



THE IMPACT OF ORDINARY POLITICAL CONVERSATION ON PUBLIC OPINION EXPRESSION: IS EXISTENCE OF DISCORD NECESSARY?

By Francis L. F. Lee

This study examines the democratic impact of ordinary political conversation by tackling two interrelated research questions: (1) Does private conversation lead to more public opinion expression? (2) Is discord a necessary condition for conversation to exert its impact? Analysis of a survey conducted in Hong Kong shows that people who talk to family and friends about public affairs more frequently are more likely to engage in online political chats with strangers, to express a minority opinion, and to vote. However, the impact of conversation does not apply to every context of public opinion expression. There is also no robust evidence showing that the impact exists only among people who perceive differences in opinions in their social networks.



The significance of ordinary political conversation in democracy has been a prominent subject of debate and empirical research in the past decade. Mansbridge, for instance, regards everyday talk as part of society's larger "deliberative system."¹ Through political conversation, citizens exchange information, develop and refine their opinions, create political meanings, construct social and personal identities, and connect public discourse to personal lives. As Walsh puts it, everyday conversation is where "people accomplish the civically desirable work of connecting themselves to politics."² Kim, Wyatt, and Katz argue that conversation is "the heart of deliberative democracy,"³ and state that conversation is where "democratic culture receives its most concrete realization."⁴

Other studies, however, have pointed to the variability of political conversation. The extent, characteristics, and consequences of political discussions are context-dependent, whereas contexts are partially shaped by external factors⁵ and co-created by people within a given situation.⁶ Thus, not all conversations are equally relevant to democracy. More specifically, some theorists focus on whether conversations involve discord, arguing that only discussions across and about differences are truly democratic.⁷

Francis L. F. Lee is an assistant professor at the Department of English and Communication, City University of Hong Kong.

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The present study tackles two interrelated questions: Does ordinary political conversation lead to more public expression and discussion behavior? Is this impact of ordinary political conversation conditioned or moderated by the existence of discord?

These questions involve two theoretical assumptions. First, in the tradition of deliberative democracy, it is assumed that public opinion expression and discussion are important to the health of a democratic society. It is also assumed that this applies to Hong Kong, a democratizing society and site of the present study.⁸ While these assumptions can be debated, they constitute the starting point for the present empirical study.

**Ordinary
Political
Conversation and
Public
Opinion
Expression**

Communication researchers have long realized the influence of interpersonal communication on people's political attitudes and behavior.⁹ Most pertinent to the present study is research focusing on the democratic impact of what Kim, Wyatt, and Katz label "ordinary political conversation,"¹⁰ that is, conversation on politics or public affairs among acquaintances in everyday settings, such as homes, workplaces, schools, or restaurants. Engagement in such conversation is driven by both "supply and demand" factors.¹¹ That is, people who engage in political conversation want to do so (e.g., they are interested in politics) and have opportunities to do so (e.g., they have many friends and relatives who are also interested). Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that ordinary political conversation contributes to political knowledge¹² and political participation.¹³ Others have demonstrated the relationship between political conversation and quality of individual opinions. Analyzing panel data, Lalljee and Evans show that political discussion is related significantly to the consistency and stability of some political attitudes.¹⁴ Kim, Wyatt, and Katz, on the other hand, find that political discussion contributes to argument quality, willingness to argue, and opinion consideredness.¹⁵

The present study attempts to replicate some of these findings in the context of Hong Kong, focusing on public opinion expression as a consequence of ordinary political conversation. Public opinion expression can be broadly defined as opinion expression outside private, sociable settings of ordinary political conversation. It is the basis of public deliberation and a key aspect of a democratic civic culture.¹⁶ In a democratizing society such as Hong Kong, where political culture is under continual development,¹⁷ enhancing citizens' public opinion expression can be crucial to the development of democracy itself.

Because of the complicated and multiple meanings of "public,"¹⁸ public opinion expression can encompass a range of practices. For example, it can simply involve opinion expression in front of people outside one's social network, e.g., strangers who are members of a larger public. Studying "talk to strangers," however, presents a research challenge, since in modern societies people are actually expected to *not* interact with non-acquaintances.¹⁹ Nevertheless, developments in mass media and communication technologies provide specific opportunities and contexts for people to talk to non-acquaintances about politics and public affairs. Two such contexts are Internet political chat rooms and political call-in

talk radio. Each has its own special characteristics. For example, Internet chat is often conducted anonymously and in a transborder manner. Nonetheless, these two are mediated contexts for public discussion that are prominent in the West and in Hong Kong.²⁰ Hence both are examined here as forms of public opinion expression.

