

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**Motivations for Political Discussion:  
Antecedents and Consequences  
on Civic Engagement**Homero Gil de Zúñiga<sup>1</sup>, Sebastián Valenzuela<sup>2</sup>, & Brian E. Weeks<sup>3</sup>

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*Scholarship on informal discussion of politics and current events has mainly focused on its cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral effects. In comparison, fewer studies have addressed the antecedents of political talk. Using 2-wave U.S. panel survey data, this study sheds light over 2 sets of motivations people may have for engaging in political conversation: civic-oriented and social-oriented goals; and their effects over civic participation. Using structural equation modeling, results suggest that both civic and social motivations are positive predictors of frequency of political discussion, and indirectly associated with civic engagement. From a theoretical perspective, these findings cast political talk as a more complex phenomenon than what deliberative theory suggests, and point to social motivations as an additional path to civic life.*

**Keywords:** Motivations for Political Discussion, Social Motivations for Discussion, Civic Motivations for Discussion, Political Discussion, Civic Participation.

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Frequency of citizen-to-citizen political conversations has long been theorized to have a positive impact on citizen engagement, an expectation that has been confirmed empirically by scores of studies (for overviews, see Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013; Toka, 2010). This relationship is not solely constrained to face-to-face talk. Using social media and other digital services for interactive communication can also foster participatory behaviors (Boulianne, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, 2015a; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). Although existing research has produced important contributions to our understanding of the effects of informal political conversation on participation, we know little about the reasons people have for casual talk about politics in the first place (Gil de Zúñiga, Bachmann, Hsu & Brundidge, 2013; Rojas, 2008). What motivates people to have conversations about

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public issues? And perhaps more importantly, do these distinct motivations yield similar or dissimilar outcomes for participatory behaviors?

According to deliberative theorists, individuals come together to exchange information, elaborate on problems facing the community and learn about opportunities to engage in civic activities (Cohen, 1989; Gastil, 2008). These civic goals, however, are in contrast to the findings provided by a number of ethnographic studies, which suggest that oftentimes these conversations are far more casual and informal, not aimed at persuasion or information exchange (Eliasoph, 1998; Walsh, 2004). In other words, people can talk about news, politics, and community affairs for purely social reasons, such as a passing time with others or for a desire to strike up a conversation with an acquaintance (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011). Yet, little research has been conducted on the consequences of noncivic goals on individuals' civic life.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it explores people's motivations (i.e., the psychological forces that support action) for engaging in political discussion, including civic-oriented and social-oriented goals. Second, and most importantly, it investigates how these motivations are related to civic participation in order to answer the question: Do these motivations matter? To do so, it uses data from an original two-wave panel survey of a national sample of U.S. adult residents, which is better suited than cross-sectional data to deal with issues of endogeneity and causal inference.

### **Motivations for political discussion**

Deliberative political discussion is considered by many to be a hallmark of functioning democracies and scholars relying on the premises of deliberative democratic theories have envisioned "rational" citizens engaging in purposive and goal-oriented discussions, driven by instrumental and civically minded reasons for communication with each other (e.g., Gastil, 2008; Fishkin, 1995). The instrumental or strategic approach to discussion suggests that people's reasons for interacting with others are largely functional and purposive, driven by the outcome of exchanging information or opinions (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2010).

In a political context, these instrumental motivations of interpersonal communication may be the closest fit to civic reasons for public discussion implicit in the deliberative, Habermasian approach to political discussion (Habermas, 1984). Grounded on this tradition, previous research has placed considerable importance on specific civic motivations for discussion, such as gaining information, forming opinions, expressing oneself, and persuading others (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991; Rojas, 2015). Contemporary research in this area has demonstrated implicit or explicit connections between civic motivations and both interpersonal and online discussions of public affairs with some evidence indicating that instrumental reasons are a driving force for discussions about politics (Kwak et al., 2005).

Given this context and focusing on concrete purposes associated with the instrumental motivations for discussion—gathering information, forming and expressing opinions, and persuading others—this study tests the association between instrumental (or civic) motivations and political discussion. In hypothesis form, we expect that:

**H1:** Civic motivations (in wave 1, herein W1) will be positively related to discussion of public affairs (in wave 2, herein W2).

Although civic motivations are likely to facilitate political conversations, such discussions may also arise out of more informal interactions that are not driven by such deliberative and instrumental goals (Eveland et al., 2011; Kim & Kim, 2008). Mansbridge (1999) has argued that everyday talk is “not always self-conscious, reflective, or considered” (p. 211). If not purely expressive, some discussions about public affairs likely occur organically in noncivic, social situations as people may talk about politics for pleasure, affection, inclusion, escape, and relaxation (Rubin, Perse, & Barbato, 1988; Schutz, 1966).

