

Department of Political Science  
**CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY**

**THE RELEVANCE OF MICRO SOCIAL CONTEXTS FOR  
INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: A COMPARATIVE  
ANALYSIS**

**By**  
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*I hereby declare that this work contains no materials accepted for any other degrees in any other institutions. This thesis contains no materials previously written and/or published by another person unless otherwise noted.*

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August, 2011

## Abstract

In my dissertation I explore the role played by the micro social contexts in which ordinary citizens are embedded on their political engagement. I start my examination with the assumption that participation in informal political conversations promotes individuals' political participation and contributes to an increase in their level of political cognition. I analyze the effects of everyday political discussion in two types of micro social settings – close, intimate and generic ones. Results indicate that political discussion in either type of social setting has both direct and indirect effects on voting and political knowledge. Most of the direct effects are moderated by macro contextual factors. Specifically, frequency of political talk in intimate settings appears to advance individual political knowledge in those countries characterized by extensive political talk in the micro social settings. Political agreement with close, intimate peers stimulates electoral participation, especially in newly democratized countries. Frequent political talk within generic social settings, on the other hand, generates an increase in political knowledge in less developed countries. With regard to the indirect effects, my results indicate that political discussion stimulates individuals' attention to political news in media and general political interest. Political interest and media attentiveness are, in turn, the most significant antecedents of voting and political knowledge.

I continue with an empirical examination of the hypothesis that political discussion is a significant antecedent of individual political engagement and test different directions of influences between the two. Results indicate that the assumption present in the previous literature might not be tenable in its original form. In the context of Japan, the classical direction of effects seems to be reversed; more politically knowledgeable and opinionated people are more likely to

engage in political conversations. On the other hand, there is evidence that informal political talk influences individuals' levels of political opinionation and knowledge indirectly. More frequent political discussion and membership in loosely connected networks of political conversation strongly affects individuals' interest in politics, which, in turn, influences their level of political knowledge. For the relationship between political discussion and participation, my results confirm the expectations formulated by the previous literature; frequent political conversation stimulates participation in political and civic activities in Hungary.

Having established that in some contexts and under specific circumstances micro social settings play an important role in politics, I examine the supply side of those politically relevant features of social networks, in countries dissimilar in their democratic experiences. The results indicate that people from countries with a more recent democratic experience are, in general, part of smaller, less diverse, less politicized and more politically homogeneous social networks compared to their counterparts from older democracies. Within the group of newly democratized countries, people who were socialized in a democratic period are similar to young generations from consolidated democracies in their patterns of social connectivity. However, in the new democracies, those generations who were socialized in democracy tend to participate less in political conversations compared to those who became adults under authoritarian regimes.

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# Table of contents

Introduction .....	10
Chapter 1: Social networks, political discussion and engagement: the state of the art .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.1. Main concepts.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.2. State of the art.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.3. Research questions, design and data .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 2: Micro social embeddedness, electoral behavior, and political knowledge: a comparative analysis .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.1. Micro social contexts, political behavior and knowledge: a review ..	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.1.1. Micro social contexts and individual turnout .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.1.2. Micro social contexts and political knowledge .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.2. Hypotheses .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.3. Data, measures and research design .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.3.1. Data .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.3.2. Measures.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.3.3. Research design.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.4. Results .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.4.1. Intimate social networks, voting and knowledge .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.4.1.1. Intimate social networks and voting.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.4.1.2. Intimate social networks and political knowledge	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.4.1.3. Intimate social networks and political interest .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.4.1.4. Intimate social networks and media attentiveness	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 3: Generic social settings, voting and political knowledge: a comparative analysis.	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
3.1. Generic social networks and individual turnout.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
3.2. Generic social networks and political knowledge .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
3.3. Generic social networks and political interest.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
3.4. Generic social networks and media attentiveness .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
3.5. Conclusions and limitations .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 4: Political communication and cognitive involvement with politics: examining directions of effects in Japan .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

