

minimally invasive approach provided a “chance to pass legislation, though also limited the kind of legislation they could pass” (p. 237).

Despite differences in the scope of these two books, both include a penultimate chapter discussing the specific provisions included in the ACA. Jacobs and Skocpol focus their description on the benefits directed at different demographic groups, as well as at society as a whole. They conclude that the ACA “amounts to a very good deal for the great majority of Americans and for the country as a whole” (p. 146.). In contrast, Starr organizes his overview as an analysis of the public philosophy revealed by the specific provisions adopted (i.e., notions of fairness, responsibility, freedom, and federal responsibility). Despite these distinct approaches to cataloging the provisions in the ACA, both make similar points, and it is quite evident that they are describing the same piece of legislation. Together these two chapters provide an excellent primer for anyone wishing to understand the content of the ACA.

Both books conclude with a chapter speculating on the future prospects for the ACA. Jacobs and Skocpol adopt a more optimistic forecast, which may be explained by their earlier publication date—since the year between the two books’ publication was characterized by a much higher level of resistance to, and persistent criticism of, the ACA than initially anticipated. Starr emphasizes that despite the belief among many of the law’s supporters that the “normal process of implementing the Affordable Care Act would strengthen it politically” (p. 269), the intended and unintended delays in implementation now seem more likely to result in confusion and uncertainty than in broad political acceptance and support.

In addition, both books emphasize the complexity of the ACA’s policy design—making clear that a “minimally invasive reform” approach typically relies on policy tools that are tricky to implement and oversee. Most notably, much of the policymaking authority was devolved to state governments and federal agencies—providing new policy venues for policy losers (particularly those represented by powerful interest groups) to work to roll back provisions that harm them. The degree to which industry groups are successful in this lobbying effort is likely to impact the success of the ACA, particularly its ability to constrain growing health-care costs.

Finally, both books address efforts to repeal the ACA. From the vantage point of summer 2010, Jacobs and Skocpol (correctly) viewed the constitutional challenges posed by state government as unlikely to overturn the law (p. 154). And both books emphasize the consequences of the 2012 Presidential and Congressional elections, noting how a “swing in power to the Republicans could therefore bring about a complete turnabout in national health policy” (*Remedy and Reaction*, p. 279). Further emphasizing the high stakes of political developments in the next few months and years, Starr relayed concerns among many of

those involved in passing the ACA that this would be the country’s last chance since “as health costs raise, the chance of ever passing a universal program again may slip away” (p. 281).

Civic Talk: Peers, Politics, and the Future of

Democracy. By Casey A. Klofstad. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010. 200p. \$26.95.
doi:10.1017/S153759271200223X

—William A. Gamson, *Boston College*

Those who frequently talk about politics and current events in their social conversations are more likely to be engaged in various forms of civic and political life than those who rarely have private conversations about politics. This book explores the tricky question of whether it is, in some sense, *because* of this private peer talk that their civic engagement is stimulated. After all, it is plausible to argue that whatever personal and group factors ultimately determine civic engagement influence both public action and personal reading and social conversations. The existence of a correlation is far from establishing a causal link.

Civic Talk presents some suggestive data that peer conversations interact with personal inclinations and situational factors in ways that contribute to increased civic engagement for some people, sometimes. The author readily acknowledges that the book leaves many unanswered questions, but it does provide a thoughtful review of the complex processes and mechanisms involved in increasing civic engagement.

The discussion is grounded in a data set about private conversations and different forms of civic engagement. The sample is that portion of the entering class at the University of Wisconsin in the academic year 2003–4 who were living in university housing. The appeal of this sample is the random assignment of roommates, allowing a comparison of those who reportedly engage in political conversations with their freshmen roommates and those who do not. About a quarter of the students participated in filling out questionnaires at the beginning and end of their first year and again in the second half of their (presumptive) senior year in 2007–8. Those who talked politics with their freshman roommates are compared on their subsequent actions of participating in service groups and/or in more overtly political groups. To get a bit more direct data on the mechanisms involved, the author also ran four focus groups in April 2008, with eight participants in each.

I can readily understand the author’s desire to run the focus groups because there is a thinness in the questionnaire data that gives one the feeling of seeing things from a distance and at second hand. Rather than actual conversations, we have reports about conversations and we really have little idea of the substance of such conversations. Those who did not talk politics with their randomly

assigned roommate may well have found other peers with whom they did talk.

Within the acknowledged limits, however, it does appear that for some people who are predisposed and presented with opportunities for extending their civic engagement, having a roommate with whom one talks politics does contribute to and facilitate the process. But it seems to do this to a greater degree for participation in nonprofit service activities than for more overtly political engagement. To quote Casey Klofstad (p. 45), “While civic talk has a significant effect on participation in voluntary civic organizations, the results . . . show that such conversations have a less reliable influence over whether a person participates in political activities.”

