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# Exposure to Political Discussion in College is Associated With Higher Rates of Political Participation Over Time

CASEY A. KLOFSTAD

*While individuals who are exposed to political discussion are more politically active, analytical biases make it difficult to show evidence of causation. It is also uncertain how long the relationship between discussion and participation lasts. Here both questions are addressed with panel data collected from individuals who were randomly assigned to their college dormitories. The data show that exposure to political discussion in college leads to higher levels of participation, immediately while still in college and years into the future after graduation. As political behavior is habitual, the initial increase in participation after being exposed to political discussion is a mechanism underlying the long-run relationship between discussion and participation.*

**Keywords** political discussion, political participation, social networks, panel study

Research on political behavior is largely focused on the influence of individual demographic characteristics, such as socioeconomic status (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995) and partisan preferences (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). Against this dominant paradigm, a growing literature examines the influence of social context. For example, people living under the same roof can influence one another to vote (Nickerson, 2008). Individuals become informed about politics through deliberation, the process of formulating government policy with other citizens (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Mendelberg, 2002). Social interaction causes individuals to have a greater sense of attachment to community, which leads to more frequent civic participation (Putnam, 2000). Civically engaged individuals influence how we learn about politics by providing the rest of us with information (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991; Barker, 1998; Dawson, Prewitt, & Dawson, 1977; Downs, 1957; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1968; Newcomb, 1943; Newcomb, Koenig, Flacks, & Warwick, 1967; Silbiger, 1977; Stimson, 1990; Zaller, 1992). Exposure to dissonant points of view can cause changes in political attitudes (Klofstad, Sokhey, & McClurg, 2013; Levitan & Visser, 2008; Sinclair, 2012; Visser & Mirabile, 2004).

Within this broad literature a number of studies focus on the influence of exposure to informal political discussion—ad hoc conversations as people go about their daily routine (Klofstad, McClurg, & Rolfe, 2009)—on political behavior. These studies show a strong correlation between talking about and participating in politics (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991, 1995; Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995; Kenny

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1992, 1994; Klobstad, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011; Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; McClurg, 2003, 2004; Mutz, 2002; Rolfe, 2012; Sinclair, 2012; Zuckerman, 2004). A number of mechanisms underlay this relationship. For example, McClurg (2003) shows that political discussions are an important source of information about politics (also see Downs, 1957). Information motivates participation because it increases civic competence (the ability to participate) and civic engagement (having an interest in participating in the first place). Klobstad (2007, 2011) shows that political discussion increases civic engagement and leads discussants to mobilize one another to participate in civic activities, both of which increase the likelihood of participating even after controlling for other correlates of participation such as education and income (Verba et al., 1995). In a similar vein, Rolfe (2012) argues that voter turnout is a social process, whereby candidates' mobilization efforts are transmitted through the electorate via increased political discussion during the election.

It has also been shown that the relationship between political discussion and civic participation is influenced by the nature of the relationship between discussants. For example, Klobstad (2011) finds that exposure to discussion has a stronger influence on participation if the discussants trust one another. Individuals who have more intimate social ties influence one another more easily for numerous reasons. For example, the more intimate the social bond the greater pressure the individual feels to comply with group norms in order to continue to be a part of that social network (Dawson et al., 1977; Mendelberg, 2002; Putnam, 2000). In addition, the more intimate a social relationship the more perfect the information the members of that relationship have about one another. The more perfect the information about the other person, the easier it is to persuade him or her to adopt a particular way of thinking or behaving (Brady, Scholzman, & Verba, 1999; Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 2002).

While our understanding of political discussion networks is growing, this literature is often criticized. Of particular concern is the possibility that the relationship between discussion and participation is spurious due to analytical biases (Klobstad, 2011; Laver, 2005; Lazer, Rubineau, Chetkovich, Katz, & Neblo, 2010): (a) Rather than discussion leading to participation, participating in politics may cause one to talk about politics (i.e., reciprocal causation). (b) Individuals who are politically active might choose to associate with people who are interested in talking about politics (i.e., selection bias or homophily). (c) A factor that has yet to be accounted for, or that cannot be accounted for, explains the relationship between discussion and participation (i.e., endogeneity or omitted variable bias).

A second shortcoming of the political discussion literature is that less attention has been paid to the long-run influence of these conversations on political behavior. One exception is Klobstad and colleagues (2013). This study made use of the 2008–2009 American National Election Studies (ANES) Panel Survey (ANES, 2009). These data show that individuals who were exposed to disagreeable conversations about politics in September 2008 were less certain of their vote choice for president in October 2008, in some cases held weaker partisan and ideological preferences in November 2008, in some cases were less likely to consume news media in October 2008, and in some cases were less likely to be interested in politics in November 2008. In contrast, exposure to disagreement had no relationship with political efficacy in November 2008 or voter turnout in the 2008 election. While this study leverages temporal separation of cause (i.e., disagreeable dialogue) and effect (i.e., political participation and attitudes), and uses propensity score matching to make the results of the analysis more analogous to those of a controlled experiment (Ho, Imai, King, & Stuart, 2007), causal inferences based on purely observational data are uncertain. Moreover, this study only examined the influence of exposure to disagreeable discussion one to two months afterward.

