

ONLINE DELIBERATION AND ITS INFLUENCE: THE ELECTRONIC DIALOGUE PROJECT IN CAMPAIGN 2000

VINCENT PRICE
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ABSTRACT

The Electronic Dialogue Project, designed to test the expectation that group deliberation produces deeper public engagement with political issues, assembled representative groups of citizens to participate in online political deliberations during the 2000 presidential campaign. Sixty groups, drawn from a random sample of Americans, engaged in a series of monthly, real-time electronic discussions about issues facing the country and the unfolding presidential campaign. Preliminary results suggest that online discussions fostered increased political engagement and general community participation. Controlling for initial trust and propensity to attend, the number of discussion events attended is a significant predictor of post-project social trust. The results support the theoretical connection of social capital to active political participation.

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Discussion among citizens is thought to be the foundation of sound public opinion. The “classical” conception of public opinion viewed it as an emergent product of widespread popular conversation (see, for example, Blumer 1946; Berelson 1956). When collective action is required and shared norms do not offer adequate guidance, democratic societies sort out conflicting preferences for action through discussion. Opinions formed in isolation, without the benefit of deliberation and debate, may reflect *mass* preferences; but without the back-and-forth of disagreement and discussion, one does not have true *public* opinion (Fishkin 1991, 1995). Discussion expands the range of ideas and arguments brought to bear on an issue, forces people to consider and defend their views, and fosters understanding of multiple points of view (Gutmann and Thompson 1996). Engaging in political debate is also thought to help people develop the sorts of abilities, attitudes, and motivations that enable deeper engagement in political affairs (Finkel 1985; Gastil, Deess and Weiser, 2002). By promoting basic norms such as social trust and efficacy, political deliberation fosters electoral engagement and, beyond that, engagement in one’s community.

Viewed in this light, contemporary civic life in American has been judged rather poorly by many accounts and is perhaps getting worse. Survey research has provided consistent indications that most American citizens rarely care deeply about or talk about political affairs (see, e.g., Neuman 1986). When most people do discuss politics, their conversations usually take place within primary groups of family and close friends—that is, among like-minded people who largely resemble each other socially and politically (Wyatt, Katz and Kim 2000). Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that most opinions given to pollsters often seem poorly considered, superficial, and unbolstered by much political knowledge (Delli-Carpini and Keeter 1992).

Many researchers have argued that the citizenry no longer functions as an effective public; it has been converted into a body that *consumes* political views disseminated by elites through the mass media, rather than an autonomous, deliberating body that *discovers* its own views through conversation (Mills 1956; Habermas 1962/1989; Ginsberg 1986; Fishkin 1991).

According to Putnam (1995, 2000), civic engagement in America has been in decline since at least the early 1960s. Not only are forms of formal political participation such as voting becoming rarer, so are many forms of voluntary community association that afford citizens the chance to meet, to talk, and to organize. Armed with trend analyses of multiple survey data sets suggesting broad declines in social trust, group affiliations, and sociability, Putnam argues that the “social capital” needed to maintain a healthy democracy has eroded.

Not all observers share this worrisome portrait of civic life (e.g., Yankelovich 1991), and others—even if they find problems with current conditions—hold out hope for the future. With the advent of new, interactive modes of electronic communication and the World Wide Web, some have taken the hopeful view that these might energize the citizenry, creating novel

opportunities for widespread exchange of ideas, debate and thus new forms of “teledemocracy” (Arterton 1987; Becker and Slaton 2000). However, views about future prospects, and more particularly the capacities of Internet-based communication to foster political discussion and heightened engagement, vary widely. Aside from concerns about lack of representativeness owing to social-structural biases in access to and use of the Internet, analysts point to more fundamental problems. Fishkin (2000) has argued that Internet discussions lack the richness of face-to-face exchanges, and are too superficial to sustain sound political deliberation. Sunstein (2001) warns that the Internet, far from encouraging the give-and-take of political dialogue over shared issues, will instead encourage “enclave” communication among very like-minded citizens, producing polarization of opinions, widening gulfs between extreme sides on public issues, and facilitating “cyber-cascades” of unfounded and often false information that may diffuse rapidly through such enclaves. Putnam (2000, 177) remains skeptical of the Internet’s capacities for regenerating social capital, in part because “computer-mediated communication networks tend to be sparse and unbounded,” encouraging “easy-in, easy out” and “drive-by” relationships rather than the dense networks of closer acquaintance promoted by face-to-face contact.

Regardless of their relative optimism or pessimism, most theorists and researchers share the fundamental notion that citizen discussion—in ordinary if not necessarily in Web-based situations—contributes to improved opinions and fosters civic engagement. Yet these basic propositions remain open to question. First, although numerous surveys find that people who discuss public affairs are more knowledgeable about politics and more politically involved than their peers (e.g., Robinson and Levy 1986), it is very difficult to sort out whether discussion is a *causal* factor or merely one of myriad “symptoms” of good citizenship. Survey-based measures of political conversation, despite their many demonstrated utilities (e.g., Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995) are of limited value in trying to tease out such causal connections. People who discuss public affairs are better educated, more attentive to media messages, more knowledgeable about politics, and more politically involved (Robinson and Levy 1986; Weimann 1982; La Due Lake and Huckfeldt 1998; McLeod *et al.* 1999). Where some recent studies have directly engaged citizens in discussion—for example, the “deliberative polls” conducted by Fishkin (1995) and others—these have tended toward simple input/output models of deliberation effects and have not tested, for example, whether exposure to disagreement in particular has any of the putative benefits it has been accorded. In all likelihood, experimental designs will be needed to sort out causal connections among these various characteristics and behaviors (Putnam 2000).

Second, there are reasons to argue that discussion—whether face-to-face or computer mediated—might not necessarily produce salutary effects. Undesired social-normative pressures such as tyranny of the majority, conformity, or spirals of silence may indeed result (Noelle-Neumann 1984;

MacKuen 1990). Further, as Sunstein (2001) shows, group discussion has been known to produce undesired collective outcomes, such as opinion polarization or shifts of opinion in new and risky directions (see also Brown 2000). Disagreement may be fundamentally uncomfortable for citizens, and it could conceivably lead to withdrawal rather than increased engagement. Consequently, despite their widespread appearance in theory and research, the propositions that discussion improves opinion quality and that it fosters civic engagement actually lack conclusive empirical evidence.

THE ELECTRONIC DIALOGUE PROJECT IN CAMPAIGN 2000

The Electronic Dialogue Project was designed in large part to address this issue. In this project, the first ever of its kind, representative groups of citizens participated in online political deliberations during the presidential campaign. Sixty groups, drawn from a probability sample of Americans, engaged in monthly electronic discussions about issues facing the country and the unfolding presidential campaign.

The project, sponsored in part by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, takes advantage of unique capacities of the Internet and World Wide Web for circulating information, conveying public discourse, and gathering survey data. The novel design enables exploring complex connections between individual opinions and collective group outcomes, examining how much participants learn from group interactions, determining the extent to which unique ideas and arguments are generated by discussion—and examining whether discussion engenders civic-minded attitudes and increased participation. A research setting is created where the putative advantages of group opinion, rooted in discussion and disagreement, can be tested in a rigorous fashion. The project identifies several target outcomes: opinion change, opinion quality (especially the ability to hold “considered” opinions that take account of others’ perspectives), electoral engagement, social trust, and broader engagement with one’s community. Several, less beneficial outcomes are examined as well: potential distortions induced by group processes, negative responses to political conflict, and possible alienating or enervating effects of having one’s views challenged by others.

