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Talk Leads to Recruitment

How Discussions about Politics and Current Events Increase Civic Participation

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There is a positive relationship between how much we talk about politics and current events and how much we participate in civic activities. However, analytical biases make it difficult to accurately estimate the causal influence of talk on individual behavior. Moreover, existing data sources do not include information on the mechanisms that might explain how individuals translate talk into action. These problems are addressed with new data that were collected through a natural experiment. The results show that civic discussions promote civic participation largely because during such discussions we are recruited to become involved.

Keywords: *social network; peer; civic participation; recruitment*

Recent scholarship has focused on the influence that the people around us have on how we participate in the processes of democratic governance. Specifically, this literature shows that those of us who discuss politics and current events with our peers—the people in our immediate social environment—are also active in civic activities. However, while the correlation between discussions with peers and civic participation has been well established, we have not yet explained how this relationship works.

What happens when we discuss politics and current events that leads us to participate in civic activities? This question has not been answered for two reasons. First, we have been unable to accurately estimate the causal influence of peers on individual behavior. Reciprocal causation, endogeneity, and selection bias make it difficult to determine if our peers influence us or if our own patterns of behavior influence how we choose and act with our peers. Second, data sources with information on how much individuals talk with their peers about politics and current events do not include information on the mechanisms that might explain how individuals translate talk into action.

These problems are addressed in this article with new data that were collected through a natural experiment conducted on students at a large public university in the Midwestern United States. The design of this study allows us to more accurately estimate the causal influence of peers because information was collected on how individuals responded to the influence of a randomly assigned peer group. In addition, this study collected information on the mechanisms that could be causing the relationship between civic discussion and civic participation. This was done by asking study participants specific questions about what occurred during conversations that they had with their peers about politics and current events.

The results of this study suggest that civically relevant discussions with peers promote civic activity by subsidizing the costs and increasing the benefits associated with participating. Peers go about this in three ways: by providing individuals with information on how to become active in civic activities, by increasing individuals' engagement with politics and current events, and by explicitly asking individuals to participate in civic activities. When compared to one another, being asked by someone to participate—recruitment—appears to be the most influential mechanism behind peer influence. Further analysis suggests that peer-to-peer recruitment is more effective when the target of the mobilization effort has prior experience participating in civic activities.

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Existing Research on Peer Influence and the Inability to Show Causation

A number of lines of research in the social sciences have examined the influence that social context has on political behavior.[1] With specific regard to peers, the literature suggests that informal conversations about politics encourage individuals to participate in civic activities (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1991, 1995; Huckfeldt et al. 1995; Kenny 1992, 1994; Lake and Huckfeldt 1998; McClurg 2003, 2004; Mutz 2002).[2] For example, using a national social survey, Lake and Huckfeldt (1998) showed that the amount of political discussion occurring in an individual's peer network correlated with his or her level of participation in campaign-related political activities during the 1992 presidential election. Similar findings have been made with local-level survey data. For example, data from the seminal South Bend Study conducted by Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) suggest that political discussions with peers have an impact on how individuals participate in elections (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1991, 1995; Kenny 1992, 1994).

Despite this volume of research, extant scholarship does not provide definitive evidence of a causal relationship between conversations with peers and individual participation in civic activities. Existing works are incomplete because it is difficult to determine if our peers influence us or if our own patterns of behavior influence how we choose and act with our peers (e.g., Laver 2005). The central argument made in this literature is that talking about politics with our peers leads us to become more active in politics. However, an equally plausible explanation is that being active in politics causes you to talk about politics with your peers (reciprocal causation). It could also be the case that individuals who are more active in politics explicitly choose to associate with peers that are more interested in talking about politics (selection bias). Finally, some factor that has not been accounted for could be causing people to both have political discussions with their peers and participate in politics (endogeneity bias).

Traditionally, nonrecursive regression models are used to overcome analytical problems like these. In such specifications, the independent variable of interest (in this case, the amount of conversation about polices and current events an individual has with his or her peers) is modeled with instrumental variables that do not correlate with the outcome variable being predicted (in this case, the amount of civic participation an individual engages in). However, it is difficult to think of any variable that could reliably predict the level of civically relevant talk occurring in an individual's peer group yet not be correlated with how civically active that person is. Instrumental variables like these have not been identified.[3]

What Causes Peer Influence?

Peer influence has also been understudied because existing data sources that include information on how individuals interact with their peers do not include measures of the mechanisms that might explain how individuals translate civically relevant discussions into civic participation. To determine how to identify and measure what drives peer influence, it is first necessary to review why people choose to become civically active. With this knowledge, we can determine what types of information to gather in attempting to decipher why conversations with peers lead individuals to participate in civic activities.

