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Gender and the Perception of Knowledge in Political Discussion

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Differences in knowledge about politics between men and women have the potential to affect political discussion. We examine differences in the perception of political knowledge between men and women and the effects these differences have on how often men and women talk about politics. We find both men and women perceive women to be less knowledgeable about politics and men to be more knowledgeable, regardless of the actual level of knowledge each discussion partner holds. This perceptual knowledge gap could have ramifications for discussion as political participation, since people turn to those they perceive to be experts to gather political information.

Keywords: *women and politics; public opinion; political participation*

Research on the gender gap in American politics has focused primarily on finding and explaining differences among men and women in vote choice, party identification, issue positions, and political participation (Burns 2002; Seltzer, Newman and Leighton 1997; Plutzer and Zipp 1996; Shapiro and Majahan 1986). Less explored are gender differences in other areas of mass political behavior, such as political discussion. Huckfeldt and various colleagues argue variation in political discussion patterns and topics helps to explain one's knowledge about, participation in, and interest in the greater political process (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). More importantly, political discussion and the level of disagreement in political discussion have important repercussions for the health of democratic government in the United States (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004; Cramer Walsh 2004; Mutz 2002).

Many theorists place primary importance on this need for substantive deliberation to take place before meaningful results, such as political equality, can be produced from democratic government (Fishkin 1992). As Mutz (2002, 122-23) argues, even when this deliberation occurs in the most simple, less-than-ideal form of exposure to viewpoints different from one's own, changes, such as a greater willingness to extend civil liberties to disliked groups, can occur. Particularly for a political minority, such as women, inclusion in and participation in the process of discussion could further this type of exposure to new viewpoints and could potentially have positive effects on democratic government. However, the extent to which women and men discuss politics together is limited (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Social identities, such as gender, shape the groups within which one talks about anything, including politics, and these identities instruct the information one extracts from the discussion, while further defining the ways in which this social identity is pertinent to the discussion (Cramer Walsh 2004). What this means for the interaction of gender and democratic citizenship is that the theoretical benefits of political discussion may not be realized within the reality of political discussion between the sexes. More understanding is needed about how men and women discuss (or do not discuss) politics with each other and the consequences of these patterns.

One important component in explaining the frequency of political discussion is one's body of knowledge about politics. As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, 6) note, "Political knowledge is . . . a critical and distinct facilitator of other aspects of good citizenship." Knowledge about politics can make the products of political discussion more fruitful for democratic citizens, because people attempt to choose

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experts with whom to confer and learn about politics (Huckfeldt 2001). However, recent evidence demonstrates a sizable "knowledge gap," or difference in objective political knowledge levels, between men and women (Mondak and Anderson 2004). This gap mirrors other gaps in political participation between men and women (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001) and is not entirely accounted for by survey measurement challenges (Mondak and Anderson 2004). With the important role that knowledge plays in political discussion, it is likely these differences between men and women's political knowledge can have important ramifications for discussion as a form of political participation for women and men.

To that end, in this article, we examine how women and men perceive the political knowledge levels of those with whom they discuss politics and the effects these perceptions have on the frequency of political discussion between men and women. We find that both men and women perceive women with whom they discuss politics to be less knowledgeable about politics, and men with whom they discuss politics to be more knowledgeable, regardless of the level of objective political knowledge held by the discussant. However, we find that this bias in perception does not cause women and men to talk about politics less frequently with each other. Because discussion continues while the perception of political knowledge is flawed, these differences have the potential to discount women's contributions to political conversation.

Gender and Political Discussion

In previous studies of political discussion between women and men, a consistent finding is that men and women do not talk about politics much with each other. Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995, 195) note that in their 1984 survey of South Bend residents' discussion, a "sexual segregation" exists in whom women and men choose as their partners in political discussion. They find that among spouses, 76 percent of women name their husband as a discussant, but only 55 percent of husbands name their wife as a discussant (p. 197). Among nonrelatives, this sexual segregation is more pronounced: eighty-four percent of men named only men as discussion partners, and 64 percent of women named only women as discussion partners (p. 195). Huckfeldt and Sprague demonstrate that this segregation, even between spouses (on whom they concentrate), has important consequences for the flow of political information. Primarily, husbands in their survey who named wives as discussion partners were less likely to believe their spouse followed politics and knew a lot about politics than wives who named a spouse, even when controlling for objective factors, such as the spouse's education level and age (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, 201).

