Group Discussion that Promotes Positive Political Experiences

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Abstract
This study tested the relationship between communication style and appraisals of a policy discussion as experienced by college students in 54 three-person, ad-hoc groups. Groups decided details of a public policy proposal. After making this decision, members rated the cooperative and adversarial communication in their group’s discussion and whether they gained knowledge and were satisfied with their group’s decision. Cooperative communication positively predicted both knowledge gained and decision satisfaction and was a stronger, more reliable, predictor of these outcomes than adversarial communication. We suggest that creating a cooperative goal structure within initial political discussions may promote cooperative communication and foster a positive political experience.
“Civic competence is not a birthright of citizenship but a function of practice and refinement of communication skills. Interpersonal political communication is viewed as the medium through which civic efficacy develops and democratic norms emerge” (McDevitt & Kiousis, 2006, p. 247). Deliberative democratic theory is predicated on the privileged role of communication in the development of political ideas. This research identifies group communication processes that promote positive political experiences. We argue that the way in which politics is discussed in small, informal, short-term groups affects people’s evaluations of their experience. A large body of work has documented positive associations between frequency of political talk and political knowledge, sophistication, participation, and tolerance, to name a few (e.g., Barber, 1984; Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Kim & Kim, 2008; Mutz, 2006; Price, Capella, & Nir, 2002), but less attention has been paid to the communication styles that affect people’s appraisals of these discussions (e.g., Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009).

We receive some clues from the group decision-making literature. When group members are satisfied with discussion processes (e.g., open discussion, consideration of all members’ opinions), they tend to be satisfied with group decisions (e.g., Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001; Thomas & Fink, 1961). In other words, a cooperative discussion style promotes a positive evaluation of group outcomes. One may assume that a cooperative discussion is devoid of competitive or adversarial elements. We assert, in contrast, that when a group discusses a political issue, there may be elements of both cooperative and adversarial communication – the former promoting and the latter inhibiting a positive group experience. The present study provides a test of the relative and unique influence of both cooperative and adversarial communication on appraisals of a political discussion. Given the possibility for conflict in political discussions due to differing interests (Mansbridge, 1980), examining the joint influence of these communication styles allows for deeper insight into discussion features that promote positive experiences.

**Deliberative Learning**

McDevitt and Kiousis’s (2006) Deliberative Learning Model (DLM) states that political engagement develops as informal political discussions increase in frequency and in conversational partners. This model views interpersonal political communication as the mechanism that introduces new participants to political ideas and creates opportunities for people to practice, refine, and articulate their own political beliefs. Informal political discussions are defined as spontaneous political talk with peers for the purposes of sharing information (Kim & Kim, 2008), and it is through these discussions that political opinions develop and political behaviors emerge.

The DLM tracks political learning through three stages of development, characterized by the diffusion of interpersonal political discussion. The authors conceptualize the process of diffusion as the movement of interpersonal political discussion from one context to another. According to this model, the first stage of political learning begins in a peer-centered learning environment, or a setting in which political discussions are initiated and moderated by someone in a leadership position. Over time, as political confidence increases, the likelihood of engaging in more spontaneous political discussions outside of the classroom increases (stage 2- diffusion of deliberative inclinations). As the likelihood for future political conversations increases, people consume increasing amounts of political news in preparation for these discussions (Atkin, 1972). This leads to the third stage – receptivity to future learning, which hopefully endures over time.

This research simulates the first stage of the DLM by focusing on how communication affects participants’ appraisal of a peer-centered political discussion. We hope to understand
features of communication that might compel those new to politics to advance through the political diffusion process.

**Communication Style**

A review of research on interpersonal political communication (Carpini, et al., 2004) finds that engaging in frequent political discussions associates with a host of beneficial political outcomes. Our research shifts attention from frequency of talk to the qualities of political talk that lead to a positive experience. This is important because having a positive experience during a political discussion should lead to future political conversations (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009), thus initiating the diffusion process postulated by McDevitt and Kiousis (2006). The DLM proffers two communication features thought to increase the likelihood of political diffusion: civility and opinion validation. Civility refers to the cultivation of tolerance, equality, and a willingness to be exposed to opposing perspectives. Opinion validation refers to a willingness to “test out” opinions with peers (Dutwin, 2003). We conceived of two communication styles based on these two criteria: one featuring the presence of these criteria (i.e., cooperative communication) and one defined by their absence (i.e., adversarial communication).