It is fortuitous that the final wave of data collection took place in the spring of 2008. When one thinks back on the atmosphere in Madison during the presidential primary season of that year, there was a compelling contest among such Democratic candidates as Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and John Edwards, as well as a less dramatic Republican primary contest. Wisconsin was a battleground state. To expect to find any direct connection between the involvement of those students in political campaigns that were mobilizing large numbers of the normally passive and their political conversations with freshman roommates seems far-fetched. Obviously, there is a long process of engagement, with many factors operating to activate and sustain the readiness to become involved when the opportunity arises.

The strength of this book, then, is not in “proving” that having a freshman roommate with whom one could talk politics does or does not “cause” political engagement. It is found, rather, in its thoughtful discussions and detailed exploration of the ways in which private conversations spill over into a broader process of developing civic engagement—interacting with a variety of individual predispositions and, to a lesser extent, more collective experiences.

It would have been intriguing—albeit difficult to implement—to compare autobiographical accounts of the civic careers of different patterns of engagement among selected participants. What was the career path of those who first turned to service organizations and later to more political ones? Do they remember any conversations that were especially significant? How did they become involved in networks of those already engaged and did this process begin with private, social conversations? Did they experience a civic awakening or was the process more gradual without critical moments?

While this is a book for an academic audience, it is written in an accessible manner. If one wanted to explore, in a graduate seminar, the broader process of becoming a political activist and sustaining such activity, this is a helpful discussion for teasing out the role of conversations in the process. If we cannot randomly assign people to peer

groups and experimentally remove the selection factor, we can do a lot more to capture their own insights and learn more about the kind of conversational content that stimulates engagement and that which represses it.

One might find some of the answers in the large social-movement literature on *collective action frames*. Charlotte Ryan (*Prime Time Activism*, 1991), for example, distinguishes an injustice, an agency, and an identity component. One might hypothesize that private conversations often contribute in important ways to the creation of a sense of injustice, creating a collective “we” opposed to some “they,” and a sense of collective empowerment that “we” can do something about it through collective action. By demonstrating what it is in private conversations that builds the different components of collective action frames, one could further the quest for understanding their role in promoting civic engagement.

At This Defining Moment: Barack Obama’s Presidential Candidacy and the New Politics of Race. By Enid Logan. New York: New York University Press, 2011. 229p. \$79.00 cloth, \$23.00 paper.

Obama’s Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America. By Michael Tesler and David O. Sears. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010. 208p. \$54.00 cloth, \$18.00 paper.
doi:10.1017/S1537592712002241

— Antoine J. Banks, *University of Maryland*

In 2008, Americans witnessed a historical moment. Barack Obama, an African American, was elected the forty-fourth president of the United States of America. With a black president, the argument went, we have truly entered a new “postracial” era, in which the color of one’s skin is no longer an impediment to one’s opportunities or success in life. Obama’s campaign strategy to de-emphasize race also reinforced this notion of a colorblind America. His race-neutral approach proved successful across the board in the general election, garnering a majority of the Latino and black vote and a larger share of the white vote than previous Democratic candidates, such as John Kerry, Al Gore, and Michael Dukakis. Pundits and social scientists asserted that this wide level of support was proof that race no longer mattered in electoral politics. But both books under review convincingly and impressively declare otherwise; they find that race played a substantial role in the 2008 presidential election and perhaps more than at any time in the past 20 years.

Enid Logan’s central argument is that race was an important factor in the 2008 presidential campaign, but its role deviated from our traditional notion of the way that black candidates influence the electorate. Obama did not offer a race-conscious agenda, such as proposing policies that would directly alleviate the inequalities between blacks and whites. His race-neutral approach resonated with many

Book Reviews

Civic Talk: Peers, Politics and the Future of Democracy, by Casey A. Klofstad. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011. 184 pp. \$59.50 hardback and e-book.

Reviewed by MOLLY W. ANDOLINA

In his carefully constructed study of political conversations, Casey Klofstad provides compelling evidence for the impact of civic talk on the participatory habits of today's young adults. *Civic Talk: Peers, Politics and the Future of Democracy* is a well-documented portrait of how our social network can pull us into voluntary civic life and even get us to the polls on election day. The book fills a gap in the literature on political communication and reinvigorates the importance of peers as key socializers in political life.

Klofstad's key strength lies in his synthesis of two somewhat diverse research orientations. The first, drawing from political science, focuses on individual-level antecedents and influences on political action. The second, more clearly situated in the field of political communication, documents the relationship between political behavior and one's social network. By incorporating these two elements (the individual and his or her social environment), Klofstad attempts to address weaknesses in each area of study, although he is clearly tackling more issues in the latter than the former.

