

12 Macro-Politics and Micro-Behavior

Mainstream Politics and the Frequency of Political Discussion in Contemporary Democracies

Too much agreement kills a chat.

—Eldridge Cleaver

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHERS AND democratic theorists since Aristotle have considered political discussion—or at least its ideal version, democratic deliberation—an essential, albeit potentially conflictual element of the democratic process (Bohman 1996; Elster 1998; Fishkin 1991; Macedo 1999). Discussions about politics, it is argued, allow citizens to express their preferences, debate contentious issues, and even transform individual preferences to achieve a collective decision of superior quality. (For a discussion of these issues, see Knight and Johnson 1994.) Recent empirical studies suggest that at least some of these claims have merit (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002). For example, discussing politics generally improves citizens' knowledge of public affairs (Bennett, Flickinger, and Rhine 2000), enhances political tolerance (Mutz 2002a), increases political sophistication among participants in face-to-face discussions (Gastil and Dillard 1999), and significantly elevates opinion quality (Wyatt, Katz, and Kim 2000). In contrast, relatively infrequent political discussion can breed a culture of conformity and intolerance, especially if discussion partners lack diversity (Gibson 1992; see also Gimpel and Lay, in this volume).

Political discussion is a critical element in the formation of individuals' political attitudes and behavior (Jennings and Niemi 1981), and it has been found to be an indicator of increased political sophistication and attentiveness (Inglehart 1977). Researchers have also been interested in political discussion because it constitutes a prime source of information about political affairs (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague, in this volume) and because it constitutes a crucial mechanism of political mobilization, in particular during election campaigns (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Leighley 1990, 1995). Thus, given the central role that political conversations play in the life of a democracy, it is surprising that the determinants of political discussion have been the focus of investigation much less often than other acts of political participation (see, e.g., Leighley 1995). And while a rich literature has examined various aspects of political discussion, few (if any) researchers have systematically examined the determinants of political discussion from a comparative perspective.¹ Moreover, while a number of studies have examined the role of opinion diversity at the micro-level (for a discussion,

see Zuckerman and Kotler-Berkowitz 1998), few have considered the impact of the national political community on people's willingness to engage in political discussions.

To help close these gaps, we investigate the determinants of the frequency of political discussion in fifteen contemporary democracies. We argue that an explanation of political discussion that is valid across countries requires consideration of both individual-level variables and a country's macro-political climate. Moreover, and relatedly, we examine the impact of citizens' attitudes relative to the distribution of opinions among others in the country. Our analyses show that political heterogeneity at the macro level and an individual's position relative to mainstream opinion in society systematically affect the likelihood of their getting involved in political discussions. Specifically, we find that being outside the political mainstream and living in a country marked by heterogeneity of political preferences significantly increases the frequency of political discussion in contemporary democracies. Below we discuss extant research on both the individual-level and contextual determinants of political discussion. Consequently, we derive a series of hypotheses and develop an estimation model that is tested with data from fifteen contemporary democracies. A concluding section discusses the findings and points out areas for future research.

THE MACRO-POLITICAL CLIMATE AND POLITICAL DISCUSSION

Typically, talking about politics is considered both an individual and a social activity that shapes political behavior, but that can also be viewed as a political act itself (Huckfeldt 1986; Gamson 1992). And while a rich body of research focuses on how individual-level variables as well as the immediate (micro-) political environment affects citizens' propensity to engage in political discussion (e.g., Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995), few studies have considered how the macro-political context affects people's frequency of political discussion (but see Noelle-Neumann 1993).² This relative inattention to the impact of the wider political community is perhaps not surprising given that most studies of political discussion have been conducted in single-country settings where the macro-political context can be held constant.

The use of a single-country design has two important drawbacks, however: For one, it is difficult to establish whether the individual-level factors that drive political discussion in one country also play a role in others. It is easy to imagine that such factors may have dissimilar effects on individuals exposed to different political, social, and cultural contexts where political discussion may have a different meaning as a form of political participation and social interaction. Furthermore, single-country studies cannot consider whether and how differences in countries' political environments influence political discussion. Given that political discussion is both an individual and a social political act, the specific question we seek to answer, then, is how an individual's placement in the macro-political space, measured at the level of countries, may affect the frequency of his or her engagement in political discussions.

THEORIZING ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF MACRO-POLITICS ON POLITICAL DISCUSSION: THE ROLE OF MAINSTREAM OPINION

Because of differences in opportunities for discussion, preferences for avoiding unpleasant social interactions, and pressures to conform, people outside the mainstream might be expected to discuss politics less frequently than those in it (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002; MacKuen 1990, 64).³ However, a contrasting perspective suggests that individuals in the mainstream may discuss politics less frequently because they are content with the status quo and have fewer incentives to express their views. This expectation is based on the idea that extremists, or hard-core opinion holders, may be more committed to their views and more willing to share them. They are, by definition, not in the mainstream and therefore unlikely to be content with the status quo.⁴ Moreover, people may locate themselves in the political mainstream because they are not much involved in politics; instead, they simply accept the dominant position without giving it much consideration. As a result, the very lack of interest in political affairs that leads to the acceptance of the mainstream position in society may also be responsible for individuals' low engagement in political discussions.

While these arguments provide competing ways to think about how attitude distribution may affect citizens' propensity to engage in political discussion, they are silent about what it means to be in the mainstream. Here we propose two explicit ways to conceptualize the political mainstream and locate citizens in it. First, citizens find themselves either in the political majority or minority with respect to support for incumbent political authorities. Second, we can measure the distance of an individual's opinion from a country median.⁵ Both conceptualizations of the political mainstream lead us to propose that those outside the mainstream are more likely to engage in political discussions.

POLITICAL MAJORITY-MINORITY ALLEGIANCE AND POLITICAL DISCUSSION

Democratic politics frequently are viewed through the lens of majority and minority status because those in the majority determine the authoritative allocation of values (Easton 1953) or "who gets what, when, and how" (Lasswell 1953). As a result, whether an individual is part of the political majority or minority frequently has been found to affect political attitudes. It is not clear, however, whether and how support for the political majority should affect the frequency of political discussion. Extrapolating from studies that have documented the positive effects of being in the political majority on political attitudes and behavior (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Anderson and LoTempio 2002; Anderson and Tverdova 2001; Bowler and Donovan 2000), we expect those identifying with a governing party to view the national political arena as a friendlier place and, as a result, be more willing to express and discuss their views.