In addition, one area of research with “public opinion expression” as its core concern is research on the spiral of silence, which defines public opinion as opinion that can be expressed publicly without fear of sanction.²¹ In fact, formation of reasoned public opinions would be undermined if social pressure could effectively silence dissent. Hence, willingness to express minority opinions is also examined here.

Moreover, opinions can also be expressed through actions. In Hong Kong, voting participation has been increasing over the years. However, non-institutional forms of participation, especially rallies and protests, have also been highly prominent.²² This study thus examines both voting and protest participation.

These practices and contexts by no means exhaust the full range of public opinion expression in a society, yet they are pertinent to a number of conceptual distinctions (acquaintances vs. non-acquaintances, majority vs. minority, and speech vs. action).

Ordinary political conversation is expected to encourage public opinion expression. It can help people develop their individual opinions on public affairs in the first place. In a broader sense, meanings and identities are created through such conversation so that citizens come to connect themselves to public affairs in specific ways.²³ Moreover, while conversation is partially driven by media use,²⁴ it can also generate further interest in public affairs and elaboration of news content.²⁵ It may even allow people to develop various discussion skills. Even if private conversation is not exactly public deliberation, it can be a “practice field” for the latter. Hence, four hypotheses about the “main effects” of ordinary political conversation were set up:

H1: Conversation is positively related to political discussion with strangers online.

H2: Conversation is positively related to calling in to political talk radio.

H3: Conversation is positively related to willingness to express a minority opinion.

H4: Conversation is positively related to political participation.

These “main effect” hypotheses pertain to the first overall research question and constitute the basis on which the second research question—whether discord moderates or is a condition for ordinary political conversation to exert its influence—is addressed. In fact, questions about conditions are not new in the theorization of political discussion.

*The
Conditioning
Impact
of Discord*

Almost a century ago, Lippmann questioned whether it is naïve to believe that free political discussions could generate the truth. He concluded that “the marketplace of ideas” can function *only* when all relevant and accurate information is available, which in turn is dependent on the press fulfilling its duty.²⁶

Specification of conditions is also key in various theories of deliberative democracy. Broadly defined, deliberative democracy assumes a process of “undistorted communication” at the center of democratic decision making.²⁷ But communication cannot be undistorted unless a set of conditions is met. For deliberation in the society at large, most theorists agree that a high degree of social and economic equality, freedom of speech and of the press, inclusiveness of the deliberation, accountability of leaders, and the existence of democratic institutions are fundamental. For discussions in public forums, the most important conditions include the forums’ being open to all to participate, discussants’ willingness to reason with one another, equality among and accountability of the discussants, and availability of relevant and truthful information.²⁸

Considerations of necessary or moderating conditions should be equally important for ordinary political conversation. Through in-depth interviews and field observations of interactions among civic association volunteers, Eliasoph found that “public-spirited talk,” i.e., talk that is open to debate and devoted to questions about the common good, seldom occurs because of the way volunteers define the social contexts for interactions.²⁹ Walsh, through field observations of a group of retired, middle-class men interacting within a coffee shop, demonstrated that conversation allows people to construct common identities as the basis of their political opinions.³⁰ But such common identities may then serve also as the basis of exclusion and unwillingness to debate with others. The implication of these studies is that ordinary political conversation would not be democratic unless the proper conditions are there.

Both Eliasoph and Walsh focus on how citizens construct the conditions for discussion. The present study, however, focuses on the impact of political conversation on people given the existence (or absence) of certain conditions.

More specifically, this study examines the notion of discord. Schudson argues that private, sociable conversation has little to do with democracy because such conversation is merely for the sake of pleasure.³¹ Politeness prevails, and people seldom seriously debate differences, as Eliasoph’s findings suggest.³² Indeed, decades of research have found a general tendency for people to talk mainly to others with similar views.³³ Comparing mass media with interpersonal communication, Mutz and Martin argue that the latter is not an important source of discordant information and views for citizens.³⁴

However, homogeneity in discussion is a matter of degree.³⁵ Similarity of political views is only one factor affecting people’s choices of discussant and is not always the most important one. Huckfeldt, for instance, found that perceived expertise is more influential than perceived agreement when people decide whom to talk to about public affairs.³⁶ More important, discussant choices are made within specific social loca-

tions and situations.³⁷ Politics is often not an important factor when people decide where to work, whom to marry, whom to befriend, or which community organizations to join. But once people enter such locations, they may encounter diverging political views simply because others in those locations happen to hold them. In this situation, some people, but not everyone, would refrain from political discussions.³⁸ As a consequence, while ordinary political conversation is mainly consensual for some, it can be mainly dissenting for others.