4.1. Direction of effects between political communication and cognitive involvement with politics: the state of the art .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4.2. Research design, data and measures.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4.2.1. Data .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4.2.2. Measures.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4.3. Political communication and cognitive involvement with politics: a non-recursive model design.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4.4. Political communication and cognitive involvement with politics: a recursive model design .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4.4.1. Casual political conversations and political opinionation: results ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4.4.2. Casual political conversation and knowledge: results..	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4.4.3. Political discussion and interest: results .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4.5. Conclusions and limitations .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 5: Social networks and political participation: examining directions of effects in Hungary .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
5.1. Research design, data and measures.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
5.1.1. Data .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
5.1.2. Measures.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
5.2. Interpersonal communication and political participation: a non-recursive research design .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
5.3. Interpersonal communication and political participation: a recursive research design	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
5.4. Conclusions and discussion.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 6: (Small) Talk that Matters: a comparative examination of social networks and political communication .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
6.1. Determinants of social networks and political discussion: state of the art	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
6.2. Hypotheses, research design, and data .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
6.3. Personal and political discussion networks: a comparative assessment...	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
6.3.1. Size and diversity of social networks .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
6.3.2. Politicization of networks.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
6.3.3. Political agreement .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
6.3.4. Generational differences in social connectivity and political discussion patterns	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
6.4. Conclusions .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

Conclusions ..... 18

List of References..... 24

Appendices ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

## List of Tables and Figures

Table 1: Micro- and macro-level determinants of individual turnout ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 2: Micro- and macro-level determinants of political knowledge ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 3: Micro- and macro-level determinants of political interest **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 4: Micro- and macro-level determinants of media attentiveness ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 5: Micro- and macro-level determinants of individual turnout ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 6: Micro- and macro-level determinants of individual political knowledge ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 7: Micro- and macro-level determinants of individual political interest... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 8: Micro- and macro-level determinants of media attentiveness ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 9: Effects of political communication on opinionation ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 10: Effects of political communication on knowledge..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 11: Effects of political communication on interest ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 12: Fit statistics for models of effects between political communication and opinionation  
..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 13: Estimates of effects between political communication and opinionation ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 14: Fit statistics for models of effects between political communication and knowledge  
..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 15: Estimates of synchronous effects of political knowledge on communication ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 16: Fit statistics for models of effects between political communication and interest . **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 17: Estimates of reciprocal effects between political communication and interest ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 18: Effects of political communication on political participation and interest ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 19: Fit statistics for models of effects between political discussion and participation .**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 20: Estimates of reciprocal effects between political discussion and participation .....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 21: Fit statistics for models of effects between social networks and political participation ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 22: Estimates of reciprocal effects between social networks and political participation ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 23: Average number of three types of friends (ISSP 1986) . **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 24: Average number of three types of friends (ISSP 2001) . **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 25: Test of significance of countries’ differential effect on number of close friends ...**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 26: Measures of social networks (CID)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 27: Test of significance of countries’ differential effect on measures of social networks ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 28: Average measures of political talk in various social settings (standard errors in parentheses) ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 29: Test of significance of countries’ differential effects on frequency of political talk ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 30: Measures of political agreement within intimate micro social settings .....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 31: Level of political agreement within various generic groups .....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 32: Determinants of frequency of general political discussion .....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 33: Determinants of general political discussion; OLS estimates .....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Table 34: Determinants of membership to a group of friends; logistic regression estimates .**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 1: Cross-lagged reciprocal effects between political discussion and cognitive involvement ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 2: Cross-lagged unidirectional effects from political discussion to cognitive involvement ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 3: Cross-lagged unidirectional effects from cognitive involvement to political discussion ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 4: Synchronous reciprocal effects between political discussion and cognitive involvement ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 5: Synchronous unidirectional effects from political discussion to cognitive involvement ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 6: Synchronous unidirectional effects from cognitive involvement to political discussion ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 7: Cross-lagged reciprocal effects between political discussion and participation.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 8: Cross-lagged, unidirectional effects from political discussion to participation.....**Error!**  
**Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 9: Cross-lagged, unidirectional effects from political participation to discussion.....**Error!**  
**Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 10: Synchronous, reciprocal effects between political discussion and participation...**Error!**  
**Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 11: Synchronous, unidirectional effects from political discussion to participation.....**Error!**  
**Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 12: Synchronous, unidirectional effects from political participation to discussion ...**Error!**  
**Bookmark not defined.**

## Introduction

Ordinary citizens' participation in political discussions has been seen as a desirable feature of democracies ever since the heydays of the Athenian demos. More recently, advocates of deliberative democracy have suggested that everyday political talks function as fora in which people learn about politics, form and refine their political preferences, and prepare to express them through political actions. In short, the give and take of everyday political conversations is believed to lead to an increase in levels of political interest, knowledge and participation. A less optimistic view about informal political conversation though, is that this is a mere form of social entertainment and sometimes might hinder political knowledge and lead to political intolerance. This happens when political discussion exposes people to one-sided views and insulates them in politically homogeneous micro social settings, in which a dialogue between holders of divergent political views becomes impossible.

