# The Functions of Political Discussion and its Impact on Political Awareness:

# A Research Note

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Political scientists tend to presume that citizens' participation in spontaneous political discussion is somehow beneficial for democratic processes. To be sure, discussion on any topic surely reflects some interest in the subject matter, which can then be reinforced by the apparent, shared interest of the discussion partners. Discussion with others might help us to a broader perspective on political matters, and create a greater awareness of the significance of politics for citizens' life. This heightened awareness that politics matters - which, as it was argued above, probably comes in tandem with increased personal interest in politics - may instill a stronger sense of political efficacy and participatory attitudes. Interpersonal communication must lead to sharing information about the state of the world, and how sensible – and less sensible – people with given tastes and other characteristics may feel about it. Hence, it could be expected to make the political choices of the discussion partners better rooted in socially acceptable argumentations. Discussion should thus lead to enlightenment: a better understanding of politics, of fellow citizens, and of ourselves.

Plausible as these claims are, it is not entirely obvious to what extent they hold. It is equally plausible that communication about a subject among the disenchanted may just increase a shared recognition of the irrelevant or appalling nature of the matter. Instead of broadening one's horizon, communication with peers may lock one up in a narrow perspective dominating the particular social environment from which all or most discussion partners come from. Rather than increasing one's stock of dependable political knowledge it may just spread disinformation, and root political choices in the expressive, psychologically comforting, rather than politically instrumental logic of most small talks, friendly joking, and family disputes. Clearly, it is the need for psychological comfort, social adjustment and dominance, rather than the search for some objective truth and the implications thereof that dominates most causal chat among lay citizen-observers of politics. Thus, it is not entirely

obvious that citizens learn to make better, rather than just more thoroughly rationalized choices as the result of political discussions.

**Research question, hypotheses**

This paper aims at advancing our understanding of these issues. The present, inexcusably sketchy draft focuses exclusively on the mid-term impact of political discussion on the acquisition of what I will label here as lexical and practical political knowledge. Hard-pressed with time, I decided to proceed to describing a possible research strategy and presenting some initial findings without offering either an elaborate discussion on the theoretical issues involved or a review of the previous literature on the subject matter. Let it suffice to say here that at stake is the idea that participation in political discussion may be a particularly effective way of (A) political learning in general; and (B) accessing helpful information shortcuts in particular. Clearly, interpersonal discussion has an enormous potential for instant feedback from message recipients to message senders; for decentralization and compartmentalization of message fabrication; and for continuous message adjustment to the interests, attention span, cognitive and other facilities of the message-recipients. Thus, it may be vastly more successful than mass communication in educating the participants, reliably conveying especially those pieces of information that they, personally, need most to arrive at exactly those political choices that they would make if they were fully informed.

What seems to be doubtful is not whether interpersonal communication can communicate its messages more powerfully than mass media do. Rather, questions are due about the content of the messages that come across in this kind of communication. These questions are implied by the likely motivational basis for political discussion, which hardly ever appears to be the desire to learn the so far unknown truth about politics to make better choices ourselves. Clearly, in our everyday life we discuss politics with our peers mostly to

have an agreeable, possibly entertaining, and one way or another reassuring chat with another human being. Moreover, these other humans rarely have a radically different stock of political knowledge than us. Nor are they less blinded by an ego-expressive rather than analytical orientation when it comes to chatting about politics than we ourselves are. It bears mentioning that deliberative polls, citizen juries and the like create a different situation in both respects exactly by pulling the participants out of their usual social roles and niche. However, outside of such unusual contexts, the routine political discussions that occur in our everyday life may not often mobilize the powerful educational potential of this peculiar arena of political communication.

Hence, three key hypotheses will be looked at below. The first stakes on the educational potential of political discussion, and holds that participation in political discussion with friends, relatives, work mates and other peer increases one's stock of factual political knowledge.