The factors that influence whether a person chooses to participate in civic activities are numerous. However, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) offered a comprehensive and parsimonious summary of these determinants in their Civic Voluntarism Model. This model is composed of three categories: resources (e.g., civic skills, time, and money), civic engagement (e.g., political interest and efficacy), and recruitment (i.e., being asked to participate). Verba and colleagues found that each of these factors has an independent and significant impact on the costs and benefits associated with civic participation. Moreover, existing research suggests that individuals gain access to resources, engagement, and recruitment as they discuss politics and current events with their peers.

To illustrate how resources, engagement, and recruitment could explain peer influence, consider the various factors that determine whether a person decides to vote. For example, information on the candidates and the issues at stake in the election is the most basic resource that this person would need to decide whether to vote (e.g., Popkin 1995). Individuals can obtain information from a number of different sources. For example, our hypothetical voter could gather information by taking the time to monitor the news media, attend political party rallies, and read direct mail pieces sent by the candidates. However, this individual might also obtain information with greater ease through conversations with his or her

peer group (Downs 1957; Huckfeldt, Ikeda, and Pappi 2000; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1968; McClurg 2003; Popkin 1995). Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) suggested that conversations with peers are a low-cost source of information because they allow individuals to gain this resource from trusted sources on specific issues of interest. In addition to being lower-cost, we might also gain resources from our peers with greater enjoyment. For example, an individual is more likely to enjoy an informal discussion with friends than going to a candidate rally filled with strangers. In this sense, any political content we might get from conversations with our peers is a "by-product" of social interactions based on other goals (Downs 1957; Walsh 2004).

Being civically engaged—having a psychological predisposition to participate—also motivates civic participation. This is the case even after accounting for how many resources a person has (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). For example, consider our potential voter again. Regardless of how much information this person has on the campaign and the candidates, this citizen is unlikely to vote if he or she is not interested in politics and current events (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). As with information, discussion of politics and current events with peers could increase an individual's level of civic engagement. For example, talking about politics and current events in a social setting could lead an individual to learn about and become more interested in participating in civic activities (McClurg 2003).

Finally, even the most engaged and resource-rich individual will be more likely to participate in civic activities if they are asked by someone else to act (Gerber and Green 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Consider our hypothetical voter one last time. This individual will be more likely to vote if he or she is motivated to do so by someone else. For example, a number of studies show that our hypothetical voter will be more likely to vote if he or she is asked to do so by a political party operative that is canvassing from door-to-door in the neighborhood (e.g., Gerber and Green 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).[4] However, party operatives are not the only potential source of recruitment. Existing works suggest that peer groups could also be a potent venue for recruitment (Gerber and Green 2000; Godwin and Mitchell 1984; Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1999). For example, through an experimental study of voters in New Haven, Connecticut, Gerber and Green (2000) showed that door-to-door canvassing is more effective at eliciting voter participation than phone calls or direct mail. This suggests that the face-to-face style of recruitment that we would expect from peer networks might be especially effective at eliciting individual civic participation.

Data: The 2003-2004 Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project (C-SNIP)

Because of persistent analytical biases and insufficient data on the causal mechanisms that might underlie peer influence, a different way of collecting and analyzing data on this topic is needed. The need for information on causal mechanisms is easily solved by adding measures of these concepts to a study of peer influence. However, overcoming reciprocal causation, selection bias, and endogeneity bias is less straightforward.

As Figure 1 illustrates, one way to get past these analytical complications would be to examine individual-level behavior over multiple points in time. Ideally, the subjects under study would also be randomly assigned to new social environments. This research design allows us to determine causation because it follows the logic of a controlled experiment. An individual enters a new social setting with a given set of characteristics, a treatment in the form of the new environment is applied, and the impact of that treatment on current patterns of behavior is measured by controlling for patterns of behavior before exposure to the treatment. Random assignment ensures that the estimated peer effect is not actually being caused by any other unobserved factor.

With this ideal research design in mind, data were collected from first-year college students living in university housing at the University of Wisconsin–Madison during the 2003-2004 academic school year. This study is hereafter referred to as the Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project (C-SNIP).[5] To collect data on patterns of behavior over time, C-SNIP participants completed two survey questionnaires: one at the beginning of the school year before they were affected by their new peer group at college, and a second at the end of the school year. During the first wave of the study, each student was asked about his or her patterns of civic participation during high school. During the second wave of the study, students were asked about their civic activities in college, as well as about their peers inside the dormitory community. In total, 25 percent of the eligible population

Figure 1
Overcoming Analytical Problems in the Study of Peer Influence

Analytical Problem	Solution	Explanation	C-SNIP Execution
Reciprocal Causation	Measure Patterns of Behavior Before and After Exposure to Peers	Controlling for past patterns of behavior allows causation to be inferred if there is a relationship between peer discussion and current patterns of behavior.	Patterns of civic participation were measured before and after study participants encountered their new peers at college.
Selection Bias	Random Assignment to Peer Groups	The individual is no longer able to select his or her peer group.	Study participants were randomly assigned to their college dormitory, and assignment preferences are controlled for.
Endogeneity Bias		Any explanation of civic participation that is not accounted for is still orthogonal.	