In the previous literature, the empirical test of the statements that describe potential benefits of informal political conversation revealed inconsistent findings, tradeoffs between equally desirable political outcomes that are related to political talk and, for most of the cases, several limitations imposed by available data. One of the most challenging conclusions was reached by Mutz's study, which suggested that the type of political communication that advances political participation – one that exposes people to similar political views – is incompatible with the one that promotes political tolerance – political conversation that exposes people to dissimilar views (Mutz 2006). This finding indicates that informal political discussion is not a panacea for alleviating all democratic dysfunctions. On the contrary, it invites a more nuanced

approach in studying the role of political communication for individual political engagement. However, Mutz's results are not conclusive. Other scholars found evidence that exposure to political disagreement does not hinder political participation (Horan 1971, Nir 2005) and might even promote it, through an increase in political knowledge (Leighley 1990, McLeod *et al.* 1999, Scheufele *et al.* 2003, Scheufele *et al.* 2004, Kwak *et al.* 2005). Notwithstanding the inconsistencies of their results, most of these studies cannot say much with regard to the direction of the influences flowing between political communication and engagement. Although most of them found a significant relationship between some features of informal political conversation and political engagement, they were unable to establish whether political talk drives political engagement or, on the contrary, political engagement leads to an increase in levels of informal political conversation.

The study of the relationships between social networks and political engagement is worth pursuing for both theoretical and practical reasons. From a theoretical point of view, it is important to clarify the role of interpersonal communication among other classic predictors of individual political engagement. Previous research documented the existence of strong relationships between the micro social settings in which individuals are embedded and their levels of political participation and cognition. Therefore, empirical models that fail to consider the social nature of individual political engagement (and fail to include features of political discussion in social networks among other explanatory variables) are underspecified and lead to biased estimates and erroneous conclusions. To give an example, some studies showed that, when social networks are included in models that predict political behavior and knowledge, the effects of classical predictors, such as education and income drop or diminish. This suggests that the mechanism through which these demographics operate is by placing people in more

politicized settings, for instance (Abrams *et al.* 2010). Equally important, thus, the inclusion of sociological factors into models of political engagement should be accompanied by an explanation of the mechanisms that make political communication a significant antecedent of political participation and knowledge. Besides these technical concerns about omitting social context from empirical models of individual political behavior, there are equally important practical ones. These theoretical aspects have practical consequences. Understanding the circumstances and the mechanisms that make participation in political conversations a significant antecedent of political engagement can inform policies designed to create a more politically educated and participative citizenry. Such measures should be preceded by a comprehensive examination of the effects that various features of political communication might have on forms of political engagement. As Mutz pointed out, equally valuable political outcomes, such as participation and political tolerance, for instance, appear to be served by different informal discursive practices. If this is indeed the case, social scientists and public policy pundits should find effective ways to equip their citizens so that they get along with exposure to political disagreement in their social networks while keeping social cohesion and harmony in their social interactions.

There is abundant evidence that the way individuals understand various facts and behave in different realms of their lives is both a matter of their individual characteristics and of the social contexts to which they belong. People do not make decisions – be they political or not – in isolation but as they find themselves embedded in diverse social networks they are susceptible to employ and adopt the ideas and norms that flow through those groups. In short, people are connected and thus, the understanding of their attitudes and behaviors should take into account

the structure of the linkages among them and what flows within those groups, i.e. ideas, social norms (Christakis and Fowler 2009).