More recent work supports the continued existence of sexual segregation in discussion. In a study of political discussion in Ireland, Miller, Wilford, and Donoghue (1999) find gender affects political discussion in additional ways. They find women are less inclined to discuss politics than men. Additionally, they find women believe they are less able to persuade and influence others' political opinions than men, even when they hold strong opinions about politics. Finally, they find women are more likely than men to stay out of a political argument, because they are more likely to feel the other person's political views will win out over their own. Similar to Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995), the authors find men are more likely to discuss politics with people outside of the family, while women are more likely to name family members and husbands as discussion partners. It is important to note that the history of gender relations in Ireland (such as the very recent changes to divorce laws) differs from those in the United States, which may make comparison between women and men across the two countries less fruitful. Nevertheless, some of the same conclusions as Huckfeldt and Sprague's earlier survey are evident, and as recently as the 1990s, Verba, Burns, and Schlozman (1997, 1056) report men were more likely to say they discussed politics, and that they enjoyed discussing politics, than women. This persistence of gender disparities in political discussion, similar to other disparities in political participation for women, is particularly intriguing, given changes in women's participation as political elites over time. Although a few studies find electoral context, particularly the presence of women candidates, creates a greater level of interest and engagement among women (Hansen 1997; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001), the overall conclusion from studies of women's political discussion is that it is segregated from and occurs less often than discussion for men.

The Role of Political Knowledge

Although these patterns in sexual segregation are stark, it remains unclear whether these patterns of discussion between men and women reflect difference or discrimination. With regard to difference, it may be that women are systematically different from men on the characteristics that are antecedents to

political discussion. Alternatively, sexual segregation in political discussion between women and men may reflect a systematic discounting of women's potential for political discussion. This distinction is important for two reasons. First, to the extent that discussion fuels democratic participation among citizenry, understanding why women and men do not talk about politics with each other could inform other debates about discussion, such as the extent to which private political discussion mirrors the ideal conditions for deliberative democracy (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002; Mutz 2002). Second, if sex segregation in discussion is the result of discrimination, this distinction could point us toward a possible remedy to sex segregation in discussion and its connection to women's political participation.

We argue the distinction between difference and discrimination in political discussion lies in two related characteristics that are antecedents to political discussion: discussant knowledge and perception of this knowledge. Discussant knowledge, part of political expertise, plays an important role in political discussion (Huckfeldt 2001). Simply, people talk politics more often with those they perceive to be political experts. Huckfeldt (2001) contends that when people judge who is an expert, they do so based on objective criteria, particularly one's knowledge about politics, his or her education, and his or her partisan extremity, and they do so without bias toward those with whom they do not share political opinions. Burns, Verba, and Schlozman (2001) also find one's education, from which knowledge would follow, to be the most important explanation for the gender gap in political participation. However, in their examination of 1984 survey data, Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) find male spouses discount their wives' "competence" and interest in politics, even when factors influencing this, such as education, are controlled.

This discounting of women's political knowledge may be an effect of perception, based on gender discrimination, or an effect of women's actual knowledge about politics. In their extensive study of Americans' knowledge of politics, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, 145-46) find women are less informed about politics than men, particularly in substantive issue areas. The one exception to this finding is that women are not significantly different from men in their knowledge of women's rights, such as the women's suffrage movement. They contend this difference in information is "consistent with a motivational basis," in that issues regarding women's rights are more salient to women than other political processes (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 146). This finding is supported by the work of Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001), who find women can supply less political information than men when asked about it in a survey and are less likely to be sensitive to political cues, meaning they are less likely to know where groups, like the American Association of Retired Persons, stand in policy debates. They link this difference in political information to women's lack of participation in politics compared to men and find that this gap in participation levels disappears when women's differences in knowledge, interest, and efficacy in politics, as well as available participation resources, are accounted for (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997).

There are two primary explanations for these differences in knowledge. Mondak (2001) argues that the use of "don't know" as a response in typical survey question batteries, including those used by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), systematically measures not only political knowledge but also a respondent's comfort with answering "don't know" to a question (Mondak 2001, 225). Women are more likely to answer "don't know," accounting for some of the disparity (they estimate up to 50 percent) between men's and women's political knowledge found in previous work (Mondak and Anderson 2004, 510). However, these differences are also the result of social role expectations, similar to those linked to the gender gap in issue opinions and political participation. Gender socialization has the effect of either telling women it is not important for them to know the information or making the information women have about politics not fit into the definition of what is traditionally political (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997; Sapiro 1983). Processes linked to gender role socialization (particularly in past generations), such as choice of occupation or civic involvement and educational attainment, also shape political participation and therefore the opportunities for women to accumulate knowledge about politics (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001).

Although our purpose here is not to explain why differences exist and persist in political knowledge among women and men, the fact that these differences do exist in political knowledge between men and women may be an explanation for why women and men do not talk about politics. If people seek out experts with whom to talk about politics, women's lesser political knowledge may make them less desirable discussion partners. However, it may be the case that judgments about women's levels of political knowledge are as important as the actual objective level of knowledge women

possess. Gender stereotypes exist for women and men candidates; for instance, people believe women candidates possess traits stereotypical of women or believe they will be more credible at handling "women's issues" (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Sanbonmatsu 2002). Within political participation, Verba, Burns, and Schlozman (1997, 1070) conclude that men appear to have more of a "taste for politics," because men's greater knowledge about and interest in politics does not disappear when other explanations for the disparity, such as resources, are accounted for. It could be the case that participation in political discussion follows from this belief that politics is inherently more "male" for whatever reason, leading discussion partners to make assumptions about their partners' political capabilities based on beliefs about that gender. For instance, they may believe that women know less about politics regardless of what they actually know.