The second hypothesis expects that political discussions promote opinion-holding about political actors. Of course, this is just a trivial derivative if the first hypothesis were to be confirmed. However, it becomes a rather more intriguing proposition if this hypothesis is supported while the first is rejected. That constellation may seem to underline that interpersonal political discussions generate powerful learning effects, but the things learnt this way have more to do with the expressive needs of the discussion partners' egos than with anchors in political reality.

The third hypothesis is probably the most important for democratic theory. It submits that political discussions, even if they do not add to the participants' stock of political knowledge significantly, are still instrumental in spreading useful information shortcuts. In other words, political discussions increase practical political knowledge without making much of a difference in lexical knowledge. For instance, they may spread the use of the left-right

semantics in the participants understanding of key political actors as well as themselves. Crucially, the third hypothesis submits that the information shortcuts gained through political discussions are, at least for most of the time, genuine functional equivalents of lexical knowledge, i.e. the thing that they are a shortcut for. In other words, participation in political discussions enhances citizens' ability to make political choices – e.g. vote in elections – as if they were fully informed without really making them better equipped with lexical knowledge.

Note that all three hypotheses can be given a stronger formulation too. In this stronger formulation, participation in political discussions, because of its interactive, user-customized nature, exercises the above effects more than exposure to mass media does.

**Research design**

For a new assessment of the political learning that occurs through political discussions among citizens in everyday life, I propose to analyze non-experimental data partly from panel studies, and partly with simulation methods. By concentrating on non-experimental survey data, I hope to observe not the potential, but the actual impact of these discussions. This seems crucial because of the concerns expressed above about the actual content of everyday political discussions, and about the motivations on the part of message-senders and message-recipients in such real-world situations. By using data from panel, rather than snapshot surveys, one can hope to clarify better the direction of the causal processes that produce the rather obvious and oft-documented positive correlations between participation in political discussion on the one hand, and lexical political knowledge as well as the use of information shortcuts like the left-right semantics on the other.

Simulations, in their turn, are expected to shed further light on whether participation in political discussions may be as instrumental in promoting practical political knowledge than an actual increase in one's stock of lexical political knowledge. Put differently, are the

information shortcuts obtained through discussions actually leading to apparently better-informed choices? The method that will be used to explore this below was developed by Bartels (1996) and Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), and involves regression analyses of cross-sectional data about political preferences and their determinants. These regression equations follow the general pattern shown in Equation 1 and involve, among the independent variables, a constant *a*, various exogenous determinants of political preferences – i.e. sex, age, etc., indicated as the $X_1, X_2, \ldots X_n$ variables in Equation 1 -, and interactions between all the *X* variables on the one hand, and political knowledge (the *Knowledge* variable) on the other.

$$(1) \qquad Preference = fn\begin{pmatrix} a + b_0 Knowledge + b_1 X_1 + b_2 X_2 + \ldots + b_i X_n + \\ + b_{n+1} X_1 Knowledge + b_{n+2} X_2 Knowledge + \ldots + b_{2n} X_i Knowledge \end{pmatrix}$$

Note that the *fn* linking function can be linear as in Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), probit as in Bartels (1996), or assume any number of other functional forms that are appropriate given the distributional properties of the dependent variable and its expected relationship with the independent variables.[1] In any case, equations of the above type can readily generate estimates of how particular individuals may change their revealed political preferences – e.g. vote choices in elections or responses to attitude items in surveys – if their knowledge level increased. All one has to do is to:

[1] Note too that if the *Knowledge* variable is set to have values falling strictly within the 0 to 1 range, then Equation 1.1 can be rewritten without any further ado as in Equation 2 (cf. Bartels 1996):

$$Preference = fn\begin{pmatrix} a + b_0 Knowledge + b_1 X_1 Knowledge + b_2 X_2 Knowledge + \ldots + \\ + b_i X_n Knowledge + \\ + b_{n+1} X_1 (1 - Knowledge) + b_{n+2} X_2 (1 - Knowledge) + \ldots + \\ + b_{2n} X_i (1 - Knowledge) \end{pmatrix}$$

1. substitute some fictitiously high value to the actual observations about the individual respondents' political knowledge level; then
2. use the information contained in the *X* variables and the empirically estimated *b* regression coefficients to estimate how the given respondents would be expected to vote if their political knowledge increased to this fictitiously high value and the assumptions underlying the regression model held; and then
3. compare these predicted preferences to those observed, or, better yet, to those expected if the assumptions underlying the regression model held and the respondents' knowledge level remained as observed.