The study’s three main theoretical contributions can be summarized succinctly: learning whether group discussion indeed improves the quality of public opinion, determining whether it facilitates civic engagement, and exploring what characteristics of groups and group interaction make important differences in opinion quality and engagement. The study also provides a rich experimental venue for learning more about interactive surveys, gaining practical experience with new panel survey techniques, and discovering exciting new ways to complement standardized survey measures of public opinion with conversational assessments. This article outlines the design of the project and summarizes some of the key findings to date. The following is only an overview

of results; specific details of the analyses are presented elsewhere. In keeping with the theme of other articles in this issue, the findings linking project participation with sociability and civic engagement are highlighted.

STUDY DESIGN

The Electronic Dialogue 2000 project is distinguished from other Internet-based studies in a number of ways. While most studies examine asynchronous message boards or less formal and happenstance "chat" experiences on the Web, this project created synchronous, real-time, moderated group discussions that were designed specifically to produce useful citizen deliberation. Second, the project did not rely upon a convenience sample of Internet users, as is common in Web-based studies; instead, it began with a broadly representative sample of Americans and attempted to recruit from that sample a set of sixty discussion groups that would be, in their entirety, as nearly representative as possible of U.S. citizens.

The project involved a multi-wave, multi-group panel design, lasting roughly one year. All data gathering was conducted over the World Wide Web. The core of the project consisted of those sixty groups of citizens who engaged in a series of monthly, real-time electronic discussions about issues facing the country and the unfolding presidential campaign. A set of baseline surveys in February and March 2000 assessed participants' opinions, communication behaviors, knowledge of public affairs and of the presidential candidates, and a variety of demographic, personality, and background variables. Subsequent monthly group deliberations began in April and generally included pre- and post-discussion surveys. The full text of all group discussions, which lasted an hour apiece, was recorded. A series of end-of-project surveys were then conducted in January and February 2001.

Initial Recruitment: In February 2000, a random sample of American citizens age 18 and older ($N = 3967$) was drawn from a nationally representative panel of survey respondents maintained by Knowledge Networks of Menlo Park, California. The Knowledge Networks panel includes a large number of households (in the tens of thousands) that have agreed to accept free WebTV equipment and service in exchange for completing periodic surveys on line.¹

The aim of the initial sample survey was to recruit participants into three groups for the Electronic Dialogue project: first, a main group of people who would participate in monthly, hour-long moderated discussions about the presidential election in small groups (target $N = 900$); second, a control group of people who would complete all monthly surveys associated with the project but would *not* engage in online discussions (target $N = 100$); and a third group of people who would complete only the project's initial baseline surveys in February and March 2000 and the final, post-project surveys one year later (target $N = 500$). The third group was intended as a control for panel effects, and

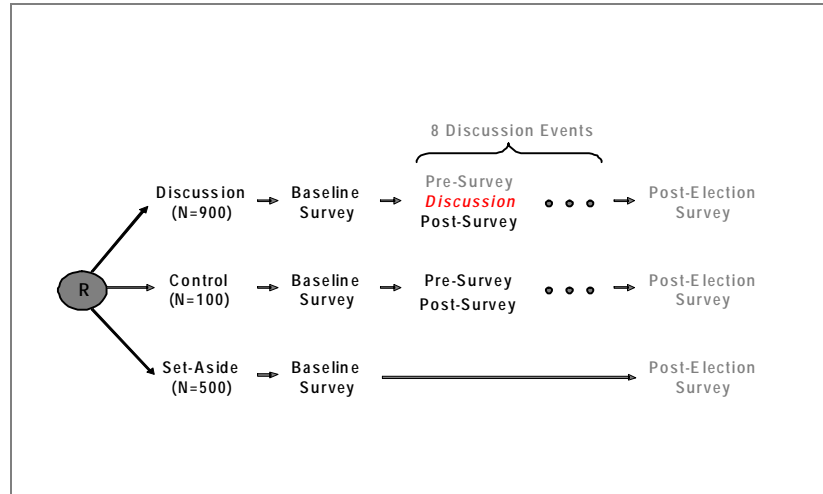
also as a potential “set-aside” pool of new recruits for use should attrition necessitate additions to either of the two panel groups. All members of the main discussion panel and the survey-only control panel were released from all obligations to complete other surveys for Knowledge Networks, aside from those issued as part of the Electronic Dialogue project. Assignment to the three groups (main discussion panel, survey-only control panel, and pre/post only “set-aside” group) was randomized. Figure 1 illustrates the project design.

The initial recruitment survey provided a brief description of the year-long project and emphasized the need for a representative sample. If respondents expressed an interest in participating, they were then given a consent form to complete (randomized to correspond to each of the three main experimental panels). Overall, 51 percent of those recruited agreed to participate and completed the consent forms, with overall acceptance rates roughly similar across the three groups of respondents. The final number of recruited project participants was 2014. Of these, 1076 were assigned to the main discussion panel, 168 to the survey-only control panel, and the remainder to the pre/post “set aside” group. Analysis of group characteristics (demographics, age, race, gender, political interest, ideology, and party leanings) confirmed that the randomization was successful.

The Baseline Surveys: Two baseline surveys were conducted, the first from February 8 to March 10, and the second March 10–23. All three groups (discussion, survey-only control, and pre/post only “set aside”) were contacted. The surveys included extensive measures of media use, interest in the presidential campaign, general political knowledge and knowledge of the campaign, political discussion, and a wide variety of political attitudes and opinions. Some 1801 respondents completed the first baseline (89%), and 1743 completed the second (87%). Both baselines were completed by 1684 respondents, or 84 percent of those who completed consent forms. Cooperation rates were generally similar across the three main groups.

Characteristics of the obtained baseline sample are outlined in Appendix A. Shown in the table are basic demographics for the full recruitment survey ($N = 3967$), those completing both baseline surveys ($N = 1684$), and those completing both baselines who were assigned to the Discussion group ($N = 915$). For comparison purposes, the left column of Appendix A presents results from a national RDD survey with identically worded questions fielded on the same days as the Knowledge Networks baselines for the Electronic Dialogue Project. In general, the samples are rather similar; however, the final baseline and discussion group samples tend to over represent males, and to under represent those with less than a high school education, non-whites, and—especially—those who have low levels of interest in politics. This is perhaps not surprising in light of the fact that participants agreed to join a year-long project associated with the presidential election campaign—a substantially greater commitment than that generally associated with completing surveys. Analyses

FIGURE 1: DESIGN OF THE ELECTRONIC DIALOGUE 2000 PROJECT



of the other groups not depicted in Appendix A (the survey-only control group and the set-aside group) found that they matched very closely the discussion group on a wide variety of demographic, behavioral and attitudinal variables.