Another exception is (Klofstad, 2010, 2011). These studies examine individuals who were randomly assigned to their freshman college dormitory roommates. Data were collected at three points in time: the start of the freshman year of college (2003), the end of the freshman year of college (2004), and the fourth year of college (2007). These data show that exposure to political discussion with one's randomly assigned roommate during the freshman year of college correlates with more frequent participation in civically oriented student groups over the entire time span of the study. These studies also identify a mechanism underlying this long-term relationship: the initial increase in participation after being exposed to political discussion. More specifically, as political behavior is habitual (Brady et al., 1999; Fowler, 2006; Gerber, Green, & Shachar, 2003; Putnam, 2000), the initial positive influence of political discussion on civic participation placed those who were exposed to discussion on a trajectory of higher levels of participation over time compared to those who were not exposed.

Klofstad's (2010, 2011) leveraging of random assignment to social condition, and measurement of political behavior over time, has produced some of the most direct evidence of social influence on civic participation to date. This research design accounts for reciprocal causation through temporal separation of cause (discussion) and effect (participation). Random assignment accounts for selection bias because the individual did not choose his or her discussant. As in a controlled experiment, random assignment also increases the likelihood that the observed relationship between discussion and participation is not caused by any unobserved influence on participation. In addition, to the best of my knowledge these studies are the only data on the relationship between political discussion and civic participation collected from the same population over many years. However, a limitation of these studies is that they are focused on participation in civic-minded student organizations, not political activities. Also, while this panel study covers a four-year time span, the data are less representative of the wider public because they were collected from individuals while they were in college.

Here I extend this research (Klofstad, 2010, 2011) with a fourth wave of data collected from the same panel. At the time these data were collected the study participants were in their mid-twenties, full-fledged adults years removed from their time in college. The data show that political discussion is associated with higher levels of political participation, both immediately after exposure while still in college and years into the future after leaving college. There is a more consistent relationship over time between discussion among roommates and participation compared to the relationship between political participation and political conversations within the wider social context of the dormitory. The data also show that the initial positive influence of political discussion on political participation is a mechanism underlying the long-run relationship between discussion and participation.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. First, based on the preceding discussion of previous research, predictions are stated. Second, the panel data and method of analysis are described. Third, the results are presented. Finally, the implications of the results are discussed. In whole, this article highlights the importance of social-level influences on political participation. The results also demonstrate that seemingly inconsequential interpersonal interactions can influence human behavior years into the future. This study also illustrates the utility of data collection techniques that leverage natural instances of random assignment to social conditions.

## Predictions

- Exposure to political discussion will correlate with higher rates of political participation over time.

- There will be a more consistent relationship over time between political discussion among roommates and political participation than with exposure to political discussion within the larger, less socially intimate, dormitory social network.
- The initial increase in political participation associated with political discussion is a mechanism by which the positive relationship between discussion and participation lasts years into the future.

## Data and Method

### *Participants and Procedures*

A panel survey was administered to the 2003–2004 entering class of the University of Wisconsin-Madison ( $N = 6,574$ ). Those who resided in university housing (estimated  $N = 4,348$  according to university records) were randomly assigned to their roommate through a lottery. Participants ranked the 18 dormitories on campus in order of where they desired to live. They were then sorted randomly to determine the order in which they would be assigned to housing. If space was available in the participant's first dormitory of choice, he or she was placed there. If space was not available an attempt was made to place the participant in his or her second dormitory of choice, and so on. While pre-assignment ranking influenced which dormitory the participant was assigned to, he or she was still randomly assigned to a roommate. Study participants also had the option to select their own roommate (12.6% of students living in university housing,  $N = 550$ , as reported in the 2003 wave of the panel study). These participants are excluded from the analysis.

Participants were invited to participate in four surveys: (a) In 2003, as they first arrived on campus, participants reported how politically active they had been during high school. (2) In 2004, at the end of the first year of college, participants reported how politically active they had been during their first year of college, and whether they were exposed to political discussion in their randomly assigned dormitory. (3) In 2007, during the fourth year of college, participants reported their current level of political participation. (4) In 2012 participants reported their current level of political participation. All four questionnaires were self-administered over the Internet. Unique login names and passwords were assigned to each participant to prevent completion of more than one questionnaire. Contact information for participants was obtained from the university's office of the registrar, the university's alumni association, and publically accessible databases.

