

From the secret ballot to the public vote:

Examining voters' experience of political discussion in vote-by-mail elections

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Abstract

Considerable research on political discussion has focused on identifying its antecedents and outcomes. The rise of voting by mail provides an opportunity to examine the subject in a new context—one in which voters discuss their views and electoral choices with others while filling out their ballots. We explored the possibility that conventional predictors of political engagement would predict who partakes in such discussions. Past research also suggested that those voters most likely to report changing their minds as a result of discussion would perceive their discussants as holding contrary views and higher levels of political sophistication. We further hypothesized that less politically engaged voters would seek out discussants they rated as more knowledgeable than themselves, whereas the more politically sophisticated voters would seek out like-minded discussants. Past research also suggested that the least partisan voters would be those most likely to report disagreement in their absentee discussions. To test these hypotheses, we analyzed telephone survey data from two elections conducted in Washington state. Results showed that the factors that predict traditional forms of political participation and discussion do not explain who engages in discussion during vote-by-mail elections. We also found that independent voters were more likely to talk with ideologically divergent discussants, whereas less knowledgeable citizens sought discussants who knew more about politics than they did. Many voters reported that these discussions shaped their vote choices, with the highest rates of perceived influence coming from those who viewed their discussion partners as more knowledgeable and more ideologically divergent.

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For many theorists, democracy requires open and ongoing public discussions. Without a free exchange of ideas, “rule by many” can devolve into rudderless mobs manipulated by elites and subjugating minorities (Dewey, 1954/1927). Contemporary deliberative theorists emphasize discussion’s necessity for well-reasoned decisions and an engaged citizenry (Habermas, 1996; Mansbridge, 1983). Indeed, evidence shows discussion can yield more informed and considered public judgments (Fishkin, 2009; Luskin, Fishkin, & Jowell, 2002) and a range of positive civic impacts (Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2009).

Consistent with the deliberative tradition, many acts in the American public sphere are communicative, such as attending a rally, town hall meeting; or presidential caucus, to name a few (Cook, Delli Carpini, & Jacobs, 2007). Discussion of politics is pervasive in public life and has been studied in settings ranging from highly-structured deliberative events (Fishkin, 2009) to more informal chats between friends and family, where people share information and opinions about issues (Jacobs et al., 2009; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004) or seek to persuade one another (McClurg, 2006; Thorson, 2012). The confluence of interest in discussion generally and deliberation in particular, has created a substantial body of theoretical and empirical literature on how citizens talk to one another about politics (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Jacobs et al., 2009).

Despite the attention paid to political discussion, researchers have overlooked a context on the rise—discussions among people *as they fill out their ballots*. More citizens than ever vote outside the traditional polling place in vote-by-mail elections (e.g., in Oregon and Washington)

or by taking advantage of relaxed absentee voting laws (as in California and other states). Though absentee voting can be a “quiet and solitary” affair that makes one pine for the bustle of the polling place (Arvin, 2008), it affords one the chance to talk with fellow voters while voting. This juxtaposes the principle of the secret ballot with the spirit of open discussion.

In this essay, we consider how such discussions differ from other forms of political talk, who engages in this type of behavior, and how those individuals perceive these unique exchanges. We begin with a theoretical overview, advance specific hypotheses, and provide an initial test using absentee voter data in Washington state. Our conclusion discusses the implications of our findings about the prevalence, experience, and impact of absentee discussion.

Political Discussion

Talking through politics can have many benefits, such as a refining one’s own issue positions (Cappella, Price, & Nir, 2002; Gastil & Dillard, 1999). Individuals can learn even more if they have heterogeneous interpersonal discussion networks, which often provide more diverse information and viewpoints (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). Though people typically avoid cross-cutting conversations (Landmore, 2013; Mutz, 2013), citizens who develop ideologically diverse networks can sample them to discern the balance of opinions (Beck, 2002). This sampling may be even more important than the information people encounter (Mondak, 1995). People may support or reject a political candidate, party, or issue based on the prevailing views in their network, independent of their personal opinions (Beck, 2002; Sinclair, 2012).

In this and other ways, dyadic discussion can influence voter decision making. Discussing politics with nearly anyone can shape an individual’s decisions, as long as the discussion partner’s preferences become apparent (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991). Rather than trusting only the opinions of intimate social contacts, individuals trust people they perceive as

competent (Ryan, 2011). Dyadic discussion also has a greater impact when it spurs disagreement that motivates deeper consideration of others' views (Huckfeldt, 2007).

When voters talk with one another about politics, any new information goes through the same cognitive filters used to process media messages (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). This involves accepting or rejecting that input based on their ideology when citizens have the requisite political sophistication (Zaller, 1992), or more ubiquitously through cultural biasing (Gastil et al., 2011). The net result may be a relatively faithful approximation of voters' underlying values and even exhibit a kind of collective rationality (Page & Shapiro, 1992), but many voters reach their decisions via simple heuristics (Lupia, 1994) that include partisan signals, media sources, "opinion leaders" with recognized expertise (Chaffee, 1982) or cultural credibility (Gastil et al., 2011), as well as political discussion network hubs (Eveland, Hutchens, & Morey, 2013).

This portrait of political talk provides a background for the current study. Nonetheless, it stands at considerable remove from a discussion that might take place while holding an official ballot in one's hand. Thus, the next section focuses on the details of the vote-by-mail context.