Organization of the Small-Group Discussions: Beginning in April, participants in the main discussion group were invited to attend small group (i.e., 5–10 person) discussions once a month. The intention was to maintain consistent group membership over the course of the campaign. Anticipating far less than perfect attendance, and in order to insure adequate group size, a total of sixty groups were formed, with roughly fifteen participants per group. Because groups were to meet live and in real-time, with membership straddling several time zones, a complete listing of participant availability (in the afternoons and evenings, seven days a week) and rank-ordered preference for meeting times was obtained from all respondents. Analysis of these data suggested that sixteen timeslots would accommodate over 60 percent of participants' first choices of meeting times and would meet virtually all availabilities (though for many participants not a top choice). Participants were offered these sixteen possible time slots and were requested to choose *all* timeslots for which they would be available. Final groups, sixty in all, were then constituted.

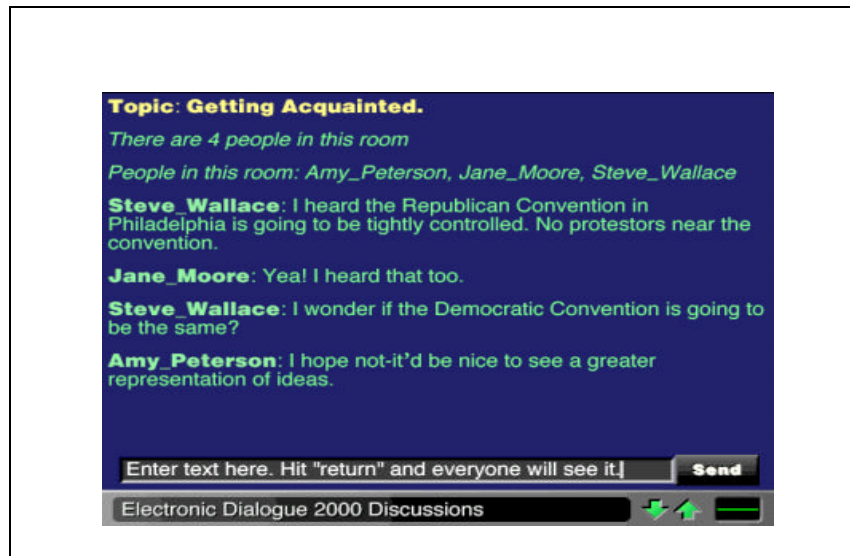
Because of the theoretical interest in the impact of disagreement, composition of the discussion groups was manipulated in order to insure variance in levels of political agreement and opposition. Specifically, three experimental conditions were created: homogeneously liberal groups ($n = 20$), homogeneously conservative groups ($n = 20$), and heterogeneous groups

constituted of members from across the political spectrum ($n = 20$). For this purpose, a 7-point party identification scale and a 5-point political ideology scale were combined into a single index, which ranged from -5 (strong Republicans/very conservative), through 0 (independents/moderates/other centrists), to $+5$ (strong Democrats/very liberal). Conservative groups were drawn from the lower end of this continuum (the 20 groups averaged -3.1 on the index, with a standard deviation of 1.6), and liberal groups from the upper end (the 20 groups averaged 2.5 with an SD of 1.6); the heterogeneous groups were drawn from the entire continuum (the 20 groups averaged $-.33$ with an SD of 3.5 , more than twice as large as the SD across homogeneous groups).

The Discussion Events: Most monthly discussion “events” consisted of three parts: a pre-discussion survey, an online discussion, and a follow-up post-discussion survey. Participants in the main discussion panel ($N = 915$) were asked to do all three parts, whereas those in the control panel ($N=139$) completed only the survey portions (see Figure 1).

Participants logged on to their “discussion rooms” at prearranged times, using their WebTV devices, television sets, and infrared keyboards. A sample view of the format for the discussion screen is presented in Figure 2 (with hypothetical participants). The full TV screen was used. Participants typed their comments and, when they hit the “enter” key on their keyboards, would post these comments to all other group members present in the room.

All discussions were moderated by project assistants working out of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, and were carefully coordinated and scripted to maintain consistency across groups. Prompts and questions were “dropped” by moderators into the discussions at prearranged times. The full text of all discussions, including time stamps for each comment, was automatically recorded (see the sample transcript, with pseudonyms, in Figure 3). Discussions were lively and engaging, and participants contributed on average between 200 and 300 words per event. Topics of discussion included which issues respondents thought were of importance to the country and which ought to be the focus of attention in the campaign, specific issues and policy proposals (e.g., in areas of education, crime and public safety, taxes, and foreign affairs), characteristics of the candidates, campaign advertising, and the role of the media. An outline of the discussions and the dates on which they occurred is presented in Appendix B. The first event, with discussions held in mid-April, focused on getting acquainted and identifying issues of main concern to participants. The second, held in mid-May, focused on educational issues; and the third event, in mid-June, dealt with issues of crime and public safety. The fourth, held at the end of July and in early August, centered on participants’ views of campaigning. The main campaign season involved three further discussions. Just after Labor Day in September, groups viewed and then talked about advertisements from each campaign. Following the first presidential and vice presidential debates in October, groups

FIGURE 2: SAMPLE VIEW OF WEBTV "DISCUSSION ROOM"**FIGURE 3: SAMPLE DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT**

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[21:40] *** MODERATOR 'Some argue that the national budget surplus should be
used to cut taxes. Others argue that the surplus should be used to cut the
deficit or pay for other government programs. What do you think should be
done?'
[21:41] <Susan> pay off the deficit the little it bush would give me back
would be better spent to insure social security and other social problems
[21:41] <Bob> do not pay for more government programs. we have enough
already. a small tax cut, and the bulk should be put into paying down the
deficit
[21:41] <James> I think the National debt should be paid off with the surplus,
then other programs could be looked at
[21:41] <Mary> give us a break n our taxes...it's tiime
[21:42] <Bob> a large tax break could increase inflation
[21:43] <Susan> that is where bush is so wrong. even the critics say his plan
won't work
[21:43] <Susan> tax plan
[21:43] <Bob> isn't that what critics are supposed to say?
[21:44] <Susan> lol
[21:44] <Susan> they aren't criticizing gores plan
[21:44] <Bob> are you referring to the liberal media by any chance?
[21:45] <Susan> no! real people economists!
[21:45] <Susan> bsh promises the oon - gore is realistic and practical
[21:45] <Bob> i'm tired of hearing every time gore talks tax cuts its for the
wealthy. he has beaten that dead horse too long, it's not accurate.
[21:46] <James> they neither one do anything with out congress going along
with it
[21:46] <Susan> but lets face it - nothing passes without the congress and you
know how they can stonewall things
[21:46] <Susan> so most of these promises mean nothing
[21:46] <Bob> that's a fact
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discussed the candidates' stands on health care and taxes, and how effective they thought each campaign had been to that point. In the week prior to the election, groups talked about a variety of other issues that had surfaced during the campaign. With the election results still in doubt, groups met again in early December to discuss the electoral process, how each candidate and the press were handling the disputes over the election, and the role of the Electoral College.

