Dear all,

Thank you very much in advance for taking the time to read this paper. It is a draft of my dissertation proposal. I would be very grateful for any feedback on any aspect of it. My biggest question is about the methodology: does it make sense? Have I adequately justified it with respect to my theoretical background and research questions? My committee consists of people who are mostly interested either in the theoretical literature I'm drawing on or in ethnographic methods, but not both, so there is a bit of a disconnect there and that is where I can use the most help. But again, anything you say will be very helpful and very much appreciated.

cheers,
Amy

# The moral discourse of politics:
# a case study of political talk in everyday life

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I can't stand when somebody comes to me with a certain religious belief and tries to convert me. You know religion to me is . . . private. It's mine. It's . . . ah, sacred. It's . . . what keeps me going, you know, my faith. . . . And that's my feelings and beliefs on politics. - Irene, 37

I don't enjoy a good debate. I don't. I'll listen to you, but I'm not going to tell you how I feel about it. . . . I don't want to prove I'm right and you're wrong, cause there's no right or wrong. – Andrea, 39

I think heated discussions are very good, but everybody's afraid to have a heated disucssion anymore. . . . If I keep [my opinions] to myself, they're of no value. If I say something out and you listen, and you say, "that's interesting; let me think about that" and you talk to two friends, who knows where that's going to go? – Robert, 55

What is the role of political talk in democratic life? The 2008 election brought an outpouring of discussion-based activism, in which people eagerly engaged fellow citizens in conversations about politics, but we still know very little about the role talk plays in democratic practice, particularly in the casual conversations of our daily lives. While the mass-mediated public sphere appears increasingly polarized, and "swing" voters increasingly pivotal, statisticians tell us we are neither as divided nor as mercurial as we think we are. This project asks how Americans talk about politics, with whom and in what settings, and what role such conversations play in the formation of both a broad public sphere and of the sociopolitical self.

My approach is ethnographic, bringing the insights of cultural sociology to bear on the study of deliberative democracy by conceptualizing political talk as a meaning-making practice embedded in social and cultural structures. Not only do people make sense of political issues *through* talk, but they must also make sense *of* political talk itself and its role in democratic citizenship. Diverse traditions provide multiple and often conflicting resources, and we need to understand better how people use these resources in making sense of the abstract idea of the public through everyday interactions. In this project, I will investigate how people draw on available moral vocabularies in both

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practicing and thinking about political talk.  In particular, I ask what informal political talk can tell us about the lived experience of American democracy in the context of social changes such as economic restructuring, large-scale immigration, and race and class relations in the age of Obama, Palin, and the tea party.

*Background*

In their classic study of opinion formation in a small Ohio community, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (1944) found that people identified social interaction as the most significant influence on their voting preferences.  More recently, participants in Gamson's (1992) study of *Talking Politics* lamented their lack of opportunities to discuss "serious" issues in their everyday lives.  Eliasoph (1998) demonstrated that Americans avoid speaking in a political idiom, actively constructing an etiquette of parochial self-interest or small-scale pragmatism according to which "public-spirited talk" is taboo, even for activists speaking in public settings.  Walsh (2004) quotes a member of a men's informal discussion group as claiming that the group does not discuss politics—because they avoid arguing over contentious issues—despite numerous conversations that, according to the researcher, address public matters and contribute to political meaning-making.  Kim, Wyatt and Katz (1999) claim that informal conversation contributes significantly to the quality of opinion, including the likelihood of having opinions and the ability to support them with reasonable arguments.  The juxtaposition of these findings, along with quantitative evidence that informal political talk is widespread (Jacobs et al 2009, Bennett et al 2000, Kim et al 1999), suggests that social interaction plays a key role in American political life, but that we still know little about how political discussion unfolds in casual settings, what it encompasses, and what meanings people attach to it. (See also Ryfe 2008, Thompson 2008, Jacobs et al 2009, Mendelberg 2002.)