Below, we test two relationships related to gender and political discussion to uncover the role political knowledge plays in fostering sex segregation in political discussion. We expect two relationships among political knowledge, discussion, and gender to emerge. First, we expect the perception of women's political knowledge in political discussion will be lower than the perception of the political knowledge of men discussion partners. We expect this relationship will exist in addition to any objective difference in the level of knowledge between women and men. Second, we expect this difference in the perception of women's political knowledge will lead respondents to discuss politics with women less frequently than they do with men, due to the importance of expertise in political discussion.

Data and Research Design

To examine these two questions, we use data from the 1996 Political Network Election Study.[1] This survey consists of two samples containing information about individual citizens as well as the people with whom they discuss politics. Both samples were gathered in three waves of data collection prior to and following the 1996 election season. In the first sample, that of main respondents, respondents were asked various questions about their political discussion habits. Within these discussion habits, the respondent named up to five people with whom he or she discussed politics, and then identified various characteristics of each of these discussion partners, such as whom the respondent thinks that discussion partner was going to vote for in the election. This main respondent could name up to five discussion partners, but did not have to do so; he or she could name anywhere from zero to five discussants. The main respondent also gave contact information for these discussants. Other relevant information, such as the main respondent's educational level and political party affiliation, was also collected.

The second sample contains information from the discussants named by the main respondents in the first sample. The discussants answered a battery of questions similar to those asked of the main respondents, such as their own vote choice. Upon completion of this second sample, the resulting information gives us two main views concerning discussion patterns. First, we have information about the main respondents' discussion network. That is, how large is their network, and whom does it contain? Second, we have information about a set of dyads, or pairs of main respondents and individual discussants. Here, we focus on the dynamics of the discussion dyads.

To address the first of the two relationships expected above, whether men and women perceive women's levels of political knowledge differently, we utilize the difference between the discussant's objectively measured political knowledge ("real" knowledge) and the main respondent's perception of the discussant's level of political knowledge ("perceived" knowledge) as our dependent variable.[2] We use this variable (real minus perceived) because it accounts for the possibility we wish to test, which is whether men and women perceive their discussion partners to have different levels of political knowledge. However, it does so by accounting for the actual level of knowledge of that particular discussant upon which the perception of knowledge is based. We measure the perception of knowledge using the question, "Generally, speaking, how much do you think (first name of discussant) knows about politics?" Following from Huckfeldt (2001) and the measurement recommendations of Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993, 1996), to measure objective knowledge, we use a three-question objective knowledge battery preceded by an introductory statement: (1) Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not? Is it the president, the Congress, or the Supreme Court? (2) Next, what are the first ten amendments in the Constitution called? (3) How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto? These three questions, although brief, include two of Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1993) five recommendations for questions that hold

Table 1
Composition of Dyads within Discussion Networks and Mean Levels of Objective Political Knowledge within Dyads

Type of Dyad	Percentage	Respondent Knowledge	Discussant Knowledge
Women main respondent–woman discussant	34.03	1.98	1.99
Woman main respondent–man discussant	22.71	1.94	2.47
Man main respondent–woman discussant	13.29	2.26	2.03
Man main respondent–man discussant	29.97	2.47	2.42

Table 2
Mean Levels of Objective Knowledge, Perceived Knowledge, and Frequency of Discussion by Gender

	Objective Knowledge			
Gender	Respondent	Discussant	Perceived Knowledge	Frequency of Discussion
Men	2.24	2.44	1.43	2.01
Women	2.06	2.00	1.22	1.85

Note: Objective political knowledge is scored 0 to 3. Perceived knowledge is main respondent's perception of discussant's knowledge, scored 0 to 2. Frequency of discussion is scored 0 to 3.

enough difficulty to adequately distinguish respondents' differences in knowledge levels by reducing reliability problems stemming from easy guessing. Although the additional question (the Bill of Rights question) was not recommended specifically by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993), it does possess the face validity they emphasize for choosing civics-based questions. This leads us to believe we have constructed a valid index for measuring objective knowledge.

For the second relationship we test, whether perception of political knowledge affects the frequency of political discussion, we use the main respondent's perception of the frequency of political discussion with that discussant as the dependent variable.[3] For the first relationship, we utilize ordinary least squares regression (OLS), since the dependent variable is continuous. For the second relationship, because the values of each dependent variable are ordinal responses (*a great deal*, *average amount*, and *not much*; and *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, and *often*, respectively) we utilize ordered logistic regression (Long 1997).