My dissertation contributes to existing research on these topics in the following ways. First, my study enlarges the scope of previous analysis by examining the relationship between interpersonal communication and political engagement across countries that differ in their histories and political cultures. This comparative assessment makes it possible to answer the question whether these relationships are general or context dependent. Previous studies were conducted in a limited number of countries, mostly the US and more recently in the UK, Germany, Spain and Japan, and therefore there is a lack of a comprehensive examination of the effects that political discussion has across diverse polities. Second, in my analysis I test directions of the effects between interpersonal communication and political engagement. This allows me to answer the question whether the oft-documented relationship between political communication and engagement is due to the fact that communication enhances engagement or the other way round. The vast majority of previous research could not answer such questions, mostly because of the lack of appropriate data. The third contribution of this study lies in providing an explanation of the mechanism that links interpersonal communication and political engagement. There is limited reflection on these issues beyond the finding of a significant relationship between the two. Building on social psychological theories, especially theories of social identity, uses and gratification, I suggest that political discussion influences forms of political participation and cognitive involvement with politics through an increase in political interest. Finally, my study explores the supply side of these politically relevant features of the interpersonal communication and tests the hypothesis that length of democratic tradition predicts them. In the same context, it investigates generational effects on social networks usage and

political discussion patterns between people who were socialized under authoritarian regimes and those who grew up in democracies.

To explore these questions I draw on several comparative studies, namely the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), the Comparative National Election Project (CNEP), and Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy (CID), and panel data collected in national studies conducted in Japan and Hungary. The results of my investigation show that interpersonal communication has both a direct and an indirect effect on an individual's level of political engagement. Moreover, these effects are moderated by macro level factors, such as length of democratic experience, level of economic development, and norms of social and political communication in the countries analyzed. Specifically, political similarity between respondents and their intimate, close peers functions as an incentive for electoral participation. This effect appears to be stronger for those people living in countries with a more recent democratic experience. Additionally, political similarity with close discussion partners has a positive effect on political knowledge for those living in older democracies, more economically developed countries, and societies that have higher averages of political agreement. On the contrary, more frequent talk with people who are part of generic social networks has a positive effect on political knowledge for those people who live in less economically developed countries. The indirect effect of interpersonal communication operates through an increase in levels of political interest and media attentiveness. More frequent political talk in either intimate or generic settings leads to an increase in levels of political interest and media attentiveness in all countries analyzed. Both political interest and media attentiveness are among the strongest antecedents of political knowledge and participation. However, political agreement in intimate settings appears to discourage media consumption and this is even more the case in older democracies and more

economically developed countries. Also, political conversations in intimate settings cease to have a stimulating effect on media attentiveness in those societies characterized by extensive informal political talk.

When the assumption that interpersonal communication affects political engagement is questioned, results show mixed evidence. The classic assumption that political talk promotes knowledge and diversity of political opinions does not hold in the political context of Japan. On the contrary, in my analysis I find that those people who are more politically knowledgeable and hold a diversity of political opinions are more likely to engage in political conversations with their peers. For the relationship between political discussion and participation though, results show that the classic assumption holds when tested in the context of Hungary. Those people who have more political discussants among their close others participate more often in civic and political activities. With regard to all these analyses, there is evidence that political discussion affects both political participation and knowledge through an increase in levels of interest in politics. The amount of political discussion in one's micro social settings signals the importance attributed to this topic in those social environments. Theories of social identity and those of uses and gratification would predict that this acts as an incentive for group members to seek political information either through media or political conversations. My analysis also confirms the existence of reciprocal effects between engagement in political discussion and levels of political interest.

Finally, there is evidence that the supply of these politically relevant features of the micro social settings varies across countries. People who live in countries with a non-democratic past are embedded in smaller and less diverse social networks, tend to discuss less politics in their everyday social settings and participate in more politically biased conversations. Within

countries with a more recent democratic experience, people who were socialized during democratic years are less likely to discuss politics compared to people who were socialized under authoritarian regimes. This suggests that past legacies might be transmitted between generations, although this finding might be also indicative of differences in regime type and openness of the political competition in the aftermath of democratization.

My dissertation proceeds as follows. In the first chapter I introduce the main concepts of my research and discuss terminological distinctions with regard to their use across existing studies. I give an overview of the conclusions reached in previous research on the social underpinnings of political engagement and highlight the gaps that I see in these studies, mostly with regard to their inconsistencies and limitations. I introduce my research questions and give a brief account of the research design employed in my dissertation. More detailed accounts of specific hypotheses, data and research design are given in each of the chapters. In chapter two I present the results of a comparative analysis of the effects that casual political conversation in close, intimate social settings has on individual electoral participation and political knowledge. Chapter three complements this analysis with an examination of the effects that political discussion in generic social settings has on individual voting and political cognition. These analyses employ data collected in countries with dissimilar histories and political cultures, including different democratic experiences. In both chapter two and three, I test the moderating role of macro contextual variables on the relationship between informal political discussion and engagement. These macro level variables are the length of democratic experience in the countries analyzed, their level of economic development, and norms of social and political interactions. In chapter four, the classic direction of influence between political communication and engagement is examined empirically. Specifically, in this chapter I test for reciprocal effects between political