Recent studies have shown that network heterogeneity has a positive main effect on political participation and media use.³⁹ The present study, however, explores discord as a moderating variable. It is expected that discordant conversation is more likely to generate public opinion expression. There are various reasons. First, discord may generate more heated debates and thus arouse interest in and concern about topics being debated. More fundamentally, since discussions in the public arena would involve people with different values and beliefs, the experience of ordinary political conversation should be more relevant to public opinion expression if such conversation *also* contains discord. People may also develop skills in handling disagreement, such as "agreeing to disagree," through discordant conversation. There could be additional possibilities, yet the present study examines only the overall conditioning impact of discord. Therefore:

H5: The positive impact of ordinary political conversation on various forms of public opinion expression is stronger among people who recognize the existence of discord in their social networks.

Data and Operationalization. Data are from a survey conducted in September 2004 by the Quality Evaluation Center at the City University of Hong Kong. The population was all Hong Kong Cantonese-speaking residents between the ages of 15 and 70.⁴⁰ A computer-assisted telephone interviewing system was used by trained interviewers. Telephone numbers were randomly selected from the most current directories, with "1" added to the last digit so as to include non-listed numbers, and the "most recent birthday" method was used to select respondents. Eight hundred interviews were completed, yielding a response rate of 69.3%.⁴¹

Key variables were operationalized as follows.

Ordinary Political Conversation. Two four-point scaled questions asked how frequently respondents discuss "politics or public affairs" with their family and friends respectively (1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes, and 4 = often). Each variable's mean of 2.32 is low compared to U.S. findings.⁴² The democratic culture is not yet fully developed in Hong Kong,⁴³ though caution should be taken in comparing a democratic and a democratizing country.⁴⁴ The two variables correlate ($r = .45, p < .001$) and were averaged as an index of ordinary political conversation (Cronbach's $\alpha = .62$).

Method

Existence of Discord. Respondents used a three-point scale (1 = mostly the same, 2 = half-half, and 3 = mostly different) to indicate how their opinions on politics and public affairs differ from opinions of friends/family. Respondents perceived the family as a more consensual environment than friend groups (mean scores of 1.69 and 1.86, respectively, differ significantly [$p < .001$] in a paired sample t -test), as has been found in past research in the United States and Germany.⁴⁵

The two variables on discord are weakly correlated ($r = .15, p < .001$), making combining them problematic. However, since the concern for the present study is the amount of discord a person experiences in ordinary political conversation, combining them is conceptually valid. For the purpose of analysis, what is needed is a way to distinguish those who experience significant discord in ordinary political conversation from those who do not. The two discord variables were first averaged. When one value was missing, the value of the valid variable would be used. Then, the discordant group included respondents who have a score of 2 or above in the averaged index ($N = 402$). The concordant group included respondents who have a score below 2 ($N = 321$).⁴⁶ This averaging may contribute to lower reliability of the combined measure, but there should be no systematic biases introduced.

Online Political Discussion with Strangers. Respondents were asked if they are online (yes = 62.5%) and how frequently they discuss politics and public affairs with strangers in chat rooms. The responses were originally measured with the same four-point scale used for political discussion, but because of the heavily skewed distribution, a dichotomous variable was constructed with 0 = never (81.4%) and 1 = rarely, sometimes, or frequently (18.6%).

Calling Talk Radio. Respondents were asked whether they listened to two types of public affairs radio phone-in talk shows.⁴⁷ If the answer was affirmative, they were asked, using the same four-point scale as for political discussion, whether they have ever called a talk show. Despite the prominence of talk radio listening in Hong Kong,⁴⁸ only a tiny proportion of respondents reported ever calling. The call-in variable was dichotomized, with 0 = never (94.6%) and 1 = rarely, sometimes, or frequently (5.4%).

