It’s good to talk:  
Talk, disagreement and tolerance

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Abstract:
Open political discussion between citizens is a cornerstone of democratic theory and contextual accounts of political behaviour. It provides both a means through which individuals can discover what their peers think and a forum within which they can rationalise and explain their own opinions. Much previous research has focussed on the potential of political conversation as a means of influencing others, and of converting holders of minority views to the opinions of the majority. However, theoretical accounts of political conversation also stress its potential impact on more systemic attitudes towards democracy, including the development of tolerance for divergent views and lifestyles. The paper provides an evaluation of these potential effects in the context of recent British politics.
Introduction

In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in the empirical analysis of political conversations among citizens in established democracies. In line with early literature on socialisation and vote choice and the neighbourhood effect, survey evidence from the USA, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and Japan has demonstrated the importance of social context in voter decision-making. For instance, other things being equal, individuals are influenced by the opinions of those they talk to: individuals embedded in social and conversational networks in which most members support a particular political party are themselves more likely to switch their support to that party than are others whose social networks are dominated by support for other parties, or for none. Pressures towards conformity of opinion notwithstanding, however, political disagreement is likely to persist within conversation networks, since these are seldom entirely closed communities and are hence open to the introduction of new and heterodox views.

Attention has also focussed on conversation’s role in both the formation and the recall of political attitudes. Individuals whose conversations are with people who hold left-wing or libertarian views are themselves more likely to adopt such views themselves, and those who talk to individuals with right-wing or authoritarian opinions are similarly likely to come to share the views of those they talk to. And individuals’ ability to recall political information and opinions seems to be enhanced by their involvement in political discussion: the more they talk, the easier they find it to give their own views on political matters.

At the same time, there is a parallel concern in the political science literature with questions of citizenship, social capital and civic engagement. Of particular interest is how ‘good citizenship’ skills might be inculcated. We might include among such skills a range of factors, including an understanding of political issues, a sense of political efficacy, and a degree of social and political tolerance. In this paper, we combine the two literatures and ask: is political conversation between individuals conducive to good citizenship? As discussed below, such attention as this question has received is largely based on North American examples. We therefore extend the investigation by using empirical data from the United Kingdom.

Skills for good citizenship

Political theory suggests a number of attributes which citizens in an effective democracy should acquire. In this paper, we focus on three: political knowledge, a sense of empowerment, and tolerance for others. Each plays an important role in electoral democracies.

Deep within most models of democracy is some notion of informed judgement: citizens, goes the argument, should be making judgements on the basis of information, and clearly held views. To take just one example, the classic Downsian model of voter choice assumes that individuals judge parties’ commitments against their own beliefs and desires, and vote for the party which most closely represents their views. But in order to make such judgements, individuals need to know what their views are.
This is not to say that individuals’ attitudes should, once formed, become permanently fixed and exogenous to social interaction. Democratic debate depends upon the possibility of (hopefully rational) persuasion to change minds and behaviours. But effective citizens, while not immune to persuasion, should be clear what they believe (and why): they should not have closed minds, but nor should they flip-flop from one position to another, depending on which argument they heard most recently. Knowing one’s own mind is a crucial corollary of being an effective citizen.

Just as important in democratic theory is the idea that citizens can make a difference through their involvement in the political process. As is well-known, in a mass democracy, the chances that any one individual’s participation will prove crucial are very small. In such situations, rational choice theory suggests free riding may become prevalent. Knowing that their personal participation is not crucial, rational individuals should opt out; but if all are rational, none participate, and democratic involvement fails. In practice, the collective action problem rarely bites as hard or as severely as theory suggests it might. Turnout may vary according to the closeness of the electoral competition, for instance, being higher in tight contests, lower in uncompetitive ones, both nationally and in particular constituencies. But from a rational choice perspective, the real surprise is that so many vote at all.

This is reflected more widely in the persistence of a sense of political efficacy among citizens. In an ideal democracy, citizens should feel they can make a difference through their actions, and that their opinions matter to, and can influence, those in power. The less influential citizens feel, by contrast, the more alienated they are likely to be from actual political practice in their society (though not necessarily from the ideals of democracy per se). As with attitude uncertainty, there are grounds for suspecting that engaging in political conversation may enhance individuals’ sense of political efficacy. For instance, political conversations may help them identify like-minded individuals on whose support they might depend should they try to influence events. Or again, discussing politics with others might build the self-confidence needed to engage more directly in politics. That said, rather different scenarios can be envisaged, whereby political conversation may lead to a declining sense of efficacy. One example might be a situation in which all discussion partners agree that there is little they can do about a situation (as in the common conversational statement: ‘they never listen’). In what follows, we ask whether and how political conversation influences efficacy.

Finally, tolerance of others and of their opinions is perhaps the most basic general attitude underpinning democratic practice. Toleration is rarely absolute and can be difficult to achieve, but it is of huge importance. In a tolerant polity, supporters of the opposition agree that the incumbent government has a clear right to govern and supporters of the government agree that the opposition has a right (even a duty) to oppose (even if neither group of supporters approve of their rival party’s policies). And such a sensibility should survive a change in government.

But an intolerant climate closes down the ability to dissent and disagree. More than that, it ultimately contributes to a situation in which a new government is likely to be seen by a substantial proportion of the population, those who did not vote for it, as illegitimate. This is a recipe either for political instability (opponents of the government may feel little compunction in expressing their opposition in extra-legal
ways) or for political repression (the government may feel just as little compunction in suppressing the rights of its opponents).

The ability to tolerate not just the political views of others, but also their right to express those opinions publicly is at the root of political tolerance in a democracy. In addition, tolerance demands making allowances not only for the political opinions of others but also for other aspects of their lifestyles, especially where these lifestyles differ from one’s own. In what follows, we look therefore at two aspects of tolerance: political tolerance and social tolerance.

Talk and civic good practice

Clearly there are many influences, both positive and negative, on political knowledge, efficacy and tolerance. In this paper, however, we are particularly interested in the effects of political conversations between citizens. Writers from a variety of different theoretical perspectives have made claims regarding the supposedly beneficial effects of conversation on civic values. Early advocates of democracy made strong claims for the important and potentially beneficial consequences of open discussion between citizens. For instance, in his celebrated essay *On Liberty*, J.S. Mill argued:

…there is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides (of an argument); it is when they attend only to one that errors harden into prejudices, and truth itself ceases to have the effect of truth by being exaggerated into falsehood.\textsuperscript{11}

More recently, the concept of the ‘ideal speech situation’ underpins Habermas’s theory of communicative action.\textsuperscript{12} It is through such discussions, he argues, that rational consensus is reached and truth claims are validated. In an ideal speech situation, discussion must be open, rational, and not systematically distorted, and those engaged in the discussion must be open-minded about both their own claims and those of their fellow conversants. For Habermas, the ideal speech situation serves as a means by which he can escape the tendency for critical theory to undermine itself by challenging all truth claims, including its own. Where truth claims can be tested through discussion, a form of external validation exists.\textsuperscript{13} Whatever the controversies surrounding his position, however, Habermas does give discussion a central place in his social theory. It underpins the possibility of a rational society.