Discussion in Vote-by-Mail Elections

The conventional conception of voting as pulling a lever at the polls has given way to a system wherein the manner and location of voting varies by jurisdiction, or even by individual. Early voting, absentee voting, and a varied voting technologies have become commonplace, and states such as Oregon and Washington have come to rely on vote-by-mail. Advocates and critics disagree on the propriety of mass voting outside the polls (Greenhill & Shipman, 2010), also called "convenience voting" (Project Vote, 2007), but there is no denying that the departure from the private polling booth creates an opportunity for a more discursive voting experience.

Vote-By-Mail Discussion and Voter Decision Making

Voting by mail enables citizens to discuss their choices openly and at length with their family, friends, or roommates *as they fill out their ballots* (Richey, 2005). This phenomenon is quite rare in traditional polling-place elections, where voters typically enter a private booth to fill out their ballots. Vote-by-mail elections provide a special opportunity for all voters, including those less politically engaged, to discuss issues, candidates, and ballot measures with interpersonal contacts while making their voting choices. In temporal terms, voting by mail can also connect discussions more directly to the act of making voting choices, which could boost the importance of that discussion in voters' minds much like political ads timed to sway opinions shortly before an election occurs (Krupnikov, 2011). These discussions could be especially important for undecided voters, perhaps helping them decide how to mark their ballot.

Vote-by-mail discussion could have other important effects on voter decision making. Under Page and Shapiro's (1992) model of information processing and rational choice, voters who discuss their ballot choices would be receiving information shortly before they reach a final decision. This would narrow the temporal gap between information acquisition/integration and vote choice, reducing any information loss and perhaps improving decision making. In Zaller's (1992) model, less-knowledgeable voters are unable to connect their values to their vote choices. Discussion while voting gives even unsophisticated citizens access to at least one independent information-processor, and if that person shares their views—as discussants generally do (Mutz, 2006)—that can only narrow the gap between this group's voting efficacy and that of their more knowledgeable peers. Likewise, the heuristics model of decision making favored by Lupia (1994) suggests that voters who struggle to find partisan cues from media messages could turn to discussants. Vote-by-mail discussion may tip the balance toward interpersonal cues: Opinions expressed during the completion of one's ballot surely have greater salience than remembered

endorsements from other people and organizations, such as parties and interest groups.

However, the lack of political knowledge among voters, which has been studied at some length (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960), may present a problem. Even cognitive shortcuts may not be enough to help voters, who often vote differently than they would if better informed (Bartels, 1996). What might be the benefits of absentee discussion if people are uninformed? They may find discussion unhelpful, or they may unwittingly lead others astray with shoddy facts or baseless recommendations.

Vote-By-Mail Discussion and Voter Participation

Beyond affecting the process by which voters make choices, vote-by-mail discussion may have implications for participation. Absentee and mail-in voting¹ have been promoted as a way to increase turnout and mobilize the disenfranchised, so perhaps the discussion that accompanies it may also draw in less-engaged citizens. Studies have shown that increased absentee voting can boost turnout (Richey, 2008), though not necessarily in the long-run (Gronke & Miller, 2012). Vote-by-mail may not change the demographic makeup of those who vote (Southwell, 2004) so much as draw older, better educated, and less affluent voters away from the polling place and onto the absentee rolls (Barreto, Streb, Marks, & Guerra, 2006).

Regardless of whether vote-by-mail elections change the makeup of the electorate, they are responsible for this new context of political discussion; the rise of voting by mail has increased the pool of citizens who could discuss politics with others in this setting. Research on voting by mail has found that it is encouraging more discussion in the citizenry in general, not just in the context of filling out one's mail-in ballot: General political discussion occurs more

¹ Several U.S. states have instituted vote-by-mail elections, in some cases replacing polling place elections entirely. Many others have relaxed rules for absentee voting, effectively creating a combination of vote-by-mail and polling place elections. At the time of this study, Washington was transitioning to mail elections, but a large majority of voters were already voting-by-mail.

often among mail-in voters compared with traditional polling-place voters (Richey, 2005).

Predictors of Absentee Voting Discussion

The dearth of scholarship in this area leaves unanswered key questions about the forces that shape discussion among mail-in voters and the outcomes of this discussion. First, we want to determine the relationship of absentee voting discussion, if any, to traditional predictors of political participation and engagement. People of higher socioeconomic status and education are often more politically knowledgeable, active and engaged, and are more likely to participate in deliberative meetings (e.g. Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Those same privileged citizens may be more likely to gather with fellow absentee voters to complete ballots, or to have the wherewithal to engage with friends or family members as they vote by mail. Those who are the most engaged, and hold stronger partisan stances, are more likely to discuss issues with others (Mutz, 2006), so we might expect similar patterns for this kind of discussion.

However, different patterns may emerge for the antecedents of vote-by-mail discussion. Some research on political discussion has found that the traditional predictors of political participation are less useful when looking at other forms of “discursive participation,” such as community meetings on public issues and internet discussion of political topics (Jacobs et al., 2009). Dinner-table deliberations that occur in vote-by-mail elections are less costly than attending a formal public event (see Berger, 2013): It takes little effort for neighbors already be gathering for a social event to spend time discussing voting choices, and even less effort for family members or roommates. After all, absentee voting made voting more accessible for citizens unable to participate in traditional voting or other political acts (Barreto et al., 2006). Therefore, absentee voters who choose to discuss their ballot with others while completing it may *not* differ in their political knowledge, partisanship, socioeconomic status, or other

conventional predictors of political participation when compared to their absentee voting counterparts who eschew such discussion. Because of these conflicting signals from the literature, we ask the research question, *What socioeconomic and political factors serve as antecedents for vote-by-mail discussion?*

The Experience of Absentee Voting Discussion

Beyond identifying the predictors of absentee voting discussion, the perceived outcomes of those participating in this form of discussion are worth examining (see Knobloch & Gastil, 2014). We presume that a primary motivation for discussion is voters' perception that it helps them make good choices. A wide range of factors influence the decision to vote (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), but those do not compell more intensive discussion beforehand. Thus, we focus in this initial study on voters' perceptions of the participants in their discussions and the consequences thereof.