However, supporters of the opposition have a greater incentive to make their views known because of the potential to bring about political change. Because political institutions are the result of distributional conflicts in society, the expres-

sion of collective bargains over socially acceptable wins and losses, they will change when the balance of these wins and losses shifts (Knight 1992). At any given moment, the maintenance of political systems is more likely to be challenged by those in the minority than those in the majority. Thus, members of today's political minority are the "instigators of political change" (Riker 1983, 64), and supporters of the incumbent government have the greatest incentive to avoid change. Thus, political discussion may be an important way to help bring about change or mobilize for it. Following this logic, we would expect a positive relationship between being in the political minority and the frequency of political discussion. Hence:

Hypothesis 1: Supporters of the political opposition (the political minority) will engage in political discussions more frequently than supporters of the incumbent government (the political majority).

THE MEDIAN VOTER AND POLITICAL DISCUSSION

Another way we can locate people politically is with the help of the median voter. A country's political discourse and its underlying political space are commonly defined by a simplifying notion of ideology that facilitates political communication and competition. Ideology is usefully expressed in terms of a left-right continuum, which is commonly considered a summary of voters' positions across a range of policies (e.g., see Klingemann 1979). Left-right placement is a useful indicator of people's location in a country's political space because it measures political orientations at a very general level and in commonly understood and widely accepted terms (Klingemann 1979; Fuchs and Klingemann 1989). As importantly, the left-right scale is crucial to understanding how voters choose among parties, how parties compete for voters, and how policy positions are packaged in party platforms (Gabel and Huber 2000; Huber 1989). Simply put, then, the left-right dimension measures the nature of competition in a political system as well as where an individual locates herself within that space: in the political mainstream, close to the median opinion, or at the extreme as her political convictions diverge further from those of others in the country.⁶

Assuming that being close to the median voter connotes holding a mainstream opinion, we can translate the arguments made above to voters who are located differently in the left-right political space. That is, theories of social conformity and opportunity, which are designed to operate on the micro-level, would suggest that individuals further removed from the median voter would be less likely to engage in political discussions. At the same time, we argue that the effects of the macro-environment on discussion behavior can be linked via a utility-based perspective that focuses on incentives to change the (macro-level) status quo and people's needs to express their views to bring about this change. According to this view, we would expect those at the extreme ends of the distribution to report *more* frequent political discussions. Hence:

Hypothesis 2: As individuals locate themselves further toward the extreme ends of the political spectrum, they will engage in political discussions more frequently than individuals who are close to the median voter.

MACRO-LEVEL EXPLANATIONS: POLITICAL HETEROGENEITY AND THE SIZE OF GOVERNING MAJORITIES

As the above discussion indicates, each conversation about politics takes place in a political environment that is structured in particular ways.⁷ And as we argue above, the most fundamental characteristic of this context is the makeup of the national political landscape in terms of majority-minority power relations and the left-right dimensions of political contestation. Information about where an individual stands relative to the median voter or governing authorities furnishes important, but not the only, pieces of information about the shape of the macro-polity. In particular, it does not allow us to make statements about how differences across countries affect the frequency of political discussion. Therefore, it is important to examine the overall distribution of political preferences in a society and the aggregate level of government support to fully understand what drives political discussions in various countries. Because most political discussions take place in the generally nonthreatening company of family, friends, neighbors, and work-mates with whom individuals establish long standing relationships (Bennett, Flickinger, and Rhine 2000; MacKuen 1990, 83; Zuckerman, Kotler-Berkowitz, and Swaine 1998), it is reasonable to expect that heterogeneity of political opinions would lead to more frequent political conversations. In addition, opinion diversity means that a political conversation is more likely to provide discussants with valuable new information (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague, in this volume). This, in turn, may well motivate more interaction and discussion (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, 54; MacKuen 1990, 71). And because politics occupies only a small part of people's daily lives, it is relatively easy for people to ignore differences in political beliefs or to discover them after a relationship has already become established (Mutz 2002a).

More generally, heterogeneous settings may stimulate political conversations if there is "a tradition of moderation" (MacKuen 1990, 85)—that is, if the country's political culture does not stigmatize disagreement and creates a sufficiently friendly environment for crosscutting interactions. Thus, such environments may increase the levels of "expressivity" for an entire community (MacKuen 1990, 73),⁸ although probably more so in established rather than emerging democracies. In transforming political systems, social and political divisions have a potential to produce frequent, highly charged but insulated political discussions that might prevent cross-fertilization of public dialogue (MacKuen 1990, 86). In contrast, long periods of stability in established democracies suggest that people generally agree about their country's political goals, and that major controversies exist only with regard to the means of achieving those goals. Since conversations are easier when opposing sides disagree about how to achieve consensual goals rather than about the goals themselves (MacKuen 1990, 85), we posit that political heterogeneity in our sample of established democracies should lead to higher frequency of political discussion. Hence:

Hypothesis 3: Individuals in countries with more heterogeneity in citizen political preferences will discuss politics more frequently than individuals in countries with less diversity.

DATA AND MEASURES

Research that investigates the impact of variation in national contexts in addition to individual differences requires a cross-national research design. The data analyzed here include both individual-level and aggregate-level information. Our individual-level data come from the World Values Surveys (WVS) in 1990 as part of the 1990–93 waves. Countries that provided the most important survey items and had a sufficient number of cases for multivariate analysis included Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United States.⁹ Thus, we were able to employ surveys from a diverse set of contemporary democracies with widely varying political cultures, structures, and histories.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable investigated in this study is the frequency of political discussion. Specifically, respondents were asked, “When you get together with your friends, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never?” The values of this variable range from 1 to 3, with 3 indicating frequent discussion and 1 indicating the respondent never discussed politics. This measure focuses on people’s political discussions with friends and is not designed to capture all conversations a respondent could conceivably have regarding politics. Beside conversations with strangers, this measure might also omit political conversations among members of the same household (see, e.g., Zuckerman, Kotler-Berkowitz, and Swaine 1998). However, we feel that this does not necessarily compromise the variable’s validity as a measure of the general concept of democratic deliberation—first, because even private conversations among friends or family members meet the minimum standards of democratic deliberation and, second, because discussions among friends and family members are likely to share important characteristics.

Political theorists conceptualize democratic deliberation as contested political discussions that take place in public spaces, relate to matters of public concern, are addressed to unrestricted audiences, and are open to all citizens (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002). These elements are deemed necessary to ensure a truly democratic discussion where all interested citizens of diverse viewpoints may encounter each other and voice their opinions. In our view, political discussion among friends, especially in mature democracies, meets these criteria.