From a rather different perspective, recent literature on deliberative democracy also valorises the power of discussion between citizens.\textsuperscript{14} Deliberative democracy emerges from critiques of both representative democracy and of conventional opinion polling. Representative democracy, for some, limits public involvement in politics to the Schumpeterian role of voting in regular elections. In this conception, civic duty is reduced to voting the rascals out (or in), with little or no opportunity for direct involvement in governing or in decision-making. As a result, there is relatively little need for voters to think about political issues: the rare voting decision can be reduced to a tribal choice (via partisan alignments or social cleavages) or to a summary judgment on government competence.\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, opinion polls, touted by their founders as an exercise in direct democracy may be equally flawed as some respondents give ‘top of the head’ answers to questions they have just been confronted with and have not thought about deeply.\textsuperscript{16}
Advocates of deliberative democracy claim it circumvents these perceived deficiencies of conventional methods of gauging public opinion. In deliberative democracy, citizens discuss issues before coming to conclusions. Such discussion serves a number of purposes. It: reveals and shares information; encourages individuals to justify their claims; and helps legitimize the final decision, since all have been involved in making it. Deliberative polling takes this one stage further by drawing a random sample of the population (as in conventional polling) which is then brought together over a period of time during which it is exposed to information (whether in print or electronic media, or imparted by expert speakers) which can be interrogated and discussed by the sample members. Opinion polling at the end of this process is therefore based on more informed judgements than conventional polls. Again, the opportunity to discuss is held to produce better democratic outcomes than situations where discussion is not available to citizens.

Similarly, the currently fashionable social capital literature puts interactions between citizens at the core of its thinking. The more people encounter others on terms of broad social equality, Putnam claims, the more they will trust not only those they interact with generally, but also other members of society more widely. By interacting, he argues, we learn that others, even those whose opinions differ from ours, are reasonable people with whom we can get on. The trust so engendered acts as a societal lubricant, developing social capital. And societies rich in social capital are (in the most audacious step of the social capital argument) richer, healthier and happier than are societies which lack social capital. But underpinning it all is interaction – and conversation – between citizens. Talk, for social capital theorists, is good, especially when it exposes us to the ideas, opinions, hopes and beliefs of people outside our narrow circle of close acquaintances.

All of the above accounts, despite their very different theoretical underpinnings, share the same emphasis on the importance of talk as a means of encountering and debating different opinions. That said, they, and the empirical literature on the political effects of conversation discussed in the introduction, also share an apparent paradox. Open and rational discussion tends to lead to agreement, other things being equal. Individuals influence, and are influenced by, the opinions of those they talk to. But if this is inexorable, then one might expect that members of the same discussion network will come to share the same views. And if that happens, then the beneficial consequences of encountering diverse opinions will be removed. This begs a pressing question: can diversity of opinion be maintained in discussion networks (and if so how)?

In a path-breaking series of analyses, Huckfeldt et al. demonstrate that, despite the pressures towards conformity in discussion networks, dissent and disagreement remain endemic. One way of thinking about this is to consider what would happen if our discussion networks developed by random encounters. Imagine a society in which 75% of the adult population believe in the truth of some proposition A. If I talk to one individual drawn at random from this population, there is a 0.75 probability chance that he or she will agree with A. But if I talk to two randomly chosen individuals, the probability that both will believe A drops to 0.75^2, or 0.56. If my randomly drawn discussion network contains three individuals, the chance they all think A drops further, to 0.75^3, or 0.42. And so on.
Of course, few of us choose our discussion networks purely at random. That said, nor do we generally choose networks which are either uniform or hermetically sealed. Granovetter’s seminal analysis of the importance of weak ties demonstrates what happens when discussion networks are porous. Consider two distinct conversation networks, each containing four individuals who interact frequently (figure 1). Within each group, this frequent interaction is likely to lead to the development of consensual thinking, so we would expect individuals A, B, C and D to hold the same views as each other. Similarly, we would expect W, X, Y and Z to agree with each other too. However, the views held in common by A, B, C and D may well be different from those held by W, X, Y and Z. If we then allow occasional discussions between individuals D and W (a weak tie in Granovetter’s terms), that link becomes a conduit through which members of each discussion network can be exposed to different views. To the extent that we all have weak ties, and have discussion networks within which diverse opinions exist, we are all bound to be exposed to different opinions. Again, diversity can be maintained, even while discussion tends to lead to consensus. In other words, if discussion has beneficial effects by exposing individuals to diverse opinions, these beneficial effects need not be undermined by the act of discussion itself.

Further, recent empirical work among North American voters suggests that political conversations with others are an effective means of clarifying one’s thoughts and deciding what one really does think. For instance, participation in political discussion has a positive impact on individuals’ abilities to recall political information and opinions quickly, accurately and with certainty. Similarly, cross-cutting social networks, whose members are exposed to divergent opinions on a regular basis, seem to generate greater understanding of, and tolerance towards, the attitudes of others than do homogeneous networks.

All these studies suggest political conversation can have democratically beneficial effects, especially when such discussion exposes individuals to different views and opinions. But is this always the case? In some circumstances, political discussion may be either impossible or extremely undesirable. For instance, where an issue stirs up deep emotions, with competing sides holding profoundly opposed and deeply entrenched views on the matter, discussion may foment ever greater division rather than either consensus or mutual tolerance. In the remainder of the paper, we provide an empirical evaluation whether the effects of political talk are positive, negative or neutral for democratically desirable attitudes, using data from recent British elections.

**Putting the theory to the test: methodological desiderata**

Ideally, an empirical analysis of the ideas discussed above should meet two methodological desiderata. First, the results should be replicable, and hence demonstrably not simply an artefact of a particular data set. Secondly, some insight into causality is desirable, since the direction in which causality runs is potentially problematic and raises important issues regarding the interaction between political conversation and ‘good citizenship’. The discussion above assumes implicitly that, if the hypothesised effect is observed, causation runs from conversation to political knowledge, efficacy and tolerance: the more people talk to others about politics, the more confident they become of their attitudes and their ability to make a difference, and the more tolerant of others they will become. However, an equally plausible
interpretation would claim that causality actually runs from knowledge, efficacy and tolerance to conversation. In this interpretation, those who feel confident of their opinions will be more willing to express them than those who are not. Similarly, such a view would lead us to expect that those who feel they can make a difference politically will be more likely to talk to others than those who felt they had little influence, since the former group would see a greater point to political conversation: if I believe I can have an effect, I will want to persuade others to my point of view, but if I feel I have no influence, I may well think there is little point expending energy on a task I do not think will make a difference. And, most fundamentally, one could plausibly argue that those who are already most tolerant of other views and opinions will be more likely to engage in political conversations than will those who are most intolerant, since the former group will be more comfortable than the latter with the prospect of encountering views divergent to their own. Untangling the causal direction, in a nutshell, allows us to investigate whether political conversation makes good citizens, or whether it is good citizens who engage in political conversation.

