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

C.J. Pattie
Department of Geography
University of Sheffield
Sheffield
S10 2TN
Tel: 0114 222 7947
E-mail: c.pattie@sheffield.ac.uk

R.J. Johnston
School of Geographical Sciences
University of Bristol
Bristol
BS8 1SS
Tel: 0117 928 9116
E-mail: r.johnston@bristol.ac.uk

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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, explain and perhaps modify 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 and in contextual effects in politics more generally. In line with early literature on socialisation, 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 for voter decision-making.\(^1\) 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.\(^2\)

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 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.\(^3\) Furthermore, 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.\(^4\)

At the same time, there is a parallel concern in the political science literature with questions of citizenship, social capital and civic engagement.\(^5\) Of particular interest is how ‘good citizenship’ skills, including clear preferences and opinions on the major issues of the day, a sense of political efficacy, and a degree of social and political tolerance, might be inculcated. 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 extend that coverage 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.\(^6\) We focus on three: confidence in one’s political opinions, 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.\(^7\) 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 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 draw 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 is of huge importance. However, 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 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**

Many factors will influence confidence in one’s political attitudes, efficacy and tolerance, both positively and negatively. 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. 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.

Recent literature on deliberative democracy also valorises the power of discussion between citizens. In deliberative democracy, citizens discuss issues before coming to conclusions. Such discussion: reveals and shares information; encourages
individuals to justify their claims; and helps legitimate the final decision, since all have been involved in making it. Again, the opportunity to discuss is held to produce better democratic outcomes than situations where discussion is not available to citizens.

Similarly, the social capital literature puts interactions between citizens at the core of its thinking. By interacting, Putnam argues, we learn that others, even those whose opinions differ from ours, are reasonable people with whom we can associate. 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, in which case 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 generate 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.
Recent North American empirical work suggests that political conversations with others are an effective means of clarifying one’s thoughts and deciding what one really does think, especially when discussion partners are perceived as being particularly expert or knowledgeable regarding politics.\(^{16}\) For instance, participation in political discussion has a positive impact on individuals’ abilities to recall political information and opinions quickly, accurately and with certainty.\(^ {17}\) 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.\(^ {18}\) The effects of cross-cutting discussion networks on participation are more complex, however. Some research suggests that exposure to cross-cutting opinions can reduce the likelihood of voting.\(^ {19}\) This seems to be at odds with the argument above regarding the potential effects of political discussion on feelings of political efficacy. However, further research reveals that the adverse impact of cross-cutting conversations on participation is most pronounced for individuals who are in the political minority within their local neighbourhood: those who are in the local majority seem little affected.\(^ {20}\)

All these studies suggest that political conversation can have democratically beneficial effects, especially when it 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.\(^ {21}\) 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. Thus the remainder of the paper explores empirically whether the effects of political talk are positive, negative or neutral for democratically desirable attitudes, using data collected at 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 its direction is potentially problematic and raises important issues regarding the interaction between political conversation and ‘good citizenship’. The discussion above assumes implicitly that causation runs from conversation to certainty over one’s political attitudes, 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 they will tolerate others and their opinions. However, an equally plausible interpretation would claim that causality actually runs from attitude certainty, 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.\(^ {22}\) Similarly, 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 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, 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 can to reproduce our results on different data sets. However, surveys containing questions on political conversation are relatively 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 and 2005 election cross-sections, asked 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 in each case). 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 at 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 they 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). Although 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, they
were asked how often they discussed politics with people in particular social groups: 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 is also measured differently in 2005 compared to 1992. Respondents to the 2005 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 respondents 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 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 increased over time. 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, however. 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.24 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 changed. If conversation affects attitudes, then measures of discussion networks in 1992 should correlate with attitude change between 1992 and 1997.

The analytical strategy involves controlling 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 in 1992. Once again, we can then add conversation measures, having controlled for most of the other factors which might affect the dependent variable, concentrating on conversation’s impact on attitude change.