Note: C-SNIP = Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project.

of first-year students living in university housing fully completed both questionnaires ($N = 1{,}102$). Just over 30 percent of the eligible population completed at least some portion of both questionnaires ($N = 1{,}338$).[6]

Random assignment to a new peer group is incorporated into the C-SNIP design because study participants were assigned to their dormitory based on a random lottery. Incoming first-year dormitory residents fill out a preference sheet where they rank the dormitories in order of where they would like to live. Students are then "randomly sorted by computer to rank students in the order they will be assigned to residence halls" (University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of University Housing 2004). If space is available in the student's first housing choice at the time that his or her name is reached in the random list, the student is placed in that dormitory. If space is not available, an attempt is made to place the student in his or her second choice dormitory, and so on.[7]

Measures

Peer Influence: Talk about Politics and Current Events among Randomly Assigned Roommates

In the second C-SNIP questionnaire, each student was asked, "When you talk with your roommate, how often do you discuss politics and current events: often, sometimes, rarely, or never?" Peer influence is estimated with this measure of discussion frequency. The average student reported discussing politics and current events, somewhere between *rarely* and *sometimes* (an average of 1.5 on the 0 to 3 scale ranging from *never* to *often*). Just fewer than 16 percent of students reported that they never discussed politics and current events with their roommate.

Admittedly, I did not have complete control over the treatment being applied to each student in this study. In a true experiment, the researcher is able to assign the treatment that his or her subjects receive. However, in the case of this natural experiment, the treatment (the amount of civically relevant discussion that roommates engaged in) was not under my control. While this is not ideal, it is not detrimental to the analysis because there is a great deal of natural variation in the amount of discussion that a student could have been exposed to in his or her dormitory room. In total, 50 percent of students reported that they were exposed to below average levels of civically relevant discussion ("never" or "rarely"); the other 50 percent of students were subjected to above average amounts of discussion ("sometimes" or "often"). Moreover, as discussed in the next section, any potential nonrandom assignment of students to these different treatment conditions is accounted for in the analysis with an exhaustive set of control variables.

It is also worth noting that this measure is based on each student's own report of how much he or she discussed politics and current events with his or her roommate. Use of self-reports is a standard and accepted practice in this line of research. However, an exogenous measure of the amount of discussion occurring among roommates might be a more objective way to estimate peer influence. For example, instead of using each student's self-report of how much discussion of politics and current events occurred, we could use the

report supplied by his or her roommate. This type of analysis would depend on correctly identifying roommate pairs in the C-SNIP data set. Unfortunately, only a small number of respondents reported their address in the questionnaire. As such, only 108 pairs of roommates were able to be reliably identified out of the students that participated in the study. Among these pairs, 65 percent agreed that their level of discussion of politics and current events was either above or below average. Admittedly, this is not complete agreement. However, given the fact that the measure in question is a rough 4-point ordinal scale, these results suggest that roommates were not in overt disagreement about the nature of the treatment that was being applied to each student. In other words, an exogenous measure of this variable would not be meaningfully different from the self-report that is used in this analysis.

Causal Mechanisms: Resources, Engagement, and Recruitment

The second C-SNIP survey included questions that allow for an examination of whether conversations with peers about politics and current events generate resources, engagement, and recruitment. To see if informational resource transfers occur among peers, respondents were asked, "How many times have your roommates given you any information about how to become active in politics and current events: often, sometimes, rarely, or never?" The average student reported exposure to such information somewhere between *never* and *rarely* (an average of 0.5 on the 0 to 3 scale ranging from *never* to *often*).

Increased civic engagement though peer interaction was measured by asking, "Thinking about how interested you were in politics and current events before you came to the UW Madison, has talking with your roommates increased your interest in politics and current events: very much, somewhat, not that much, or not at all?" The average student reported enhanced engagement somewhere between *not at all* and *not that much* (an average of 0.7 on the 0 to 3 scale ranging from *not at all* to *very much*).

Finally, peer-to-peer recruitment was measured by asking, "How many times have your roommates asked you to participate in an event or organization related to politics and current events: often, sometimes, rarely, or never?" Again, the average student reported enhanced engagement somewhere between *never* and *rarely* (an average of 0.3 on the 0 to 3 scale ranging from *never* to *often*).