Our choice of data has been guided by these desiderata. As noted above, replicability requires that we are able to reproduce our results on different data sets. However, surveys containing questions on political conversation are few and far between in British social science, so we are not overwhelmed with possible data sources. That said, two surveys in the British Election Study series, the 1992 election cross-section and the 2005 election cross-section, did ask respondents about their political conversations with others (on both occasions, the political conversation questions were included in a self-completion questionnaire which was left with respondents at the conclusion of the main interview). We therefore make use of these data sets for our replication study. The studies provide snapshots, thirteen years apart, of the British electorate. Both were conducted at an election in which the governing party (Conservative in 1992, Labour in 2005), having enjoyed a prolonged period of power and re-election in previous contests, won once again, albeit in the face of mounting public unhappiness and with a reduced majority as a consequence.

But the surveys also present a challenge for a replication study, since the questionnaires employed on each occasion differ substantially from each other, partly due to the passage of time (some questions of relevance in 1992 would have been quite irrelevant in 2005 and vice versa) and partly to a transfer of responsibility for the survey from one research team to another. Of particular concern to us, the surveys ask about political conversation in rather different ways. In 1992, BES respondents were asked to name the three individuals whom they talked to most frequently ‘about important matters’. They were then asked a series of follow-up questions about each of their named discussants, including how often they talked about politics with each person, and how frequently they disagreed with that person when they talked politics.

We can get some idea of the density of individuals’ political conversation networks in 1992 by counting the number of people each respondent reported talking to about politics every time they met or at least sometimes (the alternatives were seldom or never discuss politics). And, by counting how many of these relatively frequent political discussants our respondents reported disagreeing with at least sometimes, we can also obtain an idea of how much dissent they encounter overall.

The results indicate relatively frequent political discussion (Table 1). While 46 per cent of respondents said they had no discussants with whom they at least sometimes
discussed politics, a majority reported at least one relatively frequent political discussant. And a sizeable minority (almost 40%) reported 2 or more people with whom they regularly discussed politics. Dissent was less frequently encountered, however. Almost 60% of respondents seldom if ever encountered political disagreement in their conversations (this is made up, however, of two groups: those who said they had no discussants with whom they regularly talked politics, and those who did have such discussants, but reported that they seldom disagreed: while 46 per cent of the overall sample fall into the first category, 14 per cent fall into the latter). Even so, most of those who reported having relatively frequent political conversations did report encountering at least some divergence of opinion in those conversations, and some individuals seem to have met with quite widespread disagreement. For instance, almost 7 percent of respondents in 1992 said they sometimes disagreed about politics with all three of their named political discussants.

The 2005 BES asked about political conversations in a rather different way. Rather than asking respondents to name particular individuals with whom they talked, the 2005 BES team asked them about how often they discussed politics with people in particular social groups. They were asked how frequently they talked politics with: their spouse or partner; other family members; friends; neighbours; and fellow workers. With the exception of conversations with spouses and partners, we cannot tell from the 2005 data how many individuals in each category each respondent talked to (talking politics to one fellow worker would result in just the same response as talking politics to four, for instance). But we can still get some idea of how diverse respondents’ political conversation networks were in 2005 (at least in terms of the sorts of people they talk to) by counting how many different groups they report having at least one relatively frequent political discussant in: we count the number of groups in which they report at least one discussant with whom they discussed politics ‘frequently’ or ‘sometimes’.

Political disagreement, too, is measured differently in 2005 compared to 1992. Respondents to the former survey were asked whether the people they talked politics to in each group supported the same political party as they did themselves. We have therefore measured the extent of political disagreement within conversation networks in 2005 by counting the number of times each respondent reported that either some or all of their relatively frequent conversation partners in each group supported a different party to themselves.

Only just under a quarter of respondents in 2005 reported (in effect) that there was no-one with whom they discussed politics relatively frequently (Table 1). Around 14 per cent reported at least one group of people within which they found political discussants. Most reported having discussants in more than one group. And 7 per cent of respondents reported that they found political discussants in all five of the named groups. As in 1992, apparent exposure to disagreement was more limited in 2005 than was exposure to political conversation: 44 per cent of respondents in the latter year said there was no-one in their political discussion network who supported a different party to themselves (or that they had no political discussants). But a majority of 2005 respondents reported at least one group of people containing political discussants with views different to their own.
These measures of political conversation network density and disagreement form the key explanatory variables in the replication exercise reported below. It is normal in replication studies to employ, as far as possible, identical measures derived from different data sets. Clearly, our 1992 and 2005 political conversation measures are not identical. However, this presents us with an opportunity as well as a problem. The obvious problem is that we cannot say for certain that the extent of political conversation in 2005 was any different from levels 13 years before. A careless reading of table 1 might lead the unwary to conclude that both political discussion and dissent within conversation networks had both increased over time. But much of the apparent difference here is almost certainly an artefact of the very different ways in which the two surveys asked about political discussion. But there is an opportunity too. If we can replicate the same basic results using two different sets of measures of political conversation, we can have some confidence that our results are robust, and not just the outcome of question wording effects.

Our second desideratum, understanding the causal order, can be tackled by using time’s arrow. In general, events in the past can have effects in the future, but the future seldom affects the past. Lest readers think we have taken to a belief in time travel, consider turkey sales, which rise dramatically immediately before Christmas. In this case, the future does affect the past, since anticipation of the upcoming celebrations affects consumer and producer behaviour - and turkey mortality! But such examples apart, the past drives the present, not vice-versa. We can use panel data, in which the same individuals are interviewed at two different points in time, to exploit time’s arrow and so understand causality. Respondents to the 1992-1997 British Election Panel Study were drawn from the 1992 BES cross-section and so most had completed the 1992 political conversation questions discussed above. In addition, they were asked a range of questions (including questions on political efficacy and tolerance) in both 1992 and 1997, allowing us to gauge how much their opinions had changed over time. If conversation affects attitudes, then measures of discussion networks in 1992 should correlate with attitude change between 1992 and 1997.