Yet, these estimates about particular individuals are not reliable when the initial regression analysis omits many conceivable determinants of political preferences - either for lack of data, or because the given determinant is suspected to be endogenous to knowledge, or political preference, or both.[2] However, the same estimates have a very useful characteristic as long as the regression equations allowed interactions between knowledge on the one hand, and all shared determinants of political knowledge and political preferences on the other. In that case, the regression equations can be used to derive approximately correct estimates of the direction and size of the *net aggregate* change that would occur in the distribution of political preferences within any group defined in terms of the regression equations' independent variables if the knowledge level of all group members changed to a given degree.

This merely requires calculating the difference between the two sets of predicted values mentioned above. Remember that one of these sets of predicted values refers to the preferences predicted for the respondents under the given statistical model and given their

[2] Importantly, Sturgis (2003) provided evidence that even then such simulated estimates from cross-sectional data of possible knowledge-induced opinion change broadly correspond to the actual changes that occurred in the political opinions of the respondents when they attended a deliberative poll after an initial survey.

observed information level and their specific constellation of characteristics on the *X* variables. For instance, if the dependent variable was voting preference among three parties, and we run a multinomial regression or a discriminant analysis to model the impact of political knowledge on preferences, the predicted value will be the probability of support for each of the three parties, for instance .65, .25, and .10 for parties A, B and C, respectively.

The other set of predicted values refers to the preferences predicted for the respondents under the given statistical model, a fictitious, arbitrarily high knowledge level, and their specific constellation of characteristics on the *X* variables: say a .68, .28, and .04 probability of support for parties A, B and C, respectively. Given how they are derived, these predicted values are identical for every respondent with identical (fictitious or observed) knowledge level and values on the *X* variables. As long as we omit some relevant determinants of vote choice from the estimation model, we cannot tell exactly which one of these individuals is most likely to vote for each of the parties. But, as long as the model controls for all variables that can influence both vote choice and knowledge level, the predicted values give an unbiased estimate of the fraction of vote that each party can expect in any group that can be delineated in terms of knowledge level and the *X* characteristics, including the electorate as a whole too.

Thus, the numeric example above can be interpreted as follows. In a certain group of respondents who share identical characteristics along the *X* variables, we expect 65, 25 and 10 percent voting for Party A, B and C, respectively, if everyone voted and their knowledge level remained unchanged. The expected distribution of the same votes is 68, 28 and 4 percent if the individual knowledge levels of these people increased to that fictitious level that our estimation processed focused on. It is this "knowledge effect" or "information effect" on the vote that practical knowledge must produce by definition: i.e. whatever shortcuts provide the functional equivalents of lexical political knowledge, they must, by definition, enable less

than fully informed voters to vote the way they would if they were fully informed. While we cannot test at the level of individual voters whether participation in political discussions does provide such an alternative to learning facts the hard way, we can carry out the test at the level of all groups defined uniquely in terms of the *X* variables in our sample of respondents in a straightforward way. First, we need to substitute a measure of political discussion to *Knowledge* in Equation 1 and estimate the likely impact of increased political discussion on support for each of the parties the same way as described above about the estimation of knowledge effects. Then, weighting each group by its actual size in the survey sample at hand, we can calculate, separately for each of the parties, the correlation between the estimated change of support in case of increased knowledge and increased participation in political discussion. The more positive the correlation, the more it is the case that greater participation in political discussion does come with something that is a functional equivalent to greater lexical knowledge in generating practical political knowledge, i.e. an ability to emulate fully informed choices.