If the practice of absentee discussion is somewhat common and those discussions are sufficiently engaging, it stands to reason that a substantial proportion of people engaging in it will report being *influenced* by these discussions. But who among the vote-by-mail electorate will find these discussions influential? We might expect that the views and sophistication of one's discussion partner, or discussant, could prove important. Given how deliberation among like-mindeds is more about refining and reinforcing one's attitudes than actually changing them (Sunstein, 2002), and scholars have found that disagreement makes dyadic discussion more influential (Huckfeldt, 2007), for better or worse (Ryan, 2013), we posit *H1: Citizens are more likely to report voting differently than they otherwise would have as a result of discussing one's ballot with someone whose political views generally differ from their own.*

But whether one agrees with one's discussion partner is only one aspect to consider.

Research shows that individuals perceived to be more knowledgeable are more persuasive (e.g., Chaffee, 1982; Ryan, 2011), so it stands to reason that one is most subject to influence from those who disagree *and* appear relatively knowledgeable. Thus, we advance *H2: Those who report themselves as experiencing disagreement in their discussions will more frequently believe the conversations influenced them than those without disagreement, particularly when self-reporting as less knowledgeable than their discussants.*

Next, we can expect that some absentee discussers will perceive imbalances in their own political knowledge relative to their fellow discussants, whether those imbalances affect vote choices or not. Less knowledgeable voters are entering situations in which they may be challenged on factual questions by their more knowledgeable compatriots; perhaps less knowledgeable voters are merely trying to learn more by talking to others. This is comparable to other research into the presence and effects of political discussion, which has assumed that one who talks to an undecided or opposition voter will be exposed to new, cross-cutting information that could enhance one's own knowledge and views (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). The converse also follows from Huckfeldt's research: Those who are more knowledgeable and engaged may want to connect with those who are not as politically engaged or sophisticated to give advice and sway potentially undecided voters. Assuming a degree of self-awareness among less politically sophisticated and active voters, we therefore posit *H3: Relative to their politically active counterparts, people with lower political knowledge will be more likely to report discussing their ballot with a discussant more knowledgeable than themselves.*

In everyday political life, voters typically seek out like-minded people for their political networks (Landemore, 2013; Mutz, 2006, 2013), but if absentee discussions are low-cost exchanges among whoever is at hand, the like-mindedness of discussants may be more a matter

of proximity than selection. Within-household political agreement (Beck & Jennings, 1991) would lead to agreement among discussion partners, regardless of political knowledge, interest in politics, or partisanship. Those with less political knowledge, however, might need to reach out more widely to find a suitably knowledgeable discussant. Meanwhile, more knowledgeable voters often insinuate themselves into the conversations of their less knowledgeable counterparts in pursuit of winning voters for their favored candidate or cause (Thorson, 2012). Therefore, we advance *H4: More politically knowledgeable discussers will be more likely to report having like-minded conversation partners than will less knowledgeable discussers.*

Finally, studies of agreement in political discussion have highlighted the sensitivity of disagreeing with others in a public forum. People likely experience tension when talking politics with an ideological opponent (Mutz, 2006). We might expect that some moderates would face less tension in talking to a strong partisan than would a strong conservative talking to a strong liberal. Moderates may be choosing to participate in discussions in which their opinions will be challenged by others—again, as seen in other studies of cross-cutting discussion (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). This leads to *H5: People who are less strongly partisan will be more likely to report being exposed to disagreement in their absentee discussions.*

Methods

To address these questions, we conducted telephone surveys during the 2006 and 2007 Washington state general elections. The 2006 election featured a U.S. Senate race between incumbent Democrat Maria Cantwell and Republican challenger Mike McGavick, as well as three fairly high-profile ballot initiatives, and 64.6 percent of those registered (or about 2.1 million voters) cast ballots in the election. The 2007 general election was an off-year for national and Congressional races, but the election featured several municipal and county elections across

Washington, along with two moderate-visibility statewide initiatives. Fifty percent of the state's registered voters (roughly 1.6 million individuals) turned out for that election. Though these figures were lower than for the 2008 presidential election (86 percent turnout, or about 3 million voters), turnout and participation level for 2006 and 2007 were higher than many other states achieve even in presidential general elections.

Taken together, the two surveys included a large sample of absentee voters because Washington state was already in the midst of a transition to completely vote-by-mail elections. The state previously had lenient rules for absentee voting (e.g., not requiring affirmation of one's inability to vote in a home precinct on election day). By 2004, only a third of the state's ballots came from polling stations (Washington Secretary of State). By 2006, much of the state had instituted mail-in voting, and 88.5 percent of the state's ballots were mail-in votes. At the time of this study, Washington was similar to Colorado or California, where large portions of the electorate voted by mail, than it was to Oregon, which had been a vote-by-mail state since 1998.

Survey Design and Sample

We drew a sample of these absentee voters from the Washington Poll, a statewide random digit dial survey of several hundred voters conducted by the University of Washington. The October 2006 poll queried 700 registered voters over several days just before that November's general election. The poll had a response rate of 19 percent using AAPOR Response Rate 2, which is on par with the response rates of recent national telephone surveys. The 2007 poll collected 601 complete surveys during an equivalent interval, with a AAPOR Response Rate 2 of 17 percent, again comparable to many recent surveys (e.g., Pew Research Center for People & the Press, 2012). Moreover, the representativeness of the Washington Poll, in spite of its modest response rate, has been borne out in its ability to consistently produce demographically

representative and electorally predictive results for Pacific Northwest electorates.