To encourage participation, in 2003, 2004, and 2007 participants were recruited three times via e-mail. Each participant who completed a questionnaire was entered into a prize drawing for one of 50 \$20 prizes. In 2012 participants were first contacted by mail, then three times by e-mail, and a final time by postcard. A pre-incentive of \$2 was included in the initial contact letter.

To incorporate random assignment in the analysis, the following participants were excluded:

- $N = 550$  who selected their own roommate, as reported in the 2003 questionnaire
- $N = 3,599$  who did not provide a response in the 2003 questionnaire to whether they selected their own roommate
- $N = 91$  who moved from the room they were originally assigned, as reported in the 2004 questionnaire
- $N = 1,073$  who did not provide a response in the 2004 questionnaire to whether they moved from the room they were originally assigned to

- $N = 185$  who moved out of university housing, as reported in the 2004 questionnaire
- $N = 8$  whose assigned dormitory could not be verified, based on responses to the 2003 questionnaire and university records

These criteria yield  $N = 1,068$  participants included in the analysis (24.6% of the university's estimated 4,348 residents in university housing in 2003–2004).

The Appendix contains an analysis of cooperation rates and non-response bias. The analysis suggests that the results in this article are more applicable to individuals who are predisposed to participate in politics. While less representative of the wider public, this population is useful to study as a “most likely” case (Gerring, 2001) of social influence because these types of individuals are more likely to be influenced by political discussion (Klofstad, 2009, 2011). In this same vein, the political orientations of adolescents and young adults are more malleable than those of their elders (Alwin & Krosnick, 1991; Franklin & Jackson, 1983). Consequently, political experiences at this time in the life cycle influence attitudes and behavior later in life (Bartels & Jackman, 2014; Beck & Jennings, 1991; Carpini, 1989; Jennings & Niemi, 1981; Mannheim, 1952; Newcomb et al., 1967). Moreover, when young adults leave their families (e.g., attend college), peers exert greater influence on their political attitudes and behaviors (Beck, 1977; Campbell et al., 1960). Taken together, if we do not find evidence of lasting social influence via political discussion in these data we are not likely to find it in other social contexts.

### Measures

Political participation is measured in four ways based on responses to questions included in all four waves of the panel study. Participants reported how active they were in “partisan groups” and “organizations that take stands on political issues”: “not at all,” “not very,” “somewhat,” or “very.” As many participants did not engage in these activities (Table 1), these two variables are coded 0 = “not at all” and 1 = “not very,” “somewhat,” and “very.” The rate of partisan participation did not vary between 2003 and 2004 ( $t_{1001} = 0.15, p = .88$ ), increased significantly between 2004 and 2007 ( $t_{556} = -2.88, p < .01$ ), and again between 2007 and 2012 ( $t_{344} = -4.89, p < .01$ ). Participation in groups that take stands did not vary between 2003 and 2004 ( $t_{809} = 1.25, p = .21$ ), increased significantly between 2004 and 2007 ( $t_{553} = -6.87, p < .01$ ), and decreased significantly between 2007 and 2012 ( $t_{345} = 3.52, p < .01$ ).

Participants also reported how frequently they contacted elected officials about issues or problems they were concerned about: “never,” “once,” or “more than once.” As many participants did not engage in this activity (Table 1), the variable is coded 0 = “never,” 1 = “once” or “more than once.” Contacting declined significantly between 2003 and 2004 ( $t_{944} = 11.54, p = .01$ ), increased significantly between 2004 and 2007 ( $t_{521} = -6.31, p < .01$ ), and again between 2007 and 2012 ( $t_{345} = -2.56, p = .01$ ).

Self-reported voter turnout in 2006 (collected in 2007), 2008 (collected in 2012), 2010 (collected in 2012), and 2012 (collected in 2012), is also examined. As seen in the wider electorate, turnout declines among this population when the presidency is not on the ballot (Table 1). In comparing the two off-cycle elections, turnout decreased significantly between 2006 and 2010 ( $t_{332} = 10.83, p < .01$ ). In comparing the two presidential elections, turnout did not vary significantly between 2008 and 2012 ( $t_{514} = .51, p = .61$ ).