We define **cooperative communication** as that in which civility is cultivated, opinions are respected, and there is a perception that group members are listening to one another. Indicators of cooperative communication include reports that people listened to one another, felt as though their ideas were respected (even if disagreements occur), and felt that their group worked well together. Alternatively, **adversarial communication** is that which lacks civility, demonstrated by hostile or tenuous discussions. Indicators of adversarial communication include reports of behaviors such as ostracism, a lack of listening, frequent interruptions, and general hostility in the form of opinion rejection. Disagreement may appear in either style depending on whether it is welcomed and respected (cooperative) or attacked and disrespected (adversarial). We expect that reports of cooperative and adversarial communication within a group should differentially affect the success of the discussion such that cooperative communication should lead to more positive evaluations whereas adversarial communication should lead to negative evaluations.

**Discussion Appraisals**

Appraisal of the group discussion can be measured across two dimensions important to political development. The first dimension, **knowledge gained**, addresses whether participants feel as though they learned something from their discussion. Some of the earliest work in political communication (e.g., Two-Step Flow, Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) argued that the virtue of interpersonal political communication was its unique ability to efficiently transmit relevant political information. If people believe they could easily learn something through political discussions, the likelihood for future discussion is increased. The second dimension is **decision satisfaction**, defined as the degree to which participants liked their group’s decision, and believed it to be high in quality. Satisfaction with the group’s political discussion and decision may promote future discussions of a similar ilk. Research examining jury duty (Gastil, Burkhalter, & Black, 2007) and online deliberation (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009) supports this idea. Thus, perception of knowledge gained and satisfaction with the group’s decision are considered evidence of a positive political experience.

**Hypotheses**

Our first hypothesis predicts that cooperative communication is positively associated with the outcomes of knowledge gained and decision satisfaction. We derive this hypothesis from literature on group decision making. Research on group decision rules has shown that group
members are more satisfied with decisions made under unanimity rule than majority rule (Kaplan & Miller, 1987). Unanimity rule requires that all group members’ opinions be considered in the final group decision, promoting more inclusiveness and fairness than majority rule. Alper, Tjosvold, and Law (1998) found that constructive controversy during team discussion positively predicted members’ confidence in the team and perceptions of the team’s effectiveness (which included, in part, member satisfaction with the team’s work, akin to our group decision-satisfaction measure). Tjosvold, Wedley, and Field (1986) defined constructive controversy as “the open-minded discussion of opposing positions” (p. 36) – a process that resembles cooperative communication: all members feel understood, included in discussion, and respected despite disagreement. Thomas and Fink (1961) found that open sharing of views during group discussion led to more satisfaction with the group decision. Finally, Gastil (2008) contended that deliberation forums are effective to the extent that the following social processes are adhered to: Adequate distribution of speaking turns, empathy, mutual comprehension, and respect. This research suggests that a cooperative discussion colors group members’ evaluation of group outcomes, improving their satisfaction with the decision and possibly judging their experience as one in which they gained knowledge. We propose the following hypothesis:

H1. A cooperative communication style will positively predict a) knowledge gained and b) group decision satisfaction.

Our second hypothesis predicts that adversarial communication is negatively associated with the outcomes of knowledge gained and decision satisfaction. Other research has demonstrated that the presence of an open and inclusive discussion process promotes positive evaluations of the group’s outcomes without simultaneously examining the relative and unique contributions of adversarial communication to these same evaluations. Mansbridge (1980) noted that adversarial communication in the political context is common and cautioned that the possibility for interpersonal conflict leads some to avoid politics altogether (Ulbig & Funk, 1999). We expected that the presence of hostility, tension, and conflict within the discussion should lead to a less pleasant experience in a similar way that a cooperative discussion leads to a more pleasant experience. We advance the following hypothesis:

H2. An adversarial communication style will negatively predict a) knowledge gained and b) group decision satisfaction.

Method

Participants

A sample of 162 undergraduate students at a large Midwestern University provided data for this experiment, creating a total of 54 three-person groups (36 mixed-sex groups, 14 all-female groups, and four all-male groups), and was 40.1% female. The average age was 19.33 years ($SD = 1.06$). The sample was predominately White (78.3%) with 8.7% identifying as African American, 4.3% Asian, 2.2% Chicano/Latino/Hispanic, 2.2% Middle Eastern, 4.3% Mixed, with the remaining students reporting “Other.” Students received credit in the communication course in return for their participation.

