondents in a mid-size midwestern city and its contiguous areas (cooperation rate = 49%). The second study was a panel study consisting of two waves of data collected via telephone. Wave 1 (n = 146) of that survey was conducted in September 1996 (cooperation rate = 51%), and Wave 2 (n = 97) was conducted concurrently with the cross-sectional survey in October and November of 1996 (dropout rate = 33.6%). The relevant questions for the present study were included in Wave 2 of the panel survey and the cross-sectional survey.

There were no statistically significant differences in key demographic characteristics across the two samples, nor were there any demographic differences between panel dropouts and those who completed the second wave of the panel study. This suggests that it is reasonable to analyze the cross-sectional study and the second wave of the panel together. Overall, approximately 52% of the combined sample was female. The average age of respondents to these two surveys was around 44 years of age. On average, respondents had completed around 15 years of formal education and had an annual household income of approximately $30,000 to $40,000. These demographic characteristics are similar to those from the 2000 ANES national sample in the first study.

Measurement. Questions used to tap several concepts were employed in the present study. Four demographic variables were measured and used strictly as control variables: age (in years), education (number of years of formal schooling), household income (measured in $10,000 increments), and gender (females coded as the high value).

News media use was tapped via two items to maintain maximum comparability with the measurement in Study 1. Respondents were asked to report the number of days reading a newspaper (M = 4.71, SD = 2.65) and to rate, on a 10-point scale from "rarely" to "all the time," their frequency of viewing network television news (M = 4.25, SD = 3.73).

To measure communicatory utility, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which a series of questions applied to themselves in terms of "why they turn to news about the presidential campaign" using a 10-point scale from "not at all" to "very much." Communicatory utility gratifications were assessed by the average of four of these items regarding use of news so that information could be passed on to others, to get information to use in disagreements, to give interesting things to talk about, and to use as ammunition in arguments (α = .85, M = 3.66, SD = 2.10).

Frequency of discussion of the presidential campaign was measured with a single item regarding the frequency of discussion of "important issues in the presidential campaign" using a 10-point scale from "not very often" to "very often" (M = 5.03, SD = 2.72).

To measure elaboration on news content, respondents were asked to indicate the applicability of a number of statements about the ways people use the news media for stories about the presidential election campaign using a 10-point scale ranging from "not at all" (applicable) to "very much." Elaboration was measured using the average of three of these indicators regarding the extent to which respondents think about news information after exposure, try to tie together ideas of their own and news story content, and interpret news stories in ways that are personally meaningful ($\alpha = .77$, $M = 5.71$, $SD = 2.19$).

The key dependent variable in the present study was candidate issue stance knowledge. Issue stance knowledge was measured by asking respondents to place each of the two major presidential candidates on 10-point scales from "strongly oppose" to "strongly favor" for several issues (i.e., educational vouchers, use of the National Guard to combat drugs, and a balanced budget amendment). In the same way that ideological knowledge was tapped in Study 1, respondents were given one point for placing the candidates in the "relatively correct" position. That is, as long as respondents were capable of seeing Dole as more supportive of educational vouchers than Clinton—regardless of the actual scale positions used—this was considered a correct response. Leaving the scale blank for either candidate, or placing candidates on the same position or in the wrong relative positions, led to a score of zero for that issue. Scores on each of the three issues were averaged and then multiplied by 100 to construct the measure of candidate issue stance knowledge ($\alpha = .70$, $M = 41.91$, $SD = 38.99$).

Results

H3 stated that communicatory utility motivations should be positively related to elaboration on news content. As indicated in Table 2, this hypothesis received considerable support. After controlling for demographic variables, news use, and self-reported discussion, the motivation to use news for later discussion was positively and significantly related to elaborating on news content ($\beta = .31$, $p < .01$). H4 was also strongly supported.

Table 2
OLS regression results predicting elaboration on news content
(1996 local data)

	Elaboration on news content	
	b (SE)	β
Age	.022 (.008)	.16**
Education	.076 (.040)	.11#
Income	–.058 (.052)	–.06
Gender (F)	–.317 (.227)	–.07
TV news viewing	–.029 (.032)	–.05
Newspaper reading	.002 (.048)	.00
Communicatory utility motivation	.320 (.063)	.31**
Frequency of discussion	.258 (.049)	.32**
Adjusted R^2	.297	
SE of estimate	1.823	

Note. *b* = unstandardized regression coefficient; β = standardized regression coefficient (beta).

#$p < .10$; **$p < .01$.

Holding all other variables constant, discussion of the campaign was strongly related to news elaboration ($\beta = .32$, $p < .01$).