The analytical strategy followed in the paper is to control for other likely influences on our dependent variables. In the cross-sectional analyses of the 1992 and 2005 BES data, we control for social class, education, age, gender and strength of partisanship. All feature regularly in models of political behaviour, civic activity and citizenship. Broadly, we expect more middle class and better educated groups to have greater certainty about their opinions and a greater sense of political efficacy than the less affluent, and those with fewer educational qualifications. And we expect the young and those with more formal education to be more tolerant of different viewpoints and lifestyles than the old and the less well educated. Having used these variables to develop baseline models, we then add our conversation measures to the models to assess the impact of conversation net of other factors. A similar analytical strategy is adopted for the panel data, although in these the dependent variables are respondents’ scores on our indices of political efficacy and tolerance in 1997, and the models control for each respondent’s score on the equivalent measure 1992. Once again, we can then add conversation measures, having controlled for most of the other factors which might affect the dependent variable, and concentrating on conversation’s impact on attitude change.
Defining the dependent variables

Having outlined our methodological wish list and, in the process, defined our key independent variables, we now turn to a brief discussion of our dependent variables. We examine the impact of political conversation on four different factors linked to notions of the good citizen: attitude uncertainty; political efficacy; political tolerance; and social tolerance. Each is described briefly below.

Attitude uncertainty

As discussed above, democratic accountability requires that voters know what they want from politics and have some idea of their own positions on the issues of the day. The trick, however, is how to measure the confidence with which individuals hold their views. Huckfeldt, Sprague and Levine solved the problem in their study by measuring how long respondents took to answer political attitude questions. Mutz and Mondak took a rather different tack, looking at the effect of conversation on respondents’ awareness of the rationales for views other than their own. Respondents to one of the surveys used in their research were asked a series of attitude questions, and were then asked to give any reasons they could think of in support of each side of the issue. This then provided a scale of their ability to understand the views of others.

Neither approach is possible using the BES data, however. We therefore come at the issue from another direction. We have taken 33 political attitude questions from the 1992 BES and 21 from the 2005 survey, and have counted the number of times respondents said they either did not know what they thought or had no opinion on an issue (details of the questions employed are given in the Appendix).

Precise comparisons between the two years are difficult, partly because different numbers of questions were used on each occasion, and partly because many of the questions themselves were different between the years. Since individuals may be more uncertain on some issues than on others, part of the variation in the scales between 1992 and 2005 may be simply an artefact of which issues were asked about and when. Also, the scales almost certainly underestimate genuine issue uncertainty, since there is a well-known tendency for survey respondents to give an answer to a question, even if they have no real opinion. Even so, the pattern of responses is remarkably similar in both years (figure 2). Between 40% and 50% of respondents claim to have an opinion on every question asked. Around 20% say they were unsure about one issue, rather fewer were unsure about two, and so on. Very few indeed failed to give an opinion on several issues.

Political efficacy

Political efficacy is measured differently in 1992 and in 2005. The 1992 political efficacy scale is constructed from respondents’ answers to two agree/disagree statements: people like me have no say in politics; and councillors and MPs don’t care much what people like me think. Responses were coded so that strong disagreement on each question scored 5 and strong agreement scored 1. By adding together respondents’ scores on both questions, we construct a scale which runs from 2 (low
efficacy) to 10 (high efficacy). The resulting scale suggests most people think they
can have at least some influence (figure 3a). Few think they have little or no impact
on politics. And few think they have a great deal of influence. Most are in the middle
of the scale.

The picture is somewhat different in 2005, largely because the question used for the
efficacy scale is different. In the later survey, respondents were asked ‘On a scale of 0
to 10, where 10 means a great deal of influence and 0 means no influence, how much
influence do you think you have on politics and public affairs’. Compared to 1992, the
most striking feature is the large proportion – around a quarter of all respondents –
who said in 2005 that they felt they had no influence on politics (figure 3b). That
aside, the pattern for 2005 looks similar in other respects to the situation 13 years
before: most respondents were in the middle of the scale and few claimed a great deal
of influence.

This should not be interpreted as indicating a major fall in political efficacy between
1992 and 2005, however. Much of the difference between the two graphs is almost
certainly the result of variations in the questions employed; for instance, the 2005
question highlights a possible ‘no influence’ response in a way the 1992 questions do
not.

**Political tolerance**

Political tolerance is measured here using responses to a question which was asked in
both the 1992 and 2005 BES studies. Respondents to both were asked whether they
agreed or disagreed with the statement ‘people should be allowed to organise public
meetings to protest against the government’: the scale runs from 1, the least politically
tolerant response, to 5, the most tolerant. Not surprisingly, perhaps, most respondents
agreed with the statement: 63% did so in 1992, as did 73% in 2005 (table 2). However,
between a quarter and a third of respondents were either ambivalent about the
statement or disagreed with it. If anything, public tolerance of anti-government protest
meetings grew between 1992 and 2005. Although it is impossible to prove the claim,
a plausible explanation for the increase is public opposition to the Iraq war. The anti-
war marches of February 2003 were, collectively, one of the largest anti-government
public demonstrations in modern British history. Other large-scale events such as the
anti-poll tax protests of the early 1990s and the pro-hunting Countryside Alliance
rallies of the early 2000s almost certainly also helped increase public support for anti-
government protest meetings.

Tolerance of anti-government political meetings is a relatively low-threshold demand,
so it is hardly surprising that most people in an established democracy support the
statement (indeed, it is more surprising that so many oppose it or are ambivalent about
it). Other questions tap into political tolerance in more demanding ways. For instance,
respondents to the 2005 BES were asked whether they agreed with statements such as
‘in a true democracy, the majority has a responsibility to protect the rights of all
minorities’, ‘political parties that wish to overthrow democracy should not be allowed
to stand in general elections’ or ‘I usually take the opinions of people who support
other parties seriously even if I don’t agree with them’. That said, these other
questions are not repeated in both surveys. We therefore make use of the public
meetings question since it provides a replicated measure.\(^{32}\)
Social tolerance

The analyses below also look at patterns of social tolerance: are those who engage in political conversation more or less tolerant of alternative lifestyles than are those who do not discuss politics?

Social tolerance scales were constructed for each year. The 1992 scale was based on respondents’ levels of agreement with two statements: ‘people in Britain should be more tolerant of those who lead unconventional lifestyles’; and ‘homosexual relations are always wrong’. The 2005 scale summed levels of agreement with three questions: ‘young people today don’t have enough respect for traditional British values’; censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral values’; and ‘people in Britain should be more tolerant of those who lead unconventional lifestyles’. In both cases, the most socially tolerant responses were coded 5 and the most intolerant were coded 1. Low scores on the resulting scales therefore reflect intolerance of alternative lifestyles, while high scores reflect tolerance.