Defining the dependent variables

Having outlined our methodological wish list and defined our key independent variables, we 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 problem, however, is how to measure the confidence with which individuals hold their views. Huckfeldt, Sprague and Levine solved it 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 then asked to give any reasons they could think of in support of each side of the issue. This 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). To be clear, we are not measuring respondents’ political knowledge here: all the questions employed are attitude questions with no ‘correct’ answer. Instead, these questions provide reasonable measures of the overall certainty with which individuals hold their opinions. The more often an individual gives a ‘don’t know’ response, we argue, the less certain they are of their views.

These are not ideal measures. For instance, on some controversial issues some respondents may hold views they fear will be seen as generally unacceptable and hence might respond that they had no opinion, or might give what they perceive to be a socially desirable response, rather than giving their true opinions. However, while this may affect particular individuals’ responses to particular questions, it is unlikely to be true for all individuals on all issues. In addition, 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. However, by gauging the number of ‘don’t know’ responses for as wide a range of attitude questions as possible, we try to smooth out the impact of such effects.

A related problem with the scales employed here is that they potentially confuse uncertainty (the lack of clear opinions) with hesitancy (confidence in expressing one’s opinions). ‘Don’t know’ responses may arise from both. However, we can get a clearer sense of what the uncertainty scales are measuring by comparing them with other measures of individuals’ general predispositions towards politics. For instance, in 1992, respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement ‘politics and government are too complicated for me to understand’. The more respondents agreed with the statement, the higher they scored on the attitude uncertainty scale. Similarly, the 2005 uncertainty scale correlated strongly with respondents’ pre-election self-assessments of their attention to politics. The Spearman’s rank correlation between our attitude uncertainty measure and attention to politics was a highly significant -0.377, indicating that the more attention individuals paid to politics, the less likely they were to give ‘don’t know’ responses. Similarly, after the 2005 election, respondents were asked about their general levels of interest in politics (with replies coded into 5 categories, from ‘a great deal’ of interest to ‘none at all’). The attitude uncertainty score was significantly related to this measure, too: the greater a respondent’s interest in politics, the lower his or her score on the attitude uncertainty scale. We argue, therefore, that our interpretation of the scales as indicating attitude uncertainty has face validity, since we would expect those who pay less attention to politics or have little interest in the subject to be less clear in their opinions than those who are interested or do pay a great deal of attention.

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 changed between the surveys. 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, when. Even so, the pattern of responses is remarkably similar in both years. 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 distribution of the resulting scale resembled a normal curve, with most respondents clustered near the centre (indicating that they felt they had some influence) and few at the extremes (reporting either no or substantial influence).

The issue was addressed somewhat differently in the 2005 survey, when 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. That aside, the pattern for 2005 looked 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.

**Political tolerance**

Political tolerance is measured here using answers to a question asked in both BES studies: whether respondents 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% in 1992, and 73% in 2005. However, between a quarter and a third of respondents were either ambivalent about the statement or disagreed with it.

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 focus on the public meetings question since it provides a replicated measure.\textsuperscript{32}

**Social tolerance**
Social tolerance addresses whether those who engage in political conversation are more or less tolerant of alternative lifestyles than those who do not discuss politics? It is measured here using responses to a question asked in both 1992 and 2005. In each survey, respondents were asked how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement that ‘people in Britain should be more tolerant of those who lead unconventional lifestyles’. In both cases, the most socially tolerant responses were coded 1 and the most intolerant coded 5. High scores on the resulting scales therefore reflect intolerance of alternative lifestyles, while low scores reflect tolerance. In both years, respondents emerged as more tolerant than intolerant of unconventional lifestyles. While 49% in 1992 and 42% in 2005 agreed society should be more tolerant, only 15% and 16% respectively disagreed (the remainder felt current levels of toleration were sufficient).