These two years of data were combined into a single dataset by combining perfectly matched variables and standardizing variables with differing response scales prior to merger.² This produced a total sample of 418 respondents who had already voted by mail at the time of the survey, which provided ample statistical power to detect even small effect sizes (Cohen, 1988), though sub-sample analyses (e.g., the 149 people who engaged in vote-by-mail discussion) yielded power levels sufficient only to detect moderate effect sizes.

Measures of Discussion During Absentee Voting

Absentee voting and discussion. Interviewers asked respondents if they had “already filled out and returned your ballot for the November election.” This was used to create a dichotomous absentee voting variable, with those who had voted by mail receiving a score of one ($N = 418$) and all other voters receiving a zero. (Regarding the data herein, we use “voted absentee” and “voted by mail” as synonymous.)

Absentee voters then received a follow-up question: “As you were filling out your mail-in ballot, did you talk to friends or family members to get advice on one or more of your voting choices?” That question was used to create a dichotomous variable, with absentee discussers set at one ($N = 149$) and all other absentee voters set at zero. Questions in the 2006 survey focused on the prevalence of absentee voting discussions, while the 2007 survey included additional questions about the nature and effects of absentee discussions. Thus, only a smaller subgroup of the overall sample heard those questions ($N = 53$), a reduced sample size that permits only

² Analyses of the combined 2006-2007 data employed a dummy variable to control for potential election year effects on the dependent variables. This predictor never reached significance. In addition, to control for differences in the election context and electoral process between those years, a regression analysis on this combined 2006-2007 data included a series of interaction terms between this election year dummy variable and each independent variable used in the model. The results of that analysis are described below.

cautious extrapolation from significant associations and leaves non-significant findings with negligible interpretive value.³

Absentee discussion voting influence. To assess the subjective impact of these discussions, interviewers asked, “When talking about their ballot choices, some people have already made up their minds, whereas other people might not yet be sure how they are going to vote. Did your discussion of the mail-in ballot choices lead you to vote differently than you would have?” This resulted in a dichotomous Perceived Voting Influence scale, with “yes” responses coded as one and “no” as zero ($M = .30$, $SD = .46$).

Absentee discussion knowledge imbalance. Absentee discussers were also queried about knowledge imbalances between themselves and their discussion partners: “Some people know more about politics and elections than do other people. Compared to yourself, would you say that the person [or persons] you were talking with knew more, less, or just as much about politics and elections?” Responses were recoded into a three-point Relative Knowledge scale, with respondents’ discussion partners knowing relatively “less” about politics set to one and partners knowing “more” set to three ($M = 2.16$, $SD = .64$). The scale was also collapsed into a dichotomous Discussant Knowledge variable ($M = 0.28$, $SD = 0.45$) used to differentiate between voters who had discussed their ballots with people more knowledgeable than them (set to one) versus voters who talked with people who knew less or about the same as them (zero).

Absentee discussion agreement. Finally, interviewers asked about the level of agreement in their discussions: “When some people talk about politics, they like to talk with people who

³ This 2007 data also gave a window into who these discussion partners are: The vast majority of people, 79.6%, said they spoke with a spouse or partner. But other social and familial connections also seem to be important: 57% of people reported speaking with a housemate, 51.3% reported talking with a friend, 31.5% reported speaking with a child, and 31.1% said they talked with a co-worker. Smaller proportions of respondents reported speaking with a fellow member of a community, political, or religious group (23.5%) or a sibling (13.8%).

generally agree with them. Others prefer to debate or argue with people who usually have different opinions. Would you say that the person [or persons] you were talking with while you were filling out your ballot typically expresses [or express] views on politics similar to or different from your own?" Responses were recoded into a three-point View Similarity scale from "different" set to one and "similar" to three, with "both/in between/depends" set to two ($M = 2.58$, $SD = .67$). This scale was also collapsed into a dichotomous Absentee Discussion Disagreement variable, to differentiate between voters who engaged in discussions with people who regularly or occasionally disagreed with them, which was set to one, and those who talked to people who typically agreed with them, which was set to zero ($M = 0.30$, $SD = 0.46$).⁴

General Political and Demographic Measures

Political knowledge. For the 2006 survey, a political knowledge index was created from respondents' answers to five questions asking about basic state and national political facts (e.g., "Which political party currently has the most seats in the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington D.C.?"). Coding each correct response as one and all others as zero, scores on the five items were averaged to create a Political Knowledge index ($M = 0.63$, $SD = 0.27$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.62).⁵ For the 2007 survey, political knowledge was measured with two similar factual questions, the answers to which correlated moderately ($r = .28$, $p < .01$) and were

⁴ This dichotomous variable was coded in the opposite direction of the agreement scale variable in order to match the direction of the dichotomous knowledge imbalance variable mentioned above. That is, both dichotomous variables indicate that either a voter chose to expose herself to an intellectual challenge (in an ideological opponent or more knowledgeable discussion partner) or chose not to do so.

⁵ There were substantial associations between the state and national political knowledge items on the 2006 survey, with r values ranging from .154 to .362, all significant at a $p < .01$ level. Scale reliability values dropped to around .5 if the state-level items were deleted, suggesting that they were important to the political knowledge scale. This is in line with Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), who found that most kinds of political knowledge are related.

averaged together to form a political knowledge index ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 0.35$).⁶ For combined data analysis, the two scales were standardized and combined into a scale ranging from 0 to 1.