In the discussion of the empirical results below, I will show how one can filter out from these estimates any impact of the significant positive correlation between knowledge and political discussion. At this point, however, let me proceed to describing the data set that will be used for the analysis.

**Data set**

All empirical analyses reported below rely on a panel study of Hungarian citizens, the third wave of which is going to start while the 2006 ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops convene in Nicosia. Obviously, the analyses reported here only use data from the first wave in November 2003, when 3000 respondents were interviewed, and the second in June-July 2005, when 312 of the original respondents in the third wave and 2000 newly selected respondents were

interviewed.[3] Clearly, once the data from the third wave, during which we expect to interview about 900 previously interviewed respondents as well as a fresh 500 sample in the immediate aftermath of the 2006 Hungarian elections, become available, more elaborate analyses will become possible. Consequently, the present analyses should be considered a preliminary exploration of the possible strengths and weaknesses of the research design suggested above.

Apart from the panel design that is helpful in sorting out the direction of causal relations between inter-correlated variables, the advantage of this survey is that all waves of the survey included at least one sample component with a relatively large number of items related to political knowledge and sophistication. Besides, the first (and third) wave questionnaires included measures of participation in political discussion at election time. Below I take these latter measures as indicators of the propensity of respondents to participate in political discussions about electorally relevant matters throughout the whole period covered by the panel.

**Results**

The first set of results take advantage of the panel-structure of the data on the 312 respondents who were interviewed both in 2003 and 2005. Both times they were administered identical questions on self-reported interest in politics; their placement of self- and the six main parties; what they liked and disliked about each of the four major parties (open-ended question); which of the parties in their view pursued and which opposed each item on a list of 9 political

[3] The first survey in the series took place in November 2003 and was directed by Professor Róbert Angelusz of Eötvös University on behalf of a broader team (see http://valasztaskutatas.hu) with funding from the Hungarian Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Communication and Informatics. The second and third waves have been directed by the present author on behalf of the same group of scholars with funding partly from the Center for Policy Studies at the Central European University and mainly from "The Integration of Hungarian Polity in the Political System of the European Union" project, funded by the Bureau for Research Development and Utilization (KPKI, a Hungarian government agency) under registration # 5/079/2004.

goals, including goals like "promoting the development of a free market economy and private enterprise", "strengthen national feelings", "increase the influence of churches and religion", or "reduce taxes". In 2005, a few additional knowledge quiz items and a battery of questions about issues, asking the respondents to place the four major parties and themselves on seven balanced issue scales, were also added to the questionnaire. In the analyses reported below, these items were transformed into various simple scales, and served as dependent variables measuring knowledge, political opinion-holding and the use of the left-right heuristics in 2005; and as control variables for the respondents' 2003 level of political interest, knowledge, opinionation and heuristic use. As further control variables, the respondents' age (in years), sex, education; a dummy for rural residence; and a simple scale indicator of household affluence based on items measuring the possession of various expensive durable goods by the household, also entered the OLS-regression analyses reported in Tables 1 to 5.[4]

The independent variables of greatest interest in these analyses refer to questions about how often the respondent attends to political news in different types of media; and how often did the respondent discuss politics with (a) family members; (b) friends; (c) neighbors; and (d) workmates during the 2002 election campaign. A factor analysis of the four items about political discussion plus the five items about political media exposure – one each about television, newspapers, weekly magazines, radio and the internet – separated three clearly distinct clusters of variables. The four political discussion items fell in the first; three items detecting exposure to widely used and typically mid-brow media (radio, television, newspapers) in the second; and the items detecting exposure to less widely used and often quite high-brow media (weekly magazines, internet) formed the third group. The original

[4] I also experiemented with the inclusion of several other socio-demographic variables like age-squared and household income, but these variables never recorded a significant net effect in these analyses and were therefore excluded from the final models presented in Tables 1 to 5.

items referring to each of the three clusters were condensed into three simple additive scales referring to the respondents' political information sources.