Both of the relationships we expect above require that we control for each of the four types of discussion dyad combinations possible between men and women: a man names a man as a discussant (man–man), a man names a woman as a discussant (man–woman), a woman names a man as a discussant (woman–man), and a woman names a woman as a discussant (woman–woman). Table 1 shows the percentage of dyads in each of these four categories in our sample. Table 1 also gives the mean level of objective political knowledge held by the respondent and discussant pairs in the four dyads, and Table 2 shows the overall objective knowledge, perceived knowledge, and frequency of discussion for men and women in the sample. Two things are of note in Tables 1 and 2. First, the sexual segregation in political discussion dyads mentioned above is clear, in that single-sex (woman–woman and man–man) dyads make up 64 percent of the sample, and mixed-sex dyads compose only 36 percent of the sample. Second, the knowledge gap evident in the research of Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996); Mondak and Anderson (2004); and Verba, Burns, and Schlozman (1997) also exists in our survey data. In each of the mixed-sex dyads, women's mean political knowledge is significantly less than men's ($p < .05$). Women's perceived knowledge is also less than men's in the overall sample, as is their frequency of discussion.

Within the models discussed below, we also control for other variables known from previous research to affect political discussion. These include other factors that contribute to the perception of political expertise in a discussant, such as discussant and respondent interest in politics, education level, partisan extremity, and age. We control for objective knowledge in Table 3, in that objective knowledge is a strongly significant predictor of perceptions about discussant expertise (Huckfeldt 2001).[4] We include a control for whether

the discussant pair is married, since this is common within man–woman and woman–man dyads. Finally, we control for the level of agreement, both perceived and objectively defined, due to the strong effects of disagreement in discussion (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001).

Perceptions of Political Knowledge

To address the first of the two research questions, we determine whether the difference between the level of objective political knowledge (real knowledge) and the perceived level of political knowledge (perceived knowledge) varies among each of the four types of gender dyads. Table 3 shows the results of the OLS regression of real minus perceived knowledge on the characteristics of the dyads.

As we expect, we find that the difference between real and perceived political knowledge varies significantly with the gender combination of the discussion dyad. The scale of the dependent variable (real minus perceived knowledge) is such that the negative end of the scale (–3.5) indicates the extreme position of a discussant who has no objective knowledge but is perceived to know a great deal. The positive end of the scale (3.3) indicates the extreme of a discussant who is perceived to know nothing but objectively answered every question correctly. In the results, the three positive coefficients for each of the dyads (man–man, man–woman, woman–woman; woman–man is the omitted base category) show that with each change in dyad combination, the pair is moving toward the positive end of the scale. That is, for a woman main respondent who chooses a man as a discussant (the omitted base category), the constant of –1.24 indicates there is more knowledge perceived than there is objectively for that discussant. Comparatively, when a man main respondent chooses a man as a discussant, the positive significant coefficient (0.21) moves them "up" the scale—the perception of knowledge is still more than the objective knowledge, but the gap between the two is smaller. For a woman main respondent who chooses a woman as a discussant, the larger positive coefficient (0.36) moves them even farther up the scale, toward the point where objective knowledge becomes larger than perceived knowledge. Finally, for the fourth category, a man main respondent who chooses a woman as a discussant, the positive significant coefficient (0.39) indicates they are the furthest up the scale. The women

Table 3
The Main Respondent's Difference in Knowledge Perception of Discussant by the Discussant's Interest, Education, and Partisan Extremity and by Other Factors

Factor	Coefficient
Objective discussant knowledge	0.93 (0.03)
Discussant interest[a]	–0.28 (0.04)
Discussant education[b]	–0.10 (0.03)
Discussant partisan extremity[c]	–0.04 (0.03)
Discussant age[d]	–0.01 (0.001)
Woman main respondent–woman discussant[e]	0.39 (0.07)
Man main respondent–woman discussant[f]	0.39 (0.08)
Man main respondent–man discussant[g]	0.24 (0.07)
Objectively defined main respondent knowledge	–0.01 (0.03)
Main respondent interest[a]	–0.06 (0.04)
Main respondent education[b]	–0.01 (0.03)
Main respondent partisan extremity[c]	0.03 (0.03)
Perceived agreement by main respondent[h]	–0.16 (0.06)
Objectively defined agreement[i]	–0.08 (0.06)
Political network name generator[j]	0.02 (0.05)
Main respondent age[d]	0.002 (0.001)
Spouse	0.10 (0.09)
Constant	–1.29 (0.18)
N	1,356
F/*df*/*p*	62/17/0.00
R^2	0.43
Root mean square error	0.92

Note: Regression model. Standard errors for coefficients and constant are shown in parentheses. Difference in knowledge perception is main respondent's perception of discussant's knowledge subtracted from discussant's objective knowledge, where main respondent's perception regarding how much the discussant knows about politics is 1 = *not much*, 2 = *average amount*, and 3 = *great deal*, and discussant's objectively defined knowledge is number of correct answers to knowledge battery (0–3).