Discussing public affairs could be used to entertain, pass time, or continue a small talk with acquaintances, just as it occurs when people talk about the weather, sports, or television programs in informal, social settings. Likewise, if one is attempting to initiate or maintain a relationship, it may be used to get to know or impress others as well (Eveland et al., 2011). Previous work based on focus groups also suggests that these informal, more social motivations, such as finding common ground or showing respect, can be equally—if not more—important for citizens than the motivations highlighted by deliberative theorists, such as expressing one’s own or swaying other’s opinions (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002; Sinclair, 2012).

Still, we know little about the relationship between noncivic, social motivations and discussions of politics and public affairs (Eveland et al., 2011). Literature on motivations for interpersonal communication, along with some of the findings drawn from research about deliberation processes, suggests a possible link between noncivic, social motivations and frequency of discussing public affairs and politics. These motivations that are purely social—think passing time with people one cares about, entertaining oneself, and getting to know other individuals better—offer a natural setting for public discussion by lowering the barriers of psychological and social influences.

In his analysis of small group forums, Ryfe (2006) found that citizens like to start such discussions by “telling stories” about themselves, their family and acquaintances in relation to the issue rather than “argue, debate, or lecture” (p. 73). We would note that this casual type of interaction is consistent with self-presentation and relational goals of interpersonal discussion, including appearing likeable and forming relationships (Guerrero et al., 2010). These social goals could also provide an ideal condition for political discussion by bringing people into the conversation, giving them an impression that they are being listened to and that their conversation partners are sincere (McCoy & Scully, 2002; Ryfe, 2006). The feeling of accountability that occurs in informal conversations is especially important for the formation of identity within

social groups, as it facilitates purposive and intentional thinking along with motivations to sustain the discussion.

However, noncivic, social goals may be unrelated to the frequency of political discussions. Politics inherently involve conflict and individuals often refrain from political discussions in an effort to avoid conflict and discomfort in interpersonal settings (Ulbig & Funk, 1999). Given that people want to form good impressions and maintain relationships (Guerrero et al., 2010), public affairs may not be considered a preferred topic for many people. As they are less likely to risk conflicts, citizens may attempt to avoid bringing up politics in their informal conversations and instead focus on conversations that are safe and have little potential for disagreement. Mutz (2002) offered a similar argument when explaining why most people refrain from discussing politics with those who think and vote differently, which is the maintenance of social harmony. Considering the conflicting literature on the subject, at this stage we cannot predict the sign of the relationship between social goals and political talk. Thus, we feel compelled to ask the following research question:

**RQ1.** What is the relationship between noncivic, social motivations (W1) and discussion of public affairs (W2)?

### **Discussion and civic participation**

Civic participation is conceptualized in this study as citizens' voluntary civic actions and activities that are not political in nature, pursuing to resolve community problems as a main objective (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). The rationale here is to capture individuals' behavior that do not seek to influence the government or political institutions practicing politics, but rather activities that are not financially compensated, and aim to foster community life and citizenship via charity donations, voluntary work for nonpolitical groups, simply getting involved in community projects, etc. In short, civic behaviors that promote more cohesive and unified communities (Pasek, Kenski, Romer & Jamieson, 2006).

Reasons to learn more about civic engagement are important. In fact, there are so many virtues attached to the study of civic participation and its impact in public life that some authors opted to summarize them with blurry lines in an attempt to be inclusive, although not exhaustive (Schlozman, Verba & Brady, 1999). From a microlevel or individual perspective, this type of voluntary civic actions are beneficial to those who take part on them. Civic engagement channels and fuels people's educational abilities, so individuals may better act and relate to others in their communities (Uslaner & Conley, 2003). Furthermore, participating civically will also tend to help citizens to generate a stronger sense of competence and efficacy, accept more responsibilities, and develop a higher degree of respect for others in their communities (Schlozman et al., 1999).

From a macro perspective, civic engagement is the foundation of democracy (Skocpol & Fiorina, 2004). That is, civic voluntary activities foster ties, connections and communities in such way that embeds individuals in a thriving relationship between the state of power and individuals, enhancing a healthier democracy.

In this context, the study of political discussion and political conversations among citizens becomes key in order to understand better *how* and *why* people may participate civically. Previous research examining the relationship between frequency of public discussion and civic engagement is rich and vast (Valenzuela, & Bachmann, 2015). A consistent finding is that public discussion is significantly and positively associated with participation in both civic and political activities (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Klofstad, 2011; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; Pattie & Johnston, 2009; Shah et al., 2005). The reasons for this positive link are manifold. Conversations provide opportunities to exchange information, discuss issues that affect the community, and expose individuals to concrete ways to address these issues and become more involved in civic life (McClurg, 2003; Rojas, 2008; Rojas et al., 2005).