Exposure to political discussion is measured in two ways based on responses provided in 2004. The first is participants' reports of how often they discussed “politics and current events” with their randomly assigned roommates over the course of the 2003–2004

**Table 1**  
Political participation descriptive statistics for participants included in analysis

Participants	% Participated
<b>Partisan organizations</b>	
2003	18.4 ( $N = 195$ )
2004	17.7 ( $N = 179$ )
2007	23.0 ( $N = 133$ )
2012	33.3 ( $N = 180$ )
<b>Organizations that take stands</b>	
2003	25.2 ( $N = 216$ )
2004	25.2 ( $N = 254$ )
2007	40.1 ( $N = 232$ )
2012	30.6 ( $N = 165$ )
<b>Contacting elected officials</b>	
2003	38.0 ( $N = 404$ )
2004	17.1 ( $N = 162$ )
2007	29.7 ( $N = 171$ )
2012	35.6 ( $N = 192$ )
<b>Voter turnout</b>	
2006	66.3 ( $N = 374$ )
2008	93.0 ( $N = 481$ )
2010	31.9 ( $N = 165$ )
2012	92.4 ( $N = 477$ )

*Note.* Cases with missing data were omitted using listwise deletion.

academic year. The second is participants' reports of how often they did the same with their randomly assigned "housemates." University of Wisconsin–Madison dormitories are divided into smaller units called houses. Each house is comprised of 50 to 80 students. A house is either a single floor in a high-rise building, or a stand-alone building adjacent to others that are included in the dormitory. The house is the center of the larger dormitory community for the student. As dormitories vary in size, physically and in number of residents, the house is a more comparable measure of social context across study participants.

Both discussion variables are scaled 0 = "never," 1 = "rarely," 2 = "sometimes," and 3 = "often." The mean level of discussion between roommates ( $\bar{x} = 1.4$ ) is significantly higher than that between housemates ( $\bar{x} = 1.2$ ;  $t_{929} = 5.09$ ,  $p < .01$ ). There is a positive correlation between discussion with roommates and housemates ( $r = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Individuals who were politically active in high school were significantly more likely to report being exposed to political discussion (Table 2). However, the substantive differences in the average levels of discussion are relatively small. Moreover, focus group evidence gathered from a separate cohort of University of Wisconsin–Madison freshmen who were also randomly assigned to dormitories shows that political discussion only took place if both roommates were interested in doing so (Klofstad, 2010, 2011). More specifically, the level of discussion reported by study participants is not simply a reflection of their own political engagement.

**Table 2**  
Average level of political discussion during the first year of college (2004) by political participation in high school (2003)

	Level of discussion	
	With roommate	With housemates
Partisan groups		
participants	1.6	1.2
nonparticipants	1.4	1.5
Groups that take stands		
participants	1.3	1.1
nonparticipants	1.6	1.5
Contacting		
participants	1.3	1.1
nonparticipants	1.5	1.3

*Notes.* All differences are statistically significant at  $p \leq .01$ . Cases with missing data were omitted using listwise deletion.

In addition, as discussed later, political participation during high school is accounted for in the analysis.

### *Method of Analysis*

The study participant is the unit of analysis. The data are treated as a within-subjects design, where participants are compared to themselves on the extent to which they change their political behavior over time in response to past exposure to political discussion. The analysis is conducted with logistic regression models for dichotomous dependent variables:

$$P_{t+1,i} = R_{t+1,i} + H_{t+1,i} + P_{t,i} + D_{t,i} + B_{t,i} \quad (1)$$

$$P_{t+2,i} = R_{t+1,i} + H_{t+1,i} + P_{t,i} + D_{t,i} + B_{t,i} \quad (2)$$

$$P_{t+3,i} = R_{t+1,i} + H_{t+1,i} + P_{t,i} + D_{t,i} + B_{t,i} \quad (3)$$

Here,  $i$  indicates the study participant.  $t$  indicates the wave of the survey, such that  $t$  are the data collected in 2003,  $t+1$  are the data collected in 2004,  $t+2$  are the data collected in 2007, and  $t+3$  are the data collected in 2012.  $R_{t+1,i}$  and  $H_{t+1,i}$  are political discussion within the roommate dyad and the dormitory house respectively, as collected in the 2004 wave of the panel study.  $P_{t,i}$  is the rate of political participation measured in the 2003 wave of the panel study (i.e., a lag of the dependent variable). Accounting for how active participants were before being exposed to political discussion allows for a more conservative estimate of the relationship between discussion and participation. In addition, as political discussion and participation are correlated (Table 2), the lagged dependent variable accounts for the participant's a priori predilection to initiate such conversations with his or her randomly assigned roommate and housemates.

Participants included in the analysis resided in 18 dormitories. Fixed effects for each dormitory with a large number of participants (at least 5% of participants,  $N = 12$  dorms) are included in the analysis ( $D_{t,i}$ ). This excludes 6 dormitories with 16 or fewer residents who participated in the study. To account for cases where both roommates in a dormitory room participated in the study (16.0%,  $N = 171$ ), a variable indicating whether both roommates participated in the study is also included in each analysis ( $B_{t,i}$ ). Including a lag of the dependent variable in the analysis, in tandem with random assignment of study participants, makes other control variables unnecessary. Standard errors are clustered by dormitory house ( $N = 100$ ) in all analyses to account for the possibility of common influence of house environment.