communication and two forms of cognitive involvement with politics, namely political knowledge and diversity of political opinions. Chapter five continues the examination of direction of effects between political communication and another form of individual political engagement, namely political participation. Chapter six explores the determinants of those politically relevant features of the interpersonal communication. Specifically, it looks at differences in patterns of social networks and informal political discussion between old and new democracies. It also test whether, in countries with a more recent democratic experience, there are significant differences between people who were socialized under authoritarian regimes and those who came of age under democracies, with regard to social network usage and political discussion patterns.

Throughout my dissertation I employ statistical methods that were previously used by scholars engaged in research on similar issues. On the one hand, this makes possible a comparison between my results and the findings of extant research. On the other hand, as discussed in my chapters, other methods might be more appropriate for the study of the problems raised by my investigation. Moreover, as highlighted in the last part of each individual chapter, there are limitations imposed by the use of specific methods.

## Conclusions

In my dissertation I explored the role played by the micro social contexts in which individuals are embedded on their political engagement. This examination included a comparative analysis of the relationships between individual micro social embeddedness and political engagement, an investigation of the direction of effects flowing between the two, and a look at the supply of the politically relevant features of micro social contexts and their determinants across countries with different democratic experiences.

In chapter one I introduced the main concepts employed in my dissertation, namely social networks, political talk and homogeneity/heterogeneity. I discussed the usage of these concepts in the previous literature and emphasized terminological inconsistencies in the way they were employed. I presented the main findings of extant literature on social influences in politics and I highlighted their inconsistencies and limitations. This led me to introducing my research questions and information on the data employed for answering them.

In chapter two and three I examined the effects that intimate and generic social networks have on individual political participation and knowledge, across countries diverse in their histories and political cultures, including dissimilar democratic experiences. The effects of the two types of social settings were explored in conjunction with influences of macro contextual factors, namely length of democratic experience, economic development and the degree of politicization and agreement characterizing informal conversations at country level. Results indicated that there are both similarities and differences in the effects of the two types of social settings. Moreover, they were shown to operate both directly and indirectly, through an increase in attentiveness to politics. Specifically, frequency of political talk in intimate settings was found

to increase political cognition in those countries characterized by extensive political talk in micro social settings. Political agreement with intimates appeared to encourage electoral participation, especially in newly democratized countries. It also appeared to contribute to an increase in individual political knowledge in older democracies, more economically developed countries, and societies that have higher averages of political agreement. On the other hand, frequent political talk within generic social settings was found to generate an increase in political knowledge in less developed countries. ‘Weak ties’ thus appeared to function as an alternative channel of political information in those environments in which media access is limited for economic reasons. With regard to the indirect effects, my results indicated that participation in political discussion leads to an increase in individuals’ attention to political news in media and general political interest. Political interest and media attentiveness are, in turn, the most significant antecedents of individual turnout and political knowledge. Macro level variables were found to moderate some of these effects. Political talk in intimate settings, for instance, ceases to have a stimulating effect on media attentiveness in those societies characterized by extensive political talk in informal settings. Additionally, political agreement with intimates acts as a disincentive for getting information via various media; this effect appeared to be stronger in older democracies and more economically developed countries. Overall, these findings indicated that the influences stemming from micro social interactions are related to contextual characteristics at the macro, i.e. country level.

In chapters four and five, the assumption that effects flow from political discussion to political engagement is questioned and alternative directions of influence between political communication, participation and cognition were tested. These investigations drew on panel data collected in national survey studies conducted in Japan and Hungary. Results showed that the

assumption present in the previous literature might not be always tenable. In the context of Japan, participation in informal political conversations is not accompanied by an increase in levels of political knowledge and opinionation. On the contrary, my results suggested that those who are more politically knowledgeable and opinionated will be more likely to engage in political conversations with their peers. On the other hand, there is evidence of reciprocal effects between political talk and interest, in the Japanese context. Participation in frequent political talk with members of less tightly connected social networks is associated with higher rates of political interest which, in turn, feeds into an increased appetite for political communication. With regard to the relationship between political discussion and participation, results confirmed the expectations formulated by the previous literature; in the context of Hungary, frequent political conversations with peers was found to stimulate participation in political and civic activities. Moreover, there seems to be reciprocal influences operating between social networks and political participation. People who are part of larger and more diverse social networks are more likely to participate in political and civic activities and their participation positively affects their level of social interactions.