In order to understand how interaction contributes to political thinking and identity, qualitative researchers have studied the nature of informal political talk in small groups.  They have observed such talk as it occurs spontaneously (Eliasoph 1998, Walsh 2004, Harris-Lacewell 2004) and in focus groups directed by the researcher but consisting of people already well acquainted (Gamson 1992, Perrin 2006).  Their findings have offered valuable insights about the centrality of social identity to political meaning-

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making (Walsh), recurring themes and ideological frames around which people construct their understandings of issues (Gamson, Harris-Lacewell), the cultural tools on which people draw in developing plans of action (Perrin), and the ways in which small groups actively construct norms of public-spirited talk (Eliasoph).  However, by limiting analysis to what goes on within individual groups, this approach leaves open questions about the dynamics of the larger "deliberative system" (Mansbridge 1999) that those groups comprise.  (Harris-Lacewell does consider an aspect of this in her analysis of the multi-sited African American "counterpublic.")  Any individual participates in numerous discursive microcultures, each consisting of different norms as well as different combinations of perspectives.  Considering this diversity of experience is especially important when trying to understand the significance of what Mutz (2006) calls "cross-cutting dialogue"—i.e., between those with differing views—as well how these overlapping micropublics create larger "imagined communities" based on race (Harris-Lacewell 2004), nation (Wedeen 2008, Habermas 1962) or other shared characteristics.  I argue, then, that we need to look at political talk at both the narrower level of individual subjective experience and at the broader level of overarching, composite public spheres in order to understand better the role of informal talk in democratic life.

If politics is the *res publica,* the public thing that concerns us all, then defining what is public and what is private is a significant political act in itself (e.g., Benhabib 1996).  Bellah et al (1985), through interviews with white, middle-class Americans, illustrate how moral narratives draw boundaries between public and private by uncovering the vocabularies people use in expressing their moral visions.  The authors trace these moral vocabularies—most of which they characterize as varieties of individualism—to the competing liberal, republican, and biblical traditions of US history, thus drawing a connection between the larger American cultural "toolkit" and the internalized norms through which (some) Americans make sense of their own political lives.  Throughout the book, the authors consistently emphasize the impact of moral vocabularies on political practices.  Similarly, in describing political talk among a group of parent volunteers, Eliasoph notes that, "Volunteers were, above all 'moral'—in the sense of *meaning-making*—actors, rather than 'rational' actors" (1998:64, emphasis in original).  In other words, moral vocabularies or narratives are those that give meaning to

our lives.  They do so because they tell us who we are as social beings—ie, how we do and should relate to others—and it is through such lenses, therefore, that we make sense of the political, the life of the polis.  As Bellah et al demonstrate, these moral-political narratives are rooted in discursive traditions (1985) as well as in social institutions (1991), and they are made meaningful through interaction (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).  These insights inform my approach to the above questions about how the "public thing" is constructed through moral-political talk in multiple overlapping discursive spaces.

*Questions*

How do people make sense of politics, and of themselves as sociopolitical actors, through informal political talk with diverse others?

- What vocabularies do Americans use in expressing the relationship between morality and politics?
- How do people handle moral-political disagreement and what meanings do they attach to that experience?
- How do people perceive the role of political talk in democratic practice?
- What are the significant sources of variation in people's experiences of and ideas about political talk?

*Conceptual framework*

Questions about political talk are rooted in normative theories of democracy.  The 'deliberative turn' in democratic theory has called attention to the active and intersubjective nature of opinion formation—upon which legitimacy rests—in contrast to earlier models that defined opinion as an aggregate of individual and presumably static preferences (Fishkin 1995, Herbst 1993).  Theoretical claims about the democratic value of communication among citizens (e.g., Dewey 1927, Barber 1984, Habermas 1962, Chambers 2003) give rise to questions about how such interaction works in practice, what role it plays in opinion formation, and what sense people make of its place in democratic life.  I will discuss what I mean by "political talk," and then elaborate on how deliberative theory informs my investigation of it.

What does it mean to talk about politics?  While I am interested in participants' own definitions, I also expect that, like Walsh, I will encounter conversations that I consider

politically relevant even if participants do not characterize them that way. As Eliasoph argues, "political" talk is best defined not by the subject matter of a discussion, but by the manner in which it is approached. In her view, a conversation is political if it makes claims based on justice (in Pitkin's sense), addresses a "wider circle of concern" than one's own intimates, and is oriented to the common good. (I cite this with the caveat that "common" need not mean "universal.") For Mansbridge, politics includes discursive, meaning-making, and active elements:

> I adopt the formulation of Ronald Beiner, who depicts 'politics' as the medium in which human beings try to "make sense of their common situation in discourse with one another" (1983, 148), adding that "making sense" almost inevitably has decisional implications for action, when "decision" and "action" are defined in [a] highly informal, weakly collective sense (pp.216-217).