Indeed, Klofstad's most significant contribution is the way in which he addresses a long-standing issue in political communication. Specifically, while communication scholars have illustrated the connection between individuals' political talk and their political activism, they have been unable to establish that civic talk actually leads to civic action. The relationship between the two phenomena could run in the reverse, a result of the fact that individuals who are politically active seek out political conversations. Or it could be selectivity bias (people pick their friends because they want to talk politics with them), or it could be some unmeasured influence that is affecting both variables (endogeneity bias).

Here, Klofstad uses a unique data set that incorporates both a longitudinal design and an element of random assignment to provide causal evidence that "civic talk encourages individuals to participate in civic activities" (p. 30), albeit with several important caveats. The data come from the Collegiate Social Network Interaction Project (C-SNIP) at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, which surveyed incoming first-year residential students in the 2003–2004 school year. Students answered questions about their political and civic activities and orientations, as well as the conversations they had with their roommates at three separate time points: initially upon matriculation, at the end of their first year, and then again in the spring of their fourth (and, for most students, last) year of college. This panel design, along with the fact that the university randomly assigns roommates, allows

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Klofstad to address shortcomings from previous studies. He supplements the quantitative data with four focus groups of first-year students conducted in the 2007–2008 school year.

Klofstad evaluates the impact of civic talk (discussing politics and current events with one's roommate) on three different categories of civic action: participation in voluntary civic organizations; "political" activities such as contacting government officials, protesting, or working for a political campaign; and a single measure of voting. One concern with the study is that these categorical divisions seem out of line with other studies of political behavior. The first one focuses on organizational participation, but the breadth of possible activities stretches from charitable volunteering to debate clubs to working with partisan political organizations such as College Republicans and Democrats. Missing from the second category (and the survey itself) are political activities such as wearing campaign buttons, boycotting and buycotting, and signing petitions. While Klofstad offers a theoretical explanation for these groupings, he does not provide empirical support either for the clustering of the measures (via factor analysis, for example) or the scales that they comprise (alpha scores).

Such concerns aside, Klofstad's analysis indicates that civic talk positively influences students' involvement in voluntary civic organizations (talkers are 38% more likely to get involved than those who did not engage in civic conversations) and their voting habits (an increase of 7%). Interestingly, despite the focus on "politics and current events" in the civic talk variable, there is no evidence that such talk actually influences political behavior. Building on the framework of Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995), Klofstad shows that civic talk is influential because it provides students with resources (information), puts them in positions to be recruited to activities, and, to a lesser extent, increases their interest and efficacy. There is also evidence that students are somewhat affected by perceptions of their peers' norms for participation. The impact of civic talk on participation in voluntary organizations lasts throughout students' time in college, in large part because students who become active in their first year develop a habit of participating that continues over time.

Klofstad recognizes that not all students arrive at college equally primed for participation. Some have had experience during high school; others grew up in homes with parents who were interested and involved in civic life; and some already have strong political preferences. The longitudinal research design allows Klofstad to take all of these factors into account, along with the impact of gender, students' prior efficacy and interest in politics, their ideological orientations, their political knowledge, and their parents' levels of education. In so doing, Klofstad enters the debate between social psychologists, who see civic talk as narrowing the gaps between those less likely to participate and those more inclined to do so, and political scientists, who argue that civic talk actually increases participatory gaps. He sides with the political scientists, arguing that "only those of us who are predisposed to be civically active reap the benefits of engaging in civic talk" (p. 89).

Because Klofstad is interested in addressing the causal relationship between civic talk and civic action, he focuses his analysis on the impact of the randomly assigned roommate. While the key variable ("When you talk with your roommate, how often do you discuss politics and current events?") provides an absolute measure of the amount of civic talk that occurs among roommates (which is low), it does not establish *who* is initiating these conversations. It would have been helpful to ask a follow-up question to determine who was the impetus for such discussions.

In asking students about roommates, however, Klofstad discovers that the greatest influences come from individuals whom we trust, with whom we are similar (both generally and politically), and who we see as experts on politics or current events. This suggests that the real impact on students may be their broader circle of peers and that, unlike the

roommate effect, this influence might extend to political ideas and ideologies (not just actions). By establishing this causal influence among randomly assigned acquaintances, Klofstad has laid the groundwork for future studies, which could extend his framework to include controls for curricular influences, the broader peer group (and their participatory norms), and the overall college environment, while continuing his synthesis of individual-level and social-level phenomena in the study of civic action.

Overall, this book contributes to two distinct but overlapping literatures. The detailed analysis of political conversations addresses a causal question that has stumped a field burgeoning with rich, thoughtful studies. And the emphasis on the role of peers as a socializing influence within the college environment adds a much needed element to our understanding of civic engagement in higher education. Both traditions are enhanced by Klofstad's contribution.