Dependent Variable: Participation in Voluntary Civic Organizations

Participation in eight different types of voluntary civic organizations are accounted for in the analysis: charitable and voluntary service, leadership and civic training, groups that "take stands on political issues or current events," partisan groups, student government, ethnic and racial groups, student publications (e.g., newspaper), and speech clubs and teams (e.g., forensics, debate). These groups were examined because they are the most germane to participation in the processes of democratic governance.[8] For each organization, students were asked to rate how active they were in that organization on a 0 to 3 scale. The analysis in the next section examines civic participation as the sum of these 0 to 3 scales, making a 24-point scale. The average student reported a participation score of 2.5 on this scale. Just fewer than 36 percent of students reported that they did not participate in any voluntary organizations during their first year of college.[9]

Control Variables: Accounting for Past Patterns of Behavior, Nonrandom Assignment, and Survey Nonresponse

The ability of the C-SNIP data to provide evidence of causation rests on the fact that the study design makes use of multiple measures of behavior over time and random assignment to treatment groups. Past patterns of behavior are accounted for in the analysis by controlling for the respondent's report of how civically active they were in high school (essentially, a lag of the dependent variable). On average, these data show that students were more civically active during high school than they were during their first year of college. The average student reported a participation score of 6.8 on the 24-point scale, and only 5.5 percent of students reported that they had not participated in any voluntary organizations during high school.

Random assignment is automatically built into the data, since students were placed into dormitories based on a lottery. This said, since the students in this study ranked their housing options and had the option of choosing a roommate, the roommate assignment process was not perfectly random. Nonrandom assignment is not as troubling as it could be in this study because the procedure the university uses for dormitory assignment is not related to the variables of interest in this study. Students were not purposively being placed in dormitories based upon how civically

active they are; nor were they assigned with the intent of affecting discussion of politics and current events.

However, nonrandom assignment can also be accounted for directly in the analysis by controlling for why students were assigned to their roommate. In the C-SNIP survey questionnaire, students were asked to select all of the following reasons that applied for why they wanted to live where they were living: "good location on campus" (80 percent), "to be with people I already knew" (7 percent), "good social environment" (57 percent), "good academic environment" (43 percent), "single-sex environment" (3 percent), "amenities" (5 percent), "missed [the university] housing deadline" (1 percent), "random—I just took what they gave me" (13 percent), and "other" (12 percent).[10] In addition, students were specifically asked, "Did you choose to live with your roommate, or were you assigned to your dorm room?." In total, 19 percent of students reported that they had selected their roommate. Students were also asked how well they knew their roommate before coming to college. In total, only 14 percent said that they were "very well" acquainted with their roommate before the start of the academic year.[11]

Finally, to increase the precision of this analysis, it is necessary to account for why a student chose to participate in the C-SNIP study in the first place. Based on the data that were available on the entire population that was asked to complete the survey, we can compare respondents to nonrespondents in terms of gender, race, and educational background (operationalized as the student's composite ACT college entrance exam score).[12] Two-tailed *t*-tests show that when compared to the entire 2003-2004 first-year class, students that chose to participate in both surveys were more likely to be female (65 percent compared to 50 percent; $p < .01$), white (92 percent compared to 88 percent; $p < .01$), and had better ACT scores (a mean score of 28, compared to a mean score of 27; $p < .01$).

Results

If resources, engagement, and recruitment help explain how our peers influence us to participate in civic activities, measures of these concepts should correlate with both the amount of talk about politics and current events occurring in the peer network and with the amount of civic participation a person engages in. The results in Table 1 support this expectation. Talk about politics and current events among peers correlates with information resource transfers among peers, increased psychological engagement with politics and current events due to conversations with peers, and instances of peers recruiting each other to participate. In turn, resources, engagement, and recruitment correlate with higher levels of civic participation. These correlations are not extraordinarily large, but they are positive and statistically significant.

These simple bivariate correlations are necessary evidence for resources, engagement, and recruitment to be viable explanations of peer influence. However, to validate these findings with more sufficient evidence, it is useful to turn to a multivariate analysis. To test whether resources, engagement, and recruitment explain peer influence, we first need an accurate estimate of the causal influence of peers on civic participation. This estimate is derived in column 1 of Table 2 by using the amount of political talk occurring in an individual's peer network to predict how much he or she participates in voluntary civic organizations. The model controls for the three most commonly cited alternative explanations of peer influence: reciprocal causation, section bias, and endogeneity bias.[13] Reciprocal causation is accounted for by controlling for a lag of the dependent variable. Selection bias and endogeneity bias are accounted for by design in this study because students were randomly assigned to their dorms. However, as discussed in the previous section, we can also account for these biases directly in the analysis by adding the housing preference control variables in the statistical model. Finally, the model also accounts for survey nonresponse with three demographic variables.

The results in column 1 of Table 2 show the estimated impact of peers on civic participation. The peer influence coefficient is substantively large and statistically significant. All other factors equal, this coefficient indicates that increasing political talk from the minimum to the maximum leads to a 63 percent increase in civic participation (an increase from 1.9 to 3.1 on the 24-point participation scale). Due to the unique experimental design of the C-SNIP study, along with the control variables included in the model, these results are evidence of a causal relationship between talk with peers and individual civic participation.