The key question in the analysis of Tables 1 to 5 is whether the respondents' degree of participation in political discussions with peers enhances political knowledge, political opinion-holding, and the use of the left-right heuristics; and if it does, then whether it does that more or less powerfully than mass media exposure.

Tables 1 to 5 about here

Interestingly, the answers are clearer regarding the second than the first of these two questions. Without exception, all five dependent variables are more significantly and positively influenced by participation in political discussion than by media exposure, in spite of the fact that the equations always control for the 2003 level of political interest and knowledge, and, wherever possible, the starting – i.e. 2003 - score of the respondent on the dependent variable. Given these extensive controls in the equation, it is quite unlikely that the observed statistical impact of political discussion is an artifact, merely masking the self-selective processes at work in recruitment into political discussions. What is less clear is whether the observed impact of political discussion may or may not be due to chance in the case of political knowledge acquisition, for which the effect in question is significant at the $p$=.13 level) and the use of the left-right heuristic, for which the discussion effect records borderline significance. At any rate, the results suggest that political discussion offers a potentially powerful arena for political learning, although it is not entirely beyond doubt that citizens can learn in this arena not just opinions of all sorts, but also factually correct information and the use of cognitive shortcuts, i.e. things that could be instrumental for their emulation of fully informed choice behavior.

Table 6 reports the key results of a more direct test of whether participation in political discussions can pave the way to such choice behavior. This analysis relies on the Bartels-type simulation method discussed above. Recall that in this analysis, we estimate the probability of support for each relevant party both at the actually observed *Knowledge* level and at an arbitrarily high, fictitious level of *Knowledge*, for every unique constellation of values on *Knowledge* variable and the *X* variables entering the vote function that takes the general form shown in Equation 1.

The difference is then calculated, separately for each party, between the two probabilities for each group defined as a unique constellation of values on the *Knowledge* and the *X* variables. For brevity, we can call the vectors of these first differences as the Net Information Effect on Voting Support for Party *J*. Then, the calculus is repeated after replacing in the vote function *Knowledge* with a variable measuring participation in political discussion, i.e. the additive scale based on the four discussion items mentioned above that enters the OLS-regressions reported in Tables 1 and 5 as the *Political info source discussion* variable. The first differences between the mean probability of support for each Party *J* in each group defined in terms of the *X* and the discussion variables at the observed and an arbitrarily high frequency of participating in political discussions can then be conceived as measures of the Net Discussion Effect on Voting Support for Party *J.*

Note that in the present analysis, the data about all 1500 respondents in November 2003 are used to carry out these estimations. The vote function is estimated with a discriminant analysis. The *X* variables included in the analysis are the socio-demographic variables that are usually helpful in differentiating between the supporters of the main political parties in Hungary. These are age, age-squared, sex, education, net household income, the same measure of household affluence – based on the possession of selected durable goods – as above, frequency of church attendance, a dichotomous measure of

membership in the communist party prior to the democratic transition in 1990, and a dichotomous measure of the urban versus rural character of the respondent's place of residence. The arbitrarily high level of *Knowledge* and participation in political discussions that the estimated net knowledge and net discussion effects refer to equal the maximum value of the *Political knowledge in 2003* and the *Political info source discussion* variables.

Table 6 about here

Table 6 reports the key statistics of interest, i.e. the pairwise Pearson-correlation between the *Net Information Effect on Voting Support for Party A, B and C* on the one hand, and the *Net Discussion Effect on Voting Support for Party A, B and C* on the other, respectively. The cases on which these correlations are based are each unique constellation of values on the *X* and the *Knowledge* (or political discussion) variables, weighted by the number of respondents who share each of these configurations of socio-demographic and knowledge-characteristics. The higher positive values these correlations have, the more support is found for the idea that political discussion does in fact act a functional equivalent to lexical political knowledge in generating practical political knowledge, i.e. an ability to emulate fully informed vote choices.

