

Constructing the Message: The Influence of Differing Political Communication  
Styles of Voter Decision Making

BY

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## **Abstract**

Practitioner communication is commonly criticized for substituting emotion for policy, while deliberative communication is critiqued for removing emotion from reason altogether. This study proposes agonism as an attempt to bridge the divide. Agonistic political communication strives to substantively inform and motivate citizens. Furthermore, it attempts to shift unavoidable political divides from the moral realm to the political realm. To study the effects of all three message types, sample messages were constructed to reflect the differing theoretical approaches. These messages then served as the basis of small group discussions about politics and the economy. A pretest/posttest design was utilized to measure how the messages affected levels of political knowledge, efficacy, party favorability, social trust and institutional trust. Qualitative analysis of short answers and video recorded discussion offered further understanding of effects. Statistical analysis offered little support for agonism, but qualitative analysis showed agonism had potential to fulfill its theoretical purpose.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

On its most basic level, democracy is a form of government based on the principle of popular sovereignty. As Lincoln put it, democracy is a “government of the people, by the people, for the people” (Lincoln, 1863). While agreeing with democracy in principle, citizens, practitioners, and scholars find themselves disagreeing about communication’s role in achieving that goal.

On one side of the spectrum is what I will call the practitioner approach. Candidates and campaign staff commonly use the practitioner approach in political campaigns. While the practitioner approach is not universally used, it is representative of a prominent portion of political campaign communication. This approach focuses almost solely on the short-term goals of winning elections. By focusing on the short-term, practitioners create a form of political communication concerned with motivating individuals to vote for particular candidates. Part of that process involves reducing complex political problems to simple slogans (Germond, 2004). However, this approach does not encourage or focus on creating long-term engagement with the public sphere. While the practitioner approach may be effective for short-term results, it can be criticized for underestimating the average citizen, creating acrimonious divisions, disregarding citizens between elections, and upsetting the normal function of the public sphere (Hillygus & Shields, 2008; Kelley, 1960).

On the other side of the democratic spectrum are the deliberative democratic theorists. Unlike practitioners, deliberative theorists focus on creating long-term citizen engagement in the public sphere. Beyond simply voting in elections,

deliberative theorists believe citizens have a responsibility to both be fully informed on the issues and participate in on-going democratic discussions that ideally achieve consensus (Dahl, 1989; McCombs & Reynolds, 1999; Habermas, 1996; Mill, 1991). This theoretical approach thus necessitates a form of political communication that removes strategic and values-based communication meant to serve short-term goals and replaces it with rational arguments and substantive policy information. The deliberative approach, however, can also be critiqued. For instance, deliberative theorists may demand too much of individuals, requiring too much of their time and demanding they objectively reason without subjective emotion.

In an attempt to bridge the divide between these two approaches, I propose a third way of approaching political communication based on Chantal Mouffe's (2005) conceptualization of agonistic democracy. This third way of political communication, termed *agonism*, utilizes the emotional draw of the practitioner approach while also incorporating the substantive policy information vital to the deliberative approach. Furthermore, instead of consensus as its objective, agonistic communication aims to achieve a partisan divide solely within the political realm that is based on both mutual respect and an acknowledgement that consensus is impossible. Once the agonistic approach has been articulated, this study examines the ways in which the three types of communication influence individual political knowledge, efficacy, social trust, institutional trust, and party favorability. Concerned with drawing a holistic picture, this study measured democratic outcomes that are important to both deliberative theorists and political communication practitioners.

With these goals in mind, this study examines the influence of practitioner, deliberative, and agonistic political messages. My hope is to offer the theoretical underpinnings of agonistic political communication and test it alongside more established methods to highlight its potential as a third way. To this end, I begin by explicating the three theoretical approaches to democracy mentioned above, beginning with the more established practitioner and deliberative models. Following this I introduce the agonistic approach, emphasizing how it borrows from the other two models, yet represents a truly new approach to political communication. After the theoretical section, I offer the methods and results of the study. In the end, results demonstrate that the practitioner message type imparts little substantive political knowledge, while simultaneously creating acrimonious political divisions. Additionally, the deliberative approach, while imparting knowledge, does little to contextualize that information and motivate citizens. Last, the agonistic style offers an approach that can both motivate and inform citizens, while avoiding antagonistic political divisions.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **The Practitioner Approach to Political Communication**

As noted in the beginning, practitioners focus primarily on the voting aspect of democratic citizenship. However, it would be incorrect to simply say that practitioners want citizens to vote. More specifically, practitioner communication is concerned with winning votes for a particular party/candidate. While practitioners' overall goals are simple in their focus (getting their candidate elected), the strategies practitioners employ are not. Practitioners have learned, in fact, that getting their candidates elected requires several complex strategies.