In chapter six I examined the supply side of those features of the micro social settings that were found to be politically relevant. Specifically, I looked at differences in average social networks size, level of politicization and political agreement across countries that differ in their democratic experiences. The results indicated that people from countries with a more recent democratic experience are, in general, part of smaller, less diverse, less politicized and more politically homogeneous social networks compared to their counterparts from older democracies. Within the group of newly democratized countries, people who grew up in democratic periods displayed different social networks usage and political discussion patterns compared to those

who became adults under authoritarian regimes. They were found to be more similar to young generations from consolidated democracies. However, contrary to my expectations, individuals who were socialized in democracy appeared to participate in political conversations less frequently than members of the generation that grew up under authoritarian regimes. This finding may suggest that the legacies of authoritarian regimes might be transmitted from older to younger generations, especially through family socialization. Alternatively, this finding may be linked with differences in the type of authoritarian regime, the openness of political competition and more generally the nature of politics during and following the process of democratization in these countries.

There are three major contributions that my research brought to debates on the role of social influences in politics. First, my investigation has enlarged the scope of the previous research through a comparative examination of the relationships between micro social embeddedness, political participation and cognition in countries with dissimilar political cultures. This examination revealed that although we can talk about general effects of political discussion that hold across countries that differ in their social makeup and political traditions, country level characteristics moderate some of these effects. This indicates that failure to include features of social networks and political discussion in models of political behavior and cognition will lead to erroneous conclusions on the determinants of individual political engagement. From a practical perspective, these findings urge for more attention given to macro contextual variables in designing policies aimed at increasing levels of political engagement. My research brought the first empirical confirmation of the fact that political agreement is more beneficial for members of newly democratized countries.

My second contribution stems from questioning the classical direction of effects between political discussion, participation and cognition. To my knowledge, this is the first time when the results of an empirical examination have indicated that the assumption that political discussion brings about an increase in political cognition might not be tenable in all contexts. Granted, there is need for further investigation to understand whether this is due to some peculiarities of the political context in which these results were found.

Finally, my research indicated that those politically relevant micro social features might not be available in great supply especially in those contexts where they are mostly needed, namely in societies with a recent democratic experience. Previous literature showed that in newly democratized countries people are less politically engaged. My findings suggested that the micro social environments in which people from these countries reside are not conducive to political mobilization either. Specifically, people from new democracies have small social networks, less exposure to political conversations in their everyday social interactions and less opportunities to encounter political disagreement in their conversations. An additional problem, especially in some CEE countries, is that this political apathy is widespread even among those who were socialized in democracy.

In methodological terms, as highlighted in the last part of each individual chapter, there are limitations imposed by the use of specific methods as well as by the nature of the data available. I use a range of methods but their choice was constrained by the desire to provide results comparable with those in the literature to which my analysis is meant to be complementary. Yet, the study of micro social contexts in politics would benefit from research being conducted in the area of graphical modeling, for instance, which could be an interesting future path of research.

Scholars of deliberative democracy agree on the benefits of political debates among individuals who hold divergent political views and seek out to reach consensual decisions. Some of them are inclined to see casual political conversations as a form of public deliberation. These political conversational settings link the private and public spheres and prepare individuals for making decisions that might have far reaching consequences for them and their peers. However, there is also skepticism voiced on the quality of these informal political conversations and their ability to produce valuable outcomes. In this view, political talk is nothing more than an amusing way of spending spare time or an occasion to vent grievances; in short, small talk that is aimed at nothing and leads nowhere. The results of my research on political talk that occurs as a by-product of everyday social interactions give reasons for moderated optimism and highlight some problems that call for policymakers' attention. Naturally occurring political conversation might not universally contribute to an increase in political cognition, although it does so under specific circumstances, but it generally stimulates political interest and keep people connected to the public sphere. This, in turn, is a precondition of political mobilization and increase in political information and knowledge. On the other hand, in countries with a more recent democratic experience the social network dynamic is still dominated by legacies of an authoritarian past and this is an obstacle to their functioning as channels of political mobilization and suppliers of informational cues.

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