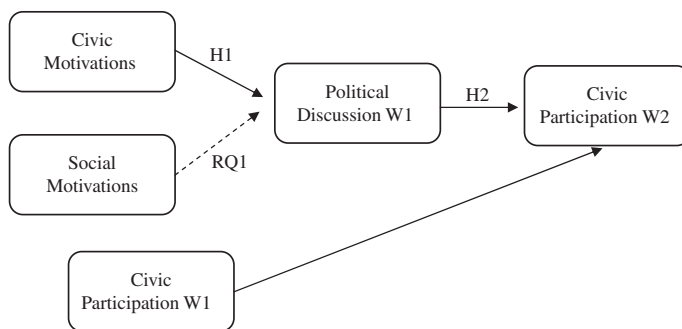
In line with Bryce's (1888/1973) classic model of public opinion formation, previous research has also found that political talk is a central intervening variable in the process of media use and media effects on political behavior. Research has found that discussion frequency can either mediate (Shat et al., 2005) or moderate (Brundidge et al., 2014) the effects of news media use on civic and political participation, although the explanations for this intervening role have not been addressed empirically as most studies operationalize talk as frequency of discussion.

The positive influence of citizen-to-citizen communication on participation includes computer-mediated and online forms of discussion, with evidence increasingly pointing out a complementary role between interpersonal and online forms of communication (Cho et al., 2009; Freelon, 2010; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Although the possibility of online interactions interfering with participation due to misinformation and uncivil aspects coming from its open nature has been raised in the past (e.g., Hill & Hughes, 1998), other research has suggested that when online interactions create an environment where citizens are encouraged to interact and gather information, online discussions can lead to further engagement (Ho & McLeod, 2008).

Such findings indicate that as citizens spend more of their leisure time online, there are unintended consequences of computer (and mobile) mediated interactions taking place with regard to discussion and participation about politics. This resonates with perspectives about how everyday conversation often leads to more strategic forms of communication and action (Gil de Zúñiga, 2015b). Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) supported this argument with empirical findings on how online groups with nonpolitical interests such as hobby-based networks often involve political discussions. The benefits of such evolution of discussions online are that there are higher possibilities of exposure to dissimilar perspectives and demographics rather than further insulating one into similar perspectives (Wilhelm, 2000). Considering the above discussed research, we posit a second hypothesis:

**H2:** Discussion of public affairs (W1) will be positively related to civic participation (W2).

Implicit in the previous hypotheses is the relationship between motivations and civic participation. If civic motivations lead to discussions, and these discussions contribute to civic participation, then motivations should have an indirect effect



**Figure 1** Theorized model of motivations, discussion, and civic participation.

on civic engagement that occurs through discussion frequency. Through these interactions, an active process of making sense of the knowledge by expressing one’s perspectives with others of similar or dissimilar opinions, citizens may transfer their vague perceptions into more reasoned opinions based on the reality, which eventually transfers to specific actions of participation (Diehl et al., 2015; Jung et al., 2011). Thus,

**H3.** Discussion of public affairs (W1) mediates the relationship between civic motivations (W1) and civic participation (W2).

This indirect relationship, however, may or may not extend to social motivations for discussions, as we cannot anticipate the nature of the relationship between these types of goals on discussion behavior. Ideally, citizens with social motivations would strike up conversations about public affairs just for the sake of talking, and this process would create opportunities that lead to participation. However, considering one’s desire to maintain the relationship along with the unwillingness to face conflicts in their everyday life (Mutz, 2002), whether this would be the case in reality is questionable. Furthermore, although it has been discussed that small talk provides natural conditions that may lead to discussions of public affairs, conversations that occur without purposive or strategic motivations for accumulating knowledge, expression or persuasion may remain what it was intended to be, a talk just for the sake of talking, without any implications for participation. We therefore posit an additional research question (also see Figure 1 for a formal theoretical figure representation):

**RQ2.** Do individuals’ discussion of public affairs (W2) mediate the relationship between social motivations (W1) and civic participation (W2)?

**Methods**

**Sample**

The data gathered in this study was collected through an online survey platform, which researches used to administer the survey (Qualtrics). In order to obtain survey respondents that resemble the U.S. population parameter, and ensure data integrity

and generalizability, the authors contracted A.C. Nielsen, a large media polling company. Nielsen provided the subjects for the study.

Nielsen draws the sample from an opt-in online panel of over 200,000 U.S. adults, applying stratified quota sampling methods that establishes a quota based on demographics including gender, age, education, and income. Previous studies have also validated this data collection method (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). In fact, given the current context in which many citizens do not own a landline phone at home, this type of data collection comes to confidently complement random digital dial sampling techniques (see special volume on online panel data, Bosnjak, Das, & Lynn, 2016).