The scales reveal a moderately tolerant population (figure 4). In both years, relatively few respondents gave either very intolerant or very tolerant responses, and most were clustered around the middle of the distribution. As with the political efficacy scales, however, not too much should be made of the apparent shift between 1992 and 2005 towards lower levels of social tolerance (more respondents were grouped towards the bottom of the scale in the latter year than in the former). Once again, question wording variations almost certainly are responsible for much of this variation.

Baseline models

The first step in the analysis is to construct a series of baseline regression models for the dependent variables. As discussed above, the baseline models control for class, age, education, gender and strength of partisanship. The results are reported in Table 3. Reflecting the noisy nature of these data, model $R^2$ values are generally low, with the amount of variance accounted for ranging from 6% to 13%. That said, the patterns revealed by the models are sensible.

Being certain of what one thinks, for instance, is related to factors such as class and education. Individuals in the middle class salariat (and, in 1992, routine non-manual workers and the self-employed petty bourgeoisie too) reported less attitude uncertainty than did members of the working class. Similarly, those with some form of formal educational qualification were less likely to give ‘don’t know’ answers to opinion questions than were those with no formal qualifications. And, not surprisingly, partisanship encourages certainty: the stronger an individual’s partisan attachment to a political party, the less likely he or she was to report uncertainty.

The effects of age and gender on attitude uncertainty were more surprising. One might expect, for instance, that attitude uncertainty would decline with age, as individuals become more fixed in their beliefs. However, those over retirement age emerge as almost the most uncertain group of all in 1992. Only the youngest respondents reported comparable levels of uncertainty (the insignificant regression coefficient for this group means its levels of uncertainty do not differ markedly from those of the
pensioners). All other age groups in 1992 reported less attitude uncertainty than the over-65s. The age variable had a slightly different impact on attitude uncertainty in 2005, but the oldest respondents were still no surer of their opinions, on the average, than most other age groups. Only three exceptions emerge. Those who were aged between 25 and 34 scored higher on the attitude uncertainty index than did the over 65s (and hence were more uncertain), while individuals in the age groups between 55 and 65 were more certain of their views than were those who had retired.

Gender, meanwhile, produces a striking and consistent significant positive coefficient in both years. Other things being equal, women are more likely to report being uncertain of their political opinions than are men. This almost certainly is not the result of actual gendered differences in political knowledge, however. Rather, it most likely reflects cultural norms: women are more willing to admit they do not know about something (or are less willing to make a guess when they are not sure) than are men. 33

Political efficacy, meanwhile, is clearly strongly related to education and to partisanship. In both survey years, the efficacy index is higher, on the average, among those with some educational qualifications than among those with none. Degree-holders stand out as the most likely to feel they had political influence. And as we might expect, the more partisan an individual is, the more politically efficacious he or she felt. Age had a weaker effect: in both years, respondents in middle age reported higher perceptions of political efficacy than did other age groups (and no other age groups differed significantly from the over 65s).

Other effects are less consistent in the political efficacy models (reflecting, perhaps, the different variables used to construct the scale in 1992 and 2005). More middle class groups reported a higher average sense of efficacy in 1992 than did members of the working class, but no such difference emerged in 2005. However, at the latter date, members of the petty bourgeoisie reported lower perceptions of political influence than did members of the working class. Gender, meanwhile, was a significant factor in 1992 but not in 2005. Women in the earlier survey reported a greater sense of political efficacy than did men, but the gender gap was not apparent 13 years later.

Doubts over variations in question wording cannot explain differences between 1992 and 2005 in the political tolerance models, however. That said, the two years’ results were broadly similar. Younger respondents were more politically tolerant in their outlook than were the oldest (though by 2005 this difference was restricted to the very youngest only). University graduates (and, in 2005, those with a school qualification) were more politically tolerant than other respondents. Those who were strong political partisans showed (interestingly) greater tolerance than did those who identified less strongly, or not at all, with a political party. Conceivably, the most partisan were also the most realistic about the workings of democracy, recognising that their party, if currently in government, would not always be in office or, if currently in opposition, might at some point win power. It would make sense for such individuals to value the right to protest against the incumbent government, for they are most likely to recognise that they may at some stage wish to avail themselves of that power. We are less sure, however, of the reason for the significant and consistent gender effect: in both years, women were less politically tolerant than men.
The correlates of social tolerance, too, were relatively consistent. Members of the middle class salariat reported higher levels of social tolerance than individuals in other social classes. Other things being equal, all other age groups were more socially tolerant than were pensioners, though the gap was largest for the youngest cohorts and narrowest for the older: we seem to become less socially tolerant as we age. And graduates were more socially tolerant than were non-graduates; in 1992, all those with formal education qualifications showed higher tolerance than those with none.

That said, the relationship between gender and social tolerance was very different from that identified for 1992 in 2005. Women at the earlier date were, on average, more socially tolerant than men. At the latter date, they less were tolerant! And whereas partisanship was related to social tolerance in 1992 (those who identified with a party were more tolerant than those who did not), there was no significant relationship between the two variables in 2005.

**Bringing conversation in**

The next stage in the analysis is to add the political conversation measures discussed above to the baseline models. Each political conversation measure is entered separately, to avoid the risk of collinearity between the two measures affecting the results. Each baseline model is therefore run twice: once with the measure for the intensity of political discussion networks; and then again with the variable for disagreement within political discussion networks. Since the coefficients for the control variables remain largely unchanged by the addition of the conversation variables, they are not discussed again. Table 4 therefore reports only the regression coefficients for the conversation variables (note that each coefficient in the table comes from a separate regression model, controlling for class, age, education, gender and partisanship: 16 separate regressions are reported there).

Despite the change between 1992 and 2005 in how political conversation was measured by the BES, the results are pleasingly consistent. In all bar one case, the political conversation measures are strongly significant and correctly signed. The larger respondents’ political conversation networks were in both years, other things being equal, the more certain they were of their opinions, the more politically influential they felt, and the more tolerant they were. The one exception to this general pattern occurred in the model for social tolerance in 2005: the size of an individual’s political discussion network had no impact on his or her social tolerance in that year ($R^2$ values did not increase substantially on the addition of the conversation measures, and are not reported here).

If anything, the results for the extent of disagreement within political discussion networks are even more consistent. Controlling once again for class, age, education, gender and partisanship, the more disagreement an individual encountered when discussing politics with others, the less attitude uncertainty he or she showed, the more politically efficacious he or she felt, and the more socially and politically tolerant he or she was. The act of engaging in relatively frequent political discussion with others has beneficial effects on a variety of the attitudes and attributes underpinning effective democracy therefore. And, particularly noteworthy, disagreement is healthy too. The more we encounter and argue about divergent views,
the more tolerant we become, the surer of our own views we are, and the more empowered we feel.