Procedure

Six students per session were brought into the laboratory and randomly assigned to a three-person group. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to obtain student opinions regarding a local policy dealing with drug-related violent crime. Groups were provided with a three-page packet that they were told to complete which consisted of a description of the issue, brainstorming questions, and a “decision” page where the group had to agree on their final policy proposal. Group discussions were videotaped and transcribed (average word count of
Political Group Discussion

1808. 53, \( SD = 1083.76 \) (per discussion) and lasted, on average, 24 minutes. Participants then completed a post-discussion survey that included questions about their group’s communication style and an appraisal of their experience.

Group Task

Participants were told that they would have to create a policy recommendation for how to deal with drug-related violent crime. This topic was previously used with college students (Gastil, Black, & Moscovitz, 2008), and was pilot tested to ensure students had an opinion on this matter. Pilot testing \((N = 178)\) confirmed that students thought this issue was interesting \((M = 4.45, \ SD = 1.35\) on a seven-point scale with 7 indicating high interest) and important \((M = 5.20, \ SD = 1.21\) on a seven-point scale with 7 indicating high importance). This issue was further chosen because it drew upon both liberal and conservative values and because prior knowledge and opinions on the issue were unlikely.\(^1\) We hoped that these qualities would make the group discussion more impactful and novel. The actual task consisted of two steps aimed at creating a policy proposal. After a brief introduction of the issue, students were provided with a list of “brainstorming questions” designed to have students think about multiple dimensions of the issue. This step was included to prolong group discussions. The group could not move on to the next question until they reached consensus about their groups’ stance on four questions such as, “certain drugs (specified) should carry a harsher sentence than others.” Following the brainstorming task, groups proceeded onto the “policy proposal” in which they selected options (from a multiple-choice questionnaire) to include in their policy. Following this discussion, all group members individually completed a questionnaire about their experience. Overall, each session took approximately 45 minutes.

Measures

For all scales, the response scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Final versions of each scale are located in Appendix A. A mean-replace imputation technique was utilized to fill in missing data. The reason for this was that if a participant missed one item, their scale average could not be registered and subsequently data at the group level would be lost. In sum, the mean replace technique replaced less than 1% of the data (17 items in total).\(^2\)

Communication style. Two scales were created to assess perceptions of cooperative and adversarial communication within the group discussion.\(^3\) The cooperative communication scale \((M = 4.63, \ SD = 0.55)\) was comprised of seven items \((\alpha = .89)\) and the adversarial communication scale \((M = 1.47, \ SD = 0.60)\) was comprised of five items \((\alpha = .79)\), with both scales demonstrating acceptable reliability. These scales were negatively correlated, \(r (160) = -.77, p < .001\).

Discussion Appraisal. Discussion appraisals were measured using two scales. The first assessed knowledge gained and was comprised of five items \((M = 3.41, \ SD = 0.77, \alpha = .74)\). The second measure, members’ satisfaction with their group decision included seven items \((M = 4.39, \ SD = 1.083.76, \alpha = .76)\).

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1 Political ideology (measured from 1 very liberal to 7 very conservative) was unrelated to interest in the issue \((r (75) = -.21)\) and issue importance \((r (75) = -.04)\).

2 All analyses were run with and without the imputed data. Because substantive conclusions were unaffected, we report the results with this correction.

3 The cooperative and adversarial scales were treated separately due to the results from an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using a Principle Components Analysis with Varimax Rotation. EFA is recommended in this case because the items are new and the scale is being developed (Wegener & Fabrigar, 2004), and it allowed us to identify possible cross-factor loadings. Based on this analysis, the cooperative scale (Eigenvalue = 6.31, 52.6% of the variance) and adversarial scale (Eigenvalue = 1.01, 8.4% of the variance) loaded on two independent factors using the standard criteria of an Eigenvalue over 1 and observations from a Scree plot. Thus both factors should be retained (Kaiser, 1960). The Eigenvalue for the first factor not retained was 0.80. The Rotated Component Matrix indicated that cooperative and adversarial items differentially loaded onto these two factors. For the first factor (cooperative communication), loadings for cooperative items ranged from .50 to .83, whereas adversarial items ranged from -.41 to -.11. For the second factor (adversarial communication), loadings for adversarial items ranged from .50 to .79, whereas cooperative items ranged from -.50 to -.06.
Hypothesis Tests