End of Project Surveys and Final Discussion: In January, two end-of-project surveys were conducted (see Figure 1). The first was fielded from January 4–18, and the second from January 19 to February 1. These surveys again included extensive measures of media use, participation in the presidential campaign, discussion behavior over the course of the campaign and in its aftermath, and a wide variety of political attitudes and opinions. All three original study groups surveyed during the project baseline (those invited to discussions, the survey-only control group, and the set-asides) were contacted for re-interview at this time.

Because of the unanticipated and unprecedented events following Election Day, the post-election discussion in December—which had originally been planned to include a project retrospective—became dedicated to a discussion of the contested election result. Thus, a final ninth discussion event was held in late February, following President George W. Bush's first major address to Congress. This final event served as an opportunity for project participants in the discussion group to consider the new President's agenda, their expectations for his administration, and to provide retrospective evaluations of the online deliberation experience.

In sum, the project amounted to a 28-wave panel study for the discussion group, and a 19-wave panel study for the survey-only control group. Given this extraordinary level of burden, it is not surprising that cooperation rates were far from perfect. However, as illustrated in Appendix C, the majority of study participants did complete most surveys. Survey cooperation rates were generally similar for both the discussion and control groups, hovering at around 70 percent early in the project and declining over the course of time to about 60 percent at the project's end (the separate "add-on" discussion following the end-of-project surveys met with somewhat weaker response).

By far the most demanding element of the project, and also the most novel, were the online discussions themselves. Rates of participation in these discussions ranged from about 40 percent at the outset and declined to roughly 30 percent toward the end, producing groups that averaged between five and six participants each. There was a fair degree of turnover in attendance from one event to the next. By the end of the eighth event in December, more than 70 percent of the discussion group (663 respondents) had attended at least one of the online discussions, and roughly 40 percent (or 350) had attended half or more of the events.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Who Participates?: The main thrust of this analysis focuses on the effects of participation in the Electronic Dialogue Project discussions. However, participation itself is also an outcome of some considerable interest, not the least because it represents a form of civic engagement worthy of understanding in its own right. Furthermore, while the vast majority of studies dealing with political and civic participation rely upon survey self-reports, here one has *actual* recorded behavior to observe. Finally, understanding influences on participation is necessary because any attempts to understand participation's effects must control for factors with which it may be confounded.

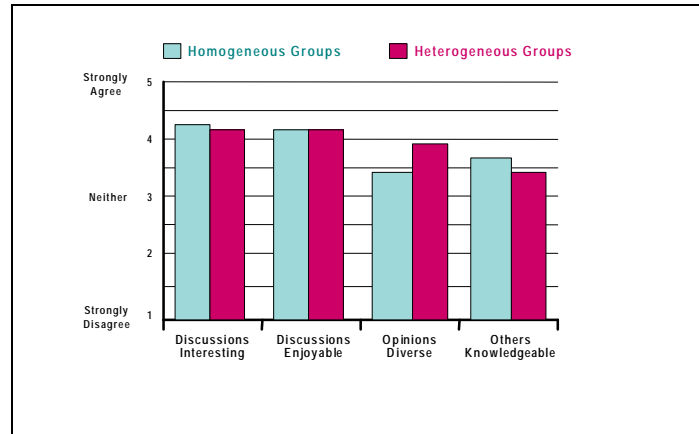
When first comparing the demographic characteristics of those who attended at least one of the discussions and those who failed to attend any, no significant differences were found by gender, region of the country, or political leanings.² However, people who showed up for the electronic discussions were less likely to be non-white and were significantly older and better educated than those who did not. The 60-and-older category was, in fact, three times larger in the discussion group than in the "no-show" group. Bivariate analyses found that those who attended the electronic conversations scored significantly higher than non-attendees on scales measuring political knowledge and interest in public affairs, which is not surprising given the focus of the project on the presidential campaign. Importantly, it was also found that interpersonal trust, political discussion, formal political participation (e.g., voting habits), and neighborhood participation (e.g., associations with community, school, and church groups) were each positively associated with attending online gatherings. There were, on the other hand, no significant differences in political efficacy or media exposure.³

Multivariate regressions predicting participation in the events were next conducted.⁴ Of the demographic variables, only age predicted participation after controls, such that older respondents were more likely to attend. Time constraints influenced participation in a number of ways. Having children at home, being employed full-time, or being a full-time student were each negatively associated with participation. The effect of time constraints was further demonstrated by the measure of schedule flexibility. The more flexible respondents (those who said they were available for participation in more timeslots during the preparation of group assignments) were considerably more likely to attend the project's electronic events. Several of the political variables were not significantly associated with online attendance once other factors were controlled. These included political efficacy, political interest and formal political participation. Political knowledge, on the other hand, remained a significant predictor.

The Role of Sociability and Social Capital: Even in the presence of strong multivariate controls—for time constraints, ideological tendencies, political knowledge, and demographic factors—political discussion, community participation, and interpersonal trust still significantly (and positively) predicted participation in the online discussions. The higher people scored on each of these measures, the higher were the estimated odds that they would participate in the electronic discussions, other things being equal. Overall, the pattern of coefficients strongly supports the view that “social capital” goes hand in hand with political participation (e.g., Putnam 1995). Trusting people who were engaged in their communities—even though these activities are not expressly political in nature—were more likely to attend. Meanwhile, mass media use had no such effect. In fact, after application of these extensive controls, it is actually the case that people who report higher levels of exposure to newspapers, TV, and talk radio were somewhat *less* likely to turn out for their online discussions.

The best multivariate models account for less than a quarter of the total variance in participation. To some extent this is good news, in the sense that random variation in participation would not have the adverse consequences for representation that systematic variations produce. There are doubtless a number of factors that could have affected attendance. Some people had unexpected interruptions (family emergencies or other sudden schedule changes). Others simply forgot (despite numerous email and telephone reminders). Others were confused by time zone differences, which is understandable in view of the fact that these deliberative groups included participants from all six U.S. time zones. Various technical difficulties might have hindered participation. The examination of available data, at any rate, indicates that these phenomena, while they did probably affect participation from time to time, did not have clearly detectable systematic effects. In the end, the Electronic Dialogue project succeeded in producing a sample of online discussants that was, despite some notable and understandable sample biases, nevertheless quite diverse and reasonably representative.

Reactions to the Discussions: Among those who did attend, response to the discussions was overwhelmingly positive. As illustrated in Figure 4, large majorities of participants rated the discussion experience as both interesting and enjoyable, and these positive reactions did not appear to diminish appreciably over time. Liking of the experience was also uniform across group heterogeneity conditions. On the other hand, as expected, participants in the heterogeneous groups were significantly more likely to agree that the opinions expressed in their group discussions were diverse; they were also slightly—but significantly—less likely to view other members of their group as knowledgeable.

FIGURE 4: DISCUSSANT PERCEPTIONS BY HETEROGENEITY MANIPULATION

Were the Discussions Substantive?: Did they shape opinion? Almost all groups, even those that were homogeneously liberal and conservative, produced both pro-and con-arguments. For example, in discussions of school vouchers, conservative groups averaged 7 pro-voucher arguments and 5 con-arguments, while liberal groups averaged 3 pro- and 8.5 con-arguments. As displayed in Figure 5, the arguments followed several main themes. The dominant argument in favor of vouchers, voiced in more than 60 percent of the groups, was that they would be a way of holding public schools accountable for their performance. Another main theme among supporters was that vouchers would foster competition, which would subsequently spur improvements in schools. On balance, however, citizens produced more arguments in opposition to vouchers than in favor. The principal reservations surrounded inequities that might be exacerbated by voucher programs, a possible draining of resources away from public schools, and concerns that vouchers would mean giving up on the very schools that require more support (arguments each voiced by roughly 70 percent of the groups).

