



Willingness to communicate about politics (WTCAP): A novel measure of interpersonal political discussion



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ABSTRACT

This paper lays out a theoretical argument for a novel survey measure of interpersonal political discussion; willingness to communicate about politics. WTCAP is defined as a state-based variable referring to a person's likelihood or propensity to actively engage in an informal political discussion in a specific situation. Complete data from 291 participants were used to test and validate this novel measure. Ultimately a six-item survey instrument was found to best fit the data. This measure was found to be a valid and reliable measure of the construct.

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1. Introduction

A substantial area of study within the social and behavioral sciences focuses on the antecedents and effects of interpersonal political discussion among democratic citizens. Existing empirical work has revealed that the theoretical musings of political scholars as far back as Plato, Aristotle and Pericles of the first Grecian city-states championing the potential benefits of political talk were not unfounded (Guttman & Thompson, 2004). Considering the popularity and relative importance of this work it is essential that empirical research continues to evolve both theoretically and methodologically. This paper looks to do just this through the introduction of a novel measure of interpersonal political discussion not currently covered in the literature.

Research on political discussion has commonly focused on either self-reports of *actual* past communication practices or measures of hypothetical *opinion expression*. While these works provide a solid theoretical and methodological foundation from which to study political discussion they are unable to capture all dimensions of the construct. This paper introduces a novel measure, *willingness to communicate about politics* (WTCAP), as a means of capturing unique information in regards to political discussion. WTCAP differs from actual discussion in that it allows for data to be included

concerning the intentions one has to communicate. Studying these intentions to communicate can tap into times when a person may want to communicate but not necessarily have the opportunity. This measure also allows us to study more informal political conversations as well as conversations among “weaker ties” by way of a unique name generator technique.

It is quite probable that existing studies of interpersonal political discussion greatly underestimate the amount of discussion that is occurring in the public, furthermore, the nature of these conversations may also be misreported. For a number of methodological reasons political discussions are often under reported in the public sphere and when conversations are reported they are typically only among strong ties (close friends and family) who share political attitudes and opinions. This, however does not tell the entire story as contemporary research suggests political discussions may in fact be more frequent and among heterophilous ties (Eveland & Kleinman, 2013). The proposed measure allows for exploration of these later forms of conversation that are underrepresented.

Consider the following example. Imagine yourself at a party that your friend is hosting. After a few minutes you strike up a conversation with another person whom you have never met but is also a friend of the party host. After introducing yourselves, a political topic is innocuously broached. Maybe you chat for ten or fifteen minutes with this person about the topic before you're interrupted by an old friend. You bid farewell to the new acquaintance and think nothing more of it. This type of conversation would not be captured with traditional political discussion measures. Nevertheless it is, in fact, a political discussion, and should be counted as such. The proposed measure would capture this type of conversation.

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WTCAP is defined as a state-based variable referring to a person's likelihood or propensity to actively engage in an informal political discussion in a specific situation. WTCAP is a novel construct, based on existing situational willingness to communicate (SWTC) scales; however the proposed measure is unique in that it is in the context of informal political talk. It is important to note that willingness is conceptualized in this scale as a behavioral intention and operationalized as the likelihood that it will occur.

This paper will include a discussion concerning general communication willingness measures as well as a discussion about the proposed operationalization of willingness as a situational based behavioral intention measured by the likeliness of an interaction occurring. The review will also include an overview of "political discussion." This will be followed by a review of current methodological tools used to assess this form of talk. Utilizing a unique data collection procedure, a *cued-recall name generator*, data will be presented authenticating the development and validation of a self-report WTCAP scale.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Willingness to communicate

Originally *willingness to communicate* (WTC) was conceptualized as a general orientation or probability that a person will initiate communication when presented with the opportunity (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). This was both conceptualized and operationalized as an individual-level, trait-based predisposition, expected to be stable across time and contexts and *not* expected to be influenced by situational goals. McCroskey and Richmond (1987) developed a twenty-item survey instrument tapping this general "intention and desire to initiate communication." (Riasati & Noordin, 2011, p. 74). The items relate to different situations and ask individuals to indicate the percentage of times between 0 = "never" and 100 = "always" they would choose to initiate communication. It is important to highlight the fact that WTC specifically refers to a person *initiating* a conversation. The WTC scale has been widely adopted and used throughout the field as an independent variable (McCroskey, 1992).