As Table 6 shows, the correlations in the left panel appear to give some, though not overwhelming support to the notion of functional equivalence. Of the four correlations, three are positive and statistically significant, and stronger or much-much stronger in absolute value than the fourth, negative correlation that runs against the hypothesis. However, one may argue that this is due to the substantial (.362) positive correlation between political knowledge and participation in discussions. This correlation may be simply be the result of the more knowledgeable having more political discussions than the ignoramuses. If so, then the left

panel of Table 6 almost certainly overestimates the degree to which discussion can be a functional equivalent of knowledge.

To meet this concern, the right-hand panel of Table 6 shows a revised estimate for all these correlations. Here, the original political discussion variable was replaced with the residual term of a regression equation with *Political info source discussion* as the dependent, and exposure to mid-brown political news media (*Political info source midbrow media*) as the dependent variable. The As a results, the correlation between *Information Effects* and *Discussion Effects* turns clearly inconsistent across parties, and positive only in one out of four cases. The conclusion is, thus, that participation in political discussion is not a functional equivalent to greater political knowledge when it comes to the test of whether the respondent votes as if he or she was fully informed.

**Conclusions**

While the results are less unambiguous than one might wish, overall it seems that they provide clear-cut endorsement for the view that participation in face-to-face political discussion with peers has a very considerable positive effect on political opinion-holding. The evidence is less clear that the powerful learning effects that this witnesses extend to learning factually true propositions. It is quite clear though that political discussion is not a functional equivalent to higher political knowledge level: people who participate more in political discussion are probably more likely to vote as if they were fully informed than people who discuss politics with peers less. However, this seems to be the result of the fact that more knowledgeable people are overrepresented among frequent political discussants. Once we adjust our estimates for this factor, it seems that political discussion cannot compensate for lack of lexical knowledge in generating practical political knowledge, i.e. voting as if one was fully informed.

**References:**

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**Table 1: The Impact of Political Discussion on Political Knowledge. Dependent Variable: Political knowledge in 2005**

| | B | Std. Error | Beta | t-value | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Constant) | -1.289 | 0.829 | | -1.555 | 0.121 |
| Age | 0.023 | 0.008 | 0.147 | 2.717 | 0.007 |
| Sex | -0.548 | 0.249 | -0.104 | -2.202 | 0.028 |
| Education | 0.797 | 0.134 | 0.354 | 5.960 | 0.000 |
| Affluence | 0.044 | 0.035 | 0.072 | 1.243 | 0.215 |
| rural residence | 0.181 | 0.258 | 0.034 | 0.702 | 0.483 |
| Interest in politics in 2003 | 0.344 | 0.169 | 0.115 | 2.037 | 0.043 |
| Political knowledge in 2003 | 0.226 | 0.051 | 0.262 | 4.469 | 0.000 |
| Political info source discussion | 0.098 | 0.064 | 0.080 | 1.517 | 0.130 |
| Political info source midbrow media | 0.014 | 0.046 | 0.017 | 0.298 | 0.766 |
| Political info source highbrow media | -0.166 | 0.108 | -0.080 | -1.540 | 0.125 |

Notes: listwise deletion of missing data, N=299. For an explanation of the variables, see the Appendix.

**Table 2: The Impact of Political Discussion on Opinion-Holding. Dependent Variable: Perceives party positions on issues in 2005**

| | B | Std. Error | Beta | t-value | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Constant) | 5.578 | 3.707 | | 1.505 | 0.133 |
| Age | 0.044 | 0.037 | 0.078 | 1.182 | 0.238 |
| Sex | -2.387 | 1.113 | -0.123 | -2.144 | 0.033 |
| Education | 1.051 | 0.598 | 0.127 | 1.757 | 0.080 |
| Affluence | 0.061 | 0.158 | 0.027 | 0.386 | 0.700 |
| rural residence | 2.552 | 1.153 | 0.131 | 2.213 | 0.028 |
| Political knowledge in 2003 | 0.254 | 0.226 | 0.080 | 1.121 | 0.263 |
| Interest in politics in 2003 | 0.159 | 0.755 | 0.014 | 0.211 | 0.833 |
| Political info source discussion | 0.731 | 0.289 | 0.162 | 2.535 | 0.012 |
| Political info source midbrow media | -0.038 | 0.205 | -0.013 | -0.187 | 0.852 |
| Political info source highbrow media | 0.741 | 0.482 | 0.097 | 1.537 | 0.125 |

Notes: listwise deletion of missing data, N=299. For an explanation of the variables, see the Appendix.