Did these discussions produce any changes of opinion? The answer appears to be “yes.” As depicted in Figure 6, those who participated in the discussions concerning vouchers became significantly less favorable toward them, as measured on a post-test in the weeks following. Multivariate analyses of pre/post opinion change, controlling for the propensity to participate, confirms a significant effect of discussion. The changes are also not temporary, as indicated by a second post-test four months later (see Figure 6; interestingly, the nondiscussants follow a secular trend of weakening enthusiasm for vouchers, such that they end up in October roughly where the discussants were following their conversations in June).

Was it in fact the *arguments* generated by the groups that produced this change? Again, the answer appears to be “yes.” The first column of Table 1 presents an analysis of pre/post opinion change on vouchers, this time at the *group* level. Not surprisingly, groups’ prior levels of support for vouchers predict

FIGURE 5: DISTRIBUTION OF ARGUMENTS ON TUITION

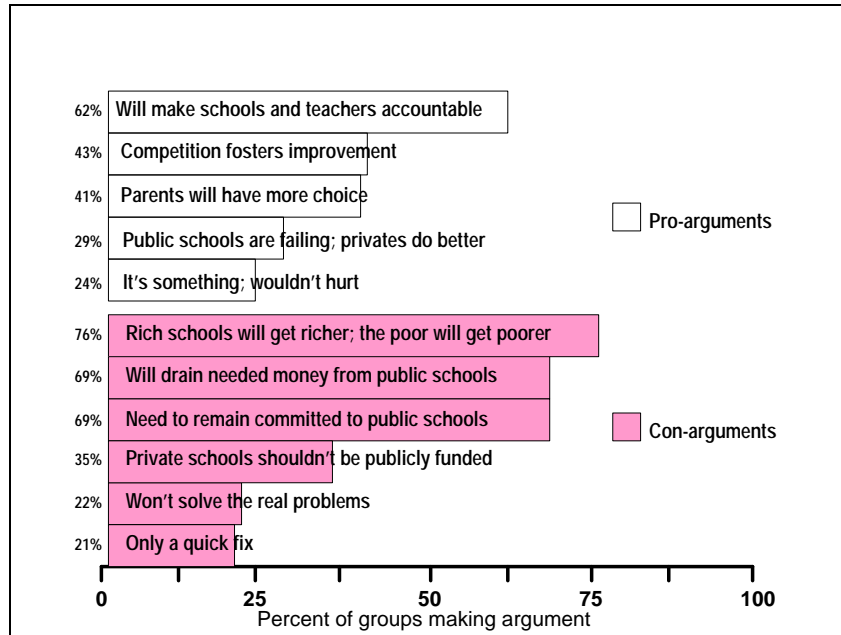
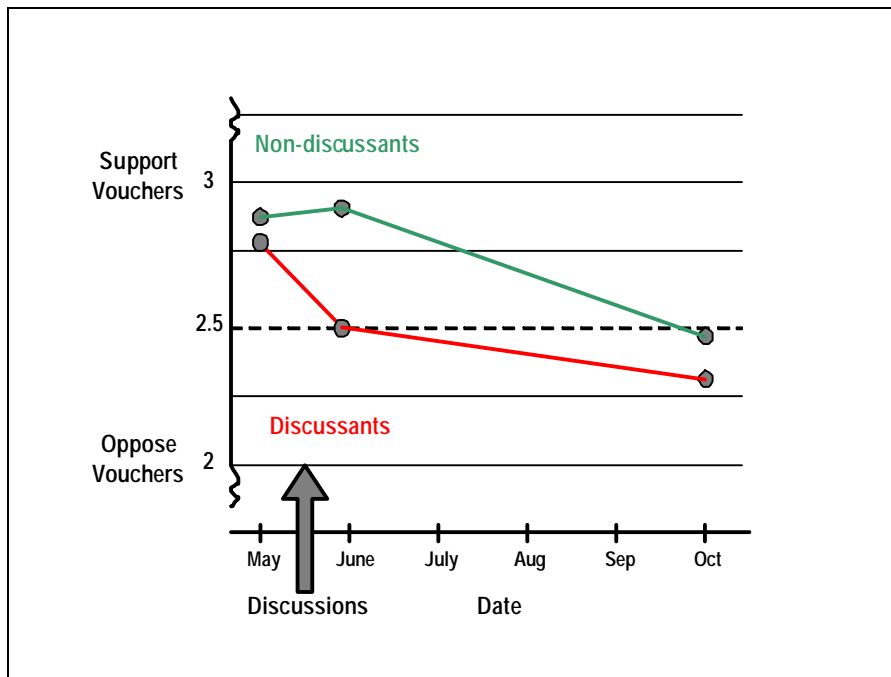


FIGURE 6: OPINIONS ON VOUCHERS OVER TIME BY PARTICIPATION



their post-discussion levels of support. Still, even controlling for initial opinion, the balance of arguments each group produced also significantly predicts the level of post-discussion support. As shown in Table 1, other (though not all) conversations produced similar effects. After discussing federal funding for character education, for instance, these groups became on average less enthusiastic about them. Even though the aggregate level of support for registering handguns across the sample of discussants did not shift in response to discussion, one can detect significant movements at the group level, in keeping with the kinds of arguments generated by each conversation. In general, opinion outcomes at the group level are predictably linked to the pattern of arguments made during discussions, controlling for initial group opinion.

Participation and Opinion Quality: Deliberation can produce issue-relevant increases in knowledge as well. While to date large increases have not been detected in citizen knowledge attributable to discussion, the results suggest that attendance produced some consequential learning. As displayed in Figure 7, for example, the May education discussions resulted in a statistically significant increase in the knowledge that George W. Bush supported school vouchers. Despite a secular trend in acquisition of this item of information among all project participants from February 2000 through January 2001 (including nondiscussants), the significant gap in knowledge created by participation in the May discussion event persisted over time.