To determine whether resources, engagement, and recruitment can explain this phenomenon, measures of these concepts were added to the regression analysis (see columns 2 through 5 in Table 2). The goal of adding these variables to the model is to "explain away" the peer effect.[14] If resources, engagement, and recruitment explain how we translate discussions with peers into civic participation, the peer influence

Table 1
Bivariate Correlations between Resources, Engagement, Recruitment, and Peer Influence

	Peer Influence: Discussion of Politics and Current Events among Roommates	Outcome Variables: Overall Level of Activity in Civic Organizations
Causal mechanisms		
Resources (information flows)	.37*** (N = 1,221)	.16*** (N = 1,224)
Engagement (increased interest)	.46*** (N = 1,225)	.10*** (N = 1,228)
Recruitment (being asked to participate)	.31*** (N = 1,220)	.19*** (N = 1,223)

Source: 2003-2004 Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project (C-SNIP).
***$p \leq .01$.

Table 2
Impact of Peers on Civic Participation, Controlling for Potential Causal Mechanisms

	1	2	3	4	5
Peer influence					
Discussion among roommates	0.39*** (0.10)	0.26** (0.10)	0.37*** (0.11)	0.25** (0.10)	0.26** (0.11)
Causal mechanisms					
Resources	—	0.40*** (0.12)	—	—	0.16 (0.15)
Engagement	—	—	0.04 (0.11)	—	–0.13 (0.12)
Recruitment	—	—	—	0.72*** (0.15)	0.67*** (0.18)
Lag of dependent variable control					
Participation in high school	0.27*** (0.02)	0.26*** (0.02)	0.27*** (0.02)	0.26*** (0.02)	0.26*** (0.02)
Survey nonresponse controls					
Gender (female)	–0.28 (0.18)	–0.31* (0.18)	–0.28 (0.18)	–0.32* (0.18)	–0.34* (0.18)
Race (nonwhite)	1.16*** (0.32)	1.21*** (0.32)	1.17*** (0.32)	1.13*** (0.32)	1.14*** (0.32)
Composite ACT test score	0.00 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Nonrandom assignment controls					
Good location on campus	–0.31 (0.26)	–0.40 (0.26)	–0.31 (0.26)	–0.36 (0.26)	–0.40 (0.26)
People I already knew	–0.30 (0.32)	–0.38 (0.32)	–0.30 (0.32)	–0.37 (0.32)	–0.41 (0.32)
Social environment	0.45** (0.18)	0.45** (0.18)	0.45** (0.18)	0.46** (0.18)	0.45** (0.18)
Academic environment	0.41** (0.18)	0.38** (0.18)	0.41** (0.18)	0.45** (0.18)	0.42** (0.18)
Single-sex environment	0.71 (0.54)	0.76 (0.54)	0.72 (0.54)	0.78 (0.54)	0.78 (0.54)
"Other"	0.28 (0.27)	0.26 (0.27)	0.29 (0.27)	0.30 (0.26)	0.28 (0.27)
Amenities	0.36 (0.37)	0.39 (0.37)	0.36 (0.37)	0.38 (0.37)	0.39 (0.37)
Missed housing deadline	1.34* (0.78)	1.29* (0.77)	1.34* (0.78)	1.13 (0.77)	1.15 (0.77)
Placement perceived to be random	0.08 (0.28)	–0.07 (0.28)	0.08 (0.28)	0.08 (0.28)	–0.02 (0.28)
Prior acquaintance with roommate	0.35 (0.25)	0.31 (0.25)	0.32 (0.25)	0.33 (0.25)	0.32 (0.25)
Selected roommate	–0.87* (0.45)	–0.83* (0.45)	–0.84* (0.46)	–0.90** (0.45)	–0.85* (0.45)
Constant	–0.47 (0.94)	–0.55 (0.94)	–0.48 (0.94)	–0.21 (0.94)	–0.25 (0.94)
Adjusted R^2	.20	.21	.20	.22	.22
N (using listwise deletion of cases with missing data)	1,100	1,095	1,099	1,094	1,088

Source: 2003-2004 Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project (C-SNIP).
Note: Model type: ordinary least squares regression. Standard errors appear in parentheses.
*$p \leq .10$. **$p \leq .05$. ***$p \leq .01$.

coefficient should drop in both value and statistical significance after these variables are added to the model. This will only occur if resources, engagement, and recruitment account for the variance in civic participation that was once accounted for by talk about politics and current events with peers.

