Do Americans Walk the Talk?

by Bob Spitzer

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Glenn Altschuler and Robert Spitzer*

In politics, what people do matters, a lot. But does it matter what they say? If so, how much? And do most Americans talk about politics in their daily lives, and if they do, so what? These are big questions, and old ones.

For the most part, America’s founders left little doubt about their faith in what modern advocates call "deliberative democracy." James Madison spoke for most of his contemporaries when he decried democracies as "spectacles of turbulence and contention." Madison’s view continues to have plenty of adherents in modern America, but the ranks of the "deliberationists" have swelled. Whether Madison would approve or not, America is much more democratic than it was in his day. That said, is today’s America an icon of democracy, or a democracy hypocrite, where we talk a good game, but don’t vote, don’t talk, and mostly don’t care?

Talking Together: Public Deliberation and Political Participation in America, by Lawrence R. Jacobs, Fay Lomax Cook, and Michael X. Delli Carpini, jumps into this fray with both feet to do something few have done: measure how much Americans talk politics, and how much it matters.

Bob Spitzer’s diary :: ::

Based on a random national survey, a specialized survey of "face-to-face" deliberators (meaning people who have attended actual meetings to talk politics), and a survey of organizations that hold civic forums, Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini find that 80 percent of Americans are public talkers – that is, they discuss, and deliberate with others about issues affecting their communities. That’s a stunning number, not just because it’s higher than that reported in past studies, but also because it eclipses the baseline number used to judge how much, or how little, we care about our democracy: voter turnout, which in the last presidential election was just over 60%. As these large numbers suggest, it’s not just society’s elites who are talking. Sure, those with more wealth and education are more likely to be political talkers, but this study finds “significant” participation regardless of elite status.

The authors admit that the number is big because they spread a wide net. They include people talking directly to each other in public, but that means in many settings, including homes, churches, and schools, in addition to formal political meetings. They encompass all issues, from local to international, and many modes of communication, including telephone talk (who knew that the annoying lady chirping on her cell phone over lunch was talking politics?), email, and of course the internet. Almost half of Americans report trying to persuade someone about an issue, and 31 percent tried to sway someone about how to vote.

And speaking of the many ways people talk politics, here’s the other big surprise: politics is still mostly interpersonal. House Speaker Tip O’Neill’s familiar bromide from thirty years ago that "all politics is local," isn’t so anachronistic after all. What do Americans talk about face-to-face? Local issues top the list at 24 percent, followed by war/terrorism/Middle East, 23 percent, children’s issues, 18 percent, and social policy, at 14 percent.

The percent of Americans who engage in "internet deliberation," however, including message boards, chat rooms, and the rest, was only 4 percent (24 percent used email). That’s remarkable not only because over three-fourths of all Americans have internet access, but also because the punditocracy keeps telling us that the era of internet politics has arrived. Maybe not so much.

The authors say all this talk matters because it stimulates political action by talkers themselves and others, including everything from contacting elected officials to volunteering to voting to boycotts. It also encourages people who do things to do more things – sort of an exercise in political body-building.

In 2000, political scientist Robert Putnam concluded that we were becoming an increasingly atomized nation, a place where people bowled alone. Well, maybe we still bowl alone, but when it comes to politics, it’s both collective and personal, and it seems to be spreading.
We’d like to play some role in stimulating more political talk on the internet. And so, we’ve committed ourselves to reviewing a book on American politics each month for Daily Kos – and inviting readers to comment, criticize, and forge a discussion chain. If we, and others, are successful, maybe a second edition of Talking Together will report that the internet is becoming a public square in an increasingly democratic culture. What say you?

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