Expression of Minority Opinion. The survey used the method typical of spiral of silence studies in measuring willingness to express a minority opinion.⁴⁹ Respondents were asked: "Imagine that you are at a dinner party. Other people at your table are discussing political reform in Hong Kong. You realize that all people's opinions are different from yours. In this situation, will you express your own opinion?" Answer categories were simply "yes" or "no" (yes = 52%). A second question was constructed in the same way with "political reform" replaced by "economic issues" (yes = 59.8%).⁵⁰

Political Participation. Respondents were asked if they voted in the 2004 Legislative Council (Legco) elections held in early September (days before the survey began) (yes = 56%). They were also asked if they joined a public rally held on 1 July 2004 (yes = 11.6%), which drew 200,000 citizens protesting against the Hong Kong and Chinese governments on democratic reform in the city.⁵¹

TABLE 1
Predictors of Ordinary Political Conversation and Discord

	Political Conversation	Discord
Age	.01	-.10
Sex	.16**	-.19
Education	.06**	-.07
Income	.02	-.01
Interest in Politics	.18***	-.14
Internal Efficacy	.14***	-.18
External Efficacy	-.03	.18*
Political Information	.14**	.04
TV News Watching	.02	-.01
Newspaper Reading	.04*	.10
Social Connection	.05**	-.09
Conversation	—	-.45**
Adjusted R ²	26.3%***	—
Chi-Square	—	52.5%***
Pseudo-R ²	—	5.4%
N	783	704

Notes: Entries are unstandardized regression or logistic regression coefficients.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Control Variables. Control variables used in the study include four demographic variables (age, sex, education, income), interest in politics (a five-point Likert-scaled statement), internal efficacy (average of two five-point Likert-scaled statements, $\alpha = .75$), external efficacy (average of two five-point Likert-scaled statements, $\alpha = .69$), television news watching and newspaper reading (both measured in time per day), political information (number of correct answers to two factual political information questions), and social connection (a five-point Likert scaled statement on whether the respondent meets with friends and relatives frequently).

Predictors of Conversation and Discord. Before testing the research hypotheses, the predictors of ordinary political conversation and discord were examined. The predictors were examined using multiple regression analysis for conversation, and logistic regression analysis for discord. The predictors are the control variables listed above, while ordinary political conversation is also added to the model for discord.

Table 1 shows that the control variables explain about one-fourth of the variance in the ordinary political conversation variable. As in the United States, ordinary political conversation is driven by both "supply and demand" factors. On the supply side, social connection and news-

Analysis and Results

paper reading are significantly and positively related to frequency of discussions. On the demand side, people with higher levels of education, interest in politics, and internal efficacy are more likely to engage in ordinary political conversation. Political conversation has a positive relationship with political knowledge even after controlling for other factors. In addition, females are more likely to have engaged in ordinary political conversation when other factors are controlled.

For discord, only two variables emerge as significant predictors. First, people having higher levels of external efficacy, that is, who regard the government as responsive to public opinion, are more likely to perceive discord among their acquaintances, which may be understood within the context of Hong Kong politics. Due to various economic and social crises in recent years, the popularity of the government has been low.⁵² As more people became dissatisfied with the government, those who see the government as responsive (i.e., are high in external efficacy) would disagree with the growing number of citizens expressing dissatisfaction with government. Within the context of their own social network, people who see government as responsive may encounter more and more friends and relatives who have become disgruntled, resulting in a relationship between external efficacy and perceived discord.

The other variable that relates significantly to discord is frequency of discussion. People engaging in ordinary political conversation more frequently are less likely to recognize discord among family and friends. On the one hand, perhaps lack of perceived discord encourages people to talk more. This is consistent with the idea of a spiral of silence as well as the argument that discussion with people holding similar views provides a more pleasurable experience.⁵³ On the other hand, frequent discussions may also allow people to resolve differences and generate more agreement.

Impact on Online Political Talk and Call in to Talk Radio. To test the research hypotheses, logistic regression analysis is used because the dependent variables are dichotomous. The regression model includes control variables, ordinary political conversation, discord, and an interaction term between the latter two. The interaction term was created following a centering procedure to minimize multicollinearity between the interaction term and the main effects variables.⁵⁴

Table 2 summarizes findings regarding the first two hypotheses.