**Bringing conversation in**

The first step in the analysis was to construct a series of baseline ordinary least squares regression models for the dependent variables. As discussed above, these models control for class, age, education, gender and strength of partisanship. The results are reported in Table 2. Reflecting the noisy nature of these data, model $R^2$ values are generally low, with the amount of variance accounted for ranging from 4% to 12%. That said, the patterns revealed are sensible. However, as our primary objective is to investigate the impact of political conversation on our dependent variables, we do not discuss the baseline models in detail here.

The political conversation measures discussed above were then added to the baseline models. Each political conversation measure was entered separately, to avoid the risk of collinearity between the two measures affecting the results. Each model was 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 here. Table 3 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).

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. (Recall that the social tolerance variable is coded so that high values indicate intolerant attitudes: negative coefficients therefore imply that more political conversation, and more disagreement within the network are associated with less social intolerance for alternative lifestyles.) 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 in table 3 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 matter, not just the binary divide between those who do engage in political conversations and those who do not.

Table 4 gives the relevant regression coefficients (each coefficient once again comes from a model with the same control variables employed in the earlier analyses). In general, the results indicate that the number of political discussions matters. In all bar four cases the coefficients are significant and correctly signed. Three of the non-significant cases concern 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. The fourth non-significant term is for the 1992 relationship between the extent of disagreement in a network and social tolerance.

Even when we restrict the analysis to those who have at least one relatively frequent political discussion partner, therefore, both 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 who 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? Family socialisation models suggest that the opinions of close family members will be particularly influential, while Granovetter's 'weak ties' argument implies the opposite – the views of more tenuous contacts might be more important. 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. A full test of the weak ties case is not feasible here, as differentiating between close and more casual acquaintances among non-family discussants results in rapidly diminishing sample sizes. However, we are able to differentiate between discussions with family members and contacts outside the family, which provides a partial test.

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), which presents daily opportunities for discussion that may not exist so readily with work colleagues or with friends and acquaintances seen 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 3, but differentiating between family and non-family political discussants. The results are shown in table 5, 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 where one conducts it – the benefits flow irrespective of whether one is talking to a relative or 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, unfortunately, 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 therefore have to assume that the status quo in 1992 remained in place.

Two regression models were fitted for each of the three dependent variables: political efficacy, political tolerance; and social tolerance (table 6). 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 0.45. 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 on 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 significantly 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. Note once again that the social tolerance variable is coded so that high scores indicate intolerance: the negative coefficients for the 1992 conversation variables therefore suggest that more conversation is associated with declining intolerance.

Conclusions: is it good to talk?

As theorists from J.S. Mill and de Tocqueville 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. Political discussion can foster tolerance and can sharpen political ideas and it does have a beneficial effect for civic attitudes of tolerance and efficacy. Those who talk more to their fellow citizens – whether fellow family members or people to whom they are not related – feel empowered as a result of doing so, and become more likely to tolerate both divergent political opinions and different lifestyles. And it is not only the frequency of discussion which helps, but also the likelihood of encountering alternative views. The more people talked to those they felt disagreed with them, the more likely they were to feel tolerant, empowered, and sure of their own opinions. Weak ties and the persistence of disagreement in discussion networks are good for the development of democratically desirable attributes.

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*.


11 Fearon, ‘Deliberation as discussion’.


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


19 Mutz, ‘The consequences of cross-cutting networks for political participation’.


23 This is not to suggest that the 46% who said they did not discuss politics ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ with any of their main discussants never talked about politics at all. While 68% of this group named no discussants at all, and 9% said they never talked politics with any of their discussants, 23% reported that they discussed politics with their named discussants but ‘seldom’ did so. This means that 35% of BES respondents reporting no political conversations whatsoever, a figure comparable to the 26% of 1992 British Eurobarometer respondents reported by Bennett et al; S.E. Bennett, R.S. Flickinger and S.L. Rhine, ‘Political talk over here, over there, over time’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 30 (2000), p. 102.

24 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.