Political interest. Interest in politics was measured by respondents' general interest "in information about what's going on in government and politics." It was measured on a scale ranging from one ("not interested at all") to five ("extremely interested") ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.91$).

Political participation. Respondents in the 2006 survey were also asked four dichotomous questions about their political activities over the past year: whether they contributed money to a political campaign, wrote a letter to a public official, signed a petition, and participated in a rally or protest. A four-point index of Political Participation was created by adding the values of those four questions ($M = 1.38$, $SD = 1.15$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .519$).⁷

Party and ideology. Party identification was measured on a seven-point scale, with "strong Democrats" set at one, "other or no party" set at four, and "strong Republicans" set at seven ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 2.20$). Ideology was also measured on a seven-point scale, with "strong liberals" set at one, "moderates" set at four, and "strong conservatives" set at seven ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.64$). Partisanship was coded into a four-point scale reflecting the strength of a person's association with their particular party: strong partisans were set at three, weak partisans were set at one, and those with other party affiliations or no party were set at zero ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 1.02$).

Demographics. Ethnicity was collapsed into a dichotomous variable, with White set at one and non-White set at zero (93.8% White). Household income was measured on a scale from one (\$20,000 or less) to seven (more than \$150,000); the median for the sample was 4, or

⁶ We conducted an additional version of our analyses below using a version of the political knowledge variable comprising these two common items from the 2006 and 2007 surveys, and the results were nearly identical. These two items covered both state and national politics, asking the respondent which political party had the most seats in the Washington State Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives, respectively.

⁷ This additive index of political participation includes standard measures of political behavior.

\$60,000 to \$80,000 per year ($M= 3.79$, $SD = 1.74$). Education was measured on a scale from one (grade-school) to six (post-graduate education); the median for the sample was four (some college/technical school), with a mean of 4.50 ($SD = 1.10$). Women constituted over half (54.4%) of the sample.

Results

Predictors of Absentee Discussion Participation

Before addressing the initial research question, a single descriptive statistic warrants mention. Our data showed that in 2006-2007, a substantial portion of vote-by-mail respondents were engaging in this form of political discussion. More than one-third (35.6%) of vote-by-mail or absentee voters discussed their choices with other people while filling out their ballots. (This figure does not include those absentee voters who had not yet filled out and returned their ballots who may have engaged in ballot-related discussion after participating in this poll.) In light of longstanding concerns about Americans' alienation from politics and reluctance to engage in political discussion (e.g. Eliasoph, 1998; Knobloch, 2011; Mutz, 2006), this finding could be a source of optimism. Taken with recent national studies of political discussion and deliberation, like those by Jacobs et al. (2009), this finding suggests a substantial portion of the electorate chooses to discuss voting choices with other people.

Are those discussing ballots while voting different from other voters? Cross-tabulations and t -tests discerned the demographic and civic differences between those absentee voters who had discussed their ballots with others (hereafter called "absentee discussers"), as compared to all other absentee voters. As it turns out, little differentiates these two groups. The percentages and means in Table 1 show no major differences between absentee discussers and other absentee voters. Absentee voters who discussed their ballots include similar proportions of women voters,

and a similar ethnic makeup, as other absentee voters and polling-place voters. Absentee discussers are not markedly different in age or education than other absentee voters. Discussers are somewhat more affluent than other absentee voters, but this difference only approached statistical significance ($t = -1.886$, $df = 356$, $p = .06$).

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Likewise, absentee discussers are somewhat more polarized on the scale of partisanship than are other absentee voters ($t = -2.599$, $df = 411$, $p = .01$), but they closely resemble other absentee voters in ideological makeup. Regarding party identification, absentee discussers were somewhat more partisan (i.e., leaned more strongly towards the Democratic Party or GOP) than other absentee voters (Levene's test of equality of variances, $p = .006$). Mean values on the party identification scale, however, were not significantly different between the groups. Absentee discussers resembled other voters in terms of political knowledge.⁸

The OLS regression model⁹ in Table 2 shows that conventional socioeconomic traits were *not* strong predictors of participation in absentee discussions, whereas political orientations showed mixed results. When testing for predictors in the subsample of absentee voters, none of the demographic variables entered in the equation emerged as statistically significant. In fact, the only two significant predictors were partisanship, which was positively related to discussion, and

⁸ Absentee voters and discussers were also compared to the remaining voting population in the sample (883 respondents who had not yet voted). Only minor differences could be seen between the three groups: Other voters were somewhat younger than either absentee group, and closer in average income to absentee discussers, though closer to other absentee voters in level of partisanship. Though the pool of non-absentee voters was somewhat limited in 2006-2007, there were still sufficient numbers of survey respondents from several counties across the state to warrant comparison with absentee voters and absentee discussers.

⁹ Though a dichotomous dependent variable would typically call for a logistic regression, we opted for a linear regression for this variable to yield a more straightforward comparison with the linear regressions on the political participation index.

political knowledge, which had a negative relationship with discussion.¹⁰ One other significant relationship was found through this regression. In order to control for differences in the election context and electoral process between the 2006 and 2007 election years, we included in the regression a series of interaction terms between the election year dummy variable and each independent variable (interaction terms not shown in table). The only significant interaction term was between election year and political knowledge ($p=.03$). Further analysis of this interaction revealed that in the 2007 data, 44.3% of low-knowledge voters and only 26.5% of high-knowledge voters had engaged in vote-by-mail discussion, compared with 36.7% of low-knowledge voters and 37.2% of high-knowledge voters in the 2006 data.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Since we expected that vote-by-mail discussion would be well-connected to the typical predictors of political behavior, we conducted a parallel analysis of the antecedents of political participation to confirm that this group was not simply an aberration in its demographic and political breakdown. This comparison showed that, unlike absentee discussion, political participation among this group is predicted well by socioeconomic, demographic, and political traits. Specifically, participation is significantly associated with education, liberal/moderate ideology, strength of partisanship, and political knowledge; two other predictors—female and income—approach significance (i.e., $p < .10$). These relationships resembled participation patterns found in larger national samples (Verba et al., 1995), which suggests that the weakness of conventional variables at predicting absentee discussion does not reflect any anomalous features of the Washington state datasets.