These classically-inspired definitions—emphasizing meaning-making, justice, and active membership in a collectivity—are compatible with a Weberian understanding of politics as that which concerns or aims to influence the distribution of power in society.[1] At the intersection of the two is the ongoing and collective negotiation of the relationship between justice and power that is at the heart of political life. Political questions ask how power is and ought to be distributed and for what ends it ought to be used. These questions are often implicit; as Harris-Lacewell observes, "Embedded within conversations that are not always overtly political is language that seeks to understand American inequality . . . and to devise strategies for advancing the interests of self and group" (2004:5). As the concern with justice suggests, political questions are often rooted in moral claims. Finally, then, I understand politics (for the purpose of this project) as a set of ongoing questions concerning the just use and distribution of power in collective life, including the ultimate goals toward which it should be directed.

Students of politics have disagreed about how best to conceptualize the place of communication in democratic life. In an effort to address the shortcomings of earlier models of democracy that assume either fixed and mutually exclusive preferences or a single common good—both of which render meaning-making largely irrelevant—

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[1] Dryzek makes a related argument, placing both critical and classical approaches under the rubric of discursive democracy (1990).

deliberative theorists have emphasized the intersubjective nature of opinion formation and the centrality of moral reasoning to democratic practice (e.g., Habermas 1962 and 1996, Gutmann and Thompson 1996). In the deliberative view, political interests, identities and meanings are not constructed prior to interaction but through it (Wedeen 2008, Ku 2000). Moral disagreement is central to political conflict, and while moral disagreements cannot necessarily be resolved through dialogue, dialogue is necessary to the expression of political equality even in the face of enduring differences (Gutmann and Thompson 1996). Deliberative theory posits that the democratic nature of political talk depends upon both the publicness of the setting (meaning that a diversity of views is represented) and the public character of the discussion (meaning that discussants appeal to common interests or values), as well as substantive equality among speakers.

Much empirical research inspried by deliberative theory has sought to measure the effects on other forms of participation of talk that conforms to these norms. These findings are mixed (Delli Carpini, Ryfe, Chambers). Increasingly, however, scholars of democracy have emphasized the importance of informal political talk and have argued that talk is itself a form of participation (Wyatt et al 2000, Conover and Searing 2005, Kim and Kim 2008, Chambers 2008, Delli Carpini et al 2004, Jacobs et al 2009). Mansbridge (1999) argues that many different kinds of talk should be understood as part of an overall "deliberative system;" it is not necessary that every encounter meet all deliberative criteria.[2] People talk not only to persuade others, but to construct "meaningful political worldviews" including understandings of their collective interests (Harris-Lacewell 2004, Fraser 1992). Deliberation can be either dialogic or instrumental; while the latter emphasizes decision-making, following Habermas, the former is aimed at understanding and plays an important role in developing a sense of the sociopolitical self (Kim and Kim 2008, Wedeen 2008).

Exposure to diverse perspectives is among the essential elements of deliberative democracy because it enables people to recognize the partiality of their own views, to empathize with others, and to gain a more realistic conception of social reality (Dewey 1927, Arendt 1958, Habermas 1962). However, studies of informal talk indicate that

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[2] In this vein, Chambers (2009) distinguishes between "deliberative democracy" and "democratic deliberation," where the former describes a system characterized broadly by communicative interactions and the latter describes the specific interactions that meet deliberative criteria.