W1 data were collected between 15 December 2013 and 5 January 2014 from an initial sample of 5,000 people. A total of 2,060 individuals responded, although 247 cases were removed for incomplete or invalid data, resulting in a final sample size of 1,813. Using AAPOR calculations (Response Rate 3, AAPOR, 2011) the response rate for the first wave was 34.6%. Data for W2 were gathered between 15 February 2014 and 5 March 2014. A total of 57% of respondents from W1 provided data in the second wave, resulting in a sample size of 1,024, which is within an acceptable rate for data representation (see, e.g., Watson and Wooden, 2006). Overall, the sample had fewer Latinos, was slightly older, and more educated compared to the U.S. Census (for full comparisons and demographics brackets see Saldaña et al., 2015; Weeks et al., 2015). However, the sample is diverse and comparable to other surveys using more traditional random digital dialing sampling methods (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2013), and to the U.S. population at large.

## Measures

### *Civic motivations for discussion*

Items measuring civic motivations for discussion were developed based on previous literature on civic discussion that outlines individuals' institutional goals in talking about politics, including the motivation to persuade others, express a political view, learn new information, and form an opinion (Conover et al., 2002; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991; Rojas, 2008). Civic motivations for discussion were measured using five items measured on a 10-point scale (1 = *never* to 10 = *all the time*) that asked respondents "how often would you say the following reasons describe your motivations for talking about politics and public affairs": "To stay informed about politics and public affairs," "To form your opinion about something," "To listen what others have to say," "To express your ideas and opinions," and "To persuade others about something" (5 items averaged scale, W1  $\alpha = .95$ ;  $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 2.61$ ; W2  $\alpha = .95$ ;  $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = 2.56$ ). The two-wave panel allows us to assess test-retest reliability and we find a correlation of .70 ( $p < .001$ , two-tailed) between the two waves. Further, a paired-sample  $t$ -test revealed no difference in means between the waves ( $p = .22$ , two-tailed).

### *Social motivations for discussion*

Social motivations for discussion items were developed based on three potential non-civic motivations for discussion as outlined by Eveland et al. (2011), including small



talk, enjoyment, and relationship development. Social motivations were assessed with three items using the same 10-point scale and question stem as for the civic motivations. The statements included, “To pass the time with others,” “To entertain yourself with others,” and “To get to know others better” (3 items averaged scale, W1 Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ ;  $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 2.33$ ; W2  $\alpha = .88$ ;  $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 2.31$ ). As with civic motivations, the test-retest method demonstrates reliability as the two waves were highly correlated ( $r = .64$ ,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed) and no differences in means emerged ( $p = .73$ , two-tailed).

#### *Political discussion frequency*

Using a 10-point scale (1 = *never* to 10 = *all the time*), respondents provided an estimate of how often they talked “about politics or public affairs online and offline” with “spouse or partner,” “family and relatives,” “friends,” “acquaintances,” “strangers,” “neighbors you know well,” “neighbors you don’t know well,” “co-workers you know well,” and “co-workers you don’t know well” (9 items averaged scale, W1  $\alpha = .87$ ;  $M = 3.3$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ; W2  $\alpha = .86$ ;  $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 1.7$ ).

#### *Civic participation*

Five items measured on a 10-point scale (1 = *never* to 10 = *all the time*) were used to measure civic participation. Respondents were asked “how often have you been involved in the past 12 months in the following activities,” including “Worked or volunteered for nonpolitical groups, such as a community project, hobby clubs, environmental groups, etc.,” “Participated in a run/walk/bike for charity,” “Donated money to a charity,” “Attended a meeting to discuss neighborhood problems,” and “Attended/watched a public hearing, neighborhood or school meeting” (5 items averaged scale, W2  $\alpha = .79$ ;  $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ).

#### *Discussion network size*

We controlled for respondents’ discussion network size, as it can affect the extent to which they discuss politics (Eveland, Hutchens & Morey, 2013; Rojas et al., 2005). Respondents were asked in an open-ended question to provide an estimate of the number of people they “talked to face-to-face or over the phone about politics or public affairs,” and “talked to via the Internet, including e-mail, chat rooms, and social networking sites about politics or public affairs” during the past month. Both items were added into a single index. The resulting variable was highly skewed (W1  $M = 4.01$ ,  $Mdn = 1.00$ ,  $SD = 20.2$ , skewness = 19.64), so, in line with prior research (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011), it was transformed using the natural logarithm (W1  $M = .33$ ,  $Mdn = .24$ ,  $SD = .37$ , skewness = 1.32).