a. Campaign interest: 0 = *not much interested*, 1 = *somewhat interested*, 2 = *very interested*.

b. Education: years of school based on self report (range is 6–10).

c. Partisan extremity: 1 = *independent or nonpartisan*, 2 = *independent leaning to a party*, 3 = *weak partisan*, 4 = *strong partisan*.

d. Age: number of years of age.

e. Woman main respondent–woman discussant: 1 if dyad is woman main respondent and woman discussant, 0 all others.

f. Man main respondent–woman discussant: 1 if dyad is man main respondent and woman discussant, 0 all others.

g. Man main respondent–man discussant: 1 if dyad is man main respondent and man discussant, 0 all others.

h. Perceived vote agreement by main respondent: 1 = respondent perceives discussant has same vote preference, 0 = absence of perceived agreement.

i. Objectively defined vote agreement: agreement regarding vote choice; 1 = agreement based on self-report, 0 = no agreement.

j. Political network name generator: 1 = respondent named discussant with whom they discuss politics, 0 = respondent named discussant with whom they discuss important matters.

discussants chosen here have more objective knowledge than they are perceived to have.

What these coefficients substantively mean is more easily seen in predicted values on the real-minus-perceived scale for each of the four dyads, holding all other variables constant at their means. For the two dyads with men as discussants (man–man and woman–man), the values on the knowledge scale are negative, –.02 for man–man and –.23 for woman–man. This indicates the main respondent (man or woman) perceives the men discussants to know more than they objectively do. On the other hand, for the two dyads with women as discussants (man–woman and woman–woman), the values on the knowledge scale are positive, .16 for man–woman and .13 for woman–woman. This indicates the main respondent (man or woman) perceives the women discussants know less than they objectively do. In short, both men and women main respondents underestimate what women discussants objectively know, and inflate what men discussants objectively know.

We feel these results are remarkable for two reasons. First, as we expected, men main respondents do perceive women discussants to be less knowledgeable than they really are. However, it is interesting that *women* main respondents perceive a woman discussant's political knowledge to be lower than it really is as well. Additionally, men discussants are perceived by both men and women to be more knowledgeable about politics than their objective knowledge score indicates—in fact, women inflate men's knowledge more than men do. Second, these relationships are interesting because they exist while accounting for the discussant's actual level of political knowledge within the variable. Women discussants may have lower objective levels of knowledge, as shown in Table 1, but this is not the only distinction; they are also perceived to have lower levels of knowledge relative to what they actually know.[5]

Perception of Knowledge and the Frequency of Political Discussion

Given these differences between gender dyads in the perception of political knowledge, we expect that both women and men main respondents will discuss politics less frequently with women and more frequently with men, since people choose to discuss politics with those they perceive to be politically knowledgeable (Huckfeldt 2001). Table 4 shows the ordered logistic regression of the main respondent's reported frequency of discussion on the dyad characteristics.

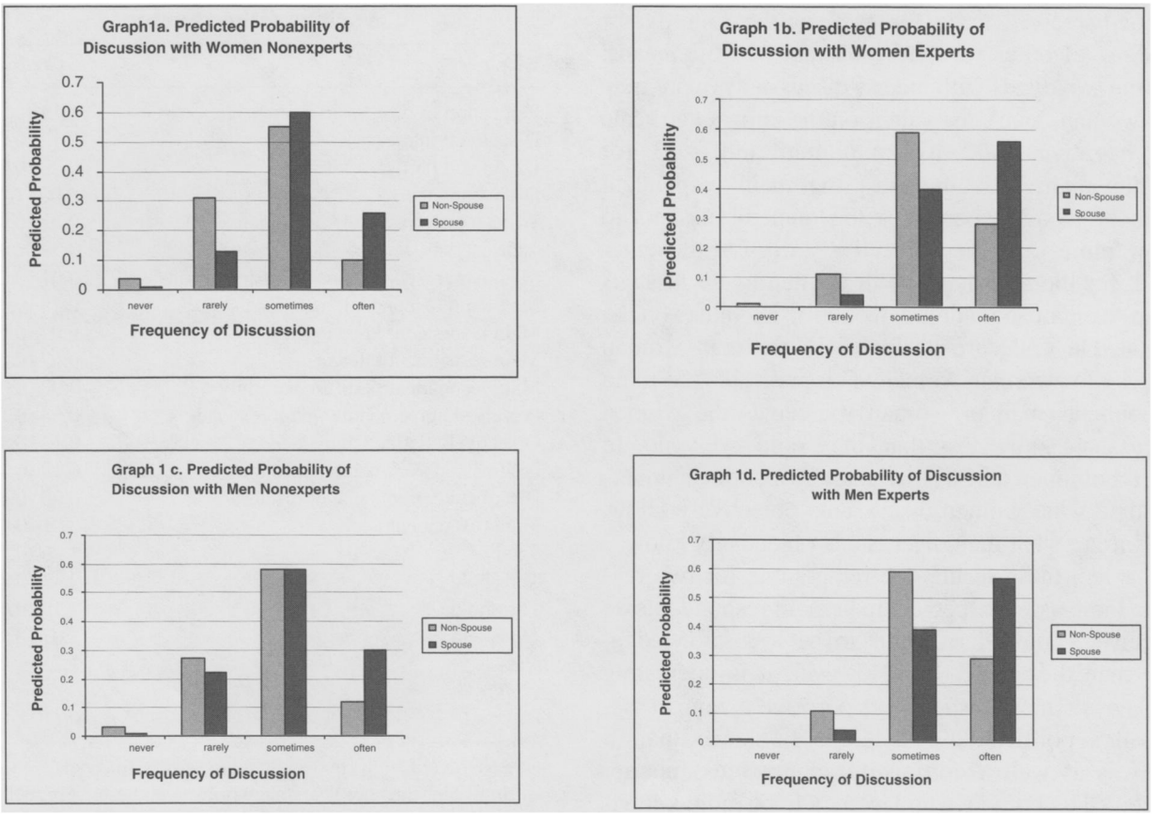
Table 4
The Main Respondent's Reported Frequency of Political Discussion with the Discussant by the Perceived Expertise of the Discussant and by Various Other Factors