most discussion of political matters takes place in private settings, among like-minded intimates, where social identity reinforces common views (e.g., Walsh). Several qualitative studies highlight the role of social motives in political talk; in particular, social boundaries, collective identities and group etiquette lead to the restriction of public talk to private settings. In Walsh's study, for example, the men whom she observed were retired, white, heterosexual, middle class, and politically conservative. She shows how boundary-reinforcing behaviors cemented shared identity by excluding those who did not fit (i.e., women, people of color, and younger people). As Eliasoph shows, the importance of social motives leads many people to downplay disagreement for the sake of harmony, often avoiding controversial topics entirely for fear of creating discomfort or division. Conover et al (2002) find that many people are interested in hearing others' ideas (reinforcing the importance of social motives), but that they hesitate to air their own preferences, often for fear of being ridiculed or pressured to change their positions. Women in their study were particularly reticent; they felt that their views were often not respected, and they experienced challenges as personal attacks or invasions of privacy. One described the act of revealing one's political position as "baring one's soul." Mansbridge identified a similar reluctance in her study of New England town meetings; in that case, many (especially women and those from working-class backgrounds) avoided public talk for fear of being ridiculed. Noelle-Neumann's research extends these social motives to the national level, suggesting that perceptions of popular opinion create pressure that influences political preferences on the large scale.

The apparent tension between norms of social interaction and those of democratic talk is the dilemma articulated by Dewey (1927) in *The problem of the public*. That problem, as he sees it, is that the kind of intimate relationships necessary to effective communication are difficult to maintain in the face of the diversity and distance that characterize a large, cosmopolitan society. Schudson sees the tension as irreconcilable, arguing that "conversation is not the soul of democracy" (1997). He claims the notion of conversation-as-democracy confuses two distinct purposes of communication. While (informal, private) conversation is non-utilitarian and aimed at strengthening social bonds, "talk" (i.e., the kind of public discussion required to address political issues) is goal-oriented and necessarily conducted across lines of disagreement. For this reason,

genuine political talk is inevitably uncomfortable, and it makes sense that most people strive to avoid it. Supporting this argument, research in psychology indicates that the kind of thinking required by public-spirited negotiation of difference is cognitively demanding—and relatively uncommon—as well (DiMaggio 1997, Ryfe 2008).

Despite its challenges, however, many people value and desire talk with diverse others about matters of common concern (Gamson, 1992; Stromer-Galley, 2002, 2003; Jacobs et al, 2009) and benefit through enriched understanding, confidence, and engagement (Delli Carpini et al, 2004; Wyatt et al). They cite largely social motives, such as the desire to understand others better, to express oneself, and to be exposed to alternative perspectives (eg, Conover and Searing, Gamson). Some use new technologies, such as internet-based discussion fora, to mitigate identified obstacles including time and space constraints and discomfort with face-to-face discussion of controversial issues, as well as the simple lack of opportunity to converse with socially-distant others in everyday life (Stromer-Galley, 2002; Dalhgren, 2002). Although these findings are usually treated as incidental, they raise important questions about the significance people attach to such cross-cutting conversations as well as about the conditions that foster effective and satisfying political discussion, especially in diverse groups. Affectively satisfying discussions are more likely to meet deliberative criteria, because they engender trust among participants (Mansbridge et al 2008, Kim et al 1999). More importantly, perhaps, the apparent desire for noninstrumental cross-cutting dialogue lends credence to the normative claims of deliberative democracy, since any democratic theory is rooted in assumptions about human nature (Dryzek 1990). Political talk with diverse others is not necessarily "like spinach" (Schudson)—bitter but good for you—but has intrinsic as well as instrumental value.

Mutz (2006) defines "cross-cutting dialogue" as that which brings together people with differing opinions or political views, but not necessarily from different social (i.e., demographic) locations. This assumes a traditional dichotomy between intellect and experience, according to which opinion can be shaped unproblematically by intellect alone. As feminists (among others) have demonstrated, however, this dichotomy is false because all knowledge is situated and social location necessarily informs opinion. Because there is no universal "common good," the articulation of self-interest plays a

valid role in political discussion (Mansbridge 1999). Furthermore, because any individual is multiply located, different interests—rooted in different elements of identity—may become salient depending on the composition of the group in which any conversation takes place. By invoking interest, I do not suggest a dichotomy between interest and morality. Claims based on material interest can be translated into moral claims via appeals to justice (Pitkin), but moral interests should also be understood as real interests in themselves (Gutmann and Thompson). While I recognize that social location or identity cannot determine interest, either material or ideal, I do assert the value of experience to political thinking and I claim therefore that the deliberative norm of inclusion must extend to the inclusion of diverse social positions and cannot be based only on difference of opinion abstracted from demographic diversity. Perhaps because it is relatively infrequent, or at least hard to locate, cross-cutting dialogue in informal settings has not received much attention from researchers. But precisely because of the challenges it poses, and because of its centrality to deliberative democracy, it is crucial that we understand how it works.