Before one can analyze strategies, however, one must first examine the theories that inform how practitioners conceptualize and understand their audience--the average American voter. For practitioners, individuals are not seen as having solidified opinions. Instead, they argue individuals construct "opinion statements on the fly as they confront each new issue" (Zaller, 1992, p. 1). Individuals construct these opinion statements partially because they possess a limited cognitive ability to process information (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Lang, 2000; Popkin, 1992). Due to their limited ability, Samuel Popkin (1992) argues moreover that citizens utilize what he terms "low-information rationality." Popkin explains:

This reasoning draws on various information shortcuts and rules of thumb that voters use to obtain and evaluate information and to simplify the process of choosing between candidates. People use shortcuts which incorporate much political information; they triangulate and validate their opinions in

conversations with people they trust and according to the opinions of national figures whose judgments and positions they have come to know. With these shortcuts, they learn to “read” politicians and their positions. (p. 7)

By viewing the voter as a low-rationality, shortcut-seeking actor, practitioners significantly devalue the importance of substantive policy information and debate. Instead, the goal becomes identifying and tapping into voters’ shortcuts.

Currently, the predominant shortcut is the voters’ gut emotions. The belief is that emotional connections are more important than rationality in the average voter’s decision-making process. As cognitive psychologist Drew Westen (2007) argues, “successful campaigns compete in the marketplace of emotions and not primarily in the marketplace of ideas” (p. 305). From this perspective, voters are more concerned about how the politician makes them feel than they are with the issues the politician supports. Westen describes part of this emotional-based process in his description of candidate “curb appeal,” which “is the feeling voters get when they ‘drive by’ a candidate a few times on television and form an emotional impression” (p. 294). This low-rationality, gut-based understanding of the voter serves as the guiding principle of the practitioners’ political messages.

With an understanding of how practitioners understand the voter, one must next examine the goals of practitioner communication. Practitioners know elections are won by dividing segments of the population. This is the point Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin (2004) make when they suggest, “As strategic competitions for support, electoral campaigns typically highlight differences in belief, value and social

identity in a way that divides segments of the population against one another” (p. 2). The key here is not simply that practitioners divide the electorate; the important point is how they divide it. Practitioners produce division by creating a we/they distinction between their candidate’s supporters and their competitor’s most often through moral, rather than merely political, terms. This morality-based division is termed antagonism. Drew Westen (2007) provides a good example of the antagonistic approach when he explains that it is not enough to say one’s opponent is lying. Instead, one must show that he is a *liar*, that lying is in his moral character (p. 338). This antagonistic separation is usually achieved through a values-focused approach to campaign communication.

From a broad perspective, the use of value reliant communication is clearly detailed in Thomas Frank’s (2005) book, *What’s the Matter with Kansas*, in which Frank details the Republican Party’s re-branding of its values to better appeal to lower-class voters. More specifically, George W. Bush might be the most notable modern candidate to employ such divisive moral rhetoric. David Foster (2006), through analyzing President Bush’s 2004 campaign rhetoric, demonstrated how Bush and his campaign team used the rhetorical strategy of polarization to tap into and exacerbate the value divisions in what is known as America’s culture war. Furthermore, Stanley Greenberg (2005) has noted in his discussion of Bush’s tight 2004 election victory that, “while many factors explain so close a result, Bush won by waging an all-out culture war that deepened and generalized the current cultural polarization of the country” (p. 311). Additionally, Christian Spielvogel (2005)

illustrated how Bush's value framing of the War in Iraq led to a moral ultimatum, highlighted by the statement, "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Bush, 2001).

It is important to note that the Democratic Party uses this strategy as well. In 1964, President Johnson ran advertisements against Senator Goldwater that used imagery and language that could easily divide the electorate along moral lines (<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org>, 2008). Most notably, President Johnson repeatedly associated Senator Goldwater with the Ku Klux Klan. More recently, Moveon.org published an article entitled "10 things to know about McCain" that described "the real McCain" (10 things to know about McCain, 2008). While not utilizing explicit moral language, the list relied on implicit moral condemnation when describing McCain's stances on child health care, war, and civil rights. For instance, Moveon.org states, "John McCain voted against establishing a national holiday in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Now he says his position has 'evolved,' yet he's continued to oppose key civil rights laws" (10 things to know about McCain, 2008). While not as explicit as others, this statement levies a strong implicit moral charge. These examples begin to illustrate the use of antagonistic division in practitioner communication.

In order to create division, practitioners develop their messages around three related concepts: condensational symbols, political mythologies, and framing. While differing in the specific approach, all three are based on resonance, which "takes place when the stimuli put into our communication evoke meaning in a listener or

viewer” (Schwartz, 1972 as quoted in Johnston-Cartee & Copeland, 1997). In other words, resonance strategy highlights some preexisting idea or value already within the individual instead of giving them new information. Resonance does not so much cause logical thinking as it does tap into stored emotional conflicts. As Schwartz noted, “We are not focused on getting things across to people as much as out of people” (as quoted in Johnston-Cartee & Copeland, 1997).