¹⁰ Analysis using a two-item version of political knowledge yielded the same results: knowledge and partisanship were the only independent variables reaching significance in the regression analysis, and the interaction between political knowledge and election year was also significant.

Given these differences in the predictive power of demographics/political orientation, it is not surprising that political participation itself is only weakly correlated with engaging in absentee discussion ($r = .103$). Taken together, these findings suggest that traditional forms of engagement are habits quite distinct from absentee voting discussion, a behavior that appears to be distributed more evenly across the electorate than are conventional political activities.

Perceptions and Outcomes of Absentee Discussion

The remaining analyses focus on the 2007 sample, which included questions on the subjective experiences of absentee discussers, including knowledge imbalances with discussants, varying levels of political agreement with discussants, and the discussions' perceived influence on one's vote choices. In an initial test of our hypotheses, we conducted a series of cross-tabulations and t-tests to find differences between the groups described below (e.g. weak and strong partisans, high- and low-to-medium political knowledge respondents). In light of the more modest data in the 2007 sample, our findings in this section represent a first—but by no means definitive—look at the experiences of people engaging in absentee voting discussion. Besides providing hypothesis tests (tempered by the modest statistical power in this subsample), these analyses raise interesting questions for future research.

Knowledge imbalances. Perceived differences in knowledge between people engaging in discussions were somewhat common, with 32.3% saying their discussion partners knew more about politics than they did and another 14.7% reporting their partners knew less than they did. Cross-tabulations of knowledge imbalances with both political knowledge and partisanship supported H3; these findings are summarized in Table 3. As predicted, more low-to-medium knowledge respondents (40.7%) reported that their discussion partner was more knowledgeable about politics than they were, compared to high-knowledge respondents (15.4%). This difference

was statistically significant ($p = .02$, directional one-tailed test). A higher proportion of stronger partisans (31.3%) reported that their partner knew more about politics than did the weaker partisans and moderates (20.0%), but this difference was not statistically significant.

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion agreement. The analysis of agreement in absentee discussions shows that agreement was the norm: About two-thirds (66.9%) of respondents said their discussion partners generally shared their views on politics. Only 11% said they discussed their ballots with people who generally disagreed with them, and another 18.5% said their discussion partners both agreed and disagreed during their discussion (that is, they disagreed at least some of the time). Cross-tabulations of discussion agreement with partisanship and political knowledge showed some differences between those groups; these are also shown in Table 3. A much higher proportion of weak partisans and moderates (45.0%) reported occasional or regular disagreement with their discussion partner, compared to strong partisans (21.9%). This difference was statistically significant ($p=.02$, one-tailed test), providing support for H5. Contrary to H4, however, roughly the same proportion of low-to-medium-knowledge respondents reported disagreement in their absentee voting discussions relative to high-knowledge respondents.

Influencing voting choices. About one-third (30.6%) of absentee discussers perceived their conversations as shaping their votes. To look more closely at this variable, we cross-tabulated it with both knowledge imbalance and disagreement level, and the results are shown in Table 3. A higher proportion of those with more knowledgeable discussion partners reported that the exchange influenced their vote choice (33.3%), as compared to those whose partners were equally or less knowledgeable (26.3%). In addition, a higher proportion of those whose discussion partners typically or sometimes disagreed with them reported that the discussion

influenced their vote choice (37.5%) relative to those whose partners typically agreed with them (24.3%). Neither of these differences, however, reached statistical significance ($p = .63$ and $.37$, respectively).

To bolster our analysis, we conducted a logistic regression (shown in Table 4) predicting absentee discussion vote change as related to demographic and political variables, along with the absentee discussant agreement and knowledge imbalance scales. A second block included an interaction term capturing the interplay between the agreement and knowledge imbalance scales.¹¹ Demographics and attitudes were not related to vote change, nor was the discussion knowledge imbalance scale. Consistent with H1, agreement in absentee discussions was negatively correlated with the discussion's perceived influence on voting choices ($B = -.729$), but this only approached significance in a directional, one-tailed test ($p=.098$).

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Moreover, the interaction term (knowledge imbalance by agreement) was significantly associated with the discussion affecting one's vote choice ($B = 1.74$, $p = .048$). To analyze this effect, we compared the mean values for discussion influence for each of four groups (discussants knew less/same vs. discussants knew more, paired with discussant agreement vs. disagreement). For people whose discussants knew more than they did, there was no difference in reported discussion influence, regardless of agreement level. For those who believed they spoke with a less knowledgeable partner, however, those who experienced disagreement were more likely to report they changed their voting choices than those who agreed with their discussants. We hypothesized the *opposite* of this, so the result contradicted H2.

¹¹ Because of the relatively low number of cases for this portion of the study ($n=53$), we reduced the number of predictors to include sex, education, political interest, political knowledge, and partisanship. The income and ethnicity items had the most missing data and were removed.

Discussion

This study provides one of the first glimpses of interpersonal discussion during the completion of mail-in ballots. We applied existing theories of political discussion to this novel setting and obtained a rough estimate of which (and how many) people engage in this behavior. We also hypothesized the subjective experience of such discussions for voters, to understand voters' personal assessments of the activity. The results offered some support for our predictions.