To summarize so far, informal talk plays a key role in the formation of political opinion and identity and is central to a vision of "strong" or deliberative democracy. While most such talk occurs among intimates and is shaped by social relationships, it is important that we understand the practice, experience and significance to those involved of "bridging" as well as "bonding" political talk (if I may borrow a metaphor). However, there has been very little attention to the former by empirical researchers, and I wish to address this need. I do not limit my inquiry to cross-cutting interactions, in part because operationalizing diversity would require defining relevant social categories in advance, and the relative significance of various axes of difference is part of my question. At some point, every conversation crosses boundaries, and every conversation contributes to political meaning-making, whether it crosses a wide gulf or narrow. Nevertheless, I include this background in order to call attention to the importance of political talk that occurs outside intimate spaces, and this of course has methodological as well as theoretical implications.

*Methodological framework*

I approach these questions through the lens of cultural sociology, which is concerned with meaning-making. While research has begun to shed light on the practice of informal political talk, we still know little about participants' subjective experience of such talk and their perceptions of its role in democratic practice. Ryfe (2005) points out that cognition is mediated by culture, and he suggests this makes deliberation more like storytelling—moral, social, meaning-infused—than argumentation. By placing meaning-making within the context of institutions and discourses as well as small-scale interactions, cultural sociologists have provided a set of tools for studying meaning empirically and sociologically.

As Schudson (2001) writes, "politics is a set of meanings, symbols, and enacted rituals" located in time and space, and embedded in social relationships. This calls for a cultural approach that examines the processes by which people construct themselves as democratic subjects (Wedeen 2002). As Sewell (2005) points out, sociologists have often conceptualized culture as either a system of symbols and meanings or as the active manipulation of resources for practical ends. Instead, he argues that these are not mutually exclusive and that cultural sociology should seek to understand the interaction between system and practice through which meaning is constructed. Agency varies among both individuals and situations, and agency is collective in the sense that mobilization of resources is an act of communication.

Meaning is plural, fluid, and contextual (Sewell 2005) but it is possible to uncover national patterns without making essentialist claims (Lamont 1992). Studies of American political life have shed light on the moral and cultural vocabularies on which Americans draw in practicing and making sense of politics (Bellah et al 1985, Schudson 1998, Wuthnow 2006, Hanson 1985). Shared vocabularies are shaped by institutions (Swidler 2001) and mediated by the micro-contexts in which people use them interactively (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003; Fine, 2004; Boltanski and Thevenot, 1999), as well as by dynamics of gender, race and class (Hansen, 1997; Harris-Lacewell, 2004; Mansbridge, 1983). Their expression may take many forms, including storytelling, rhetoric, and nonverbal or tacit communication (Polletta, 1998, 2006; Young, 1996; Chambers, 2009; Allen, 2009; Ikegami, 2005). People also shape discourses in the process of interaction, as opposed to simply using those that already exist (Harris-

Lacewell, Ikegami).  By paying attention to people's moral-political vocabularies, and the ways they are mobilized in different microsocial contexts, we can make connections between individual meaning-making and its social-cultural context.

Swidler introduces the idea of "unsettled times" as moments of disruption in which cultural repertoires become explicit.  When people's lives are unsettled, they must draw on alternative narratives in constructing new and meaningful courses of action.  In a very small way, the experience of interacting with others whose experiences, values, and perspectives differ from one's own can be seen as analogous to the unsettled times that lead people to grapple consciously with the many cultural resources available to them.  This is supported by psychological research that shows the cognitive effort associated with deliberative thinking (Dimaggio 1997).  It is also evident in the work of sociologists who contend that people do not necessarily have fixed preferences regarding social issues, but that they often have multiple views that may be relevent, depending on the context and the aspect(s) of the issue that is highlighted (e.g, Converse 1964, Zaller 1992).  For this reason, the moments in which people encounter difference in everyday interaction are crucial to understanding political talk from a cultural perspective.  How are taken-for-granted ideas and practices challenged in such situations, and how do people deal with those challenges in the context of the multiple, possibly conflicting, cultural resources to which they have access?