To test whether the initial increase in political participation via political discussion is a mechanism by which the positive relationship between discussion and participation lasts into the future, measures of participation gathered during and after the time of exposure to discussion are added to the regression analysis:

$$P_{t+2,i} = R_{t+1,i} + H_{t+1,i} + P_{t,i} + D_{t,i} + B_{t,i} + P_{t+1,i} \quad (2.1)$$

$$P_{t+3,i} = R_{t+1,i} + H_{t+1,i} + P_{t,i} + D_{t,i} + B_{t,i} + P_{t+1,i} + P_{t+2,i} \quad (3.1)$$

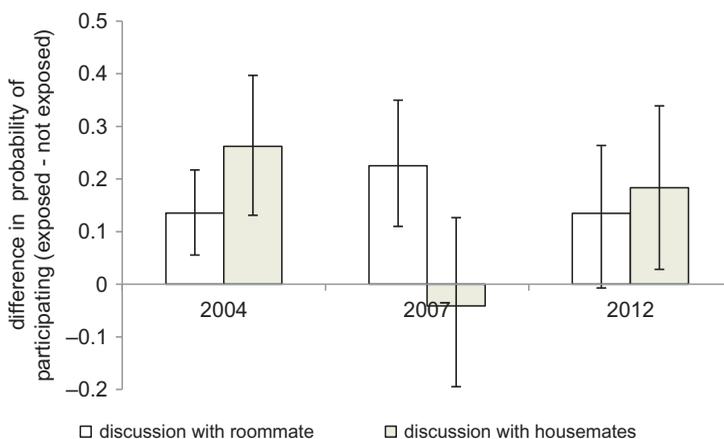
If adding these variables reduces the magnitude and statistical significance of  $R_{t+1,i}$  and  $H_{t+1,i}$ , past participation accounts for the variance in political participation in the future that was originally accounted for by political discussions that took place years prior.

All analyses were conducted using Stata/MP (version 11.2; [www.stata.com](http://www.stata.com)). As logit coefficients are not readily interpretable, their substantive meaning was assessed using Clarify, a Stata procedure that can be used to estimate the predicted probability of participating in a political activity based on the parameters of the regression model (King, Tomz, & Wittenberg, 2000; Tomz, Wittenberg, & King, 2003). Predicted probabilities were generated by varying the value of political discussion while holding all other variables in the model at their means. The predicted probabilities are presented as bar charts (Figures 1, 2, and 3). The bars in each figure represent the difference in the predicted probability of participating between participants who were exposed to the maximum and minimum levels of political discussion. The full results of the logit models are presented in the supplemental material.

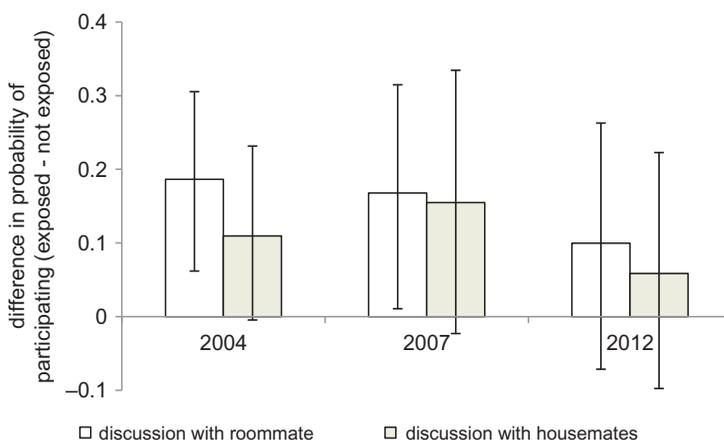
## Results

The white bars in Figure 1 indicate that individuals who engaged in political dialogue with their randomly assigned roommates were more likely to participate in partisan organizations over the entire span of the panel study, though the relationship is only a strong trend in 2012 ( $p = .06$ ). The confidence intervals for these predicted probabilities overlap, indicating that the magnitude of the effect of exposure to political discussion by one's roommate on participation in partisan organizations is constant across the study period. A looser interpretation of these results indicates a trend of increased magnitude in the relationship between 2004 and 2007, and decline between 2007 and 2012.

The shaded bars in Figure 1 show that the relationship between exposure to political dialogue on the house level and participation in partisan organizations is positive and statistically significant during the time of exposure in 2004, and again in 2012. No statistically significant effect of housemate discussion was detected in 2007.