Factor	Coefficient
Perception of discussant knowledge	1.13 (0.11)
Discussant interest	0.12 (0.09)
Discussant partisan extremity	–0.09 (0.06)
Discussant age	0.003 (0.004)
Woman main respondent–woman discussant	0.02 (0.17)
Man main respondent–woman discussant	–0.01 (0.20)
Man main respondent–man discussant	0.18 (0.17)
Main respondent knowledge	0.09 (0.06)
Main respondent interest	0.57 (0.09)
Main respondent partisan extremity	–0.02 (0.07)
Perceived agreement by main respondent	0.34 (0.14)
Objectively defined agreement	0.12 (0.14)
Political network name generator	0.18 (0.12)
Discussant's frequency of discussion	0.36 (0.10)
Main respondent age	–0.01 (0.004)
Spouse	1.26 (0.20)
Threshold (1)	–0.43 (0.43)
Threshold (2)	2.19 (0.41)
Threshold (3)	5.07 (0.44)
N	1,234
$\chi^2/df/p$	307/16/0.00
Pseudo R^2	0.11

Note: Ordered logit model. Standard errors for coefficients and cutting-point thresholds are shown in parentheses. Frequency of political discussion: 0 = *never*, 1 = *rarely*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often*. Discussant's frequency of discussion: mean frequency of political discussion reported by the discussant in his or her own network of association.

In Table 4, three important patterns emerge. First, there is no significant effect for any of the three types of gender dyads for which we control. Substantively, this means the participants in each dyad talk to each other about politics at statistically indiscernible rates from the other dyads. This discussion occurs despite the fact that both women and men see women as less "expert."[6] Second, men and women main respondents do not have a significantly higher level of discussion with men discussants. One might expect men and women to speak more with men about politics, given their perception that men are more expert, but this is not the case. Third, despite the insignificant dyad variables, the perception of knowledge *generally* is a highly significant predictor of discussion frequency. Therefore, the perception of knowledge generally is an important determinant of how often one talks to a discussant, but the differences among dyads are not,

Figure 1
Predicted Probabilities of Discussion Based on Perceived Expertise of Discussant for Spousal and Nonspousal Dyads



Note: Figure 1 illustrates the effect of the spousal relationship on the frequency of discussion.

despite differences in how the members of those dyads perceive their discussant's knowledge.

It is an interesting puzzle to find that women's political knowledge is perceived to be less by both women and men, and men's political knowledge is perceived to be greater by women and men, but this does not significantly change the frequency of discussion, despite the importance of knowledge in the frequency of discussion. The variable for whether the main respondent is the discussant's spouse may explain this seeming contradiction. This variable is positive and strongly significant, meaning spousal dyads talk to each other more frequently about politics. This suggests that although expertise plays an important role, its evaluative function may be limited to those possible discussants that are proximate to the main respondent—in their neighborhood, at their job, or in their home (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Beck 1991). That is, people may look to experts, but only those experts around them; alternatively, they may talk to nonexperts because they are proximate. What we have the ability to measure here is how often people talk to the discussants they already have, and not why they choose the discussants they choose from the universe of possible discussants. Furthermore, for men and women dyads, many of whom are likely to be spouses (over two hundred dyad pairs in this survey are spouses), different frequency of discussion may take place regardless of knowledge level because they are so proximate to each other (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995).[7]

Figure 1 shows the predicted probabilities of the four categories of discussion frequency (*never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, and *always*) for women and men experts (those who are perceived to know "a great deal") versus men and women nonexperts (those who are perceived to have "average" or "not much" knowledge). These probabilities are then broken down for spousal dyads (the dark line) versus nonspousal dyads (the light line). In comparing graphs 1a and 1c (the left-hand side) to graphs 1b and 1d (the right-hand side), it is clear that, generally, discussion happens "often" with

experts rather than nonexperts, regardless of sex. However, spouses clearly talk often more with each other than nonspousal dyads do, particularly if that person is perceived to be an expert of either sex. Women nonexperts are slightly less likely to be talked to often by their spouses than men nonexperts, but this is not a significant difference. Overall, it appears frequency of discussion is driven more by the spousal relationship of the dyad rather than the gender composition.