Working at the intersection of cultural and political sociology, Ikegami (2005) proposes a definition of publics as the communicative sites at which social networks overlap, thus creating the possibility for "emergent properties," or new combinations of ideas.  While my focus is not, like hers, on innovations that lead to broad social structural changes, I find this conception of publics useful for several reasons.  First, it suggests the importance of situating political conversations within a context that is simultaneously broader and narrower than the immediate discussion group.  The focus shifts to the individual and at the same time to the array of networks to which she belongs, and of which she represents the points of intersection.  This enables us to see the individual's experience in its many-layered context, and to take into account the ways interaction in each setting affects interaction in other settings (Collins 2004).

Second, by calling attention to the position of the individual at the intersection of multiple identities, networks, and social narratives, this approach highlights the plurality of analytical frames to which any individual has access in making sense of a particular issue (Jacobs 1996). It enables us to consider the significance of a person's exposure to a number of different microcultures (Fine 2004), and ask how people negotiate the multiple and often contradictory social identities that compete for their allegience in making sense of political issues. Third, by emphasizing the possibilty of novelty, it calls attention to the role of individual agency, suggesting that people are not simply passive collections of competing idea fragments and claims for allegiance, but active constructors of political meaning, able to draw on numerous cultural tools to which they have access and potentially producing new combinations.

Shifting attention from the immediate context of the conversation to the "sphere of publics" in which social networks overlap suggests that a spatially-bound case study will be the most fruitful approach for my study. While recognizing that any individual belongs to many networks that extend beyond her geographical community—and that any geographical "place" has ambiguous boundaries—I also recognize the importance of the local in drawing people's psychic maps (Lane 1962). Furthermore, by treating a spatially-defined community as the unit of analysis, rather than the compositionally-defined small group in which conversation takes place, I will be better able to consider the role of "weak ties" (Granovetter 1973) in exposing people to diverse perspectives. As noted above, most political talk takes place in homogeneous groups; therefore it is exposure via weak ties—any one of which may be fleeting and random, but which may be influential in the aggregate—that is likely to provide the greatest opportunity for deliberative discourse. Finally, I draw on Collins' (2004) theory of emotional energy in considering the significance of physical proximity to the ways interaction in each setting affects interaction in other settings.

*Case study and research design*

I will conduct an ethnographic case study of public life in a small postindustrial city in the northeastern United States. It combines in-depth interviews with participant observation of settings in which informal political talk takes place; this will provide data

about the nature of such talk, as well as about people's perceptions of its role in their political and personal lives.  In his study of political ideology among working-class American men, Lane (1962) found that the only two significant spaces on the men's political "psychic maps" were the local—consisting of the city and its immediate surroundings—and the national.  With this in mind, I locate my study within a single city that is both small and diverse, in which people of many social positions share concrete public spaces as well as local government and media, while also operating within the larger framework of American political culture, institutions, and mass-mediated discourse.  This approach addresses questions raised by both deliberative theory and cultural sociology by considering the meaning of political discussion within a physical and social space that mediates the larger (national) cultural context.  The specific nature of that mediation is beyond the scope of this study, but I will raise questions for further research in that area.

Located in a former steel-producing region, the site is racially, ideologically, and socioeconomically diverse, with recent demographic changes due to immigration and gentrification.  Sitting at the convergence of two rivers, the city itself was historically a commercial center, but it housed several factories and sent many of its residents to work in the steel mills of its nearby sister city.  It forms part of a "swing" region of a swing state, giving its collective opinion disproportionate weight at the national level; furthermore, the unpredictable voting habits suggest that existing preferences do not map neatly onto the official binary system of national electoral politics.  This makes it a fruitful site for observing the process of opinion formation as it unfolds both publicly and privately and in the context of conflicting loyalties, as well as for considering the meaning of public life in the context of economic and demographic transitions.