More recently a second, state-based, explication of WTC – understood as both situation dependent and variable across contexts – has come to challenge the original trait-based perspective (Kang, 2005). While an individual may have an innate proclivity to be more or less willing to communicate on a trait-based level, there are also many *situational* factors that may alter a person's WTC in a given setting. Even McCroskey and Richmond (1987) argued when developing the original WTC scale that a person's willingness to engage in a communication event is "probably to a major (though as yet to be determined) degree situationally dependent" (p. 129). State-based, or Situational WTC (SWTC) speaks to "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons. . ." (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1998, p. 547).

Differing from the trait approach to WTC, situational WTC does not necessarily mean one must initiate a conversation, rather situational WTC speaks to a more general interest in perpetuating a communicative act whether it was initiated by oneself or another. Also, the state approach acknowledges that situational factors such as the identity of potential discussion partners and the topic of conversation can influence a person's WTC. SWTC "is influenced by the immediate situational antecedents – the desire to communicate with a specific person. . . and more enduring influences such as interpersonal motivation, intergroup motivation, self-confidence, intergroup anxieties, social situation. . ." (Kang, 2005, p. 279).

2.1.1. Measuring situational willingness in context

SWTC has been investigated in a variety of contexts including, families (Avtgis, 1999), interculturality (Lin & Rancer, 2003), regarding health topics (Wright, Frey, & Sopory, 2007) and in second-language situations (Cao & Philp, 2006). SWTC in the context of provider-patient health communication (Wright et al., 2007) has been a particularly fruitful line of research, especially in terms of people's willingness to discuss health topics both with health service providers and with other lay persons (Crowell, 2004; Morgan & Miller, 2001). Like political subjects, health topics are often uncomfortable for people to talk about given the "social stigma attached to some diseases and conditions and the potentially embarrassing information about one's body that can come up in conversations about health. . ." (Wright et al., 2007, p. 36).

The majority of past studies about SWTC conceptualize *willingness* as a person's likelihood of communicating in a particular situation measured by reporting *intentions* to communicate (although other conceptualizations have used behavioral expectations or actual communication). In line with the majority of studies, WTCAP also defines WTC as an individual's *intention* to either initiate or respond to a communication engagement that serves to advance the conversation. WTCAP in this case most closely resembles a *behavioral intention* or desire to communicate in a given situation.

Currently, no studies exist that explore SWTC on the topic of politics. Most research on political discussion has focused on either self-reports of *actual* past communication practices or on hypothetical *willingness to express opinions*. Thus the current work looks to take up space in the lacuna by proposing a situational willingness to communicate about politics scale. Again, it is important to explore these works in greater detail to emphasize why a new measure is required. Before discussing these perspectives and further exploring the variable of interest (WTCAP) it is necessary to first explicate the underlying dimension of "political discussion" itself.

2.2. Political discussion

The current research is not concerned with formal rule governed deliberation but natural, everyday political conversation free of procedural constraints and formal rules. Within the literature, a veritable glut of terms has been used to label some variation of this informal discussion among free citizens. These include *political discussion* (Eveland, 2004), *political conversation* (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994), *political talk* (Walsh, 2004), *informal deliberation*, *ordinary political conversation*, and *everyday political talk* (Kim & Kim, 2008).

These types of conversations "takes place outside of formal, rule bound structures and is closely intermeshed with everyday life and social interaction outside of the political realm" (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011a, p. 1083). Informal political talk is not as formally politically driven or goal driven as deliberation. Goals of informal political talk might be more focused on social and personal gains. As Tarde (1898/1989, p. 87) put it some one hundred and twenty years ago, conversations of this kind are sometimes "without direct and immediate utility. . . one talks primarily to talk for pleasure, as a game, out of politeness." The political-ness of these conversations is also less formal.

"Communicating about politics" in the current model most closely follows the conceptualization of Eveland and colleagues' (2011a), conceptualization of political talk which refers to "interpersonal and small group interactions about the broad topic of politics that take place outside of formal deliberation settings" (p. 1083). The one note that should be made is that this research is *only* concerned with interpersonal communication about politics within dyads and not in small groups.

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