#### *Discussion network heterogeneity*

We also controlled for the heterogeneity of respondents’ discussion networks using two items that assessed on a 10-point scale how often respondents talk about politics or public affairs online and offline with “people from a different race or ethnicity” and



**Table 1** Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Motivations for Discussing Political and Public Affairs

	Civic Motivations	Social Motivations
To stay informed about politics and public affairs	<b>.903</b>	.305
To form your opinion about something	<b>.882</b>	.349
To listen what others have to say	<b>.919</b>	.415
To express your ideas and opinions	<b>.918</b>	.401
To persuade others about something	<b>.819</b>	.416
To pass the time with others	.271	<b>.864</b>
To entertain yourself with others	.288	<b>.865</b>
To get to know others better	.436	<b>.876</b>
Eigenvalues	5.8	1.0
% Variance	73.4%	10.0%
$\alpha$	.95	.89

Notes: Maximum Likelihood Confirmatory Factor Analysis with varimax rotation ( $\chi^2 = 473.3$ ;  $df = 19$ ; CFI = .94; TLI = .91; RMSEA = .15; SRMR = .04). Cell entries are standardized coefficients for Confirmatory Factor Analysis at  $p < .05$  or better.  $N = 1,016$ .

“people from a different social class” (2 items averaged scale, W1 Spearman Brown coefficient = .88;  $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 2.64$ ).

#### Control variables

Based on previous studies, our analyses also control for demographic variables including age, education, income, and gender. We also controlled for other discussion-relevant variables including political knowledge (range 0–8, W1  $\alpha = .75$ ;  $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 2.2$ ), political interest (2-item averaged scale, W1 Spearman Brown coefficient = .94;  $M = 6.67$ ,  $SD = 2.70$ ), strength of partisanship (0 = *Independent*, 5 = *strong partisan*,  $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 1.98$ ), news use (10 items averaged scale, W1  $\alpha = .72$ ;  $M = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ), and political efficacy (3-item averaged scale, W1  $\alpha = .78$ ;  $M = 5.12$ ,  $SD = 2.24$ ).

## Results

Although civic and social motivations for discussion are on face two theoretically different constructs, we begin our analyses by confirming that these motivations are indeed distinct and constitute two-latent variables (Holbert & Grill, 2015). A maximum likelihood confirmatory factor analysis structural equation modeling with varimax rotation suggested a fair fit for two factors, with the items for civic and social motivations strongly loading ( $\geq .82$ ) onto separate factors (Table 1). Although the goodness of fit statistics for these two proposed factors suggest that it is safe to consider a civic motivation to discuss to be different from a social one ( $\chi^2 = 473.3$ ;  $df = 19$ ; CFI = .94; TLI = .92; RMSEA = .15; SRMR = .04), we would also note that

**Table 2** Regression Models Predicting Motivations for Discussing Political and Public Affairs

	Civic Motivations W2	Social Motivations W2
<i>Step 1—Demographics</i>		
Age	-.05 (-.01, .00)#	-.13 (-.02, .00)**
Education	.01 (.02, .05)	.02 (.04, .05)
Income	-.01 (-.01, .04)	.00 (.01, .05)
Gender (female)	.06 (.29, .13)*	-.06 (-.26, .13)*
Incremental R <sup>2</sup>	3.6%	2.7%
<i>Step 2—News and Political Variables</i>		
News use	.09 (.17, .05)**	.15 (.25, .05)**
Political efficacy	.08 (.09, .04)*	.06 (.07, .04)#
Strength of partisanship	.04 (.05, .03)	.03 (.04, .03)
Political knowledge	.01 (.01, .04)	-.10 (-.11, .04)**
Political interest	.26 (.25, .04)***	.19 (.16, .04)**
Incremental R <sup>2</sup>	30.4%***	20.3%***
<i>Step 3—Network and Discussion Characteristics</i>		
Network size (logged)	.22 (1.56, .21)**	.18 (1.17, .21)**
Network heterogeneity	.26 (.25, .03)***	.23 (.20, .03)**
Incremental R <sup>2</sup>	11.8%***	8.7%***
Total R <sup>2</sup>	45.8%	31.7%
(Valid cases)	(996)	(1,006)

Notes: Final-entry standardized regression coefficients reported. Missing values substituted with the mean for predictor variables. Unstandardized coefficient and standard error in parentheses.

# $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed).

the dimensions of discussion are fairly correlated ( $r = .56$ ), and the fit for the data could be better given the marginal RMSEA.

The confirmatory factor analysis shows that the two-latent variable model fits the data but we found further evidence of two separate constructs when looking at the results of ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions predicting civic and social motivations for discussion (Table 2). There are some consistencies in the predictors, as network size and heterogeneity, news use, and political interest predict both constructs to similar degrees. However, there are several differences in what predicts the two motivations. For example, higher levels of political efficacy are associated with civic, but not social, motivations. This is to be expected give that civic motivations include persuading others or expressing an opinion. Individuals who are high in political efficacy, or believe they are qualified to participate in politics, are more likely to pursue these behaviors.

Political knowledge is negatively related to social motivations for discussion but holds no association with civic motivations. Passing time, entertaining oneself, or building relationships—the measures of social motivations—do not require one to be especially knowledgeable, as these conversations may not go into much depth.