A city of about 30,000 people, it is in many ways a demographic microcosm of the United States: approximately 13% black (mostly African American but including a significant immigrant population), 15% Latina/o (up from 8% in 2000), a small Asian population and a white majority, which itself is ethnically diverse.  The median household income is $33,000, and class diversity is visibly significant: public housing, working-class rowhouses, quasi-suburban subdivisions and hilltop mansions are all within close proximity of one another and of the town center, which is clearly marked by

a central square.  Over the past decade, there has been an influx of artists and gentrifiers from neighboring states, causing some friction with natives.  An elite private college sits on a steep hill overlooking downtown; relations between town and gown have always been contentious but, I am told, have improved recently.  I chose the site because I am intrigued by the combination of intimate size with diversity of race, class and ideology.

Data collection will include in-depth, semi-structured interviews with at least sixty residents.  Because my research questions focus on the experience of the individual at the intersection of multiple discursive networks and microcultures, I rely heavily on individual interviews in order to understand the subjective experience of political talk in its various contexts.  My preliminary research suggests that the effects of political talk are not necessarily apparent in the moment of interaction; people sometimes acquiesce when they do not agree, and sometimes adhere to their positions or remain silent during the conversation but change their minds or seek more information later, upon reflection.  Sometimes the effect of conversation is to bolster their existing views with better arguments; sometimes it is simply to expose them to a perspective they had not previously considered.  All of this information is more accessible via interview than observation.  Interviews also enable me to ask how the practice and norms of talk vary from one setting to another, how and whether each person's role varies depending on the context, and how people think and feel about such interactions.  I will also ask them about the influences that have shaped their values and priorites and what they think about the relationship between morality and politics.  Supplementary questions address media use and perceptions of the 2008 and 2010 elections.  The interviews are semi-structured in order to allow me to pursue unforseen issues and incorporate participants' insights and concerns; I have found this approach very valuable in preliminary research.

Sampling will aim to include a broad range of social positions, but not to produce a "representative" mirror of the community, since I cannot predict which variations will prove most salient.  In coding, I will not impose pre-determined categories, but will attend to the ways speakers draw on moral and cultural vocabularies in constructing meaning about political talk and their own roles as sociopolitical actors.

Supplementing the interviews, I will conduct participant observations of four sites in which political talk occurs informally: a grassroots political organization, a community

college, a bar/restaurant, and a set of online fora devoted to local issues. While interviews are valuable for the reasons discussed above, observation will enable me to see for myself how talk unfolds in ways that might not occur to interviewees. I have chosen these sites based on testimony from residents about the frequent political talk that takes place there, and because they are "public" in the sense that they are sites in which social networks overlap. In my first visit to the city, which will last two and a half months, I will participate in the grassroots organization as a volunteer and observe online discussion daily. During my second visit, I will conduct participant observation of a bar/restaurant known for lively political talk, and I will audit a class and join a student club at a local community college that serves adults in the workforce. To deepen my understanding of local political culture, I will supplement formal observations with historical research, attendance at city council meetings and partisan organizations, informal interaction with residents in public spaces, and attention to local media. In recording and coding field notes, I will emphasize the form, content, frequency, and tone of incidental political talk; wherever possible, I will also note who participates and to what extent diverse perspectives are represented.

*Preliminary research:*

I have conducted ten semi-structured interviews with residents in my proposed site about the role of political talk in their daily lives. All but one were women, and the sample was diverse in age, partisanship, race, and social class. I did not aim to be representative, and I was particularly interested in women's experiences because of their historical position at the intersection of public and private spheres, which raises questions about how the gendered public / private dichotomy affects women's lived experience of political life. Future research will consider gendered patterns in responses.

A few highlights of my findings so far: people reject or at least complicate conventional ideological labels, but this does not indicate a lack of coherence in their moral-political worldviews (as some have claimed). Many people avoid political talk in social situations, and this is mostly a result of the shallow and competitive character of such talk, not a lack of interest or simple obedience to etiquette as others have suggested. Respondents express profound moral commitments and a strong sense of identity with

their political views, so that argument makes them feel exposed and vulnerable; at the same time, however, they are not easily swayed from their positions, even when they experience social sanctions for holding minority views. Perceived polarization leads to misrecognition and miscommunication. Women often speak in a relational, empathic idiom that is frequently constructed as being opposed to abstract reason; it is not yet clear whether this is gendered, but it leads to questions about how and whether such a vocabulary becomes a resource in challenging perceived polarization in the body politic.