The results reported in table 4 clearly suggest that political conversation has a positive impact on democratically desirable attitudes towards politics and others, therefore. The analysis can be pushed further, however, to ask whether it is the act of political conversation per se which is important, or whether the number of political conversations matters too. The analyses just discussed are not conclusive on this, since they may result from a situation in which the key distinction is between those who engage in political conversation and those who do not. To investigate this further, the analyses were repeated, concentrating only on those respondents who reported having at least one relatively frequent political discussant. If the conversation coefficients are still significant for this group, then the clear implication is that it is the quantity of political conversation and the extent of conversation networks which matters, not just the binary divide between those who do engage in political conversations and those who do not.

Table 5 displays the relevant regression coefficients (each coefficient once again comes from a model with the same control variables as employed in the earlier analyses). In general, the results confirm that the number of political discussions matter. In all bar three cases (all concerning the effects of the size of an individual’s political discussion network: the non-significant results are for attitude uncertainty and social tolerance in 2005 and for political tolerance in 1992), all the coefficients are significant and correctly signed. Even when we restrict the analysis to those who have at least one relatively frequent political discussion partner, therefore, the total number of discussion partners and the number of political discussants our individual disagrees with, affect how uncertain he or she is about political issues, how powerful he or she feels, and how politically and socially tolerant he or she is. Taking part in political conversations helps foster democratically relevant attitudes. But even for those who do talk politics, more political discussion is better than less. Even among those with at least one political discussant, the more people they talk to about politics, and the more disagreement they encounter, the more certain they are of their own views, the more powerful they feel, and the more tolerant they are. Like any form of exercise, political conversation gains in effectiveness the more it is engaged in.

**Does it matter how you talk to: relationships with discussants**

Are all conversations equally important, or do discussions with some individuals carry greater weight, and have more influence on our outlooks, than others? This section turns to that question by looking at whether respondents’ democratically desirable attitudes were shaped by political discussions with their relatives or with people who were not family members.

Not surprisingly, family dominates discussion. In both 1992 and 2005, more individuals reported discussing politics with family members than reported doing so with other people. In 1992, for instance, around 45% of BES respondents said they discussed politics relatively frequently with other members of their family, compared to 27% who reported discussing politics with non-family discussants. The equivalent figures for 2005 (remembering the different question wordings in the two years) were 70% and 59% respectively. In part this reflects opportunity. Most individuals live
with other family members (even if only their spouse or partner), and this presents daily opportunities for speech which may not exist so readily with work colleagues or with friends and acquaintances who one sees less frequently. In part also, it probably reflects selection effects. Though few choose their spouse on political grounds, and few families show complete unanimity in political view, it is clearly the case that groups of individuals within families are more likely to share the same political outlooks than are groups of individuals drawn at random from the population. Since it is likely that at least some will find it more congenial to discuss politics with those they know to be of like mind than with people whose opinions they either do not know, or who they do know will disagree with them, this once again is likely to contribute to a situation in which political conversations are more frequent with family members than other people.

Just how much of an impact the relationship between an individual and his or her political discussants is can be seen by repeating the analyses reported in table 5, but differentiating between family and non-family political discussants. The results are shown in table 6, which reports the individual regression coefficients for the number of frequent political discussants who were family members, and the number who were not relatives (as before, each coefficient in the table comes from a separate regression model, controlling for class, age, education, gender and partisanship).

The results demonstrate that whether or not a political discussant was a family member made little difference to the size of the conversation effect. Almost all the coefficients are significant and correctly signed (only the family and non-family discussant coefficients in the 2005 social tolerance equations were insignificant). More strikingly, if we compare family and non-family discussant coefficients from the same years and models, we see that there is no overall tendency for family member coefficients to be larger than those for non-family members, or vice-versa. So, for instance, the family member coefficients in the attitude uncertainty models are larger than the equivalent coefficients for non-family members. So too is the coefficient for family members in the 2005 political efficacy models. But in the 1992 political efficacy and social tolerance models, the coefficients for non-family members are larger than are those for family members. And there is little real difference between family and non-family discussant coefficients in either year’s political tolerance models. Discussions with family members are more consequential, but only because individuals talk politics to more family members than non-family members. Once again, the analogy used earlier comes to mind: if political conversation is an exercise, it does not matter which gym one goes to in order to carry it out – the benefits flow irrespective of whether one is talking to a relative or to someone from outside one’s family.

**Time’s arrow and the problem of causation**

As discussed above, the preceding results and discussion, while supportive of the general argument that engaging in political conversation develops a sense of political efficacy and more tolerant social and political attitudes, cannot of itself be conclusive. This is because the cross-sectional relationships are also consistent with a very different interpretation: it may be tolerant individuals and those who feel confident of their political powers are the most likely to engage in political talk in the first place.
Causation could run from talk to attitudes. But it could equally well run from attitudes to talk.

We turn, therefore, to data drawn from the 1992-1997 British Election Panel Study to investigate whether individuals’ conversation networks in 1992 had any effect on how their attitudes towards tolerance and political efficacy changed between 1992 and 1997. Because only a relatively few attitude questions were repeated in both the 1992 and 1997 waves of the panel, we are unable to study the impact of conversation on changing levels of attitude uncertainty. In addition, only one of the questions used to construct the 1992 political efficacy survey was employed in both waves, so our analysis of efficacy is restricted to responses to that question (agree/disagree - sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on: answers are coded so that a high score reflects strong disagreement with the statement, indicating a strong sense of political efficacy). The measures of political and social tolerance are identical in both waves, and the same as those employed for the 1992 cross-sectional analyses reported above.

We can, of course, say nothing on whether respondents’ conversational practices varied over the five year period – neither the nature of their networks nor the intensity of disagreements. We have to assume that the status quo in 92 remained in place!

Two regression models were fitted for each of the three dependent variables: political efficacy, political tolerance; and social tolerance (table 7). In every case, the dependent variable was respondents’ 1997 score on the measure, and the main independent variable was their 1992 score on the same variable. In model I of each pair, the other independent variable was the number of relatively frequent political discussants each respondent had reported in 1992, while in model II it was the number of these discussants who the individual reported disagreeing with.

Not surprisingly, 1992 beliefs and attitudes were good – though not perfect – indicators of the same opinions five years later. As we would expect, all the relevant coefficients are positive and highly significant. In passing, it is worth noting that in all the equations the intercepts are much larger than 1.0 and the regression coefficients average around 0.5. In general, feelings of efficacy and tolerance were greater in 1997 than in 1992 (a result, perhaps, of the high expectations surrounding the 1997 election of a New Labour government and the defeat of an unpopular and exhausted Conservative administration).