Younger individuals are more likely to hold social motivations for discussion but the relationship between age and civic motivations did not reach a level of significance. Given that younger people have less solidified political views (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989), they may prefer to enter political conversations in a more social manner than a civic one.

Finally, women are more likely than men to hold civic motivations and less likely to hold social motivations. Thus, the two variables are related to predictor variables in many ways that are supported and expected by theory, providing additional construct validity. Coupled with the results of the confirmatory factor analysis, these OLS regressions provide further evidence of two separate motivations for political discussion. These multiple tests suggest that the concepts are valid and that we can proceed with the test of our hypotheses.

The hypotheses and research questions are addressed next. The first hypothesis predicted that civic motivations are positively related to discussion of public affairs. Taking advantage of our panel design, we constructed a time-lagged OLS regression model using a series of variables from W1 to predict frequency of political discussion in W2. After controlling for demographics, news, political variables, and network characteristics, the standardized coefficient for the relationship between W1 civic motivations and frequency of political discussion in W2 is .09 ( $p < .05$ , two-tailed; see Table 3). Civic motivations were positively associated with political discussion at a later time and thus we find support for this hypothesis. We also find a statistically significant relationship between social motivations in the first wave and frequency of political discussion in the second wave after controlling for numerous factors,  $\beta = .14$  ( $p < .001$ , two-tailed). Thus, in response to RQ1, we find that social motivations are positively and significantly related to frequency of political discussion.<sup>1</sup>

The second hypothesis predicted that frequency of political discussion in the first wave would be positively associated with civic participation in W2. Testing an autoregressive model in which we control for the effect of people's prior participation (W1) over their civic engagement over time (W2), results indicate frequency of political discussion still matters. In the far right column of Table 3, the coefficient for frequency of political discussion is a positive and significant predictor of civic participation,  $\beta = .10$  ( $p < .01$ , two-tailed). In fact, political discussion is clearly the strongest predictor of civic participation besides participating civically in the past ( $\beta = .67$ ,  $p < .01$ , two-tailed), thus supporting H2.

In the third hypotheses, we predicted that W2 discussion of public affairs will mediate the relationship between civic motivations in the first wave and civic participation in the second. Given the relative dearth of research on social motivations, our second research question was posed to examine whether the effect of W1 social motivations for discussion on civic participation in W2 are mediated by frequency of discussion of public affairs.

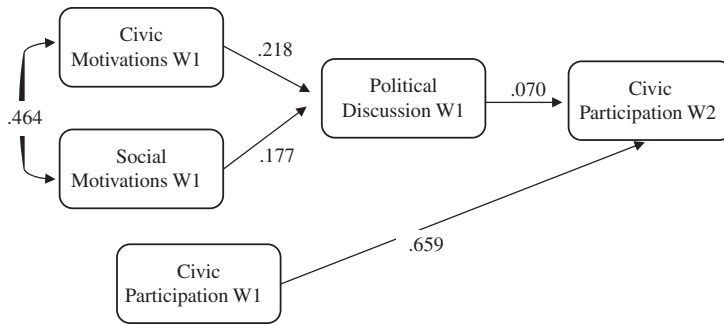
Both H3 and RQ2 were tested using a single, autoregressive lagged structural equation model that examined the indirect effects of civic and social motivations on

**Table 3** Panel Autoregressive Model Predicting Political Discussion Frequency and Civic Participation

	Political Discussion W2	Civic Participation W2
<i>Step 1—Demographics (W1)</i>		
Age	-.08 (-.01, .00)**	-.01 (.00, .00)
Education	-.00 (-.00, .03)	.01 (.02, .09)
Income	.09 (.10, .03)**	.01 (.01, .03)
Gender (female)	.00 (.01, .09)	.04 (.05, .03)
Incremental R <sup>2</sup>	3.5%	5.4%
<i>Step 2—News and Political Variables (W1)</i>		
News use	.13 (.15, .03)***	.02 (.02, .04)#
Political efficacy	.04 (.03, .02)	.05 (.04, .03)
Strength of partisanship	.08 (.07, .02)**	.00 (.00, .02)
Political knowledge	-.10 (-.07, .03)**	-.02 (-.02, .03)
Political interest	.13 (.08, .03)**	-.03 (-.02, .03)
Incremental R <sup>2</sup>	23.2%***	12.0%
<i>Step 3—Network and Discussion (W1) Characteristics</i>		
Network size (logged)	.15 (.72, .15)***	.07 (.34, .15)*
Network heterogeneity	.19 (.12, .02)***	.01 (.01, .03)
Incremental R <sup>2</sup>	12.1%***	6.9%
<i>Step 4—Motivations for Discussion (W1)</i>		
Civic motivations for discussion	.09 (.06, .03)*	-.03 (-.02, .03)
Social motivations for discussion	.14 (.01, .00)***	-.04 (-.03, .03)
Incremental R <sup>2</sup>	2.1%	0%
<i>Step 5—Civic Participation (W1)</i>		
Frequency of political discussion	—	.10 (.11, .04)**
Civic participation	—	.67 (.68, .03)***
Incremental R <sup>2</sup>		32.9%
Total R <sup>2</sup>	40.8%	57.2%
(Valid cases)	(956)	(927)