H5 predicted that elaboration would be positively related to candidate issue stance knowledge. This hypothesis was also supported by the data (see Table 3) when controlling demographics and news use ($\beta = .23$, $p < .01$). This relationship remained after control for self-reported discussion and communication utility motivations as well ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$). It is important to note that the mediation process implied by the three hypotheses tested in this study is borne out in the data. As shown in Table 3, two models were run. In the first model, only demographic and news use variables were controlled, and then communicatory utility and campaign discussion were individually entered into the regression equation predicting political knowledge. In this model, both communicatory utility and campaign discussion was positively and significantly related to knowledge. Even when these two variables were entered into the equation together (not shown in tables), each approached significance ($p < .10$) in predicting knowledge. However, once elaboration is entered into the equation, both commu-nicatory utility and discussion are reduced to nonsignificance, calling into question the support for H1 in this study. In fact, when alternating models, one excluding communicatory utility and one excluding discussion, but both including elaboration, are tested (not shown in tables), in both cases elaboration is a significant predictor of knowledge, but neither discussion nor communicatory utility even approach significance ($p > .10$). These findings are consistent with the implied mediation in both the anticipatory elaboration and discussion-generated elaboration explanations—that is, these explanations ultimately claim that it is elaboration, not necessarily the motivation or discussion itself, that produces the increase in knowledge.

Table 3
OLS regression results predicting candidate issue knowledge (1996 local data)

	Candidate issue stance knowledge			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	b (*SE*)	β	*b* (*SE*)	β
Age	–.251 (.147)	–.11#	–.301 (.147)	–.13*
Education	4.066 (.724)	.32**	3.722 (.745)	.29**
Income	3.247 (.990)	.19**	3.334 (.974)	.20**
Gender (F)	–7.324 (4.334)	–.09#	–7.272 (4.218)	–.09#
TV news	–.229 (.609)	–.02	–.578 (.602)	–.06
Newspaper	1.326 (.921)	.09	1.036 (.898)	.07
Communicatory utility		.18**	1.455 (1.218)	.08
Frequency of discussion		.18**	.938 (.957)	.07
Elaboration on news		.23**	2.884 (1.139)	.16*
Adjusted R^2	.197		.248	
SE of estimate	34.8519		33.741	

Note. *b* = unstandardized regression coefficient; β = standardized regression coefficient (beta). Model 1: coefficients with only demographic and news use controlled. Model 2: coefficients with all variables in the model controlled.

#$p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Conclusion

A number of recent studies have replicated the early results of Robinson and Levy (1986) that revealed a significant relationship between political discussion and knowledge of politics. The present study provides evidence of a relationship between discussion and knowledge, but also adds to it by offering three potential theoretical explanations for this relationship as well as an initial empirical attempt to more precisely understand the nature of such a relationship.

The three possible explanations offered for the relationship between political discussion and political knowledge were the exposure explanation, the anticipatory elaboration explanation, and the discussion-generated elaboration explanation. The exposure explanation essentially models the two-step flow (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). It suggests that in the process of having a political discussion, participants will receive exposure to news information, either as an "extra dose" for those who were already exposed to the news or as a first chance at exposure for those who were not already exposed to the news. Here, the interpersonal channel is merely carrying news information for repeated exposure. The results of Study 1 do not clearly support this explanation. Although overall political discussion frequency—and even the frequency of discussion of politics with a given partner and the level of perceived knowledge of that partner—are positively and significantly related to political knowledge, the expected interaction between frequency and discussion partner knowledge was not apparent in the present data. If the reason political discussion is related to knowledge is that discussion participants are exposed to factual information during these conversations, this interaction should have been significant, and the data should have shown greater learning from discussions with knowledgeable partners than uninformed partners. Moreover, Study 2 revealed that controlling for elaboration leads discussion to be reduced to nonsignificance. Thus, these findings raise some questions about the validity of the exposure explanation that seems to have been assumed in most past research on discussion and political knowledge.

Direct evidence in support of the two other explanations—the anticipated elaboration explanation and the discussion-generated elaboration explanation—was only available in Study 2. Study 2 demonstrated that the anticipatory elaboration explanation is viable through a strong and significant relationship between using news media for "communicatory utility" reasons (i.e., to gather information for later discussion) and elaboration on news media content. The discussion-generated elaboration explanation was also revealed to be viable through a strong and significant relationship between political discussion and elaboration on news content. Moreover, both explanations were supported through the significant linkage between elaboration on news content and political knowledge. Neither communicatory utility motivations nor political discussion had any relationship with political knowledge once elaboration was controlled, supporting the implied mediation of the effects of discussion and motivation through elaboration. These findings support recent work on the "cognitive mediation model" examining the importance of information processing as a mediator of the effects of communication motivations on political knowledge (see Eveland, 2001, 2002) and extend it to show that information processing mediates the effect of interpersonal political communication itself.