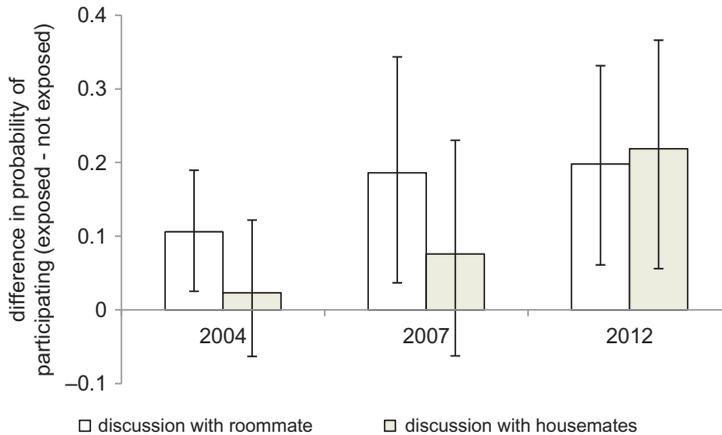
**Figure 1.** Relationship between exposure to political discussion and participation in partisan organizations. Bars represent the difference in the predicted probability of participating between study participants who were exposed to the maximum and minimum levels of political discussion (i.e., first differences). Vertical lines indicate the 95% confidence interval for each predicted difference.



**Figure 2.** Relationship between exposure to political discussion and participation in organizations that take political stands. Bars represent the difference in the predicted probability of participating between study participants who were exposed to the maximum and minimum levels of political discussion (i.e., first differences). Vertical lines indicate the 95% confidence interval for each predicted difference.

As with the results for roommate discussion, the confidence intervals for the predicted probability estimates indicate that the magnitude of the effect of exposure to political discussion by one's housemates on participation in partisan organizations is constant across the study period. A looser interpretation of these results indicates a trend of an overall decline in the magnitude of the relationship between 2004 and 2012.

The white bars in Figure 2 indicate that political discussion with one's roommate is associated with more frequent participation in organizations that take stands on political issues across the entire eight-year span on the study. This relationship, however, was not statistically significant in 2012. As in Figure 1, overlapping confidence intervals indicate



**Figure 3.** Relationship between exposure to political discussion and contacting elected officials. Bars represent the difference in the predicted probability of participating between study participants who were exposed to the maximum and minimum levels of political discussion (i.e., first differences). Vertical lines indicate the 95% confidence interval for each predicted difference.

that the magnitude of the effect of exposure to political discussion by one's roommate on participation in organizations that take stands is relatively constant across the study period. A looser interpretation of these results suggests a trend of a decline in the magnitude of this relationship over the eight-year span of the panel study. In contrast to these results, the shaded bars in Figure 2 show no systematic relationship between exposure to political dialogue from housemates and participation in organizations that take stands, though a trend indicates a positive relationship between the two in 2004 ( $p = .06$ ).

The white bars in Figure 3 indicate that the relationship between discussion with one's roommate and contacting elected officials is positive and statistically significant across the entire study period. While the confidence intervals around these estimates overlap, the data suggest a trend whereby the magnitude of this relationship increases over time. The shaded bars in Figure 3 suggest a similar interpretation for exposure to political discussion by housemates, though the only time this relationship is statistically significant is in the final year of the study.

A figure is not presented for voter turnout because no systematic relationship between exposure to political discussion and turnout was detected, save a predicted 16 percentage point increase in turnout in the 2006 election due to exposure to political dialogue with one's roommate.

Table 3 tests whether the initial increase in political participation associated with political discussion is a mechanism whereby the relationship between discussion and participation lasts into the future. As discussed in the Data and Methods section, this test was conducted by adding measures of participation gathered during and after the time of exposure to political discussion to the regression analyses presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3. Adding these measures to the analysis should decrease the size and statistical significance of the political discussion coefficients. Only cases where the relationship between discussion and participation were significant in Figures 1, 2, and 3 are included in this analysis.

The first column of Table 3 shows the results for the positive relationship between political discussion between roommates in 2004 and participation in partisan groups in 2007

**Table 3**  
 Test for whether the prior influence of discussion on participation accounts for the positive relationship between discussion and participation in the future

	Partisan groups			Groups that take stands			Contacting		
	2007	2012	2007	2007	2012	2007	2007	2012	2012
Political discussion with roommate in 2004	.47*** (.13)	.20^ (.11)	.08 (.13)	.25* (.11)	.17 (.13)	.30* (.13)	.20 (.13)	.29** (.10)	.09 (.16)
Political discussion with housemates in 2004	-.09 (.18)	.28* (.12)	.07 (.15)	.22^ (.13)	.13 (.15)	.13 (.12)	.15 (.11)	.33** (.13)	.31 (.20)
2003 participation (before exposure to discussion)	1.60*** (.28)	.50^ (.26)	.30 (.39)	1.56*** (.24)	1.28*** (.25)	.74*** (.20)	.56** (.22)	.25 (.19)	.15 (.29)
2004 participation (during exposure to discussion)	—	—	.33 (.36)	—	1.52*** (.31)	—	1.28*** (.22)	—	.49 (.46)
2007 participation (3 years after exposure to discussion)	—	—	1.17*** (.33)	—	—	—	—	—	1.69*** (.32)
$\chi^2$	102.90***	120.41***	40.77***	107.18***	133.74***	59.70***	90.67***	62.07***	90.81***
Pseudo $R^2$	.14	.20	.05	.13	.18	.07	.10	.05	.16
N	522	517	489	427	422	523	507	491	311

Notes. Model type: Logistic regression. Cases with missing data were omitted using listwise deletion. Coefficients for intercepts and additional control variables are not included in the table (see online supplemental material).