In column 2 of Table 2, we see that informational resources can explain away a portion of the peer effect. After adding resources to the model, the value of the peer effect coefficient drops by more than 33 percent. The coefficient also drops in statistical significance. Moving to the right in the table, the results in

column 3 suggest that engagement is not a very reliable explanation of peer influence. The engagement coefficient is not significant, and adding this variable to the model does not have a meaningful impact on the peer influence coefficient. Finally, the findings in column 4 suggest that recruitment has about the same explanatory power as resources. After adding recruitment to the model, the value of the peer influence coefficient falls by more than 35 percent; the coefficient also drops in statistical significance. However, this interpretation of the data changes when we add all three explanatory variables to the model at once (see column 5 of Table 2). In this model we see that resources, engagement, and recruitment account for around 33 percent of the peer effect. The coefficient also drops in significance. Moreover, recruitment appears to carry the explanatory weight in this model. Unlike the other two potential causal mechanisms, the coefficient on this variable is statistically significant. Otherwise stated, these results suggest that peers get us active largely by recruiting us to participate.

The findings presented in Table 2 illuminate why peers have an influence on the average person in this study. However, these results do not account for the fact that different individuals might respond differently to the mechanisms that cause peer influence. For example, a number of studies have shown that individuals with prior experience participating in civic activities are more likely to be recruited to participate (e.g., Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1999; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Brady, Schlozman, and Verba (1999) explained that this is the case because party workers, interest groups, and other agents of civic mobilization are "rational prospectors." To maximize the results of mobilization, agents of civic mobilization target individuals for recruitment that are most likely to be receptive. Individuals with more prior experience are a priori more likely to participate, and as such they are more likely to be the target of recruitment efforts.

These findings documented by Brady and others suggest that individuals in the C-SNIP study that participated in more civic activities during high school will be more likely to be recruited during conversations with peers about politics and current events. Table 3 shows that this is in fact the case. A difference of means test shows that individuals with above average levels of high school participation were subject to more recruitment efforts during conversations with peers. Similarly, having more prior experience with civic participation also led these subjects to be exposed to higher levels of resource transfers and led to higher levels of civic engagement as a result of discussing politics and current events with peers.

Table 4 presents the impact that these differential levels of exposure to resource, engagement, and recruitment have on peer influence. Comparison of columns 1 and 3 shows that the impact of peers on civic participation is 42 percent larger for individuals with higher levels of prior experience participating in civic activities. In other words, individuals with more prior experience are better equipped to translate civically relevant discussion into civic participation. Moreover, the data also show that resources, engagement, and recruitment do a better job of explaining peer influence for individuals with above average levels of prior experience participating in civic activities. After adding these variables to the regression model (column 2), we see that the peer influence coefficient drops in value by 58 percent and is no longer statistically significant. In contrast, when we compare the results in columns 3 and 4, we see that resources, engagement, and recruitment do not explain away peer influence for individuals with below-average levels of past experience participating in civic activities. In fact, addition of these variables to the model appears to enhance the peer effect, though only very marginally.

Discussion

The positive relationship between discussing politics and current events with our peers and participating in civic activities has been well documented. However, the extant literature has not provided an explanation of the mechanisms that lead individuals to translate civically relevant talk into civic participation. Existing research has not adequately addressed this topic because it is difficult to accurately measure the causal influence that peers have on individual behavior. Moreover, existing data sets that contain measures of how much we discuss politics and current events with our peers do not contain measures of the mechanisms that might underlie peer influence.

To overcome these persistent analytical problems, new data were collected through a natural experiment conducted on a population of first-year undergraduate college students. These new data show that when we talk with our peers about politics and current events, we engage in three distinct activities that reduce the costs and increase the benefits associated with civic participation: we exchange information on how to become civically active, we encourage each

Table 3
Mean Levels of Peer-Group-Based Resources, Engagement, and Recruitment

	Above Average Participation in High School	Below Average Participation in High School	Difference
Resources	.54 (N = 586; SD = .77)	.40 (N = 617; SD = .68)	.14***
Engagement	.81 (N = 589; SD = .90)	.68 (N = 618; SD = .85)	.13***
Recruitment	.33 (N = 586; SD = .64)	.23 (N = 616; SD = .53)	.11***

Source: 2003-2004 Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project (C-SNIP).
***$p \leq .01$ (based on a two-tailed difference of means t-test).

Table 4
Impact of Peers on Civic Participation for Individuals with Different Levels of Prior Experience