Reference

Verba, S., Schlozman, K.L., & Brady, H. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Niche News: The Politics of News Choice, by Natalie Jomini Stroud. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2011. 272 pp. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewed by KEVIN ARCENEUX

Over the past decade, Americans have witnessed seismic shifts in the structure of the news media. Cable and satellite television now reaches into more than 90% of households in the United States, and the average household has well over 100 channels from which to choose, including a number of 24-hour cable news channels. What's more, the rise of choice has been coupled with the fragmentation of political news media and the weakening of 20th-century standards for journalistic balance. The 24-hour news programs on cable don't just report the news, they report the news from a particular viewpoint. The depth of partisan news media is even more impressive if we add in the plethora of ideologically oriented radio talk shows as well as Web sites, blogs, and news aggregator sites on the Internet. As a result, Americans have more opportunity to selectively expose themselves to like-minded partisan media than has been the case in generations. Whether Americans actually do so and whether it matters is the topic of Natalie Stroud's important and timely book, *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice*.

After the introduction, Stroud begins by building a strong case for the notion that we *should* observe individuals selectively exposing themselves to like-minded news sources (Chapter 2). She carefully walks the reader through a diverse set of psychological theories that explain why people would gravitate toward like-minded information. Whether it springs from a desire to reduce cognitive dissonance, fulfill a need for closure, aid in

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Social & Behavioral Sciences \ Political Science \ U.S. Politics

Klofstad, Casey A. **Civic talk: peers, politics, and the future of democracy.** Temple University, 2011. 184p bibl index afp; ISBN [9781439902721](#), \$59.50; ISBN [9781439902745 e-book](#), \$59.50. Reviewed in 2011aug CHOICE.

Klofstad (Univ. of Miami) has written an excellent work that transcends political science, political communication, and political sociology. The primary importance of the book is its focus on "civic talk," the most basic political behavior, in which conversation provides the basis for future civic action and political participation. Far too often, scholars focus on political behaviors, such as campaign and voter turnout, without considering that simple conversation among peers plays an important role in the nature and quality of those behaviors. Klofstad's data was collected from both surveys and focus groups consisting of randomly assigned college freshman roommates; he concludes that social and contextual factors play important roles in civic participation. The book is a good complement to Russell Dalton's *The Good Citizen* (2007). Klofstad is to be commended for his efforts to overcome analytical biases associated with the study of civic talk, as well as for his focus on young people, whose civic life and engagement are all too often ignored by the political process due to their lack of previous participation. **Summing Up:** Highly recommended. Upper-division undergraduate, graduate, and research collections. -- *T. S. Fine, University of Central Florida*

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factors. Formal institutional characteristics of the electoral system have less impact than characteristics of the party system that are separate from formal institutions. The analyses show that contextual effects are often indirect and interactive which is why they do not show up in single national election studies.

Hibbard, S. W. (2009). *Religious politics and secular states: Egypt, India, and the United States*, Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 306 pp., ISBN 978-0-8018-9669-9.

In the 1950s and 1960s the US, Egypt, and India were models of secular modernity. By the 1980s and 1990s conservative Islamists in Egypt, Hindu nationalists in India, and the Christian right in the US had become strong forces in the respective nations. The aim of this book is to explain why conservative renderings of religious tradition remain so influential in these secular societies. Scott Hibbard explains the surge of right-wing religious populism in these countries by emphasizing the role of religion as an essential part of the construction of collective identities and therefore as a basis for social solidarity and political mobilization. He argues that religion provides a moral framework for interpreting modern politics and articulating collective purpose. The normative and traditional elements of religion make it relevant to political life. Political elites use this and manipulate religion for political gain and in doing so these state actors undermine the secular consensus that existed since the end of the Second World War.

Klofstad, C. A. (2011). *Civic talk: Peers, politics, and the future of democracy*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 184 pp., ISBN 978-1-4399-0272-1.

Casey Klofstad set out to test his hypothesis that civic talk causes civic participation. This is an important hypothesis because civic participation is essential to the survival of democracy. It is not easy to test such a causal relationship, but Klofstad shows that our discussions about politics and current events with friends, colleagues, and relatives (“civic talk”) has a meaningful and lasting effect on the patterns of civic participation of individuals. He uses survey data and focus groups and the results of a real life experiment to support his theories. For this real life experiment he conducted a panel study among first year college students who had been randomly assigned to dormitory roommates. His study shows that civic talk varies under different circumstances and these discussions have long-term effects. Klofstad concludes that social context plays a central role in maintaining the strength of

democracy and theories of civic participation are incomplete if they exclude the social context and only focus on individual level variables.

Compiled by Connie de Boer

With thanks to Stefan Geiss who contributed the reviews of the books written in German.