One theoretically important form of knowledge—because it is hypothesized to be a critical dimension of opinion quality (Gutmann and Thompson 1996)—is the understanding of arguments on various sides of issues. The focus on what appears to be one of the core cognitive components of civility—namely the “consideredness” of one’s opinion, not only in the sense of having developed a viewpoint anchored in argument, but also in the sense of having seriously considered other, opposing views. Citizens’ “argument repertoires” have been measured on several occasions (see Cappella, Price and Nir 2002)—the range of arguments people hold both in support of and *against* their favored position on a particular political issue or toward some political object. For example, in October the participants discussed the tax proposals advanced by candidates Bush and Gore. In the survey completed in the weeks following, respondents were asked their views of both candidates’ tax plan. If they were favorable, say, toward Bush’s plan, they were asked to provide the reasons they were favorable; they were also asked the reasons *other* people might have for feeling *unfavorable* toward Bush’s proposals. These reasons, both pro and con, were solicited for both candidates’ proposals. The number of online discussions attended by project participants significantly predicts scores on this

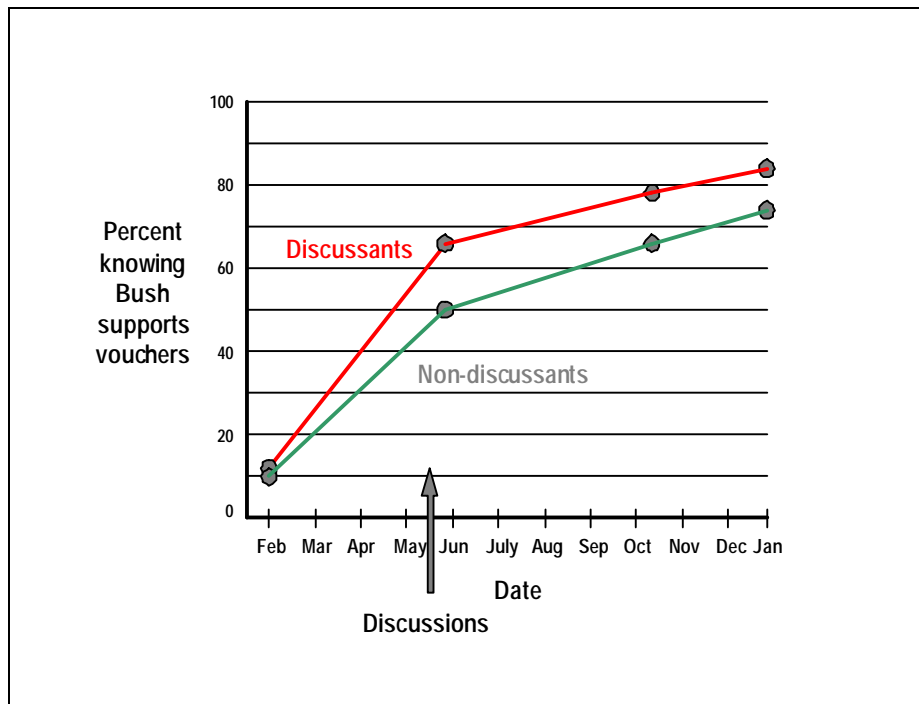
TABLE 1: REGRESSIONS PREDICTING GROUP-LEVEL, POST-DISCUSSION OPINION

	Tuition Vouchers (May)	Character Education (May)	Handgun Registration (June)
Mean Pre-Discussion Opinion of Group Members	.60***	.51***	.70***
Proportion of Arguments Favoring Proposal in Discussion	1.27***	1.72***	1.17***
Intercept	.66	.30	.62
R ²	.52	.51	.58
N	58	58	60

Notes: Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. Dependent variables are group means on each post-discussion opinion measure.

*** p<.001

FIGURE 7: KNOWLEDGE OF VOUCHERS OVER TIME



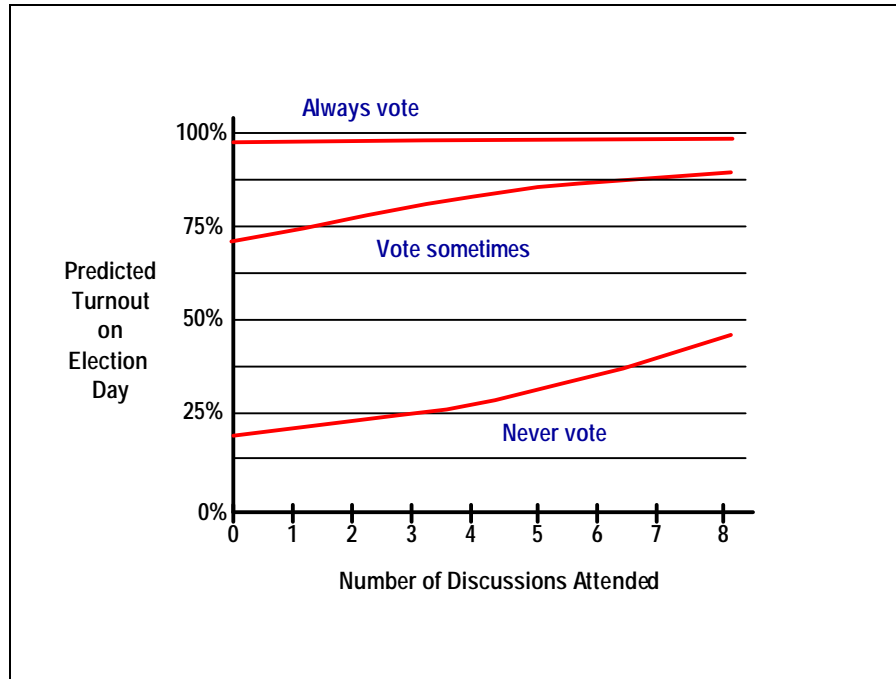
argument repertoire measure, controlling for argument repertoire assessed on the baseline survey and for propensity to attend the discussions. Furthermore, it appears to be attendance at the October event in particular—when taxes were discussed—that is primarily responsible for this effect (see detailed results in Cappella, Price and Nir 2002).

Participation and Subsequent Civic Engagement: Does participation in these online discussions in any way affect citizens' general disposition vis-à-vis politics—their attitudes toward other citizens, their willingness to engage in political behavior, or their participation in other forms of civic engagement? The analyses generally support the hypothesis that discussion fosters engagement (Price, Goldthwaite and Cappella 2002 present detailed results). First, those respondents who participated in Electronic Dialogue discussions were, all other things being equal, more likely to report having voted in the presidential election. Multivariate analyses examined the impact of participating in the online discussions, controlling for the propensity to participate—since, as already noted, more engaged and trusting citizens have a higher propensity to attend discussions. These analyses also controlled for habitual voting behavior, measured on the project baseline surveys, as well as the number of surveys completed (introduced into the models as a general control for cooperative respondents).

Figure 8 presents the model estimates of the proportion of respondents reporting having voted, by number of discussions attended. Separate estimates are plotted for those who reported, back in February of 2000, that they “always,” “sometimes” or “never” vote. The largest effects of participation are among those citizens who are not regularly in the habit of voting.