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

26 Huckfeldt et al., ‘The dynamics of collective deliberation in the 1996 election’.
27 Mutz and Mondak, ‘The workplace as a context for cross-cutting political discourse’.


29 Agreement with the statement was measured on a 5-point scale, from ‘agree strongly’ to ‘disagree strongly’. Average uncertainty scores varied significantly according to level of agreement (F = 18.19, p = 0.000), with those who agreed strongly that politics was too complicated to understand scoring highest on the attitude uncertainty scale (with an average of 2.29 ‘don’t know’ responses each), and those who disagreed strongly scoring lowest (with an average of just 0.60 ‘don’t know’ responses).

30 The relevant variable is measured on an 11-point scale: individuals who paid no attention to politics scored 0, while those who paid a great deal of attention scored 10.

31 Analysis of variance shows the relationship to be highly significant (F = 66.93, p = 0.000: the average attitude uncertainty score varied from 0.67 for those who expressed ‘a great deal’ of interest in politics, to 2.82 for those who said they had no interest in politics at all.

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.


34 Clarke et al., Political Choice in Britain.

36 *Pace* Goodin, ‘Talking politics’.
Figure 1 The importance of weak ties

A

B

C

D

Individual member of conversation network

W

X

Y

Z

Conversation partnership
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: Baseline models: OLS regression models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class (comparison = working class)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salarariat</td>
<td>-0.46**</td>
<td>0.70**</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RNM</td>
<td>-0.48**</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>-0.12*</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petty Bourgeois</td>
<td>-0.51*</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-0.18*</td>
<td>0.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisors</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.14</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>0.25**</td>
<td>-0.27**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>-0.36*</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>-0.17**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>-0.67**</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>-0.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>-0.69**</td>
<td>0.25*</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>-0.56*</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>-0.61**</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.16*</td>
<td>-0.17**</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>1.09**</td>
<td>0.49**</td>
<td>-0.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-school</td>
<td>-0.95**</td>
<td>0.88**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>-0.82**</td>
<td>0.81**</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.12**</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>0.22**</td>
<td>-0.19**</td>
<td>-0.16**</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>0.51**</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td>-0.27**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly strong</td>
<td>-1.60**</td>
<td>0.58**</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.21**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very strong</td>
<td>-1.23**</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at p=0.05
** significant at p=0.01
Table 3: 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>-0.07**</td>
<td>-0.00</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 4: Does quantity of political conversation matter? Trends for individuals with at least one political discussant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Size of discussion network</th>
<th>Disagreement in discussion network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude uncertainty</td>
<td>-0.25** -0.04</td>
<td>-0.15** -0.09**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political efficacy</td>
<td>0.13* 0.09*</td>
<td>0.18** 0.13**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political tolerance</td>
<td>0.05  0.04**</td>
<td>0.05*  0.04**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social tolerance</td>
<td>-0.09** 0.01</td>
<td>-0.05  -0.04*</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: Relationship with discussant: OLS regression coefficients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model coefficients(^{+})</th>
<th>(1992)</th>
<th>(2005)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Attitude uncertainty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of family discussants</td>
<td>-0.33**</td>
<td>-0.36**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of other discussants</td>
<td>-0.27**</td>
<td>-0.17**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Political efficacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of family discussants</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of other discussants</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Political tolerance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of family discussants</td>
<td>0.08**</td>
<td>0.06**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of other discussants</td>
<td>0.11**</td>
<td>0.08**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Social tolerance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of family discussants</td>
<td>-0.05*</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of other discussants</td>
<td>-0.09**</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td></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: Conversation and change over time, 1992-1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1997</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political efficacy 1992</td>
<td>0.51*</td>
<td>0.52**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social tolerance 1992</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.39**</td>
<td>0.39**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political tolerance 1992</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.47**</td>
<td>0.46**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of discussants 1992</td>
<td>0.10**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.04*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of disagreements 1992</td>
<td>0.10**</td>
<td>-0.05**</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.05**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ 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) introdce 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 d 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.