Who Talks While Voting?

One encouraging result is that a significant proportion of absentee voters engage in ballot-related discussions while filling out their ballots. Yet this form of discussion does not follow conventional patterns for political participation. In general, those with socio-economic advantages and prior political experience and sophistication are most likely to take political action (Verba et al., 1995). Absentee discussion, however, is not well predicted by socio-economic, demographic, or political factors; other forms of discursive behavior, such as online discussion and community meetings, have seen similar patterns of participation (Jacobs et al., 2009). People who are older are somewhat more likely to engage in absentee discussions than the general electorate, but those who are white, more educated, or have higher income are no more likely than their counterparts to do so. People with a stronger sense of partisanship are somewhat more likely to discuss their ballots with others, but those who are *less* politically knowledgeable are also more likely to engage in these discussions. In other words, absentee discussers bear a strong resemblance to the electorate as a whole.

The differences between low- and high-knowledge voters by election year also raise interesting questions. Could absentee discussion be even more useful for low-knowledge voters in off-year elections, like that of 2007? Or perhaps different segments of the electorate are

joining this activity as voting by mail becomes more widespread, as in Washington state during the late 2000s. Further research on more recent elections in Washington and on other vote-by-mail areas, such as Oregon or Colorado, could help answer these questions.

Perceptions and Outcomes of Absentee Discussion

Perceived knowledge imbalances are common in absentee-voting discussions, with nearly a third of discussants perceiving one. Those who were less politically knowledgeable, and who were self-identified independents or Democrats, report being more likely to engage with people who they perceived as knowing more about the issues than they did.¹² This result raises the question of how imbalances play out in actual conversations: Do voters openly admit their expertise (or lack thereof) to their discussants, and do those who are less knowledgeable defer to experts? Future research, preferably involving direct observation of discussions, should examine whether those shifts in knowledge happen on an issue-by-issue (or office-by-office) basis.

Open disagreement is no less common than knowledge imbalances. Nearly one-third of discussants reported talking with people who occasionally or regularly disagree with them on political issues. Also, the least partisan voters are more likely to invite such disagreement. This suggests that independents or moderate partisans are the voters who seek out the challenge of discussing political issues with people whose views often diverge from their own.

For these voters, the discussions may somewhat be more deliberative, (see Jacobs et al., 2009; Landemore, 2013; Moy & Gastil, 2006). By talking to people with divergent views, absentee discussers may hear information or arguments that change their voting choices. The

¹² This might seem obvious, but we should note that this is based on voters' perceptions of discussants' knowledge. That is, someone with a high knowledge index could be talking to someone they *see* as more knowledgeable. Likewise, the result on disagreement and partisanship seems obvious, but is not a foregone conclusion: The perception of political disagreement is more general than the voting shifts that can occur on specific ballot choices.

converse may also be true: The discussions may be less deliberative for strong partisans, since they may simply be talking through their choices with people who generally agree with them, not considering conflicting points of view. For the most partisan voters, this could translate to a sort of echo chamber in which one point of view on a particular issue or elected office dominates the discussion. Unfortunately, this means that a substantial proportion—about two-thirds—of absentee discussers are talking to people who generally agree with them on political issues, as previous research has shown in the case of general political conversation (see Mutz, 2006, 2013).

As for the influence of discussion on one's vote, this was somewhat related to knowledge imbalance and disagreement. Those talking to more knowledgeable people, as well as those conversing with people with whom they (occasionally or often) disagreed, were somewhat more likely to report that the discussion shaped their ballot choices. This provides further support for the view that cross-cutting discussions can sway public opinion (Huckfeldt et al., 2004; McClurg, 2006). In this case, such influence comes with perfect timing—at the last possible moment before the ballot receives its marks.

One anomaly arose in this context, as disagreement in discussions had an unexpected interaction with knowledge imbalances in discussion. Those who disagreed with *less* knowledgeable discussants were more likely to report that the talk influenced their choices. Perhaps these voters placed less importance on political knowledge, and instead placed a higher probative value on disagreement and cross-cutting debate? Another possibility is that lower-knowledge voters are less concerned about uncertainty and doubt than higher-knowledge voters, leaving them free to make decisive statements that help convince their fellow citizens on at least some ballot choices. If future research replicates this finding, it could reshape our expectations for influence paths in political talk. It bears repeating that our sub-sample for this portion of the

analysis was fairly modest, so the effect could be a statistical anomaly; further research in this area should help clarify whether this is the case.

As in this instance, our overall results should be seen as a preliminary cross-sectional analysis of absentee voting discussion. Given the size of the combined 2006 and 2007 sample (and the size of the 2007 sample used for analysis of discussion perceptions), statistical power discourages over-interpretation of non-significant findings (Cohen, 1988). Even the effects we did find in the 2007 sub-sample require more fine-grained testing with a larger sample. Given this study's setting in Washington state, which was transitioning from widespread voluntary vote-by-mail registration (as seen in states like California and Colorado) to statewide vote-by-mail elections (as in Oregon), future research also could benefit from comparing these discussions in states at different stages in the move toward full vote-by-mail elections.

The greatest limitation, however, comes from our reliance on survey data to measure behaviors and experiences. Many studies of political discussion and other activities rely at least in part on self-reported data (Eveland Jr & Hively, 2009; Feldman & Price, 2008). However, such data are subject to error: Respondents may not be honest to telephone interviews, or may remember things incorrectly, or may try to anticipate the answers that interviewers are seeking (Prior, 2009). Future research on this topic should involve direct observation, either via ethnographic entry into voters' homes or observation of voters who step into the lab to conduct conversations they had planned on having anyway.