More importantly for the purposes of this paper, however, by controlling for 1992 attitude scores, the regression models both take into account the major factors underlying these attitudes and also mean that the remaining independent variables are in effect investigating the correlates of change over time in the dependent variables. And since these remaining independent variables, our conversation measures, were measured in 1992, they cannot be affected by either the 1997 score of the dependent variable, or by change in the dependent variable between 1992 and 1997. In consequence, the models allow us to check on causal direction in the relationship between conversation and democratically desirable attitudes. In every case, respondents’ 1992 political conversation networks were positively related to their attitudes five years later. The more people someone talked to about politics in 1992, and the more of those political discussants he or she disagreed with, the more likely
he or she was to feel politically powerful five years later, even when the individual’s original, 1992, sense of political efficacy is taken into account. Similarly, the denser a respondent’s political conversation network in 1992, and the more disagreements he or she encountered within it, the more politically tolerant he or she became between 1992 and 1997. And the same held true for social tolerance: extensive political discussion and disagreement at the earlier date encouraged growing social tolerance at the later.

Conclusions: is it good to talk?

As theorists from J.S. Mill and de Toqueville on have recognised, democracy does not happen in a vacuum. Citizens do not act solely as isolated individuals, making their judgements and forming their opinions in private. Clearly, some personal deliberation is essential. From a normative perspective, democracy requires freedom of conscience and freedom from coercion. A situation in which individuals were not able to hold, express and proselytise for unpopular and heterodox views would not be democratic. And empirically, partisan alignments mean that many citizens hold relatively fixed political opinions through which they interpret the political world and on which they draw to make decisions. But valence politics are crucial too: citizens are evaluative, weighing up relative government performance and effectiveness. And in large part that evaluation involves contextual information: citizens are influenced by what they experience around them.

Political conversation is clearly one avenue by which contextual effects operate. From fleeting grumbles about some momentarily unpopular policy through more far-reaching debates regarding long-term goals and how they might be achieved, most adults engage in political discussions with others on a relatively regular basis. And most are likely to encounter individuals whose beliefs and attitudes clash with their own. An accumulating body of evidence suggests that such conversations are politically consequential. People can and do change their minds as a result of discussions with other citizens.

More than that, as we demonstrate here, political discussion can also contribute to the creation of the climate necessary for democracy to function effectively. In line with both Habermas’s ideal speech situation, and with deliberative democracy, political discussion can foster tolerance and can sharpen political ideas. Political conversation does have a beneficial effect for civic attitudes of tolerance and efficacy. Those who talk more to their fellow citizens feel empowered as a result of doing so, and become more likely to tolerate both divergent political opinions and different lifestyles.

There are undoubtedly reciprocal patterns of causation operating here, of course: while talk fosters tolerance, for instance, it is the tolerant who are most likely to talk in the first place. And not all possible political discussions will take place, and some that do take place may have negative results. But the analyses reported above suggest this is on the whole a virtuous circle: tolerance breeds talk breeds tolerance…. The theorists are right: it is good to talk.
Notes


6 Pattie et al., *Citizenship in Britain*.


13 Although critics point out there are limitations: see e.g. Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory*; Roderick, *Habermas and the Foundations of Critical Theory*.


17 Fearon, ‘Deliberation as discussion’.

18 Fishkin, *The Voice of the People*.


22 Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague, *Political Disagreement*.


28 Clarke et al., *Political Choice in Britain*; Pattie et al., *Citizenship in Britain*.

29 Huckfeldt et al., ‘The dynamics of collective deliberation in the 1996 election’.

30 Mutz and Mondak, ‘The workplace as a context for cross-cutting political discourse’.

32 A close examination of responses to these questions from the 2005 BES reveals that, with the exception of the question on allowing extremist parties to stand for election, they all measured the same underlying construct as the question on anti-government meetings: they all loaded well on the same component in a principal components analysis, for instance. We have repeated the analyses reported below for 2005 using a political tolerance index constructed from responses to the ‘public meetings’, ‘protecting minority rights’ and ‘taking opinions seriously’ questions: the basic results support our conclusions below.


35 Clarke et al., *Political Choice in Britain*.


37 Pace Goodin, ‘Talking politics’.
Figure 1 The importance of weak ties
Figure 2: Attitude uncertainty, 1992 and 2005

a) attitude uncertainty 1992

b) attitude uncertainty 2005

Source: 1992 and 2005 BES
Figure 3 Political efficacy in 1992 and 2005

a) political efficacy 1992

b) political efficacy 2005
Figure 4 Social tolerance, 1992 and 2005

a) social tolerance 1992

b) social tolerance 2005
Table 1: Size of, and extent of disagreement in, discussion networks

### 1992:

a) How often do you talk about politics with each person (% talking politics always or sometimes when they meet)?

b) When you talk politics with (these people) how often do you disagree?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N discussants</th>
<th>N disagreeing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3+</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2676</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2005:

a) How often (do) you talk about politics with the following people? (Spouse, other family, friends, neighbours, fellow workers: % talking very or quite frequently)

b) Do the people you talk about politics with support the same political party as you do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N types of discussant</th>
<th>N types disagreed with</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2343</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: 1992 and 2005 BES survey self-completion sections.
Table 2: Levels of political tolerance, 1992 and 2005

Q. People should be allowed to organise public meetings to protest against the government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1992 %</th>
<th>2005 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 2642 2318

Sources: 1992 and 2005 BES survey self-completion sections.
Table 3: Baseline models: OLS regression models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Attitude uncertainty</th>
<th>Political efficacy</th>
<th>Political tolerance</th>
<th>Social tolerance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class (comparison = working class)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salarit</td>
<td>-0.46**</td>
<td>-0.24**</td>
<td>0.70**</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RNM</td>
<td>-0.48**</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petty Bourgeois</td>
<td>-0.51*</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-0.48*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisors</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (comparison = 65+)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>-0.36*</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>-0.67**</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.40**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>-0.69**</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.25*</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>-0.56*</td>
<td>-0.27*</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>-0.61**</td>
<td>-0.29*</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (comparison = no qualifications)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>-0.86**</td>
<td>-0.65**</td>
<td>1.09**</td>
<td>0.88**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-school</td>
<td>-0.95**</td>
<td>-0.31**</td>
<td>0.88**</td>
<td>0.41**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>-0.82**</td>
<td>-0.50**</td>
<td>0.81**</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (comparison = male)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.92**</td>
<td>0.53**</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of party ID (comparison = no party ID)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very strong</td>
<td>-1.62**</td>
<td>-0.47**</td>
<td>0.51**</td>
<td>1.69**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly strong</td>
<td>-1.60**</td>
<td>-0.70**</td>
<td>0.58**</td>
<td>1.64**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very strong</td>
<td>-1.23**</td>
<td>-0.46**</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at p=0.05
** significant at p=0.01
Table 4: Bringing conversation in: adding conversation effects to the baseline models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression coefficients†</th>
<th>Size of discussion network</th>
<th>Disagreement in discussion network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude uncertainty</td>
<td>-0.31**</td>
<td>-0.17**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political efficacy</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political tolerance</td>
<td>0.10**</td>
<td>0.05**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social tolerance</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at p=0.05  
** significant at p=0.01  