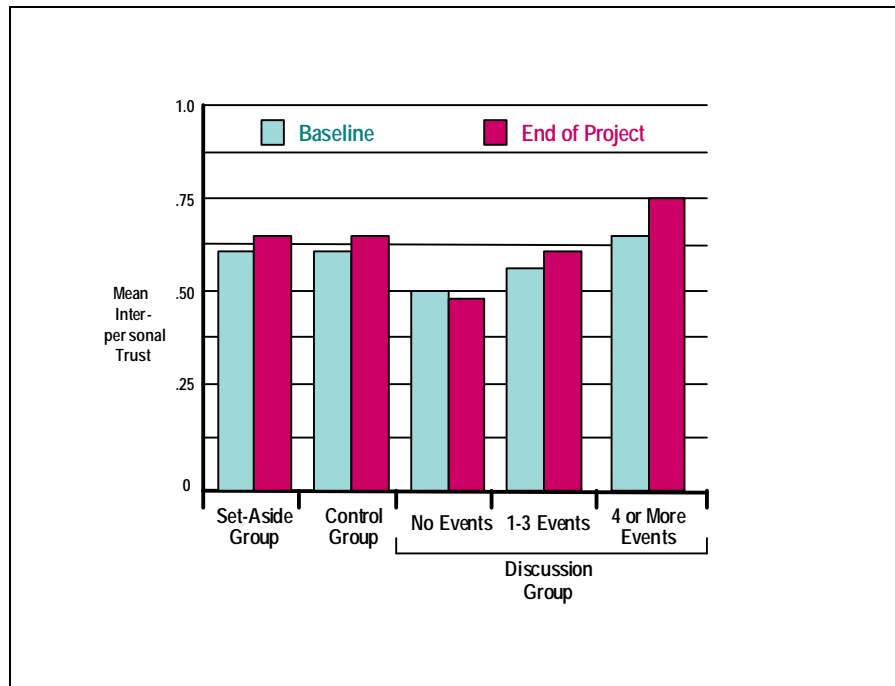
This apparent stimulating effect of discussion is not confined to the election alone. Respondents were asked in the January end-of-project survey about their willingness to engage in a variety of activities—serve on a jury, work at a election polling place, join a neighborhood association, help out with a youth program, and the like. The number of discussions attended, controlling for initial baseline community participation and propensity to attend, again significantly and positively predicted rates of community participation. As before, discussion attendance interacted with prior habits: those who were already active in their communities (as measured in the baseline survey) were not affected by attendance; whereas among those with low levels of initial community participation, attendance produced a noticeable and positive effect.

A pattern thus emerges. As seen earlier, those who are “joiners,” who engage with their communities through voluntary associations and show a civic-mindedness, were more likely to attend Electronic Dialogue discussions when invited. At the same time, controlling for these initial tendencies, attendance itself subsequently leads to increases in these same qualities. The online discussions fostered increased political engagement, in the form of voting, and more generally in increased in community participation. Thus, the process

FIGURE 8: PREDICTED TURNOUT BY DISCUSSIONS ATTENDED AND USUAL HABITS

appears cyclical: social capital fosters participation, which in turn fosters social capital.

A final illustration is presented in Figure 9, which shows mean levels of generalized social trust assessed on the second baseline survey and, one year later, on the first end-of-project survey (the dependent variable here is a three-item scale of “misanthropy” measures typically asked in the General Social Survey, which have been reversed to express higher degrees of trust). Both the control group and set-aside group show small increases. In the discussion group, meanwhile, the influence of trust on participation can be seen in the linear increase in average levels of baseline trust as one moves from none, to a few, to half or more of the events attended. At the same time, it can be seen that discussion attendance leads to increases in trust, significantly so for those who attended half or more of the events. Further multivariate analysis confirms that, controlling for initial trust and propensity to attend, the number of discussion events attended is a significant predictor of post-project social trust (Price, Goldthwaite and Cappella 2002).

FIGURE 9: PRE-POST CHANGES IN TRUST BY EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

THE ROAD AHEAD

The advent of electronic communication networks, and in particular the World Wide Web, potentially offers a new kind of public conversational space. It also presents the technological capacity to study—in new and unprecedented ways—public discussion and group opinion. Although recent years have brought more interest in the topic of political talk, and the use of focus groups in academic research appears to be on the rise, there has been remarkably little attention given to systematic analysis of verbal interactions among citizens. The few studies that have been done, like those of Gamson (1992), have focused on particularistic analytic concerns (for instance, the ways issues are framed) and have not actually examined processes of verbal interaction. The recent wave of attention to deliberative polling and electronic democracy, animated by many of the concerns just described, has produced many public interventions and a few evaluative studies—but again, this research has not generally aimed at examining group conversation *per se* (see, e.g., McCombs and Reynolds 1999). These studies have explored changes in knowledge and opinion produced by deliberation, but not in any systematic fashion the actual group interactions that produce or mediate those changes. Nor have these studies allowed for precise testing of the basic proposition that group discussion contributes *unique* qualities to public opinion above and beyond those produced by increased

learning. The Electronic Dialogue Project aimed to redress this problem. The data gathered by the project are rich, and as yet only partially explored. The purpose of this article has been to explain the rationale for the research, outline the design, and summarize some of the results to date.

This examination of who participated in the Electronic Dialogue events strongly supports the theoretical connection of social capital—voluntary associations, interpersonal trust, and shared norms of civic engagement—to active political participation. At the same time, perhaps surprisingly, a measure of political involvement (i.e., interest in the campaign) did not predict attendance at the online meetings, once other factors were taken into account. This is not to say that interest played no role. Rather, it is probable that the effects of interest were revealed in other relationships such as general political knowledge and community participation, which tap not only a set of civic skills but also indirectly motivations to attend habitually to political information.

The factors that contribute to participation in these online deliberations are themselves *products* of discussion as well. In a series of analyses, attending the group meetings was found to contribute to learning of basic issue information, expanded citizens' repertoire of arguments bearing on issues, encouraged both political and community engagement, and contributed to an increase in social trust. While awaiting application of more sophisticated analytical models to model these cyclical processes in greater detail, the results to this point must be seen as encouraging to those who have advanced what one might call the "value-of-discussion" thesis.

Still, these results remain preliminary in some respects. As noted at the outset, there are a number of potential downsides to discussion—social pressures, possible enervating effects of being challenged by others—that must still be addressed. One of the strengths of the design is that it enables one to determine, for individual participants, the range of people and ideas to which they were exposed over the course of the year. The analyses to date suggest that the various beneficial outcomes of discussion are *not* limited to groups of any single type (that is, they stem from both politically homogeneous and heterogeneous groups alike). However, there is the need to look carefully at whether these general effects might mask different patterns of outcomes for different types of participants or different types of groups. For example, what if a politically moderate participant inclined to support Gore found himself in a conservative group (or, conversely, a participant in a liberally-inclined group who favored Bush)? Were they more likely to become engaged in the campaign or less likely? Did they speak their minds as readily as others? The long history of research in group processes leads one to expect that variations in group structure will generate different patterns of group interaction, and consequently lead to differing outcomes (see, e.g., Brown 2000).

The full story of the Electronic Dialogue Project in Campaign 2000—as with perhaps the election campaign itself—has yet to be told. There is the expectation that, when all is said and done, the project will succeed in garnering

new evidence bearing on the role of discussion in shaping public opinion. More generally, it is hoped these efforts can take one further in realizing the capacities of new communication technologies for observing public knowledge and opinion “in use,” in rich conversational settings.