Conover et al. (2002) provide evidence that conversations among family members and friends share important characteristics. Specifically, using survey and qualitative data from the United States and Britain, the authors report that private political conversations are no less deliberative—based on reason, open to all, and contentious—than public discussions. Moreover, political conversations among friends and family serve a valuable rehearsal or socialization function. They provide opportunities to develop and practice arguments in a supportive and relatively safe private environment (*Ibid.*), particularly for the kinds of opinions that individuals are more careful about voicing in public contexts. Thus, we do not think that the qualifier “friends” handicaps our investigation systematically.

Figure 12.1 shows the distribution of responses to the question across the fifteen countries included in this study. As the figure indicates, slightly over 50 percent say they discuss politics occasionally, about 15 percent say they do so frequently, and nearly one-third say they never discuss politics. The graph also shows that political discussions are most common in Norway (88.5%) and Germany (84.2%), followed by Sweden, Denmark, Canada, and the Netherlands (75–80%). In contrast, we find political discussions are least common in Portugal (49.2%), while over 50 but below 60 percent of citizens in countries such as Spain, Belgium, Ireland, and Italy reporting that they discuss politics at least on occasion. Moreover, the absolute frequency of political discussions also varies within countries: While about a third of respondents in Austria, France, and Britain indicate that they never discuss politics, almost 20 percent of Austrians say that they discuss politics frequently. In contrast, only 12 to 14 percent report frequent discussion in France and Britain. This considerable cross-country and within-country variation in the frequency of political discussion warrants further investigation.¹⁰

Measuring Mainstream Opinion at the Individual Level

Recall that our primary goal is to test the relationship between mainstream opinion and the frequency of political discussion at the level of both individuals and countries. To estimate an individual's location in the political space with regard to political majority-minority support and distance from the median voter, we need information about an individual's political preferences and how these compare with those of their compatriots. The individual-level variables measuring political preferences, as well as a variety of control variables described below, are based on items from the World Values Survey.

Political Majority and Minority Status

The political majority and minority status variable was created by asking which political party the individual would vote for if a national election were held. After

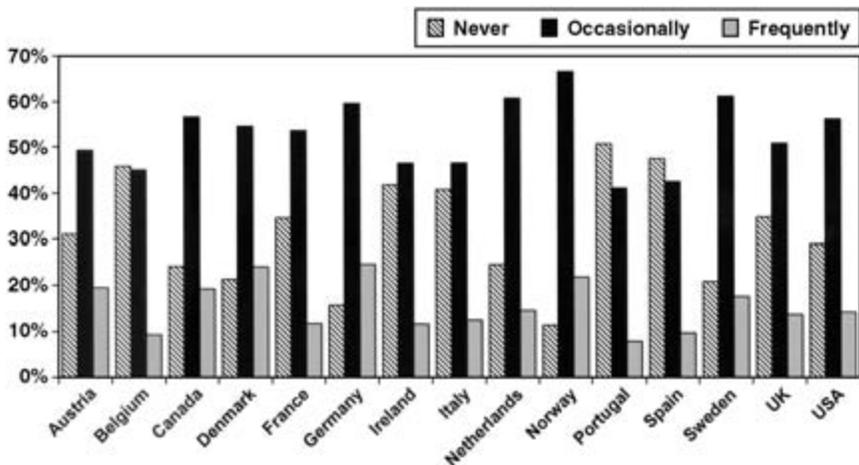


FIGURE 12.1. Frequency of Political Discussion in Fifteen Democracies

determining which political parties constituted the government in each country under study, we combined the information about the person's vote intention with the information about the party currently in power. If the respondent expressed a preference for that party, she or he was coded as being in the majority.

Distance from the Median Voter

Understanding how individual citizens' distance from the median voter (in our conception, the political mainstream) affects their propensity to engage in political discussion requires a way to summarize people's political preferences. We rely on the widely used ten-point, left-right, self-placement scale (Klingemann 1979; Fuchs and Klingemann 1989). Respondents who did not place themselves, did not respond, or responded "don't know" were excluded from the analysis. We then calculated the median voter's position for each country and subsequently measured the absolute distance of each respondent from that median. Visual inspection of left-right distributions in each country showed them to be single-peaked with very little skewness, and additional analyses of kurtosis and skewness suggested that all distributions are close to normal. The median voter located herself at a 5 in eleven countries in our study and at a 6 in the remaining four countries. Thus, individual voters' distance from the median measure ranged between 0 (when respondents were at country median position) and 5.

Control Variables

We also sought to control for a variety of factors that have been found to predict political discussion in previous analyses, such as social capital in the form of organizational membership (in church groups, professional organizations, political parties, and unions) and interpersonal trust, as well as left-right self-placement¹¹ and a standard set of demographic variables (see van Deth 1991; Topf 1995). Coding procedures and descriptive statistics for all variables are listed in the Appendix.

COUNTRY-LEVEL ANALYSIS

Our analysis proceeds in two steps: First, we examine the impact of individual-level variables on the frequency of political discussion for each of the fifteen countries in our sample. Second, by combining the data for all countries, we analyze the joint effects of individuals' status relative to the political mainstream, macro-level heterogeneity, and the country's percentage of government support in the last election on political discussion frequency.

Table 12.1 shows the ordered logit estimation results of the individual-level model for each country. Supporting the government was a significant determinant of political discussion in only three of the fifteen countries (20 percent of our cases): Austria, Belgium, and Spain. However, in all three cases, the coefficient was negative, suggesting that opposition supporters were consistently more likely to engage in political discussions than supporters of the incumbent government. This finding favors the view that being outside the mainstream enhances the frequency of political discussion. The result also shows that larger distance from the median increases the frequency of political discussion in all countries examined in our study, although it fails to achieve conventional levels of statistical signifi-

TABLE 12.1. Ordered Logit Models of the Effects of Position in the Political Mainstream on the Frequency of Political Discussion in Fifteen Democracies