Notes: Final-entry standardized regression coefficients reported. Missing values substituted with the mean for control variables. Unstandardized coefficient and standard error in parentheses. #  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed)

civic participation, through political discussion. The effects of the control variables were residualized in the model. This model exhibited a strong fit with the data ( $\chi^2 = 3.18$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = .20$ ;  $RMSEA = .025$ ,  $CFI = .990$ ,  $TLI = .975$ ,  $SRMR = .021$ ), explaining 4.3% of the variance of political discussion and 11.5% of the variance in civic participation (Figure 2). Consistent with our findings from the OLS regressions, both civic ( $\beta = .218$ ,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed) and social motivations ( $\beta = .177$ ,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed) were related to frequency of political discussion in the SEM. Discussion was also associated with civic participation,  $\beta = .070$ ,  $p < .05$ , two-tailed; after isolating the effect that peoples' civic participation behaviors had over time. That is, as it



**Figure 2** Autoregressive structural equation model of motivations, discussion, and civic participation. *Notes:*  $N = 943$ . Path entries are standardized SEM coefficients (Betas or Gamma) at  $p < .05$  or better. The effects of demographic variables (age, gender, education, race, and income) and sociopolitical antecedents (political efficacy, strength of partisanship, political interest, political knowledge, discussion heterogeneity, and discussion network size), as well as Civic Participation on Time 1 on endogenous and exogenous variables have been residualized. Model goodness of fit:  $\chi^2 = 3.18$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = .20$ ;  $RMSEA = .025$ ,  $CFI = .990$ ,  $TLI = .975$ ,  $SRMR = .021$ ). Explained variance of criterion variables: Political Discussion  $R^2 = 4.3\%$ ; Civic Participation  $R^2 = 11.5\%$ . This theoretical model was also bootstrapped based on the Standard Errors with 1000 iterations, with a 99.99% confidence interval.

**Table 4** Indirect Effects of Motivations for Discussion on Civic Participation

Indirect Effects	$\beta$
Civic motivations → Discussion → Civic participation	.038***
Social motivations → Discussion → Civic participation	.042***

*Note:* Standardized regression coefficients reported.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed).

can be expected, the effect of participating civically over time remains fairly stable ( $\gamma = .659, p < .001$ ).

Turning to the indirect effects, the results support H3, as the indirect effect of W1 civic motivations on W2 civic participation through political discussion was significant,  $\beta = .038, p < .001$ , two-tailed (Table 4). Similarly, social motivations for discussion from the first wave facilitated civic participation in the second wave indirectly via political discussion,  $\beta = .042, p = .001$ , two-tailed. Taken together, structural equation model results indicate that both civic and social motivations for discussion enhance civic participation at a later time and this effect runs through discussion frequency.

## Discussion

What causes people to have informal political conversations within their social networks? To date, this question has received scant attention, with most evidence

pointing to resources, political involvement, personality traits, culture and other structural variables (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013). The findings of this study cast light on the psychological drivers of talking about public affairs and how this behavior relates to civic engagement by examining the role played by discussion motivations. More specifically, our results indicated that citizens can hold at least two types of motivations, civic and social, and that both are related to the extent to which people engage in conversations about politics.

To the degree that frequent discussions make civic participation more likely, we have identified and empirically tested two additional, indirect routes to citizen engagement: a civic route stemming from the need to gain information, express opinions and persuade others, and a social route stemming from the sheer entertainment and relational goals achieved through informal political conversations. Interestingly, civic and social motivations are more or less equally conducive to civic engagement, as evidenced by the size of the coefficients reported in Table 4.

As expected, civic-oriented motivations, such as learning information and forming an opinion, were closely associated with frequency of discussion. This result is consistent with a view of discussions as informal deliberations among citizens, a fact that is confirmed by the strong and positive contribution of political talk on civic participation. That is, purposeful and civically oriented conversations will inexorably spark conversations among citizens, if only because one of its main drives will involve obtaining information, solve community problems, and other instrumental goals.

Whereas we were not surprised that civic motivations are predictive of civic participation, the fact that purely social and relational motivations can spur discussions and, by extension, citizen engagement is a novelty. In one sense, this result is at odds with prior research (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Prior, 2007; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005) conducted over motivations for media use and civic engagement, which has found that surveillance motivations—not social or entertainment goals—spur political behavior through news use.