**Table 3: The Impact of Political Discussion on Opinionation. Dependent Variable:**

**Number of likes & dislikes about parties in 2005**

| | B | Std. Error | Beta | t-value | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Constant) | -3.673 | 0.841 | | -4.366 | 0.000 |
| Age | 0.020 | 0.008 | 0.128 | 2.356 | 0.019 |
| Sex | 0.013 | 0.248 | 0.002 | 0.051 | 0.959 |
| Education | 0.426 | 0.133 | 0.190 | 3.199 | 0.002 |
| Affluence | 0.015 | 0.035 | 0.025 | 0.428 | 0.669 |
| rural residence | 0.356 | 0.257 | 0.067 | 1.385 | 0.167 |
| Political knowledge in 2003 | 0.127 | 0.051 | 0.148 | 2.474 | 0.014 |
| Interest in politics in 2003 | 0.548 | 0.175 | 0.184 | 3.140 | 0.002 |
| Political info source discussion | 0.232 | 0.065 | 0.190 | 3.559 | 0.000 |
| Political info source midbrow media | -0.031 | 0.046 | -0.040 | -0.683 | 0.495 |
| Political info source highbrow media | 0.028 | 0.107 | 0.014 | 0.263 | 0.793 |
| Number of likes & dislikes about parties in 2003 | 0.225 | 0.050 | 0.244 | 4.484 | 0.000 |

Notes: listwise deletion of missing data, N=299. For an explanation of the variables, see the Appendix.

**Table 4: The Impact of Political Discussion on Opinionation. Dependent Variable: Links political goals to parties in 2005**

| | B | Std. Error | Beta | t-value | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Constant) | 0.275 | 3.884 | | 0.071 | 0.944 |
| Age | 0.001 | 0.039 | 0.001 | 0.022 | 0.982 |
| Sex | 0.115 | 1.159 | 0.006 | 0.099 | 0.921 |
| Education | 0.765 | 0.622 | 0.089 | 1.231 | 0.219 |
| Affluence | 0.150 | 0.164 | 0.064 | 0.917 | 0.360 |
| rural residence | 1.435 | 1.198 | 0.070 | 1.198 | 0.232 |
| Political knowledge in 2003 | 0.488 | 0.241 | 0.147 | 2.022 | 0.044 |
| Interest in politics in 2003 | 1.552 | 0.791 | 0.135 | 1.964 | 0.051 |
| Political info source discussion | 0.645 | 0.303 | 0.137 | 2.128 | 0.034 |
| Political info source midbrow media | -0.245 | 0.213 | -0.081 | -1.150 | 0.251 |
| Political info source highbrow media | 0.373 | 0.505 | 0.047 | 0.739 | 0.461 |
| links political goals to parties in 2003 | 0.008 | 0.062 | 0.008 | 0.123 | 0.902 |

Notes: listwise deletion of missing data, N=299. For an explanation of the variables, see the Appendix.

**Table 5: The Impact of Political Discussion on Heuristics Use. Dependent Variable: Can place objects on left-right scale in 2005**

| | B | Std. Error | Beta | t-value | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Constant) | 2.602 | 0.596 | | 4.368 | 0.000 |
| Age | 0.008 | 0.006 | 0.092 | 1.378 | 0.169 |
| Sex | -0.207 | 0.179 | -0.067 | -1.154 | 0.249 |
| Education | 0.193 | 0.096 | 0.148 | 2.012 | 0.045 |
| Affluence | 0.011 | 0.025 | 0.030 | 0.421 | 0.674 |
| rural residence | -0.107 | 0.185 | -0.035 | -0.576 | 0.565 |
| Political knowledge in 2003 | 0.030 | 0.036 | 0.060 | 0.836 | 0.404 |
| Interest in politics in 2003 | 0.065 | 0.121 | 0.037 | 0.539 | 0.590 |
| Political info source discussion | 0.090 | 0.046 | 0.125 | 1.932 | 0.054 |
| Political info source midbrow media | -0.045 | 0.033 | -0.098 | -1.359 | 0.175 |
| Political info source highbrow media | 0.110 | 0.077 | 0.090 | 1.415 | 0.158 |