^  $p \leq .10$ . \*  $p \leq .05$ . \*\*  $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (robust standard errors in parentheses).

(depicted visually by the middle white bar in Figure 1). The model in the second column adds an indicator of whether respondents participated in partisan groups in 2004 while they were living in their randomly assigned dormitory. As predicted, adding this variable to the model decreases the magnitude of the *Political discussion with roommate in 2004* regression coefficient. This indicates that the initial boost in partisan participation in 2004 study participants experienced due to exposure to political discussion in 2004 helps explain the persistence of the effect into 2007. The third and fourth columns of Table 3 show that positive relationships between discussion among roommates and housemates in 2004 and participation in partisan groups in 2012 can be accounted for fully with previous participation in these types of organizations. The remainder of the table shows that the same can be said for the effect of exposure to political discussion on participation in organizations that take stands and on contacting elected officials.

## Discussion

The influence of social context on political participation is often overlooked. Instead, research on this behavior focuses on individual-level demographics such as socioeconomic status and strength of political preferences. This bias in the literature is due to analytical biases that make it difficult to show evidence of social influence. It is also unclear how long the relationship between discussion and participation lasts, which brings into question how meaningful this form of social influence actually is. To address these questions, here data were presented from a panel survey conducted on individuals who were randomly assigned to their college dormitories. This research design—random assignment to social context and measurement of behavior over time—allows for more accurate estimation of the relationship between discussion and participation.

The main findings of this study are summarized in Table 4. They support the three predictions: (a) There is a positive relationship between political discussion and political participation. Significant increases in the likelihood of participation due to exposure to discussion ranged between 10 and 20 percentage points. Strikingly, this is the case even after

**Table 4**

Summary of results (difference in the predicted probability of participating between study participants who were exposed to the maximum and minimum levels of political discussion)

	Discussion with roommate			Discussion with housemates		
	2004	2007	2012	2004	2007	2012
Mode of political participation						
Partisan groups	.14***	.23***	.13 <sup>^</sup>	.26***	n.s.	.18*
Groups that take stands	.19**	.17*	n.s.	.11 <sup>^</sup>	n.s.	n.s.
Contacting	.11**	.19*	.20**	n.s.	n.s.	.22**

*Notes.* Results based on Figures 1, 2, and 3 (supplemental tables S1, S2, and S3). In addition, voter turnout increased by an estimated 16 percentage points in the 2006 election due to exposure to political dialogue with one's roommate. No significant effects on turnout were detected for 2008, 2010, or 2012.

<sup>^</sup> $p = .06$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$  (n.s. indicates a statistically insignificant relationship).

controlling for how politically active study participants were before they were exposed to political discussion in their randomly assigned dormitory. (b) Discussion within the more socially intimate roommate dyad had a more consistent relationship over time with political participation than discussion in the wider dormitory social network. Of the 13 tests for a relationship between discussion and participation, a significant result was found 8 times for roommate discussion (9 if a  $p = .06$  result is also included) compared to only 3 times for housemate discussion (4 if a  $p = .06$  result is also included). (c) The positive relationship between discussion and participation lasts for many years, and the data suggest that a mechanism behind this long-term relationship is the immediate influence of discussion on participation. More specifically, as political participation is habitual, the initial bump in participation after exposure to political dialogue placed the discussant on a trajectory of higher rates of participation over time compared to those who were not exposed.

Beyond validating the predictions, the data also suggest how the influence of political discussion on political participation varies based on the particular activity in question. For example, compared to the other activities that were examined, the influence of discussion on voter turnout was minimal. As in representative samples of adults (Verba et al., 1995), voting was the activity that panel members participated in the most (Table 1). To wit, voting occurred among those who were and were not exposed to political discussion. The lack of variation in voter turnout could also be due to over-reporting of this socially desirable behavior.