Independent variable	Austria	Belgium	Canada	Denmark	France
Government support	-.537*** (.229)	-.373*** (.146)	-.023 (.167)	-.042 (.211)	-.030 (.236)
Distance from median	.136* (.081)	.091* (.053)	.203*** (.061)	.237*** (.071)	.260*** (.081)
Left-right self- placement	-.024 (.061)	-.021 (.032)	-.027 (.046)	-.077 (.053)	-.065 (.057)
Gender	.156 (.209)	.205 (.135)	.117 (.136)	.472** (.160)	.448** (.210)
Age	.099** (.035)	.100*** (.025)	.075** (.026)	.068** (.028)	.073* (.039)
Age ²	-.001** (.001)	-.001*** (.001)	-.001 (.001)	-.001** (.001)	-.001 (.001)
Income	.119** (.043)	.037 (.028)	.035 (.030)	-.065* (.034)	.074* (.041)
Education	-.064 (.043)	.161*** (.032)	.182*** (.035)	.171*** (.033)	.106** (.045)
Organizational membership	.107 (.088)	.430*** (.067)	.173*** (.053)	.373*** (.092)	.305** (.104)
Size of town	.082 (.055)	-.040 (.040)	-.057 (.035)	.033 (.036)	.007 (.041)
Interpersonal trust	.062 (.212)	.137 (.140)	.244* (.144)	.268* (.163)	.385 (.239)
μ^1	1.000 (1.203)	6.526*** (.883)	4.874*** (.885)	4.712*** (.975)	4.672*** (1.286)
μ^2	3.574** (1.219)	9.252*** (.916)	7.983*** (.918)	7.624*** (1.009)	7.842*** (1.335)
χ^2	36.87***	144.25***	118.85***	109.58***	67.67***
% correctly predicted	51.16	56.88	60.09	57.89	57.92
Pseudo R^2	.090	.152	.124	.150	.154
N	389	872	897	672	404

Independent variable	Germany	Ireland	Italy	Netherlands	Norway
Government support	-.053 (.140)	.112 (.160)	.043 (.161)	-.187 (.178)	.070 (.209)
Distance from median	.317*** (.054)	.158** (.067)	.141** (.052)	.086 (.075)	.280*** (.075)
Left-right self- placement	-.120** (.043)	.039 (.045)	.108*** (.033)	-.050 (.047)	-.096* (.053)
Gender	.729*** (.122)	.636*** (.155)	1.013*** (.147)	.265 (.174)	.350* (.181)
Age	.025 (.020)	.069** (.026)	.002 (.025)	.128*** (.032)	.047 (.039)
Age ²	-.001 (.001)	-.001** (.001)	.001 (.001)	-.001*** (.001)	-.001 (.001)
Income	.044* (.025)	.107** (.038)	.139** (.055)	.014 (.033)	-.012 (.035)
Education	.132*** (.028)	.137*** (.039)	.038 (.029)	.074** (.037)	.169*** (.048)

(continued)

TABLE 12.1. (Continued)

Independent variable	Germany	Ireland	Italy	Netherlands	Norway
Organizational membership	.293*** (.059)	.340*** (.091)	.502*** (.076)	.223*** (.074)	.312*** (.073)
Size of town	.017 (.028)	.038 (.026)	.026 (.033)	-.024 (.054)	.088** (.042)
Interpersonal trust	.242** (.121)	.122 (.156)	.517*** (.146)	.397** (.180)	.301 (.210)
μ^1	2.523*** (.718)	6.877*** (1.033)	3.156*** (.748)	3.570*** (1.161)	3.605** (1.228)
μ^2	5.784*** (.735)	9.552*** (1.072)	5.828*** (.772)	7.057*** (1.197)	7.735*** (1.274)
χ^2	180.84***	94.43***	175.10***	51.76***	73.60***
% correctly predicted	60.78	56.87	52.46	67.15	67.54
Pseudo R^2	.137	.131	.199	.079	.113
N	1,224	670	791	627	613
Independent variable	Portugal	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom	United States
Government support	.189 (.206)	-.523*** (.115)	-.421 (.289)	-.167 (.167)	.046 (.126)
Distance from median	.065 (.059)	.115*** (.038)	.313*** (.096)	.123** (.053)	-.001 (.050)
Left-right self-placement	-.094** (.042)	-.087*** (.025)	-.106* (.062)	.054 (.043)	.023 (.040)
Gender	.842*** (.169)	.537*** (.101)	.143 (.213)	.249* (.139)	.270** (.120)
Age	.041 (.028)	.083*** (.018)	-.022 (.046)	.084*** (.023)	.023 (.021)
Age ²	-.001 (.001)	-.001*** (.001)	.001 (.001)	-.001*** (.001)	-.001 (.001)
Income	.098** (.038)	.078** (.027)	-.011 (.031)	.053* (.029)	.059* (.035)
Education	.176*** (.030)	.096*** (.019)	.150** (.070)	.124*** (.038)	.115*** (.031)
Organizational membership	.371*** (.095)	.428*** (.077)	.191** (.090)	.288*** (.073)	.171*** (.045)
Size of town	.031 (.039)	.044** (.022)	.095* (.053)	.035 (.031)	.049* (.027)
Interpersonal trust	.505** (.200)	.160 (.104)	.251 (.241)	-.071 (.141)	.089 (.124)
μ^1	5.671*** (.949)	5.018*** (.604)	2.715* (1.578)	5.319*** (.850)	3.600*** (.765)
μ^2	8.486*** (.996)	7.708*** (.627)	5.900*** (1.610)	8.103*** (.883)	6.491*** (.787)
χ^2	132.93***	259.35***	42.15***	88.59***	74.13***
% correctly predicted	59.83	56.33	60.73	56.37	59.62
Pseudo R^2	.199	.153	.104	.100	.064
N	600	1,564	382	839	1,117

Note: Estimates are ordered logit estimates. Standard errors appear in parentheses.

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

cance in the Netherlands, Portugal, and the United States. Taken together, then, individual-level results for each country suggest that (1) those outside the mainstream are consistently more likely to engage in political discussions, and that (2) ideological distance from the median voter has a more frequent effect than support for opposition parties.

To examine the robustness of the results—specifically, whether the effect of the distance from the median was not a measurement artifact—we conducted several additional analyses with alternative indicators that are not reported in tabular form here. We estimated models with individuals' distance from the mean opinion, as well as the frequency in the population with which a respondent's left-right placement was shared. The results all tell a similar story: being further from the middle of the distribution (which also coincided with having fewer people in the population to share one's left-right position) was strongly associated with higher levels of political discussion. Thus, the results we report above are extremely robust.