Notes: listwise deletion of missing data, N=299. For an explanation of the variables, see the Appendix.

**Table 6: Pairwise Correlations Between Information Effects and Discussion Effects on Voting Support for Party *J***

| Party: | First estimate | Sig. | Second estimate | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MSZP | 0.166 | 0.000 | -0.090 | 0.001 |
| SZDSZ | 0.469 | 0.000 | -0.496 | 0.000 |
| Fidesz-MPSZ | 0.523 | 0.000 | 0.410 | 0.000 |
| small right-wing parties combined | -0.062 | 0.018 | -0.226 | 0.000 |

Notes: listwise deletion of missing data, weighted N=1444. For an explanation of the variables, see the main text.

**Appendix: Variables appearing in Tables 1 to 5**

*Age*: the respondent's age in years

*Sex*: the respondent's sex, 0=men, 1=women

*Education*: formal educational qualification of the respondent, measured on a 1 (low) to 5 (high) scale.

*Affluence*: sum of the z-scores of seven dichotomous variables registering the possession of seven durable consumer goods by the household.

*Rural residence*: coded 1 for residents of rural areas and 0 otherwise.

*Interest in politics in 2003*: self-declared interest in politics in the 2003 survey, measured on a 1 (low) to 4 (high) scale.

*Political knowledge in 2003*: the number of correct responses to a number of political knowledge quiz items in 2003.

*Political knowledge in 2005*: the number of correct responses to a number of political knowledge quiz items in 2005.

*Political info source discussion*: 12-point simple additive scale summarizing 2003 responses regarding the frequency (1:never, 3: often) of discussing politics with (a) family members; (b) friends; (c) neighbors; and (d) workmates during the 2002 parliamentary elections.

*Political info source midbrow media*: 12-point simple additive scale summarizing 2003 responses regarding the frequency (1:never, 5: every day) of following political news in (a) newspapers; (b) radio; (c) television.

*Political info source highbrow media*: 8-point simple additive scale summarizing 2003 responses regarding the frequency (1:never, 5: every day) of following political news (a) in weekly magazines; (b) on the internet.

*Perceives party positions on issues in 2005*: the number of valid answer regarding the placement of the four major parties on seven balanced issue scales in the 2005 survey.

*Number of likes & dislikes about parties in 2003*: number of reasons mentioned by the respondent to like or dislike the four major parties in responses to eight open-ended questions (two per party) on the matter in 2005.

*Number of likes & dislikes about parties in 2005*: number of reasons mentioned by the respondent to like or dislike the four major parties in responses to eight open-ended questions (two per party) on the matter in 2005.

*Links political goals to parties in 2003*: the number of valid responses offered, in 2005, regarding which party pursued and which opposed each item on a list of 9 political goals, including goals like "promoting the development of a free market economy and private enterprise", "strengthen national feelings", "increase the influence of churches and religion", or "reduce taxes".

*Links political goals to parties in 2005*: the number of valid responses offered, in 2005, regarding which party pursued and which opposed each item on a list of 9 political goals, including goals like "promoting the development of a free market economy and private enterprise", "strengthen national feelings", "increase the influence of churches and religion", or "reduce taxes".

*Can place objects on left-right scale in 2003*: the number of valid responses offered regarding the placement of self and six major parties on a seven-point left-right scale in 2003.

*Can place objects on left-right scale in 2005*: the number of valid responses offered regarding the placement of self and six major parties on a seven-point left-right scale in 2005.