H1 predicts a positive relationship between ordinary political conversation and political discussion with strangers online. Younger people and those more interested in politics are more likely to engage in online political discussions. Consistent with **H1**, there is also a significant positive relationship between discussion with strangers online and ordinary political conversation. Discord itself does not have a significant main effect on political discussions online. The interaction effect between discord and conversation is also not significant.

Table 2 also examines predictors of calling in to political talk radio. Less educated people and those who are more interested in politics are more likely to report having called in to talk radio. While the finding regarding interest in politics is intuitive, the negative relationship between

TABLE 2
Political Conversations, Online Discussion, and Calling Talk Radio

	Discuss with Strangers Online	Calling Talk Radio
Age	-.24*	.13
Sex	-.41	-.13
Education	-.04	-.36*
Income	-.05	-.01
Interest in Politics	.27*	.47*
Internal Efficacy	.07	.26
External Efficacy	-.20	-.31
Political Information	.32	.28
Watch TV News	.03	.07
Read Newspaper	-.04	.18
Social Connection	-.07	.07
Conversation	.58**	-.45
Discord	.38	.13
Conversation X Discord	-.11	.87
Chi-Square	32.6**	27.1*
Psuedo-R ²	7.3%	12.2%
N	462	557

Note: Entries are unstandardized logistic regression coefficients.
 *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

education and calling talk radio is actually consistent with similar findings regarding talk radio listening in Hong Kong.⁵⁵

However, neither ordinary political conversation, discord, nor the interaction term is significantly related to calling talk radio. H2 is not supported. In fact, the coefficient of the relationship between ordinary political conversation and calling talk radio is even negative in sign, opposite the direction predicted by H2.

Is there any explanation for the lack of (or even slightly negative) relationship between ordinary political conversation and calling talk radio? One possibility is the lack of variance in the talk radio variable, as only 5.4% of the respondents have the value of "1" in the dichotomous variable. But with two other independent variables registering significant coefficients, and the explanatory power of the model as a whole remaining statistically significant, measurement reasons may not completely explain the lack of relationship. Another possibility is that some talk radio callers are using talk radio to compensate for lack of discussions about public affairs in their daily lives. This would undermine the positive relationship, or even generate a negative relationship, between conversation and calling talk radio. Regardless, this finding shows that the relationship between ordinary political conversation and public opinion expression cannot be taken for granted. Rather, various

TABLE 3
Political Conversations, Expressing Minority Opinions, and Participation

	Expressing Minority Opinions		Participation in	
	On Political Reform	On Economic Issues	Voting	Protest
Age	-.25***	-.02	.32***	.09
Sex	-.23	-.24	.28	-.82**
Education	.12*	.13*	.05	.00
Income	-.01	.00	.03	.14*
Interest in Politics	.01	-.02	.28**	.07
Internal Efficacy	.12	.20*	-.07	.16
External Efficacy	-.01	.15	-.25*	-.63***
Political Information	.04	.04	.75**	.46*
TV News Watching	.18	.08	.09	.09
Newspaper Reading	-.05	.01	.04	.04
Social Connection	.01	-.02	.12	.12
Conversation	.31*	.26*	.58***	.13
Discord	-.07	-.17	-.36	-.43
Conversation X Discord	-.00	.32	-.12	.58
Chi-Square	60.4***	44.2***	104.3***	63.5***
Pseudo-R ²	6.2%			
N	704	704	610	704

Notes: Entries are unstandardized logistic regression coefficients.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

forms of public opinion expression have their characteristics and take place under different contexts. Such characteristics and contextual parameters could influence the degree of influence exerted by ordinary political conversation.

Impact on Expressivity and Political Participation. H3 predicts a positive relationship between ordinary political conversation and people's willingness to express minority opinions. Table 3 shows the relevant findings. The predictors of willingness to express a minority opinion on the two issues do not completely overlap. Age is negatively related to willingness to express a minority opinion on political reform, but not on economic issues. Internal efficacy, on the other hand, has a significant positive relationship with expressivity only on economic issues. Nonetheless, education lies behind willingness to express a minority opinion in both cases.

Ordinary political conversation is the only variable other than education that has significant relationship with expressivity in both cases. The findings thus strongly support H3. Yet again, the coefficients for discord and the interaction term are not statistically significant.