For participation in groups that take political stands a trend suggests that the influence of discussion decayed once the discussant left college. This could be due to the decline in this form of participation after college (Table 1), perhaps due to the end of easy access to these types of organizations that exist on a college campus. A trend suggests that the influence of discussion on participation in party organizations also declined after college. In contrast, its influence on contacting elected officials increased over time. Consequently, exposure to political discussion might have more lasting influence on inspiring people to articulate their preferences directly to elected officials instead of indirectly by influencing elections through political parties. This inference comports with prior results showing that the generational cohort of the participants in this study is typically put off by traditional party politics. Instead, their acts of civic expression are more often motivated by community-level concerns (Klofstad, 2011; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Carpini, 2006).

While the results presented here are some of the most precise estimates of the relationship between political discussion and political participation available, a panel study where members were randomly assigned to different social settings is not a fully controlled experiment. Importantly, while study participants were assigned randomly to their dormitories, the amount of political discussion they were exposed to was not controlled. Consequently, the validity of these results needs to be tested in other contexts, ideally with other natural occurrences of random assignment to social conditions (e.g., other universities, office cubicles, prisons, army barracks, and the like), and controlled experiments.

In this same vein, the sample of college-educated individuals examined here is not fully representative of the wider public. However, as education and political participation are highly correlated (Henderson & Chatfield, 2011; Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; Verba et al., 1995), the results presented here represent the influence that political discussion has on individuals who are likely to be politically active (i.e., those with a college education). Likewise, as discussed in the Data and Methods section, adolescents and young adults are more likely to be influenced by their peers than full-fledged adults. Given that I have found an effect of political discussion in this “most likely” case (Gerring, 2001), it makes sense

to dedicate resources to searching for it in other cases. This said, while it is reasonable to expect that political experiences in adolescence and early adulthood have a large influence on attitudes and behavior later in life (Bartels & Jackman, 2014; Beck & Jennings, 1991; Carpini, 1989; Jennings & Niemi, 1981; Mannheim, 1952; Newcomb et al., 1967), the magnitude of the effect of political discussion on political participation documented here could be inflated because this study population was perhaps more susceptible to social influence. Studies of subjects who are more representative of the wider public are necessary to test this proposition.

The need for further research aside, the results presented here highlight the importance of considering both individual- and social-level influences on political participation. Exclusion of either yields an incomplete understanding of participatory democracy. The results also demonstrate that seemingly inconsequential interpersonal communications can influence human behavior years into the future. This study also illustrates the utility of studying social influence by leveraging natural instances of random assignment to different social conditions.

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### Supplemental Material

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the publisher's web site at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2014.944322>.

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## Appendix

### *Cooperation Rates*

For all participants included in the panel study ( $N = 6,574$ ) American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Cooperation Rate 2 (COOP2) rates, which are calculated as the sum of fully and partially completed questionnaires divided by the total number of participants who were contacted (AAPOR, 2009), were as follows:

- Wave 1 (October–December 2003): 57.5% ( $N = 3,267$  fully completed,  $N = 513$  partially completed)
- Wave 2 (March–April 2004): 37.4% ( $N = 2,079$  fully completed,  $N = 378$  partially completed)
- Wave 3 (April–May 2007): 30.4% ( $N = 1,791$  fully completed,  $N = 210$  partially completed)
- Wave 4 (November–December 2012): 10.7% ( $N = 678$  fully completed,  $N = 27$  partially completed)

As detailed in the Data and Methods section of this article, to incorporate random assignment to dormitory in the analysis  $N = 5,506$  study participants were excluded, leaving  $N = 1,068$  participants included. Of the participants included in the analysis, AAPOR COOP2 rates were as follows:

- Wave 1 (2003): 100% ( $N = 1,023$  fully completed,  $N = 45$  partially completed)
- Wave 2 (2004): 100% ( $N = 918$  fully completed,  $N = 150$  partially completed)
- Wave 3 (2007): 56.7% ( $N = 565$  fully completed,  $N = 41$  partially completed)
- Wave 4 (2012): 50.6% ( $N = 516$  fully completed,  $N = 24$  partially completed)

### *Non-response Analysis*

Of study participants who were included in the analysis ( $N = 1,068$ ), data were available on ACT college entrance exam score (available for 92.8% of participants,  $N = 922$ ) and high school rank (available for 92.8% of participants,  $N = 922$ ). Respondents were more likely to have a higher ACT score and a higher class rank than non-respondents (Table A1). As educational attainment and political participation are highly correlated (Verba et al., 1995), respondents to the panel surveys may be more predisposed to be politically active than non-respondents. However, while these differences are statistically significant, they are not substantively large.

**Table A1**  
 Comparison of respondents and non-respondents across panel study  
 among participants included in analysis

	Respondents	Non-respondents
Wave 3 (2007)		
ACT score	28.6	27.4
High school rank	92.0	90.8
Wave 4 (2012)		
ACT score	28.5	27.7
High school rank	92.1	90.8

*Notes.* All differences are significant at  $p \leq .01$ . Cases with missing data were omitted using listwise deletion.