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APPENDIX A
SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

	Comparison RDD^A (n=2527)	Recruitment Survey (n=3967)	Completed Both Baselines (n=1684)	Discussion Group (n=915)
Gender				
Male	46.6%	50.0%	53.8%	54.5%
Age				
18-29	19.3%	23.0%	21.2%	17.0%
30-44	32.4	36.2	34.5	33.5
45-59	27.2	26.7	27.2	29.6
60+	21.1	14.0	17.1	19.9
Region				
Northeast	19.2%	18.1%	17.3%	18.1%
Midwest	20.5	21.6	20.5	19.9
South	36.5	34.2	34.6	36.5
West	23.9	26.1	27.6	25.6
Education				
Less than HS	10.6%	6.4%	5.6%	4.8%
High School	29.8	37.9	32.9	35.2
Some College	28.5	25.8	27.7	25.5
BA+	31.1	29.9	33.8	34.4
Race				
White (non-Hispanic)	77.5%	78.1%	79.0%	78.9%
Black (non-Hispanic)	9.1	7.8	8.1	8.1
Other (non-Hispanic)	5.3	7.3	7.0	7.6
Hispanic	8.1	6.8	6.0	5.4
Ideology				
Conservative	38.1%	N.A.	32.2%	33.8%
Moderate	37.5		46.7	45.7
Liberal	24.5		21.1	20.6
Follow politics				
Most of the time	32.6%	N.A.	36.6%	37.1%
Some of the time	35.1		41.2	43.2
Only now and then	19.7		17.3	15.3
Hardly at all	12.1		5.0	4.4

^A Random-digit dial telephone survey conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center during the same days the Electronic Dialogue 2000 Baseline surveys were in the field. The contact rate was 54%; cooperation rate, 57%; eligibility rate, 92%; and final response rate, 30%.

APPENDIX B
ELECTRONIC DIALOGUE 2000 DISCUSSION EVENTS

Discussion Event	Topics Discussed	Dates
1. Getting Acquainted	General introductions Issues most important to participants Main issues treated in campaign to date	April 19, 24–30
2. Education	School vouchers Funding for recruitment of new teachers Character education	May 15–21
3. Crime and Safety	Gun control/ registering handguns Death penalty Solutions to crime	June 24–29
4. Campaigning	Obstacles to voting The role of money in campaigns Candidate quality and campaign behavior	August 7–13
5. Political Ads	Viewing Bush/Gore ads (on education) Fairness and persuasiveness of the ads “Attack” advertising	September 5–11
6. The Candidates	Impressions of the candidates The candidates’ health care proposals The candidates’ tax proposals	October 7, 11–17
7. Issues from the Debates	Violence on TV Civil unions for gays and lesbians Military intervention overseas Behavior of the press and the candidates	October 30–November 5
8. The Contested Result	The voting process The Electoral College	December 4–10
9. Project Retrospective	Bush’s style of governance Faith-based initiatives Project evaluation	February 28–March 6

APPENDIX C

MONTHLY PROJECT COOPERATION RATES

Field Dates	Survey/Discussion		Discussion		Control	
			N	%	N	%
April 2000		Eligible: ^A	915		139	
4/19–5/9	Pre survey		707	77.3	122	87.8
4/19, 4/24–30	Discussion (Getting Acquainted) ^B		396	43.3	---	---
May 2000		Eligible:	906		139	
5/8–5/14	Pre survey		616	69.3	104	74.8
5/15–21	Discussion (Education) ^B		299	33.0	---	---
5/15–6/14	Post survey		558	62.8	107	77.0
June 2000		Eligible:	935		139	
6/16–6/23	Pre survey		561	60.0	89	64.0
6/24–6/29	Discussion (Crime & Safety)		340	36.4	---	---
6/24–7/19	Post survey		623	66.6	109	78.4
August 2000		Eligible:	945		139	
7/28–8/6	Pre survey		588	62.2	84	60.4
8/7–8/13	Discussion (Campaigning)		358	37.9	---	---
8/7–8/22	Post survey		642	67.9	94	67.6
Sept 2000		Eligible:	916		139	
8/25–9/4	Pre survey		592	64.6	90	64.7
9/5–11, 9/17	Discussion (Political Ads)		315	34.4	---	---
9/5–9/20	Post survey		597	65.1	95	68.3
Oct 2000		Eligible:	907		139	
9/22–10/2	Pre survey		575	63.4	97	69.8
10/7, 10/11–17	Discussion (The Candidates)		306	33.7	---	---
10/7–10/18	Post survey		493	54.4	90	64.7
Nov 2000		Eligible:	904		139	
10/20–10/29	Pre survey		510	56.4	87	62.6
10/30–11/5	Discussion (Campaign Issues) ^B		241	26.7	---	---
11/8–11/21	Post survey		591	65.4	92	66.2
Dec 2000		Eligible:	904		139	
12/4–12/10	Discussion (Contested Election)		262	29.0	---	---
12/4–12/15	Post survey		532	58.8	87	62.6
Jan 2001		Eligible:	904		139	
1/4–1/18	First End-of-Project survey		526	58.2	83	59.7
1/19–2/1	Second End-of-Project survey		524	58.0	84	60.4
Feb/Mar 2001		Eligible:	900		139	
2/28–3/6	Discussion (Retrospective) ^B		229	25.4	---	---
3/8–3/29	Post survey		482	53.3	71	51.1

^A Some panel members initially assigned to the discussion group subsequently left the project and/or the Knowledge Network panel. In an effort to maintain suitably large discussion groups, some replacement members were subsequently recruited out of the "Set-Aside" Group initially interviewed in February/March 2000 (new recruit n = 39 in June 2000 and n = 10 in August 2000).

^B Owing to periodic technical problems—server crashes, login glitches, etc.—some groups were not able to meet (two groups each in the April and May 2000 events, and four groups each in November 2000 and February 2001). The "corrected" participation rates, calculated without members of these groups included, are: 44.7% in April, 34.2% in May, 28.7% in November, and 27.8% in February.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Knowledge Networks Panel Sample begins with a list-assisted RDD sample provided by Survey Sampling, Inc., (SSI). Samples are acquired approximately once a month to ensure that they are drawn from up-to-date databases. Numbers in the SSI sample are then matched against a database of numbers known to be in the WebTV network. These numbers are then contacted, and households are asked to participate as members of the Knowledge Network panel. In exchange for completing surveys (approximately 40 minutes of cumulative survey time per household per month), panelists receive WebTV equipment and access free of charge. The recruitment process results in a response rate of approximately 55–60 percent. It produces a sample of American households that closely approximates the population at large, with a very slight under-representation of minorities and the elderly (Knowledge Networks 2000).
- ² More detailed results from analyses of factors predicting participation in the online discussions are presented in Price, Cappella, Tsfaty and Stromer-Galley (2001) and Cappella, Price and Nir (2002). A respondent was considered to have participated only if they logged into a discussion and remained in the discussion “room” for at least 5 minutes. Some participants tried to log-on to the channel, but failed to do so owing to various technical difficulties. Because these people attempted to participate, and their failure to meet the 5-minute criterion was not of their own choice, these cases were also considered “participants” for the purposes of the study.
- ³ Measures are detailed in Price, Cappella, Tsfaty and Stromer-Galley (2001). Most were multiple-item scale measures (e.g., a two-item scale of political leanings; a 24-item political knowledge scale; a three-item measure of interpersonal trust drawn from forced-choice questions used on the General Social Survey; a five-item scale of media exposure; a four-item scale of political discussion, an eight-item scale of political participation, etc.).
- ⁴ The analyses examined predictors of the *number* of discussions attended as well as the odds of attending *any single* event (using OLS models in the former case and logistic regression in the latter). Predictors of attendance were quite similar across both sets of analyses.