Table 3 also examines political participation. Both voting and protest participation are explained by lower levels of external efficacy. While the relationship between protest participation and external efficacy is similar to that in established democracies,⁵⁶ the relationship between voting and external efficacy reflects the peculiar political system in Hong Kong.⁵⁷ Information also has a positive relationship with both kinds of political participation. Besides, older people who were more interested in politics were more likely to be voters in the 2004 Legislative Council (Legco) election in Hong Kong, while men with higher income levels were more likely to have participated in the 1 July protest in the same year.

Ordinary political conversation is positively related to voting. The linkage between voting and conversation that has been widely observed in established democracies also appears in the democratizing society of Hong Kong, even after controlling for a large set of relevant variables. However, there is no relationship between conversation and protest participation. **H4**, therefore, is only partially supported.

The Moderating Effect of Discord. **H5** predicts that discordant conversation should have a stronger impact on public opinion expression than concordant conversation. Significant positive coefficients for the interaction term in Tables 1 to 3 would provide support for **H5**. However, the strongest positive coefficients for the interaction term are not significant ($\beta = .58$ and $.32$ on protest and expressing minority opinion on economic issues respectively, $p < .15$). In other words, **H5** is not supported at all.

Given the premise that increasing public opinion expression is important to democratic or democratizing societies, this study supports the general argument that ordinary political conversation is indeed relevant to democracy. Frequency of political discussions with friends and family members is positively related to practices of public opinion expression in four out of six cases—online political talk with strangers, expressing a minority opinion on political reform and economic issues, and voting. The findings can be taken as demonstrating the democratic influence of ordinary political conversations and are also consistent with the theoretical argument that private, sociable conversation can serve as the linkage between public discourse and personal lives.⁵⁸ It also adds plausibility to the claim that private conversation can be the “practice field” for public deliberation.⁵⁹

However, the lack of relationship between conversation and two other dependent variables (protest participation and calling talk radio) also shows that the linkage between public and private discussions cannot be taken for granted. Public discussions and expressions encompass a wide range of specific practices, some occurring in very specific situations. The practices or the situations within which they are carried out may therefore add additional twists to the generally positive linkage between private and public talk. In the case of talk radio, some callers may be compensating for the lack of political discussions in their daily surroundings. For protest participation, participating is costly in terms

Discussion

of the time and effort that a person has to expend (at least compared to the much simpler act of voting). It is therefore not likely that a person will be merely "talked into" protest participation. These explanations are, of course, ad hoc and speculative. Further research is needed to specify which types of public discussion and expressions that ordinary political conversation can and cannot generate, and why.

Obviously, positing private conversation as the independent variable and various forms of public expression as the dependent variables assumes a certain causal direction. One obvious limitation of this study, then, is that a cross-sectional survey can hardly demonstrate causal directions. Private conversation can be the effect of public talk, or the two can be mutually reinforcing.

Nevertheless, some of the theoretical arguments discussed in the present study are not reliant upon assumptions about causality. For example, it does not matter which way causal influence flows when the argument is simply that private talk can bridge public discourse with personal lives. Causal direction also does not matter if the argument is simply that private conversation can be the practice ground for public expression (since it does not matter if people merely go back to practice in private settings only after they have expressed some opinions in public). As long as there is systematic relationship between private conversation and public expression, these arguments are supported.

Certainly, this study was concerned with the democratic impact of ordinary political conversation, and such impact is more important and stronger if we can demonstrate that private conversation is not merely the effect of public expression. Further analysis with a more sophisticated research design can attempt to resolve this problem.

This study also examined whether the existence of discord is a condition for ordinary political conversation to exert its influence. However, the findings are negative. None of the interaction terms has a significant positive relationship with public opinion expression.

Should we conclude that the existence of discord is irrelevant? A better avenue may be to rethink some of the arguments in the debate on ordinary political conversation. Most important, much research and theoretical discussions in the past have emphasized the concordant characteristic of ordinary political conversation: people tend to talk to like-minded others, and it is believed that in ordinary political talk people usually follow the rule of politeness and sociability.⁶⁰ The present study also shows that people in Hong Kong have a tendency to talk to like-minded others. But exposure to at least some discordant opinion through conversation seems to be the norm rather than the exception: 48.3% of respondents disagree with their family members at least half of the time and 59.6% disagree with friends at least half of the time. These two percentages are even higher (59.2% and 72.6% respectively) when we exclude respondents who do not talk to their friends and family about politics *at all*. Moreover, 74.5% of all respondents reported significant disagreement among either their family members or their friends.