In the subsequent hypothesis tests, all reports are provided at both the individual level and group level of analysis based on tests of interdependence and hierarchical linear modeling. In the multiple regression analysis, cooperative communication and adversarial communication measures were included as predictors with either knowledge gained or decision satisfaction as the outcome measures. The results from the omnibus model predicting knowledge gained approached significance at the individual level, \( F(2, 153) = 3.01, p = .052, \text{Adj.} R^2 = .03. \) Additionally, both cooperative communication \((b = .26, se = .16, t = 2.40, p < .05)\) and adversarial communication \((b = .23, se = .18, t = 2.06, p < .05)\) emerged as positive, and significant, predictors of knowledge gained. Although this finding was consistent with Hypothesis 1a, the finding for adversarial communication was in the opposite direction predicted in Hypothesis 2a. At the group level, \( F(2, 50) = 2.71, p = .076, \text{Adj.} R^2 = .06, \) only cooperative communication emerged as a positive and significant predictor, \( b = .49, se = .35, t = 2.33, p < .05, \) consistent with Hypothesis 1a and inconsistent with Hypothesis 2a.

The omnibus model predicting decision satisfaction at the individual level was statistically significant, \( F(2, 159) = 89.61, p < .01, \text{Adj.} R^2 = .52. \) In this model, cooperative communication emerged as a strong and significant predictor of decision satisfaction, \( b = .49, se = .10, t = 5.78, p < .01, \) in support of Hypothesis 1b. Additionally, adversarial communication was also significant in the predicted direction, \( b = -.28, se = .10, t = -3.25, p < .01, \) supporting Hypothesis 2b. At the group level, the regression model was also significant, \( F(2, 51) = 18.79, p < .01, \text{Adj.} R^2 = .40, \) but only cooperative communication emerged as a significant predictor in the predicted direction, \( b = .57, se = .20, t = 3.46, p < .01, \) consistent with Hypothesis 1b and inconsistent with Hypothesis 2b.

Exploratory Analyses

The prior analyses test whether one’s own (or the group’s) perceptions of communication styles predict one’s own (or the group’s) knowledge gained and decision satisfaction. These tests do not speak to the impact of the other two group members’ perceptions of communication styles on one’s own knowledge gained and decision satisfaction. To answer this question, the average of the other two group members’ reporting of cooperative communication \((M = 4.66, SD = 0.45)\) and adversarial communication \((M = 1.52, SD = 0.48)\) were used to predict one’s own knowledge gained and decision satisfaction in two multiple regression models. The knowledge-gained model was significant, \( F(2, 159) = 7.42, \text{Adj.} R^2 = .09. \) Others’ perceptions of the group’s cooperative communication was a positive and significant predictor of one’s own knowledge gained, \( b = .38, se = .12, t = 3.73, p < .05. \) Adversarial communication was not a significant predictor of decision satisfaction.

\[ SD = 0.67, \alpha = .89. \] The knowledge gained and satisfaction measures were not correlated \((r = .12, p = .115)\) and thus were analyzed separately.

Results

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4 The intra-class correlation coefficients calculated for cooperative communication \((p = .08, p = .15)\), adversarial communication \((p = .15, p = .06)\), and knowledge gained \((p = .16, p < .05)\) reached the p < .20 significance level recommended by Kashy and Kenny (2000), suggesting positive interdependence across members of the same group. Only the group decision satisfaction measure did not show significant interdependence within groups \((p = .01, p = .48). \) Given significant interdependence for the communication measures, we tested whether a multi-level model would fit the data. We tested whether group-level cooperative and adversarial communication predicted knowledge gained and decision satisfaction at the individual level using Hierarchical Linear Modeling. Results from the initial null models suggested that multi-level modeling was not appropriate for these data.

5 Statistical conclusions were affected by the presence of outliers \((n = 6)\) in the model predicting knowledge gained. Once these outliers were removed (based on the criterion of a Studentized Residual that exceeds three) the model was improved and is presented in the results section. For the group-level regression model, one group was removed based on the same criterion. For the model predicting decision satisfaction, however, the presence of outliers \((n = 5)\) for the individual-level analysis, and two groups for the group-level analysis did not affect conclusions. Therefore, all participants were included in the decision satisfaction analyses.
predictor. The model predicting decision satisfaction was also statistically significant, $F(2, 159) = 56.29, p < .01$, Adj. $R^2 = .41$. Others’ perceptions of the group’s cooperative communication positively predicted one’s own satisfaction with the group decision, $b = .53, se = .07, t = 6.61, p < .05$. Others’ perceived adversarial communication approached conventional levels of significance, suggesting a tendency for it to impair one’s own decision satisfaction, $b = -.15, se = .06, t = -1.90, p = .06$.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this investigation was to understand the role communication plays in fostering a positive political experience. Much research in interpersonal political communication champions the role political talk plays in the development of political attitudes. Although past work highlighted the importance of having frequent political discussions (Carpini et al., 2004), our research found that communication style affects these attitudes as well.