While not all of the control variables consistently turn out to be significant, many do. Moreover, they paint a picture of political discussion that is characterized by inequalities along important demographic dimensions similar to those found in earlier research (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002). For example, education appears to be among the best predictors of political discussion. Specifically, respondents with higher levels of education are more likely to engage in political discussions in thirteen of the fifteen countries.¹² Moreover, in many countries, there appears to be a curvilinear relationship between age and political-discussion frequency such that the very old and the very young are less likely to discuss politics than the middle aged. Finally, men are significantly more likely to engage in political discussion than women in ten of the fifteen countries in our sample.

Indicators of social capital—organizational membership and interpersonal trust—also matter systematically in explaining political discussion frequency. Individuals who are more trusting and more involved in social and political organizations talk about politics more frequently in most countries in our study. Naturally, it would be useful to have additional information about respondents' friendship groups, including, but not limited to, measures of how much the friends like each other or how much time they spend together, in order to see how the quality of social ties affects the frequency of political discussion. While we do not have this information and cannot make any claims regarding these effects, we speculate that such factors may be at least as important as the variables we employ in our analyses (such as organizational membership or education).

CROSS-NATIONAL ANALYSIS: DATA AND MEASURES

As a second step in the analysis, we move beyond the individual countries and seek to replace country names with proper variables. Specifically, in addition to distance from the median as an individual-level variable, we examine the effect of macro-level variables in the form of government support and political heterogeneity on political discussion frequency by combining the data for all countries. Before we present the results of these analyses, however, we first explain our measure of the distribution of government support and left-right preferences in a country.¹³

Measuring Government Support at the Country Level

Our measure of government support was the percentage of each country's population that voted for the incumbent political party or parties in the national election immediately prior to the survey conducted as part of the World Values Survey.

Measuring Ideology and Political Dispersion at the Country Level

Measuring each country's left-right political landscape at the macro-level is slightly more complicated because of issues of validity and cross-national comparability. We rely on data from the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP), which allow for direct cross-national comparisons and thus are more reliable and valid than expert-based or survey-based measures (McDonald and Kim 2002). The CMP data are based on manifestos (platforms) issued by political parties at the time of each election. The data set employs a total of fifty-six common policy categories to construct a common left-right dimension (see Bowler 1990; Budge, Robertson, and Hearl 1987; Warwick 1992).¹⁴ We employ the CMP data collected for the election immediately prior to the survey we use.

To construct a measure of a country's left-right distribution, we needed to weight each party's left-right CMP measure by the party's size in the electorate. Moreover, because we are not interested in the country's mean, but rather its dispersion around that mean, we used the standard deviation as the simplest measure to calculate dispersion or heterogeneity in a country.¹⁵ Thus, we scored each party according to its left-right position using the CMP data in the last election prior to the survey we use. Next, we calculated the weighted mean and standard deviation of the party left-right positions in a country, where the weights are the percentage of votes received by a party.¹⁶ The result is the mean and dispersion of a country's ideological position as indicated by the left-right positions voters associate with when they cast votes.¹⁷

These measures of political ideology and dispersion, or heterogeneity, along the left-right dimension can be seen as the electoral representation of cleavages that serve to organize the politics of the country as a whole. Comparative political research tends to treat cleavages as nation-specific phenomena that give rise to party systems (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), and that produce different electoral and institutional arrangements (Lijphart 1984). Thus, it is sensible for our analysis of political discussion to measure dispersion at the level of the nation. In a very real way, ours is a measure of how politically divided or divergent these societies are. And although traditional social cleavages—here measured by left-right self-placement—have been weakening across Western democracies, they still structure much of Europe's political life and have important and predictable consequences for political participation, in particular for individuals' attitudes and voting behavior. These political identities still bind individuals to political parties and structure the formal and informal organization of a country's political life.¹⁸

Country-Level Control Variables

Our system-level control variables include a national election campaign, a measure of government involvement in the economy, the effective number of electoral parties, and the degree of religious heterogeneity. We expect that the occurrence

of an electoral campaign, greater government involvement in the economy (see van Deth 1991), a larger number of political parties, and greater religious homogeneity lead to higher levels of political discussion. Again, coding procedures and descriptive statistics for these variables are listed in the Appendix.

CROSS-NATIONAL ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Our pooled cross-national research design requires combining information at the level of respondents (micro-level) and countries (macro-level). This means that our data have a multi-level structure where one unit of analysis (voters) is nested within the other (countries) (Bryk and Raudenbush 1992). This type of data structure can generate a number of statistical problems, such as nonconstant variance and clustering, leading to the underestimation of standard errors—particularly at the macro-level—and, thus, a higher probability of Type I errors (see also Zorn 2001). We therefore relied on statistical techniques developed specifically for modeling multilevel data structures (Steenbergen and Jones 2002).¹⁹

One problem for inference in multilevel data structures is that if intercepts vary across countries, the estimates may be biased. Specifically, we may be overestimating the effect of a country's political makeup on discussion behavior, as the macro-level coefficients could be capturing both the true effects of heterogeneity as well as other country-specific effects not accounted for in our estimation model.²⁰ A secondary concern is that if individual-level variables have unequal slopes across nations, our pooled estimator may be biased for each country. A third concern relates to the robustness of our inferences based on potentially inefficient standard errors resulting from clustering (see Zorn 2001). Thus, multilevel modeling techniques allow for the estimation of varying intercepts and slopes, produce asymptotically efficient standard errors, and provide for a direct estimation of variance components at each level of the model.

Below we show the coefficients of interest (constants and independent variables), as well as the variance components at each level of our data (individual and country-level). These estimations allow us to establish (1) whether political differences within a population (or lack thereof) are significant determinants of the frequency of political discussion once we allow the intercepts to vary across countries and obtain better estimates of standard errors; (2) whether our macro-variables explain a substantial proportion of the country-level variance in order for us to be able to claim that we have minimized a potential omitted variable bias; and (3) whether the effects of distance from the political mainstream are similar across countries.

Analysis of Variance

First, we estimated an ANOVA model that decomposes the variance in the dependent variable.

$$\text{Discussion}_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \delta_{0j} + \epsilon_{ij}$$

In this model, γ_{00} is the grand mean of discussion; δ_{0j} contains the sources of cross-national variation, which cause countries to deviate from this mean; and ϵ_{ij} contains sources of inter-individual variation. If both variance components are

TABLE 12.2. Multi-level Estimate of the Frequency of Political Discussion: ANOVA

Parameter	Estimate: Frequency of political discussion
Fixed effects	
Constant	1.832*** (.040)
Variance components	
Country-level	.026** (.009)
Individual-level	.419*** (.004)
-2 log likelihood	51,052.70

Note: Entries are maximum likelihood (IGLS) estimates. Standard errors appear in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < .001$.

statistically significant, both levels of analysis are important for understanding political discussion (see Steenbergen and Jones 2002).