Although part of the frequency of discussion may be driven by the proximity of discussants, particularly spouses, another possibility is to consider why people discuss politics with others in the first place. The differences we find may be a result of people's seeking different types of discussants for different reasons. Perhaps a respondent chooses one type of discussant when he or she wants to learn information; this may be a job for a perceived expert. On the other hand, a respondent may deliberately choose a discussant he or she perceives to be less of an expert in order to educate or proselytize to that discussant. One may also choose certain discussants he or she perceives as knowledgeable about a specific topic, but not necessarily generally knowledgeable about politics. Though we lack the ability to test these propositions here, with more explicit data about the reasons for discussant selection and specific types of political knowledge, these other possibilities may become clearer.

Conclusion

We believe the divergent results presented above have important but still undetermined repercussions for political discussion as a form of political participation in the United States. The systematic discounting of women's political knowledge by both men and women may be one key to unlocking the continually puzzling lack of women's participation in many aspects of politics at the mass level. We know there are many antecedents of women's participation in politics, including a lack of resources (particularly, education), socialization processes, and various indicators of political engagement, such as interest in politics and the lack of objective political knowledge (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1994; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). However, our results here point to the need to reconsider the role that perception of women's stance on these indicators of participation, rather than these objective indicators of political engagement alone, plays in becoming a barrier to women's participation in politics. Here, it may still be in part a lack of objective political knowledge but also the *perception* of the lack of political knowledge among women who enter into political discussion. This suggests both discrimination and difference may be explanations for women's lack of involvement, in that the "knowledge gap" identified in the literature has the potential to become a sort of heuristic for assessing women's knowledge in political discussion. This seems to lend support to Verba, Burns, and Schlozman's (1997) conclusion that there is a difference, perhaps based on assumptions about women's involvement in politics, in the "taste for politics" between men and women.

We are left with the somewhat contradictory but intriguing finding, however, that the perceptions of women's knowledge do not have a significant effect on how often men and women discuss politics with each other. This is despite the fact that perception of knowledge generally has a strong significant effect, in that people want to discuss politics with experts. Though Huckfeldt (2001) asserts people can judge the expertise level of those with whom they discuss politics accurately, the perception effects we find here suggest otherwise; there is distortion within the judgment of expertise according to one's gender. We suspect that even though discussion continues to take place at comparable levels between men and women main respondents and men or women discussants, the assessment that women know less about politics, even if that is not truly the case, may affect the dynamics of discussion within the dyad. More specific measures of the dynamics within discussion and the outcomes of this discussion may further define the effects of the perception of knowledge. For instance, is information culled from women and men discussants considered to be equally reliable, or equally important, to the main respondent? How does information taken from discussion with men affect vote choice or opinion formation, compared to information taken from women discussants? Does the fact that women are more likely to answer "don't know" to a political knowledge question, creating a mismeasurement of the gender gap in objective knowledge (Mondak and Anderson 2004), also contribute to how women are assessed by their discussion partner when they talk about politics, or even to the lower perception of their political knowledge by the discussant? Perhaps the tendency to answer "don't know" to political knowledge questions and be perceived as a less knowledgeable discussant is part of the same dynamic of verbal and nonverbal communication within political discussion between men and women. Though we cannot measure these items here, we feel they may be better indicators in the future of the ramifications of the perceptual knowledge gap we identify in this study.

Another factor we do not consider here that may play an important role is the context in which the political discussion between men and women takes place. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996); Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001); and Hansen (1997) indicate that women's knowledge about and interest in politics increase when the subject matter becomes relevant to women's place in the political system. It is possible, then, that the perception of women's knowledge in discussion may change within an environment with a heightened focus on gender, such as an election with a major woman candidate, like the primaries of 2008. It is also possible that different indicators of knowledge, specific to these contexts, may be more accurate measures of women's political knowledge, as Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) suggest. That is, more women may be classified as experts when knowledge indicators are based on information they are more motivated to know because of their gendered connection to it.