+ All models control for class, age, education, gender and strength of partisanship
Table 5: Does quantity of political conversation matter? Trends for individuals with at least one political discussant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression coefficients(^+)</th>
<th>Size of discussion network</th>
<th>Disagreement in discussion network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude uncertainty</td>
<td>-0.25**</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political efficacy</td>
<td>0.13*</td>
<td>0.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political tolerance</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social tolerance</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* significant at p=0.05  
\** significant at p=0.01

+ All models control for class, age, education, gender and strength of partisanship
Table 6: Relationship with discussant: OLS regression coefficients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model coefficients*</th>
<th>1992</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Attitude uncertainty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of family discussants</td>
<td>-0.33**</td>
<td>-0.36**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of other discussants</td>
<td>-0.27**</td>
<td>-0.17**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Political efficacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of family discussants</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of other discussants</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Political tolerance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of family discussants</td>
<td>0.08**</td>
<td>0.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of other discussants</td>
<td>0.11**</td>
<td>0.08**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Social tolerance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of family discussants</td>
<td>0.11**</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of other discussants</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at p=0.05
** significant at p=0.01

+ All models control for class, age, education, gender and strength of partisanship
Table 7: Conversation and change over time, 1992-1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1997</th>
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+ based on responses to question ‘Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on: agree/disagree’

* significant at p=0.05
** significant at p=0.01

Source: 1992-1997 BEPS
Appendix: the attitude uncertainty scales

Attitude uncertainty scales for 1992 and 2005 were constructed by counting the number of ‘don’t know’ and ‘no answer’ responses to a series of attitude questions. The 1992 attitude questions were:

- Do you think Britain should continue to be a member of the European Community or should it withdraw?
- On the whole, do you think Britain’s interests are better served by closer links with Western Europe or closer links with America?
- Do you think Britain’s long-term policy should be to leave the European Community, to stay in the EC and try and reduce its powers, to leave things as they are, to stay in the EC and try to increase its powers, or to work for the formation of a single European government?
- Here are 3 statements about the future of the pound in the EC. Which one comes closest to your view? Replace the pound by a single currency; use both the pound and a new European currency in Britain; keep the pound as the only currency for Britain?
- (agree/disagree) If we stay in the EC, Britain will lose control over decisions that affect Britain?
- (agree/disagree) The competition from other EC countries is making Britain more modern and efficient?
- (agree/disagree) Lots of good British traditions will have to be given up if we stay in the EC?
- Government (definitely should/shouldn’t) get rid of private education in Britain?
- Government (definitely should/shouldn’t) spend more money to get rid of poverty?
- Government (definitely should/shouldn’t) encourage the growth of private medicine?
- Government (definitely should/shouldn’t) put more money into the NHS?
- Government (definitely should/shouldn’t) spend more money on education?
- Government (definitely should/shouldn’t) introduce stricter laws to regulate the activity of trade unions?
- Government (definitely should/shouldn’t) give workers more say in running the places where they work?
- (agree/disagree) Income and wealth should be redistributed towards ordinary working people?
- (agree/disagree) The government should give more aid to poor countries in Africa and Asia?
- (agree/disagree) if you want to cut crime, cut unemployment?
- (agree/disagree) Britain should bring back the death penalty?
- (agree/disagree) People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences?
- (agree/disagree) The middle classes and the working classes will always be on opposite sides in politics?
- Do you think that local councils ought to be controlled by central government more, less, or about the same as now?
- Thinking about the poll tax, or community charge, which of these statements comes closest to your view?
- (gone too far/not gone far enough) the welfare benefits that are available to people today?
• (gone too far/not gone far enough) attempts to give equal opportunities to women in Britain;
• (gone too far/not gone far enough) the right to show nudity and sex in films and magazines;
• (gone too far/not gone far enough) the building of nuclear power stations;
• (gone too far/not gone far enough) attempts to give equal opportunities to black people and Asians in Britain;
• (gone too far/not gone far enough) allowing the sale of council houses to tenants;
• (gone too far/not gone far enough) the availability of abortion on the NHS;
• (gone too far/not gone far enough) attempts to give equal opportunities to homosexuals;
• (gone too far/not gone far enough) privatization of industries;
• Do you think that trade unions have too much power or not?;
• Do you think that big business in this country has too much power or not?.

The equivalent questions for 2005 were:
• Thinking of the Euro, which of the following statements would come closest to your own view: definitely join as soon as possible; join if and when economic conditions are right; stay out for at least next 4 years; rule out joining;
• …On this … card… the end of the scale marked 0 means that Britain should definitely get out of the EU and the end of the scale marked 19 means that Britain should definitely stay in the EU. Where would you place yourself on this scale;
• Using the 0 to 10 scale… 0 means that government should cut taxes and spend much less on health and social services and …10 means that government should raise taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services. Where would you place yourself on this scale?
• Using the 0 to 10 scale…0 means left and …10 means right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?
• (agree/disagree) big international companies are a threat to democratic government in Britain;
• (agree/disagree) Immigrants make Britain more open to new ideas and cultures;
• (agree/disagree) The threat to British sovereignty from the European Union is greatly exaggerated;
• (agree/disagree) These days, people cannot rely on government to protect them from criminals;
• (agree/disagree) Immigrants take jobs away from people who were born in Britain;
• (agree/disagree) People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves;
• (agree/disagree) Competition brings out the worst in people;
• (agree/disagree) The death penalty, even for very serious crimes, is never justified;
• (agree/disagree) Violent criminals deserve to be deprived of some of their human rights;
• (agree/disagree) Convicted criminals need to be rehabilitated rather than punished;
• (agree/disagree) People who break the law should be given longer prison sentences;
• Do you think that trade unions have too much power or not;
• Do you think that big business in this country has too much power or not;
• (agree/disagree) Immigrants increase crime rates;
• (agree/disagree) Immigrants generally are good for Britain’s economy;
• (agree/disagree) Most asylum seekers who come to Britain should be sent home immediately;
• (agree/disagree) The ability of banks and companies to move money across borders seriously undermines the British government’s ability to manage the economy.