Our most notable finding is that regardless of the unit of analysis and regardless of the outcome variable, cooperative communication consistently emerged as a reliable, and positive, predictor of a positive political experience. As group members (self or others) rated their discussion as more cooperative, they also were more likely to report knowledge gained from the discussion and satisfaction with their group’s decision, all in support of the hypotheses. Measures of cooperative and adversarial communication were negatively correlated, suggesting that cooperative group discussions tended to show little adversarial communication. The effects of cooperative communication, however, emerged when controlling for the shared variance with adversarial communication. To our knowledge, this is the first investigation to show that an open, cooperative, and amiable group discussion uniquely fosters a positive appraisal of the group experience over and above the presence of adversarial communication.

Overall, cooperative communication was a more reliable predictor of discussion appraisals than adversarial communication. As expected, adversarial communication was associated with lower group decision satisfaction (at the individual level of analysis). Most of the other tests with adversarial communication as a predictor, however, were nonsignificant. This is especially surprising given that bad emotions or feedback are often more salient than positive emotions and feedback (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). One statistical explanation is that lower reliability in the adversarial measure may have attenuated the size of this estimate. We think that this explanation is unlikely given that the measure did have an acceptable coefficient alpha. Another explanation is that the discussion topic was not politically divisive thereby limiting the presence of extreme adversarial communication. A politically neutral topic, coupled with politeness norms might have hindered our ability to fully understand the relative effect of adversarial and cooperative communication on appraisals of the discussion. Future research would benefit from including a more divisive topic in an effort to mirror Mansbridge’s (1980) conception of adversarial communication as being hostile and contentious. Interestingly, an innocuous version of adversarial communication may function differently than we expected, possibly benefiting perceptions of knowledge gained. Even though adversarial communication may not have facilitated a decision that members liked, they admitted that they learned a lot in the process and the discussion prompted reflection and insight. This finding suggests that the impact of adversarial communication on group outcomes may involve both positive and negative appraisals – an idea worthy of additional research.

Importantly, questions about the content of group discussion were absent from both communication measures. There is no reason to believe that groups that engaged in a cooperative style of communication generated better political arguments or offered more factual knowledge.
than groups scoring lower on this scale. This suggests that a cooperative communication style alone can lead discussion partners to believe that they learned more and performed better on the task at hand. An encouraging implication is that while political knowledge cannot be easily coached, communication style can. Training people to undertake political conversations in a cooperative fashion (in part by instilling cooperative goals) might lead to more successful initial political encounters. Alper, et al. (1998) showed that cooperative goals positively predicted and competitive goals negatively predicted constructive controversy in teams. Their finding suggests that creating a cooperative goal structure for political discussion groups may promote cooperative communication and future political engagement. If the DLM is viable, improving the success of initial political encounters should increase the likelihood for the diffusion process to occur. And it is this process that is fundamental to political engagement and growth.
Appendix A

Cooperative Communication
1. Our group worked cooperatively together.
2. Everyone seemed agreeable in our group.
3. Everyone’s opinions were respected.
4. Our group members listened to one another.
5. Our group got along.
6. Our group worked well together.
7. I felt comfortable sharing my opinions with the group.

Adversarial Communication
1. There was no tension in our group (reverse-coded).
2. There were some tensions in our group.
3. Our group argued.
4. People had to repeat themselves to get their point across.
5. I could detect some hostility between group members.

Knowledge-Gained
1. The discussion forced me to think about things I would not often think about.
2. My knowledge in this area increased as a result of our groups’ discussion.
3. The discussion helped me to realize the difficulty of some political decisions.
4. There were perspectives brought up in the discussion today that I had not previously thought about.
5. I learned something from our group’s discussion.

Decision-Satisfaction
1. I would support the policy decision our group generated if it were on a ballot.
2. Overall, our group made a good policy decision.
3. I am satisfied with our group decision.
4. Overall, our group made a poor policy decision (reverse-coded)
5. If I were now going to create my own policy decision, it would be different than my groups’. (reverse-coded)
6. I am dissatisfied with my group’s final decision (reverse-coded)
7. If implemented, our policy would fail. (reverse-coded)
References