Also of note is the consistency and difference between our findings and those of Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995). Huckfeldt and Sprague's (1995, 202) assessment of the 1984 South Bend data reveals a similar pattern, although focused on spouses, of the discounting of women's political interest and "competence" by men. However, Huckfeldt and Sprague do not account for the objective level of political knowledge among women and men (only for education, a separate variable), leaving open the possibility that low perception of women is due to their own lack of objective knowledge about politics. As we have shown here, this is not entirely the case; although women have a lower objective level of political knowledge, they are perceived by both men to know less about politics than they really do. Also distinct, and perhaps more surprising, is our finding that outside of the spousal relationship, *women* perceive women to be less knowledgeable about politics. This leads to a puzzling frustration over what is necessary to change the gap in both perceptional and objective knowledge between men and women, and whether it is necessary to change this gap to improve women's participation in politics. What we can conclusively say about the frequency of political discussion between men and women is that gendered perceptions of knowledge do not affect this frequency. There are other reasons women and men do or do not talk about politics with each other. However, the importance of this study lies in the possibility that men and women view women as less capable discussion partners *when* they discuss politics. This perceptual knowledge gap in political discussion opens a host of possible consequences for women's participation at both the mass and elite levels.

Finally, these results return us to the impact of gender on political discussion as a form of democratic deliberation. If, as Fishkin (1992), Mutz (2002), Huckfeldt (2001), and others attest, deliberation among citizens is critical for the function of democratic government, these results suggest that the outcomes of deliberation, such as the acquisition of additional political information or an increase in tolerance, may be tempered by the social dynamics of the interaction. Some critics of deliberative democracy question the extent to which the ideal conditions of deliberation actually exist in real political conversation (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002). These conditions, namely, public deliberation without illegitimate coercion and with standards of political equality, may be undermined by the type of social dynamic we see here (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002). Conover, Searing, and Crewe (2002, 56), in fact, find standards of political equality in conversation are violated in part because women were discouraged from entering political conversation; perceptions that women know less about politics could be antecedents of this discouragement. In future research, it will be interesting to reconsider the substantive products of discussion between men and women with this information about the perception of women's political knowledge in mind. For example, the discounting of political knowledge of women could potentially affect the accuracy of information gained from political discussion between men and women or the effects of women's proselytizing about women candidates (Hansen 1997). Similarly, the effects of disagreement in discussion on tolerance of other's views (Mutz 2002) may be muted or changed by differences in how women are perceived as discussion partners. Overall, the evidence presented here questions the accuracy of perception of knowledge within political discussion and points to important considerations in the future study of women's political participation.

Notes

1. This survey is discussed extensively in Huckfeldt, Sprague, and Levine (2000) and Huckfeldt (2001). Here we focus on information about the survey that is relevant to this specific project. The survey was conducted by the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University in 1996–1997. The population surveyed is registered voters in the Indianapolis and St. Louis metropolitan areas. For the survey of main respondents, $N = 2{,}174$, and for the survey of respondents' discussants, $N = 1{,}475$. At least one discussant was interviewed for 872 of the main respondents who were willing to give more explicit information about their discussants, such as a last name and contact information. In many cases, more than one discussant for each main respondent was interviewed to

create the sample of 1,475. Any interview for which discussant information was available from the main respondent was pursued (Huckfeldt, Sprague, and Levine 2000, 649-50).

2. To create this variable (objective knowledge–perceived knowledge), we standardized the variables by turning them into z scores for objective knowledge and perceived knowledge. Then we subtracted the standardized perceived knowledge from the standardized objective knowledge. The new variable is scaled –3.58 to 3.15.

3. The specific survey question is, "How often do you talk about politics with (first name of the discussant)?"

4. We include objective knowledge as an independent variable despite the inclusion of objective knowledge in the measurement of the dependent variable. This is because the model of perceptive knowledge would be incorrectly specified without accounting for the objective level of knowledge on which the perception is based. However, the dependent variable would be measured incorrectly without accounting for how far perception is from reality instead of only perception. Without accounting for perception relative to objective knowledge, one could assume perception is low because objective knowledge is low (i.e., that the perception is simply accurate). Our dependent variable dispels this interpretation and focuses on discrimination, or the extent to which perception is off from the reality of the objective measure.

5. Throughout the analysis, we have modeled the behavior of men and women identically, noting any gender effects through the dyad variables. It could also very well be the case that men and women behave differently in terms of perception and should be modeled as such. To test for this, we split the sample by main respondents into one analysis for men and one analysis for women and used dummy variables for same- and opposite-sex discussants. Based on these results, we find that in terms of perception of expertise, men and women do behave similarly in making their assessments, and we are confident in the interpretation of our results from the combined sample in Table 2.

6. We use the perception of knowledge to measure knowledge in Table 3, because theoretically, one chooses discussants based on the perception of expertise, even though this perception is based on the level of objective knowledge to a degree (as modeled and explained in Table 2). However, alternative models of the relationship in Table 3 replacing the perception with the objective knowledge measure from Table 2 or with the perception–objective dependent variable from Table 2 yield similar results for the rest of the dependent variables.

7. Interestingly, the results of Table 2 are consistent across dyads made up of spouses and nonspousal dyads, as the control for spousal dyads is insignificant.

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