Despite this supportive evidence, more needs to be done to evaluate the three explanations. Further survey research is one potential avenue. Instead of measuring respondents' perceptions of the level of information of their discussion partners, follow-up interviews with discussion partners (e.g., Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2002) and direct measurement of their knowledge would be ideal. It is possible that the lack of

significant interaction effects in Study 1 was the result of poor measurement of discussant knowledge through respondent perceptions. Moreover, direct measures of elaboration during political conversations would help to empirically distinguish the anticipatory elaboration and discussion-generated elaboration explanations. Finally, data collected specifically to test the relevant hypotheses would include similar measures across waves of a panel so that panel analyses could be conducted to produce greater confidence in the necessarily causal claims made regarding the relationship between discussion and knowledge.

Another valuable approach to data collection—currently in the field—would be to construct a combined experimental and observational study in which anticipation of discussion as well as discussion itself could be experimentally manipulated, and in which information processing could be more precisely associated with a time frame of before (anticipatory) or during (discussion-generated) discussion. Moreover, since the exposure explanation depends entirely on the assumption that the content of political conversation typically carries factual news content—and moreover that the content is accurately conveyed—such research should attempt to answer this central question about the nature of political conversations. All of these various approaches to further research can contribute to our understanding of the relationship between discussion of politics and political knowledge.

During the past decade or so, there has been considerable interest in the role of "deliberation" in improving or sustaining democracy (e.g., Fishkin, 1991). Despite this tremendous interest, political philosophers are not in agreement about the inherent value of deliberation for democracy (Cooke, 2000; Sanders, 1997; Schudson, 1997). Moreover, although some have explicitly identified deliberation to take place in the context of small, face-to-face groups (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002), others are much more liberal in their definition of where and how deliberation may take place (including via media; see Page, 1996), and so it is not clear whether or not deliberation may take place in dyadic settings or among friends and family members. Assuming for the moment that there is not a group size limit besides greater than or equal to two, the empirical evidence presented here may contribute to the evidence on deliberation by extending prior findings that discussion of politics with others is associated with higher levels of political knowledge. More work now needs to be done to build and test theory about why this relationship exists.

Notes

1. This approach to asking respondents about their perceptions of their discussion partners is common in the study of interpersonal political discussion (e.g., Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Weatherford, 1982). However, it does suffer from potential inaccuracies in respondent perceptions. Ideally, we would have direct measures of discussion partner knowledge, but access to such data is unavailable without a separate sample of discussion partners—something not done as part of the 2000 ANES.

2. Some prior research has demonstrated significant interactions between news media use and interpersonal discussion in predicting political knowledge, although the form of such interactions has been inconsistent (Lenart, 1994; Scheufele, 2002). Therefore, a post hoc analysis was conducted (not shown in tables) to test for interactions between the two news use variables and the frequency of political discussion. No significant interactions were detected between either form of news media use and frequency of political discussion.

3. Given that our measure of discussion partner knowledge is based on respondent self-report and not direct measurement, there may be considerable measurement error that reduces the ability to demonstrate a significant interaction. Moreover, the nature of survey data has been

demonstrated to produce greater difficulty in demonstrating interactions than in experimental studies (Eveland, 1997). Therefore, future research should work to develop stronger tests of this hypothesis.

4. In order to ensure that we did not bias our findings by focusing only on the first mentioned discussion partner, these analyses were rerun in several different ways. First, a new file was constructed with a separate line of data for each discussion partner, where each original survey respondent had as many lines of data in the file as there were discussion partners for that respondent. Then a regression model was run including only the knowledge dependent variable, discussion partner frequency and discussion partner knowledge, and the interaction between them. Of course, this analysis violates the assumption of independence of observations. However, since positive non-independence (as in this case) tends to *increase* the likelihood of significant results (as would the artifactual increase in sample size), the finding of a non-significant interaction between frequency and knowledge of discussion partner ($F < 1$, $p = .445$) in this analysis further supports the original findings. (By contrast, both frequency and knowledge of discussion partner are significant in an additive model.). Finally, a third analysis was conducted in which all cases with only one discussion partner are included in a new data file. Then, for each of those with more than one discussion partner, one randomly assigned discussion partner was selected and added to the data file, producing a data file with 1,147 cases—one case for each survey respondent with valid values for the dependent variable and independent variables for at least one discussion partner. Then a regression model was run with participant knowledge as the dependent variable and discussion partner frequency of discussion and discussion partner knowledge, plus their interaction, as independent variables. This process (resampling for those with more than 1 discussion partner and rerunning the regression model) was replicated 10,000 times. (This process was also followed with a model excluding the interaction term—a purely additive model.) The average R^2 of the additive model was .04384, whereas the average R^2 of the interactive model was .04531—a very small improvement. In 10,000 tests, the interaction was statistically significant 10.53% of the time, when by chance alone we would expect it to be significant 5% of the time (i.e., $p < .05$). The 95% confidence interval around the unstandardized interaction coefficient was –0.16 and 3.78. This finding strongly suggests nonsignificance for the interaction. By contrast, the coefficient for frequency in the additive model is significant in all 10,000 replications, and the coefficient for knowledge of discussion partner is significant in 80% of the replications. These additional analyses confirm the findings for the first discussion partner presented in the text.

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