Respondents, particularly those from working-class origins, problematize existing political labels such as liberal, conservative, Democrat, and Republican. This is tied to a rejection of the presumed ideological binary that dominates official political discourse, and which participants feel mischaracterizes them and impedes understanding. This is consistent with research showing that elite polarization is not reflected in the views of the majority. For my respondents, a political label indicates a set of moral commitments, rooted in social identity, which may be manifested in diverse policy and candidate preferences. Because people attach deep moral and personal significance to their political positions, they are less easily persuaded through discussion than deliberative theory suggests (or prescribes). While open to alternative views, they are more likely to change their minds as the result of experience, reflection, and identification than through argument. At the same time, they express commitments to objectivity, information, and rationality—as well as empathy—in political talk.

Previous researchers have argued that a "coherent" political worldview is one in which any single position or preference predicts any other (e.g., Converse 1964). My participants explicitly reject this model, denouncing attempts to categorize or predict their positions according to presumably integrated and mutually-exclusive ideologies. For example, Emily and Irene (pseudonyms) told me that when they associate themselves with a particular position or "perspective," others make assumptions about them which they experience as inaccurate and unfair. Emily says that people "refuse to think you can maybe disagree with something . . . [Embracing a particular label] doesn't mean I just agree across the board with everything; like you can deviate on individual issues and topics." Irene said something very similar about her coworkers' assumptions about her (in this case, inferring her views on social issues from her economic positions) and the

negative social consequences that followed.  In both cases, these false assumptions led to self-censorship but not to changes in their positions.

Despite their insistence that they may "deviate on individual issues," however, participants' worldviews are far from random and appear to be shaped by consistent moral principles which simply do not map onto the political logics of elites.  While claiming traditional labels such as "conservative" and "liberal," they problematized those labels; for example, Victoria, a reproductive-rights activist, has much in common with self-identified conservative friends.  She feels that the term "conservative" has been "hijacked," so that now "conservatives are [perceived as] a bunch of ignorant and selfish people.  Conservative does not mean what we [think it means] today."  While self-identified liberals seemed more comfortable with the perceived implications of the label than conservatives (in my very small sample), in both cases there was evidence of a lack of "fit."  For example, Rebecca reflected critically on her tendency to think of political positions as fitting into only two ideological camps.  After she described a recent conversation in which she had told her mother "I don't think I'm as liberal as I think I am,"  I asked her how she defines "liberal" and whether she feels comfortable with the label.

> I guess I am sort of comfortable with it by default because I don't consider myself conservative.  And so I feel that it is very black and white; you're either one or the other, which is not true at all but that's how sort of I have it in my head. (laughs)

According to my participants, the false perception that there are only two fully integrated and mutually exclusive political ideologies not only silences them in many situations, but creates a major barrier to communication in general.  By creating two opposed sides, it turns political talk into a shallow, competitive game, in which the objective is not to learn or understand, but simply to score points.  Many people express frustration with the combative nature of political conversation and a desire for more effective communication with those whose views differ from their own.

In addition to this interviewing project, I have studied political discussion in online fora engaging discussants from differing racial backgrounds in conversations about race (specifically, racial aspects of gentrification).  Results indicate an explicit desire for dialogue with diverse others and frustration about the inadequate opportunities

to pursue it.  Findings also suggest that participants have internalized many of the same norms articulated by deliberative theorists, even when engaging in noninstrumental communication.  Adherence to these norms was far more evident in fora tied to geographically-defined communities than those aimed at a more dispersed and amorphous audience.  This raises questions about the mediating effects of place-based community, as well as communication technology, on the nature of political talk.

*Hypotheses*:

Gender is the most common status-related variable in political conversations, since social interaction is more likely to be segregated by race and class than by gender, and gender is the greatest source of variation in the meaning of such talk.  Men and women prioritize instrumental and dialogic communication respectively; these differences privilege male voices, but men and women are equally interested in politics as I have defined it.  Moral-political vocabularies reflect racial, ethnic, and class identities, but draw on (some) common sources.  Individuals combine these resources differently in different microcontexts; however, most individuals articulate coherent moral-political worldviews, in contrast to earlier research that suggests most people do not have coherent ideologies.  There is conflict and distrust among residents, but mitigated by a sense of shared local interests and desire for social harmony within the community.

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