Table 12.2 shows that both variance components are statistically significant and that country-level variance is proportionally much smaller than individual-level variance: Individual-level variance constitutes 94.26 percent of the total variance in the frequency of political discussion.²¹ Given that the data are measured at the individual level, this is not surprising (Steenbergen and Jones 2002, 231). At the same time, there is significant variation in the frequency of political discussion with regard to both levels of analysis. Thus, we now turn to the question of whether the model we have specified can account for this variance.

Cross-National Models of Political Discussion

Table 12.3 reports the results of multi-level models that simultaneously estimate the effects of micro- and macro-variables on the frequency of political discussion. We show two random intercept multi-level maximum likelihood IGLS (iterative generalized least squares) models. Most importantly, as the results in Model 1 suggest, people are more likely to discuss politics if they live in a country that has greater dispersion on the left-right ideological dimension than if they live in a country marked by more ideological consensus. The results reported under Model 2, which include a number of macro-level control variables, are virtually identical.

Models 1 and 2 also strongly suggest that the effect for the distance from the median variable found in the earlier country-by-country analyses is stable across countries. Again, we find that greater distance from the median increases the frequency of political discussion. To examine whether this effect is similar across countries, we also estimated the variability of the slope for the distance from the median voter measure. The results (not shown here) demonstrate that, once cross-national differences in heterogeneity and other contextual variation are taken into account, there is virtually no variability in the coefficient across countries. Thus, distance from the median has a very similar effect on political discussion, regardless of the country under study.

We analyzed the data in two additional ways to ensure that nonresponses to our left-right self-placement measure do not skew the representativeness of our coun-

try samples and, as a result, affect the validity of the inferences we draw. First, we re-estimated the model with the respondents who failed to answer the left-right self-placement question by placing them at the mean level for the country. The results show only very slight differences between the two sets of results (available from the authors on request). Second, we examined how the over-representation of one country in the pooled analyses affected our results. We found that the only country with a disproportionate share of the overall pool was Spain, with around 1,700 respondents relative to roughly 1,000 respondents in the other countries. The results in our re-analyzed models with a dummy variable for Spain were not significantly different from the results reported above.

The multi-level results also suggest that government supporters discuss politics less frequently than opposition supporters. The governing majority size variable, however, fails to achieve conventional levels of statistical significance. Thus, the results speak very clearly in favor of the notion that political variance breeds political talk, both at the level of individuals (in the form of distance from the median voter and opposition-party support) and at the level of countries (in the form of heterogeneity of left-right political preferences).

Most country-level control variables are also significant. We find that the occurrence of a national electoral campaign and greater government involvement in the economy increase the frequency of discussions across countries. The results also indicate that a greater number of political parties are associated with a lower incidence of political discussions. On its face, this result produces an apparent contradiction, given the finding that political heterogeneity breeds discussion. Post hoc, we speculate that countries marked by a larger number of political parties may also be more politically divided into subcommunities—a typical example may be the pillarized nature of Dutch politics—which may lead to less discussion.²² Religious homogeneity, finally, is not significantly related to political discussion. In the end, controlling for these macro-variables does not change the major finding reported here—namely, that individuals in countries with higher levels of political dispersion report a significantly higher incidence of political discussion than citizens in countries that are more politically homogeneous.²³

Supplementary Analyses

To validate the robustness of our results, we conducted a series of supplementary analyses. Specifically, we sought to determine whether our results are driven by the nature of the dependent variable we employed in our study. Recall that the political discussion measure asks respondents about the frequency of political conversations with friends. This measure might not capture a large portion of the political conversations that occur among members of the same household (Zuckerman, Kotler-Berkowitz, and Swaine 1998) or among strangers. Recall also that Jennings and Stoker (in this volume) demonstrate that marriage has a homogenizing effect on spouses' political attitudes through a long-term process of mutual accommodation and compromise to maintain marital harmony that usually privileges the views of husbands over those of wives.

Although we do not have a direct way to account for the frequency and nature of political conversations among spouses, we can test whether our results for individuals who are married or living with partners would differ from those for other

TABLE 12.3. Multilevel Models of the Frequency of Political Discussion in Fifteen Democracies

Independent variable	Model 1: Random intercept model	Model 2: Random intercept model
Fixed effects		
Constant	-.164 (.170)	-.229 (.172)
Government support	-.044*** (.012)	-.044*** (.012)
Distance from median	.047*** (.004)	.047*** (.004)
Governing party electoral support (%)	-.044 (.012)	.001 (.002)
Political heterogeneity	.015** (.005)	.014*** (.004)
Left-right self-placement	-.013*** (.003)	-.013*** (.003)
Gender	.135*** (.011)	.135*** (.011)
Age	.017*** (.002)	.017*** (.002)
Age ²	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Income	.015*** (.002)	.016*** (.002)
Education	.038*** (.002)	.038*** (.002)
Organizational membership	.085*** (.005)	.086*** (.005)
Size of town	.009** (.003)	.009** (.003)
Interpersonal trust	.071*** (.012)	.071*** (.012)
Campaign	—	.131** (.052)
Government share of GDP	—	.009** (.004)
Religious homogeneity	—	-.006 (.110)
Effective no. of parties	—	-.047** (.017)
Variance components		
Country-level	.009** (.003)	.004** (.002)
Individual-level	.371*** (.005)	.371*** (.005)
<i>N</i>	11,661	11,661
-2 log likelihood	21,580.51	21,570.97

Note: Estimates are maximum likelihood estimates (IGLS). Standard errors appear in parentheses. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

individuals, in order to establish if the frequency of political discussion among household intimates is driven by different factors than for the rest of the population. However, the results of these analyses (not shown) do not support this expectation: Our main explanatory variables remain substantively and statistically significant, pointing to the importance of political heterogeneity and being outside the mainstream for stimulating political conversation.