One explanation may be that as noncivic motivations (e.g., spending time with others, getting to know conversation partners better) lead to political discussions, these discussions may become more civic oriented as they progress, leading eventually to information exchanges and other instrumental goals that are more closely related to civic behavior. In other words, it may well be that people strike up a conversation about public issues for purely social reasons, but as the conversation develops a more purposive drive keeps the conversation going.

Another explanation for the contradictory findings between the effects of noncivic goals in media use and informal political conversation may lie in the inherent differences across these two communication channels (i.e., media and discussion). For example, Susan's motivation for discussing politics may stem purely from an entertainment goal, but that does not prevent her friend Joan from transmitting political information and persuasive arguments to Susan that, eventually, make her more likely to engage in civic activities. However, when it comes to media use, Susan may well avoid political and persuasive messages through the process of selective exposure.

Taken together, these findings cast the effects of citizen communication on participation in a different light from what would be derived from deliberative theory. Rather than only goal-oriented citizens talking about important community problems to, say, address public policies, discussions can also be driven by interpersonal relationship goals, sheer diversion, and passing time with others. Most importantly, these noncivic motivations do not deter civic participation. So long as they promote conversations among citizens, they may well offer an indirect path to a stronger citizenship. Put another way, our study refutes the notion that noncivic goals for discussion undermine civic action by triggering a superficial experience of engagement that leads to nowhere.

One unexpected finding in our study relates to how people's level of knowledge in time 1 negatively related to their level of political discussion in time 2. Most of current work has previously established a positive association between these two variables (see Eveland et al., 2011, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011). In this study, political knowledge is introduced as a control to isolate its potential confounding effects as for how motivations for discussion, political discussion, and civic participation are related. Within this context, our knowledge variable included many dimensions of information about politics following the work Delli Carpini and Keeter with the National Election Survey studies (1996).

Similarly, the measurement on political discussion included altogether different attributes of discussion (i.e., strength tie and heterogeneity), which have also been associated with different knowledge effects (Eveland & Hively, 2009). Nevertheless, future research should continue to delve into the nuances of this association by determining key specific mechanisms that take place in citizens' discussions, as they clearly yield different effects on the ways people learn about important public affair issues in society.

Despite the new insights shed by this study, the analysis has several limitations. One limitation of this study relates to the employment of survey data. It does so at three levels. First, the study has carefully crafted empirical models that attempt to control for as many variables the literature has previously identified as important when explaining the relationship between motivations to discuss politics and civic engagement. Yet, there might be other possibly unknown confounding variables that influence this relationship.

Second, by employing survey data, we are constrained to self-reports of motivations, discussion frequency and civic engagement, which may yield inaccurate measures due to social desirability bias. To the degree that the respondents of our survey inflated these constructs, however, the tests examining the role of noncivic motivations are truly conservative. In addition, self-reports are an important means by which researchers can learn about peoples' psychological motivations, as these are less amenable to direct observation (Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2014).

Third and perhaps more importantly, the study employs panel data in two waves which allows us to reach stronger causal inferences than cross-sectional studies because it also controls for individuals' prior levels of civic participation in an autoregressive



association. Nevertheless, our model would have benefited from data collection at a third point in time. Strictly speaking, motivations to discuss politics in time 1 should predict people's discussion patterns and levels in time 2, which in turn, would have an effect on civic engagement at time 3.

Limitations notwithstanding, our study contributes to the study of informal political conversations in three ways. First, no study has tested in a comprehensive manner the psychological drivers of political discussion at the individual level. Our findings suggest that two sets of motivations contribute to political discussion, in addition to other well-known antecedents of political discussion, such as sociodemographics, news media use, political involvement, and network size. Relatedly, the second contribution of this study is that we successfully adapted existing measures of news media motivations to political discussion, so that future research can employ these items to replicate and extend these findings. In this sense, our research offers a way of measuring discussion motivations that can be applied in both surveys and experiments that employ self-reports. Third, considering that several authors have criticized the use of cross-sectional designs to study informal political discussion (e.g., Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013), our study employed panel data, which is better at establishing a temporal order and makes the results of the structural equation models more credible.

Future research will elaborate on these findings by replicating the current analysis and testing the role of additional discussion goals. One such promising avenue is to test the relationships between motivations for discussion and subsequent behaviors in an experimental setting, such that the issue of causality is tackled in a more robust manner. Furthermore, so long as this is the first study on the relationship between motivations, discussion and engagement, the findings need to be interpreted with a note of caution. More research is needed aimed at replicating the indirect and direct effects of motivations in other political and cultural contexts, perhaps with additional control variables and different statistical procedures.

## Note

- 1 † Given the relatively high variance inflation factor between our independent variables of interest, social motivations was mean-centered to alleviate this potential multicollinearity problem (Kraemer, & Blasey, 2004).

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