A related limitation concerns how participants might have interpreted the key survey question used in our analysis, which asked whether people talked to others "to get advice" while filling out their mail-in ballot. Though that prompt was intended to help respondents understand that we were asking about election-related discussion—as opposed to, say, procedural questions

about how to fill out a ballot or when it was due—it could also have eliminated some conversations in respondents’ minds, such as ones in which they simply shared their opinions without offering advice or an endorsement.

Conclusion

Overall, political discussion in vote-by-mail elections appears to be more inclusive than some other kinds of participation. The burgeoning practice of voting by mail could help boost political discussion among those who might otherwise avoid it. Our results raise questions about this practice that may merit further quantitative—and qualitative—study. How often do less knowledgeable absentee voters benefit from their discussion in terms of “correct” voting choices (Boudreau, 2013; Lau, 2013)? How often are the discussions simply partisan echo chambers, in which people reinforce partisans’ views by talking with like-minded friends and family? Under what conditions do moderates and partisans alike end up exposed to valuable information and opinions in the course of their discussions, in a way that might appear relatively deliberative?

These and other questions become increasingly important as more local governments, states, and nations adopt vote-by-mail election procedures, or move to more relaxed absentee-voting rules. Though this thread of research may not be equally important across the U.S., electoral reforms like voting by mail and early polling-place voting have caught on in other states in recent years, so our findings may be applicable to greater numbers of voters in the near future. More and more people are voting at home, a friend’s house, or a workplace, and are discussing their ballot choices as they do so. Our theories of electoral behavior and political communication will benefit from having a better understanding of that process and its effect on voting and elections. So, too, could we benefit from learning whether this social and political practice could help rejuvenate American civic life by making mass elections more deliberative.

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Table 1

Comparing Absentee-Voting Discussers to Absentee Voters Not Discussing Their Ballots

	Absentee voters (no discussion)	Absentee discussers
Female	54.3%	55.7%
White	95.1%	94.4%
Age (<i>mean in years</i>)	62.1	59.7
Income (<i>mean, 7-point scale; 1=Less than \$20K, 4=\$60-80K, 7=More than \$150K</i>)	3.49	3.85 [#]
Education (<i>mean, 6-point scale; 1=8th Grade or less, 4=Some college, 6=Post- grad</i>)	4.45	4.55
Political knowledge (<i>mean, scale from 0 to 1</i>)	0.70	0.67
Party ID (<i>mean, 1-5</i>)	3.56	3.64
1- Strong Democrat	26.2%	31.5%
2- Democrat	27.7%	21.3%
3- Independent	8.6%	7.5%
4- GOP	23.9%	19.2%
5- Strong GOP	13.5%	20.5%
Ideology (<i>mean, 7-point scale, 1=Very Liberal, 7=Very Conservative</i>)	4.06	4.03
Partisanship (<i>mean, 1-4</i>)	1.89	2.16 [*]
1- Independent	8.6%	6.8%
2- Leans	33.3%	21.9%
3- Moderately partisan	18.4%	19.2%
4- Strong partisan	39.7%	52.1%
<i>N</i>	269	149

Note. Subscripts denote significant or nearly significant *t*-test, [#] $p < .10$, ^{*} $p < .05$. For income, $t = -1.89$ ($p = .06$), and for partisanship, $t = -2.60$ ($p = .01$).

Table 2

Linear regression predicting Absentee Voting Discussion

Predictor	<i>B (SE)</i>
Election year (2006)	-0.032 (0.058)
Female	0.026 (0.053)
Age	-0.001 (0.002)
White	-0.023 (0.115)
Education	0.021 (0.025)
Income	0.027 (0.017)
Party (GOP)	0.016 (0.016)
Partisanship	0.075 (0.027)**
Conservative	-0.023 (0.021)
Political knowledge	-0.225 (0.096)*
<i>N</i>	351
<i>R</i> ²	.048 [#]

Note. [#] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 3

Comparing Absentee-Voting Discussers' Perceptions of Discussion

	Weak partisanship	Strong partisanship	Low political knowledge	High political knowledge
Knowledge imbalance (Discussion partner knew more)	20.0%	31.3%	40.7%*	15.4%*
Discussion agreement (Discussion partner partly/mostly disagreed)	45.0%*	21.9%*	25.9%	34.6%
Discussion influenced vote choice	20.0%	31.3%	33.3%	23.1%
	Discussion partner knew less/same	Discussion partner knew more	Discussion partner agreed	Discussion partner disagreed
Discussion influenced vote choice	26.3%	33.3%	24.3%	37.5%

Note: Subscripts denote significant or nearly significant *t*-test, # $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, in comparison across groups (e.g. high versus low political knowledge). Overall $N = 53$ for these cross-tabulations.

Table 4

Logistic regression predicting Absentee Voting Discussion Influencing Vote Choice

Predictor	<i>B (SE)</i>
Female	0.549 (0.782)
Education	0.716 (0.422) [#]
Partisanship	0.167 (0.402)
Political knowledge	-0.561 (0.614)
Political interest	-0.726 (0.443)
Discussion agreement	-0.729 (0.563) [#]
Discussion knowledge imbalance	-0.390 (0.598)
Agreement X Knowledge imbalance	1.714 (1.026) [*]
<i>N</i>	53
Nagelkerke R ² values:	
(Block 1)	.310 [#]
(Block 2 – Interaction term)	.391 [*]

Note: # $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, two-tailed tests (one-tailed tests for hypothesized directional effects). Bs & SEs are upon-entry values, with interaction term entered as a separate block.