Recall also that the dependent variable quantifies political discussion in three levels: frequently, occasionally, and never. It is plausible that the meaning of these categories varies systematically across countries, such that the word “frequently” in Country A may have a different meaning in Country B. To examine whether our results are due to such differences, we collapsed the three-category dependent variable into two different dichotomous measures. First, we created a dummy variable of political discussion by combining the “frequently” and “occasionally” categories, with “never” as the remaining category. Next, we combined the “occasionally” and “never” categories (coded 0), with “frequently” constituting the remainder category. Re-estimating the pooled models using these different dependent variables, however, did not produce any changes in our substantive results, suggesting that the original answer categories have similar meanings in different countries.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was designed to examine the impact of the macro-political climate on the frequency of political discussion in contemporary democracies. While the theoretical literature typically views disagreement and discussion as essential elements of a well-functioning democracy, the empirical research conflicts on the issue of whether political dissension and heterogeneity foster or stifle political discussion. Using data from fifteen western European and North American democracies, we examined the impact of individuals’ positions in the political space relative to others and the influence of the macro-political environment on the frequency of political discussion. Contrary to many assumptions in the literature, we found that, at the individual level, increased distance from the median and, to a more limited extent, support for opposition parties lead to a greater frequency of political discussion. We also found that greater country political heterogeneity increases political discussion frequency.

Our research was not designed to determine whether these discussions were of high quality or whether they served to enhance people’s civic skills. Moreover, our research could not address what people talk about, or whether respondents typically face sympathetic or hostile others. Similarly, our analysis has little to say about how heterogeneity originates or is sustained. (For an analysis of this question, see Johnson and Huckfeldt, in this volume.) Finally, our conceptualization of political discussion is also one-sided in that we are unable to disentangle whether the nature of the discussions usually involves the rational and considered exchange of ideas among citizens (deliberation) or opinion expression under situations of real or perceived social pressure (Scheufele 1999). Thus, it may well be that citizens who are more ideologically distant from the mainstream or who live in more heterogeneous countries are more likely to create homogeneous and therefore “safe” (micro-) discussion networks, thus enhancing the frequency and intimacy of political discussions. Again, this is an issue further research should be designed to examine.

Finding that the characteristics of the wider political community affect political discussion at all is, on some level, surprising, given that the national political discourse is rather removed from people's lives compared to their immediate social and political environment. This finding raises a couple of questions. First, why do we find any evidence at all that conversations among friends respond so strongly to the macro-political environment? Second, and relatedly, in what sense is the national political community a relevant measure of majority/minority or homogeneous/heterogeneous environments for groups of friends? In answer to the first question, we speculate that in many countries—and particularly in small and unitary states—the country's macro-political environment may actually be the most important (and in some cases the only) level of politics for generating political discussion. Secondly, it is important to bear in mind that the effects we report here are the result of comparisons across the set of countries included in our study. Thus, in terms of simple probabilities, it is likely that any randomly chosen friendship group in a more heterogeneous country will be relatively more heterogeneous than any randomly chosen friendship group in a more homogeneous country. In this way, the macro-environment matters in that the odds of having a friend with the same political views (and thus the odds that the macro-environment reproduces itself at the micro-level) vary sufficiently across countries to produce the results we report.²⁴

Furthermore, one of our central findings—that supporters of the country's political opposition are consistently more likely to discuss political matters than are supporters of the political majority—is novel in research on political discussion and the macro-environment. On its face, it may seem to be at odds with the “spiral of silence” theory. We believe, however, that our findings are not incompatible with Noelle-Neumann's argument. For one, Noelle-Neumann (1974) asserts, but does not test, that those who are further away from the mainstream are likely to be “hard-core” opinion holders who are “not prepared to . . . *be silent in the face of public opinion*” (Noelle-Neumann 1974, 48; emphasis added). In a follow-up test of this argument, Glynn and McLeod (1984) found support for the assumption that hard-core opinion holders are not influenced by the prevailing “climate of public opinion” or by the “spiral of silence” in the same way as individuals who belong to the political majority. Thus, our findings seem to reinforce this proposition and slightly modify the “spiral of silence” theory.

Our findings also appear to stand in contrast to the findings by Gimpel and Lay in this volume, namely, that individuals who identify with a political party that is in the minority locally avoid political discussion. Specifically, these authors find that adolescents growing up in one-party-dominant areas are socialized in environments where minority opinions are often squelched and conformity to a single viewpoint is taken for granted. However, Gimpel and Lay's results may not be directly comparable to our findings because their study focuses on the micro-environment of adolescents rather than on a country's macro-politics and the general population. Young people differ from others in that they participate much less in politics, they may not have crystallized political opinions that they are able or willing to defend in public, and, finally, relative to older citizens, teenagers may be much more concerned with approbation from their peers than with standing up for their views. As a consequence, one could expect a much stronger confirmation of the “spiral of silence” theory among adolescents compared to other generational cohorts in the population.

But even if Gimpel and Lay's results do translate to the general population, we would argue that, in terms of aggregate-level effects, our results do not necessarily contradict these findings. Recall our finding that heterogeneous environments generate more political discussions because they provide discussants with valuable new information that motivates citizen interactions. Thus, we conceive of heterogeneity as a condition where opinions can coexist without being suppressed since the odds that no single opinion predominates are greater than in more homogeneous environments. Similarly, Gimpel and Lay suggest that "While locales exhibiting greater political diversity undoubtedly produce an information bonanza that stimulates political discussion, social pressures may act to suppress discussion in areas that are politically lopsided" (p. 213). Moreover, they discover that Democrats are more efficacious in Republican areas than in the neighborhoods where Democrats are in the majority. If political efficacy has the potential to produce more frequent political discussions, Gimpel and Lay's results are in line with the results we report here. In the end, then, our findings are actually quite consistent in that politically competitive environments are conducive to more frequent political discussions because the absence of a single dominant view is favorable to a free flow of information and expression of a plurality of minority opinions. Thus, it is only in very lopsided environments that political discussion is suppressed—and given that none of our country cases exhibits traits of lopsidedness, our results and those of Gimpel and Lay can peacefully coexist.

The results we present here also parallel the analysis by Kotler-Berkowitz in this volume. Similar to our emphasis on the importance of heterogeneous political environments for generating frequent political discussions, he points to the importance of diverse friendship networks in promoting political participation. While Kotler-Berkowitz does not examine the frequency of political discussion, and although his measure of friendship diversity is based on such factors as ethnicity, class status, and religion rather than political preferences, his finding that diverse networks of friends stimulate political participation (especially nonelectoral forms, due to more diverse, "nonredundant" opportunities for participation) is in agreement with our result about the importance of a heterogeneous political environment for producing more political discussion. Similarly, the findings reported by Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague in this volume—in particular that individuals who interact on a regular basis can experience disagreement if their discussion networks transmit divergent political messages—is compatible with our notion that political heterogeneity can be associated with a greater frequency of political discussion.