This means that, in a modern pluralistic society such as Hong Kong, a complete lack of disagreement in ordinary political conversation is

extremely unlikely (even those who reported agreement with their family and friends "most of the time" may still experience disagreement some times). This, in turn, is due to the fact that politics is not the most important concern in many decisions that people make every day. People are not likely to find themselves in an environment and social network completely homogeneous in political terms. In addition, the argument that people would stick to the norm of politeness and sociability may have underestimated people's willingness (or, for some, even propensity) to debate. It may also have underestimated people's ability to handle disagreement. In the end, Schudson's portrayal of sociable conversation is mainly a conceptually meaningful ideal-type, and this type of conversation does occur in real life occasionally. But at the same time, every individual is bound to experience some disagreement some times.

Discord may be a basic social condition for people living in modern pluralistic societies. The lack of findings about the conditioning impact of discord, therefore, can be interpreted as showing that difference in relative degree of discord experienced in conversation does not matter, not that the complete absence of discord would not matter.

Of course, this interpretation also calls for further analysis. Empirical studies on ordinary political conversation are needed in order to examine many of the arguments in the theoretical literature. More specifically, the present study points to the importance of considering questions of contexts and conditions. While it has become very common, if not imperative, for the study of media effects to consider such questions, study of interpersonal political discussion has seldom done likewise. The present study has examined only discord. There are other potentially important factors that can be explicated and examined.

NOTES

1. Jane Mansbridge, "Everyday Talk in the Deliberative System," in *Deliberative Politics*, ed. Stephen Macedo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 211-40.

2. Katherine C. Walsh, *Talking About Politics: Informal Groups and Social Identity in American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 8.

3. Joohan Kim, Robert O. Wyatt, and Elihu Katz, "News, Talk, Opinion, Participation: The Part Played by Conversation in Deliberative Democracy," *Political Communication* 16 (October-December 1999): 361-85.

4. Robert O. Wyatt, Elihu Katz, and Joohan Kim, "Bridging the Spheres: Political and Personal Conversation in Public and Private Spaces," *Journal of Communication* 50 (winter 2000): 71-92.

5. Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, "Networks in Context: The Social Flow of Political Information," *American Political Science Review* 81 (December 1987): 1197-1216; Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague,

Citizens, Politics, and Social Communication (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

6. Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Walsh, *Talking About Politics*.

7. Michael Schudson, "Why Conversation is Not the Soul of Democracy," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 14 (December 1997): 297-309.

8. This, in turn, is based upon the premise that the same normative ideal of democracy should, at least at a general level, be applicable to both established democracies in the West and democratizing societies such as Hong Kong. Admittedly, theories of deliberative or dialogic democracy are often regarded as attempts to make existing democracies—countries which have already set up the basic set of liberal democratic institutions such as periodic elections and constitutional protection of civil rights—"deeper" or "more authentic." For democratizing societies, it is arguable that the establishment of the basic liberal democratic institutions is more important than how democracy can be further deepened. Nevertheless, there is no necessary conflict between the development of liberal democratic institutions and the promotion of a more deliberative political culture. Hence there is no particular reason to dismiss the importance of public opinion expression and discussion to a democratizing society. For discussions of deliberative democracy as the deepening of existing democracy, see Iris M. Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and John Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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338; Mira Sotirovic and Jack M. McLeod, "Values, Communication Behavior, and Political Participation," *Political Communication* 18 (April-June 2001): 273-300. However, Mutz has provided evidences contrary to the argument here. See Mutz, "Cross-cutting Social Networks."

40. Cantonese is the Chinese dialect spoken by over 95% of Hong Kong residents. Although 18 is the legal age for voting, survey research organizations typically solicit the responses of individuals 15 years of age or older (in the current sample, 12.8% of the respondents are between 15 to 17, and 10.4% are between 18 to 20. See the next footnote for more information about the representativeness of the sample). From past experiences of survey research in Hong Kong, very old people's participation in survey research is plagued by problems of inabilities to understand the questions and/or to handle the survey situation itself. Interviewing very old people in telephone surveys is very costly while it actually contributes to unreliability of the results. Hence the survey did not include people aged 70 or above.

41. The sample has an average age of 37, 51.4% females, 23% holding college or university degrees, and 44.4% having household monthly income higher than HK\$20,000. According to government census data in 2001, the corresponding population (people 15 years old or above) parameters are: 41.7 years old, 51.4% females, 16.4% with college education, and 47.7% having household income higher than HK\$20,000. The sample is younger and better educated than the population. Weighting is not applied in the analyses, though, as multivariate methods are used and the discrepancies are not extreme.