	Above Average Participation in High School		Below Average Participation in High School	
	1	2	3	4
Peer influence				
Discussion among roommates	0.50*** (0.17)	0.21 (0.20)	0.29*** (0.10)	0.33*** (0.12)
Causal mechanisms				
Resources	—	0.30 (0.26)	—	0.01 (0.17)
Engagement	—	–0.17 (0.20)	—	–0.22* (0.12)
Recruitment	—	0.96*** (0.31)	—	0.34* (0.20)
Lag of dependent variable control				
Participation in high school	0.32*** (0.05)	0.31*** (0.05)	0.18*** (0.05)	0.17*** (0.05)
Survey nonresponse controls				
Gender (female)	–0.86*** (0.33)	–0.97*** (0.33)	0.29 (0.19)	0.28 (0.19)
Race (nonwhite)	1.21** (0.49)	1.18** (0.49)	0.81** (0.39)	0.79** (0.39)
Composite ACT test score	–0.02 (0.52)	–0.00 (0.05)	0.04 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Nonrandom assignment controls				
Good location on campus	–0.06 (0.50)	–0.24 (0.49)	–0.53** (0.26)	–0.56** (0.26)
People I already knew	–0.45 (0.61)	–0.69 (0.62)	–0.36 (0.32)	–0.38 (0.32)
Social environment	0.56* (0.32)	0.59* (0.32)	0.38* (0.19)	0.38* (0.19)
Academic environment	0.74** (0.31)	0.76** (0.31)	0.52 (0.19)	0.06 (0.19)
Single-sex environment	1.11 (0.83)	1.26 (0.82)	0.29 (0.67)	0.27 (0.67)
"Other"	0.39 (0.46)	0.45 (0.46)	0.11 (0.28)	0.07 (0.28)
Amenities	0.25 (0.71)	0.45 (0.70)	0.39 (0.37)	0.37 (0.37)
Missed housing deadline	3.11** (1.53)	2.57* (1.52)	0.03 (0.76)	–0.10 (0.76)
Placement perceived to be random	0.49 (0.57)	0.24 (0.58)	–0.20 (0.27)	–0.15 (0.27)
Prior acquaintance with roommate	0.29 (0.41)	0.28 (0.41)	0.40 (0.28)	0.42 (0.29)
Selected roommate	–0.82 (0.75)	–0.99 (0.75)	–0.87* (0.52)	–0.85 (0.52)
Constant	–0.45 (1.78)	–0.53 (1.78)	–0.81 (0.98)	–0.55 (0.99)
Adjusted R^2	.14	.16	.06	.07
N (using listwise deletion of cases with missing data)	528	519	572	569

Source: 2003-2004 Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project (C-SNIP).
Note: Model type: ordinary least squares regression. Standard errors appear in parentheses.
*$p \leq .10$. **$p \leq .05$. ***$p \leq .01$.

other to become more psychologically engaged with politics and current events, and we recruit each other to become more involved in civic activities. A multivariate analysis shows that of these three causal mechanisms, recruitment is the most reliable explanation for peer influence. Otherwise stated, discussing politics and current events leads us to become more civically active largely because during such discussions our peers ask us to get involved. Additionally, further analysis shows that more instances of recruitment (as well as information transfers and enhancements in civic engagement) occur during peer group discussions when the individual has a stronger resume of past participation in civic activity.

These results significantly extend our knowledge on peer influence because the experimental method of data collection that was used allows for more accurate measurement and clearer explanation of this phenomenon. This said, the results presented in this article are based on a collegiate population from one part of the United States and should therefore be tested under different circumstances. For example, questions that ask about resource transfers among peers, civic engagement, and peer-based recruitment could be added to nationally representative social surveys. However, the results in this article illustrate that we also need to make use of methods of data collection that allow for more precise measurement of causal relationships. Therefore, in addition to the experimental approach used in this article, we should continue to exploit other internally valid methods of data collection such as participant observation and focus groups (e.g., Eliasoph 1998; Harris-Lacewell 2004; Walsh 2004). These methods come with the cost of reduced external validity. However, a reduction in the ability to talk about wider populations comes with the benefit of gaining the rich information that is needed in order to learn how peer groups operate.

Future studies should also look at research questions that were not able to be addressed in the scope of this article. For example, the literature on civic participation largely negates the influence of sociological factors like peers and instead is dominated by theories that focus on individual-level explanations of individual behavior such as partisan identification.[15] However, the findings presented here show that environmental factors have a meaningful impact on how citizens participate in civic activities. This disjunction between existing theory and the findings in this article leads to an obvious question: how significant is peer influence relative to individual-level determinants of political behavior? No doubt both are important. Therefore, future studies must consider both individual-level and social-level explanations of individual behavior if we wish to extend our understanding of why individuals choose to participate in the processes of democratic governance.

Appendix

The population analyzed in this study was all 4,358 first-year students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison living in university housing during the 2003-2004 academic year (82 percent of the 5,322 first-year students that entered the University in 2003). Study participants completed two questionnaires over the Internet: one at the beginning of the school year (October-November 2003) and a second at the end of the school year (March-April 2004). Lack of access to the Internet can bias survey response rates (Best et al. 2001; Couper 2000; Dillman 2000; Zhang 2000). However, this was not an issue in this study because students had free access to the Internet. Unique login names and passwords were assigned to each respondent to prevent students from completing more than one questionnaire. For descriptive statistics, see Table A1.