Our findings indicate that democratic deliberation is stimulated by those outside the political mainstream and, as a result, may well entail some risk of instability. After all, the expression of and exposure to diverse political views may result in acrimony, hostility, or even violence (Mutz 2002a; Scorza 1998). What is more, those who oppose the status quo have the greatest incentive to change it (Riker 1982). Political theory predicts that the legitimacy and stability of political systems is more likely to be challenged by those in the dissenting minority than by those in the majority. Ideological disagreement may thus serve to provoke and mobilize those who are not part of the mainstream.

At the same time, however, we speculate that the articulation of views by those outside the mainstream may well be benign because it contributes to the range of ideas and choices that are available for collective problem solving. Normative theorists and

empirical researchers alike have argued that discussion and disagreement are essential components of sound public opinion, and that both are necessary for effective democracy (Price, Cappella, and Nir 2002). Similarly, the expression and reception of dissimilar views are said to benefit the inhabitants of a public sphere by encouraging greater interpersonal deliberation and intra-personal reflection (Habermas 1989), a process that teaches citizens “to see things they had previously overlooked” (Manin, Stein, and Mansbridge 1987, 351) and expands their understanding of others’ perspectives (Price, Cappella, and Nir 2002), thereby increasing people’s levels of perceived freedom in a polity (Gibson 1992) and producing more legitimate collective decisions (Fearon 1998, 62). Viewed from this perspective, dissent is a necessary ingredient for democracies to function well, while too much harmony could result in inferior democratic outcomes. Thus, if living in a politically heterogeneous country and being distant from the mainstream motivates individuals to get involved in political discussion, this is likely to broaden the set of ideas and choices available to the collective. Given its potential for transmitting information cheaply, frequent talk driven by opposition to the mainstream and heterogeneity of the political space may well enhance the vibrancy and stability of democratic life.²⁵

APPENDIX: QUESTION WORDING AND INDEX CONSTRUCTION

Frequency of political discussion. “When you get together with your friends, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never? Never (1), occasionally (2), frequently (3).”

Organizational membership (in church groups, professional organizations, political parties, and unions). “Now I am going to read off a list of voluntary organizations; for each one, could you tell me whether you are an active member, an inactive member or not a member of that type of organization? Not a member (1), inactive member (2), active member (3).” This was an additive index, with values ranging from 4 (not a member in any group) to 12 (active member in all groups).

Interpersonal trust. “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” Most people can be trusted (1), You have to be very careful (0).

Left-right self-placement. “In political matters, people talk of ‘the left’ and ‘the right.’ How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking? Left (1), Right (10).”

Distance from the median. This was a measure of the respondent’s absolute distance from the country median on the left-right self-placement scale.

Political majority-minority status. “If there were a national election tomorrow, for which party on this list would you vote?” If “don’t know”: “Which party appeals to you most?” If the respondent expressed a preference for the current government, he or she was coded as belonging to the majority (coded 1); all others were coded 0.

Education. “At what age did you or will you complete your full-time education, either at school or at an institution of higher education? Please exclude apprenticeships.” The measure is the respondent’s age when his or her education had been (or was expected to be) completed.

Gender. Female (0), male (1).

Age. Actual age of respondent.

Income. “Here is a scale of incomes. We would like to know in what group your household is, counting all wages, salaries, pensions and other incomes that come in. Just give the letter of the group your household falls into, before taxes and other deductions.” Answers are coded from the lowest income level (1) to the highest (10).

Size of town. This scale ranges from 1 to 8, depending on population. Under 2,000 is coded (1); 500,000 and more is coded (8).

Government support. This measure represents the percentage of votes for the incumbent political party or parties in the national election immediately prior to the survey conducted as part of the World Values Survey.

Religious homogeneity. This eight-category variable classified respondents according to religious preference: "Do you belong to a religious denomination? If Yes: Which one?" Answers were coded as follows: Belong to no religious denomination (0), Roman Catholic (1), main-line or established Protestant church for given country (2), non-established or fundamentalist Protestant churches (3), Jewish (4), Islamic (5), Hindu (6), Buddhist (7), Other (8). Homogeneity within a population is measured using this equation:

$$A_w = \sum_{k=1}^p Y_k^2/V$$

where Y_k is the proportion of the population falling into a given category within each of the variables, V is the number of variables, and p is the total number of categories within all of the variables. These indicators of homogeneity represent the proportions of sample characteristics in terms of religion along which a randomly selected pair of individuals will correspond and are interpretable in probabilistic terms. If an infinite number of pairs were selected randomly from a finite population, the average proportion of shared characteristics of these pairs would be A_w . The greater the value of A_w , the more homogenous the population would be with regard to demographic or attitudinal characteristics (Sullivan 1973, 70).

Dispersion of political attitudes. This was measured using Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) data. These in turn are based on manifestos (i.e., platforms) issued by parties at the time of each election. The data set employs a total of fifty-six common policy categories, including external-relations categories (e.g., anti-imperialism), freedom and democracy categories (e.g., human rights), political system categories (e.g., governmental and administrative efficiency), economic categories (e.g., nationalization), welfare and quality-of-life categories (e.g., environmental protection), fabric-of-society categories (e.g., multiculturalism), and social-group categories (e.g., underprivileged minority groups). For each document the data represent the percentage of all statements comprised by each category. This, in effect, standardizes the data with respect to document length, yielding a measure of party emphasis that is comparable (McDonald and Mendes 2001). We employ the data collected for the election immediately prior to the survey conducted as part of the World Values Survey. Because the CMP data provide a left-right score for each country, we weighted each party's left-right measure by its size in the electorate. We used standard deviation from a country mean to calculate dispersion or heterogeneity. Additional analyses revealed that, because the data are distributed roughly normally, the standard deviation is highly correlated with other indicators that measure the nature of distributions, such as kurtosis and skewness. Thus, we scored each party according to its left-right position using CMP data, where a party's position is measured according to the single-election left-right score in the election preceding the survey we use. Next, we calculated the weighted means and standard deviations of the party left-right positions in a country, where the weights are the percentage of votes received by a party.

National election campaign effect. This variable was coded 1 if the survey was taken within a period of six months before or after a national election (0 otherwise).

Government involvement in the economy. This measure represented the total expenditure of the central government as a percentage of gross domestic product including both current and capital (development) expenditures and excluding lending minus repayments (World Bank 2000).

Effective number of electoral parties. Based on Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) index.