42. Kim, Wyatt, and Katz, "News, Talk, Opinion, Participation," 79.

43. The status of political culture in Hong Kong has been a subject of debate among local scholars. Most agree that a civic culture has been in the process of formation in the past twenty years. However, some scholars argue that Hong Kong people's understanding of politics and democracy is only "partial." It has not yet been developed to a stage that makes Hong Kong's civic culture comparable to the West. See Hsin-chi Kuan and Siu-kai Lau, "Political Learning and Elections in Hong Kong," in *Out of the Shadow of 1997?*, ed. Hsin-chi Kuan, Siu-kai Lau, and Timothy K. Y. Wong (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2002), 309-336.

44. One specific problem here is that people in democratizing societies may be less willing to report levels of political participation and discussions to survey researchers. On the one hand, given the degree of freedom of speech and of the press that has been existent in Hong Kong in the past decades, such underreporting should not be a serious problem. In fact, survey research conducted during elections in Hong Kong has found over-reporting of voting behavior that is similar to that found in democratic countries. But on the other hand, there has not been research conducted specifically addressing the issue of whether and to what extent Hong Kong people are unwilling to report their real political behavior and attitudes in survey settings. Hence under-reporting of political discussion remains a possible problem here.

45. Beck, "Voters' Intermediation Environments"; Schmitt-Beck, "Intermediation Environments of West German and East German Voters."

46. It can also be noted that there are a few analytical advantages of combining the two in this way. First, not combining the two would entail treating the two discussion frequency variables separately. This would sacrifice the efficiency of the analysis and the reliability of the discussion frequency measure. Second, most respondents who "never" discuss politics with friends or family members have not estimated the degree of discord existing in their social networks. The number of people who have given a valid answer to both questions on discord is only 586. Combining the two variables on discord, and using one to represent existence of discord when the other is missing, is a way to reduce the number of missing cases.

47. The first question asks respondents if they listened to the talk shows hosted by a number of highly prominent talk show hosts in Hong Kong, while the second question asks them if they listened to other talk shows on public affairs.

48. Lee, "Radio Phone-In Talk Show."

49. Scheufele and Moy, "Twenty Five Years of the Spiral of Silence."

50. In the study, half of the sample was asked whether they would "express opinions" and the other half was asked whether they would "join the discussion," which, at least literally speaking, does not entail expressing one's opinion. The original intention is to see if more people would be willing to join the discussion. The results show that it is indeed the case. Percentages of respondents answering "yes" are 60.9% and 66.0% for political reform and economic matters respectively when "join the discussion" was used, while the percentages drop to 43.0% and 53.6% when "express opinions" was used. Nevertheless, there is no difference between the two when determinants of expressivity are concerned.

51. The high percentages probably result from over-sampling of well-educated people and over-reporting of participation. But the present study is not concerned with precise estimates of participation, and it is unlikely that systematic biases are introduced. There is also a lack of theoretically or conceptually informed weighting method that can be used in the context of the present study. Hence no method to correct such biases was used.

52. See Ming K. Chan and Alvin So, eds., *Crisis and Transformation in China's Hong Kong* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2002).

53. Noelle-Neumann, *Spiral of Silence*; MacKuen, "Speaking of Politics."

54. Leona S. Aiken and Stephen G. West, *Multiple Regression Analysis* (CA, Newbury Park: Sage, 1991).

55. Lee, "Radio Phone-in Talk Show."

56. Russell Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Western Democracies*, 2d ed. (Chatham, NJ: Chatham, 1996).

57. The Chief Executive of the Hong Kong government is not directly elected. What disgruntled Hong Kong people can do, as a result, is only to vote for "oppositional" politicians in Legco elections. Hence, voting in Legco elections can take up the characteristics of "protest voting." In the 2004 Legco election, protest voting seems to have been dominant.

58. Kim, Wyatt, and Katz, "News, Talk, Opinion, Participation";

Walsh, *Talking About Politics*; Wyatt, Katz, and Kim, "Bridging the Spheres."

59. Mansbridge, "Everyday Talk."

60. E.G., Mutz and Martin, "Facilitating Communication"; Schudson, "Why Conversation Is Not the Soul."