In total, 25 percent of the eligible population fully completed both questionnaires ($N = 1,102$). Excluding students that moved from the dormitory room they were initially assigned to, just over 30 percent of the eligible population completed at least some portion of both questionnaires ($N = 1,338$). To increase participation from a broad cross-section of the population under study, each student that completed a questionnaire was entered into a prize drawing for one of fifty $20 prizes. During each wave, three attempts were made by e-mail to recruit the sample to fill out a questionnaire. As with the use of the incentive, these e-mails were worded to make the prospect of participating in the study appealing to a wide audience. E-mail addresses were obtained from the University of Wisconsin–Madison Office of the Registrar and from publicly accessible student directories.

Table A1
Descriptive Statistics

	Valid *N*	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard Deviation
Peer influence					
Discussion among roommates	1,226	0	3	1.46	0.89
Civic participation					
Overall level of activity in civic organizations	1,274	0	24	2.53	3.04
Causal mechanisms					
Resources	1,224	0	3	0.47	0.73
Engagement	1,228	0	3	0.75	0.88
Recruitment	1,223	0	3	0.28	0.59

(continued)

Table A1 (continued)

	Valid *N*	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard Deviation
Lag of dependent variable control					
Participation in high school	1,315	0	20	6.76	4.17
Survey nonresponse controls					
Gender (female)	1,338	0	1	0.65	0.48
Race (nonwhite)	1,319	0	1	0.08	0.28
Composite ACT test score	1,258	17	36	28.01	2.90
Nonrandom assignment controls					
Good location on campus	1,338	0	1	0.80	0.40
People I already knew	1,338	0	1	0.07	0.26
Social environment	1,338	0	1	0.57	0.49
Academic environment	1,338	0	1	0.43	0.49
Single-sex environment	1,338	0	1	0.03	0.16
"Other"	1,338	0	1	0.12	0.33
Amenities	1,338	0	1	0.05	0.22
Missed housing deadline	1,338	0	1	0.01	0.10
Placement perceived to be random	1,338	0	1	0.13	0.33
Prior acquaintance with roommate	1,273	1	3	1.39	0.72
Selected roommate	1,274	0	1	0.19	0.39

Source: 2003-2004 Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project (C-SNIP).

Notes

1. Consult Zuckerman (2004) for a detailed summary of these research traditions.

2. It is worth noting that discussion and participation are conceptually different. A recent review of the political participation literature states that the field has defined "participation" as "action by ordinary citizens directed towards influencing some political outcomes" (Brady 1999, 737). Thus, since "political discussion is not an activity aimed—directly or indirectly—at influencing the government" (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 362), talking with peers about politics and current events is not itself an act of civic participation.

3. Nonrecursive models have been used when the independent variable of interest is peer *behavior* (e.g., vote choice), not political discussion (Kenny 1992; Levine 2002).

4. In fact, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) show that around 50 percent of the drop off in voter turnout in the United States between the 1960s and 1980s was caused because of declines in this style of mobilization by the political parties.

5. A more detailed discussion of the Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project (C-SNIP) study methodology is included in the appendix.

6. As such, the number of cases in each analysis will vary between 1,102 and 1,338, depending on missing data. These figures exclude students that moved from the dormitory room they were initially assigned to.

7. Students can also request a specific roommate, but roommate preference trumps dormitory preference (e.g., a student would be assigned to a lower-ranked dormitory to accommodate the roommate preference).

8. The C-SNIP survey also asked about participation in sport, religious, academic, occupational, performance arts, social, visual arts, and "other" groups. These affiliations were excluded because they pertain to self-development, not engagement with broader civic matters. A factor analysis of all sixteen groups also suggests that this division is appropriate.

9. The dependent variable is skewed toward zero. This is likely a product of overdispersion. In this case, it is possible that the types of individuals that engage in one civic activity are also likely to engage in other civic activities. As such, the ordinary least squares (OLS) results presented in the next section were verified using negative-binomial regression. The results did not change under this alternative specification.

10. The exact question wording was, "Why did you choose to live in the dorm where you are living?" These preferences are not taken into consideration by the University of Wisconsin–Madison when placing students in dormitories.

11. The exact question wording was, "How well did you know your roommate(s) before coming to college: very well, somewhat, or not at all?" This low level of acquaintance exists despite the fact that more than 70 percent of students that participated in this study went to high school in the state of Wisconsin.

12. These data were obtained from the University of Wisconsin–Madison Office of the Registrar.

13. Readers may wish to refer back to Figure 1 to review how the C-SNIP design accounts for these analytical problems.

14. Campbell and Wolbrecht (2006) used the same technique to explain the relationship between greater numbers of women serving in elected office, and greater levels of political engagement among female adolescents. As a germane side note, the authors found that the mechanism that links these two phenomena together is increased levels of political discussion within the family.

15. In fact, the founders of the Michigan School went so far as to say that "by and large we shall consider external conditions as exogenous to our theoretical system" (Campbell et al. 1960, 27).

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