Condensational symbols represent the first element of a practitioner’s resonance message. Johnston-Cartee and Copeland (1997) define condensational symbols as, “a highly condensed form of substitutive behavior for direct expression, allowing for the ready release of emotional tension in conscious or unconscious form” (p. 64). The importance of these symbols is that they “have more connotative meaning than denotative meaning. In other words, the significance of condensational symbols rests with the meanings that reside within the individuals that are evoked when the words or phrases are used” (Mead, 1934 as cited in Johnston-Cartee & Copeland, 1997, p. 64). Thus, employing condensational symbols allows practitioners to say very little, yet evoke a great deal of emotion. For example, a candidate may run on a platform of “family values” or “country first.” These terms, while seemingly very basic, communicate and activate extensive emotional meaning within the listener. For instance, conservative Republican candidates use “family values” to condense several attitudes about gay marriage, abortion, and stem cell research.

In addition to using condensational symbols, effective practitioner political messages weave condensational symbols within a larger myth. A political myth is

defined as “an unquestioned belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning” (Edelman, 1971, as cited in Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1997). Political myths function to construct a story for the voter that explains their world in an understandable way. It does this primarily through the use and invocation of emotion. Sykes (1970) explains, “myth is often more concerned with communicating an emotional response to a perception than it is with communicating the perception itself” (p. 20). Therefore, by creating a political myth that draws on condensational symbols, the practitioner both evokes emotion and places that emotion within a political narrative that frames the context and future action for the listener.

Last, practitioners employ framing to create persuasive political messages. Robert Entman (1993) defines framing as the process of selecting “aspects of a perceived reality and (making) them more salient in communicating a text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 52). In other words, “framing structures the reasoning process by activating certain constructs that are used to make judgments or form opinions” (Lee, McLeod & Shah, 2008, p. 698). In particular, practitioners utilize issue and value frames. Issue frames “focus on qualitatively different yet potentially relevant considerations” (Druckman, 2004, p. 672). Value frames, on the other hand, are concerned with linking particular values to issues in an attempt to “provide a comprehensible and compelling interpretive framework in which a given policy conflict will be understood” (Lee, McLeod & Shah, 2008, p.

701). Such value frames, moreover, “typically depict policy debates as clashes of moral principles or basic values, with parties to the conflict countering each other on the basis of a particular set of values” (p. 701). For example, social programs such as welfare are usually debated around the values of individual self-reliance and assistance to the disadvantaged. When conservatives discuss welfare policy, they will usually argue for the need to promote a culture of self-reliance. By discussing welfare in terms of self-reliance, a politician is able to tap into the conservative social value of individualism. To the listener, this value frame functions to frame welfare as a program that might hinder self-reliance. Thus, the program violates a conservative social value, which could serve to decrease its support among conservative voters.

Finally, the effect of this communication on voters represents the most important part of the process. In the broadest sense, political campaign communication serves a multidimensional function. First, campaigns communicate pertinent information and raise the public’s consciousness concerning political affairs (Brians & Wattenberg, 1996; Denton & Woodward, 1998; Johnston-Cartee & Copeland, 1997; Holbrook, 1996). However, it is important to note that in political advertising specifically, this issue information is usually no more than vague issue positions (Joslyn, 1980; Kern, 1989). For example, a candidate will be “against crime” or for “better education.” Second, beyond simple information transmission, campaigns “prime us to become concerned about some issues and not others, thereby affecting our position-taking” (Hart, 2000, p. 76). Third, campaign communication polarizes political races in an attempt to simplify the electoral choice (Atkin & Heald,

1976). Fourth, they serve to reconnect voters with their elected officials and aid in the stimulation of the people's voice (Hart, 2000). Examining the negative effects, scholars have found that negative campaign communication in particular can increase political cynicism while decreasing political efficacy, intention to vote, and trust in government (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Brader & Corrigan, 2006; Brians & Wattenberg, 1996; Brooks & Geer, 2007). This is important because "between 30% and 50% of political advertising produced can be described as negative" (Johnston-Cartee & Copeland, 1991, p. 3). Furthermore, scholars have shown that the emotional aspects of the practitioner approach as well as the citizen's emotional response to them can alter how citizens process new information, form political attitudes and make political choices (Brader, 2006).

While the content of political communication has been shown to cause an array of effects, so too has the use of particular frames. Scholars have illustrated that different frames encourage the "activation and the use of frame-consistent thoughts and ideas in the process of issue interpretation..." (Lee, McLeod & Shah, 2008, p. 701). For example, scholars (Brewer, 2002; Rhee, 1997; Shah et al., 1996) have found that strategic frames encourage viewers to strategically interpret political candidates and issues, and value frames induce viewers to interpret events in terms of morals or ethics. If these findings translate to this study, the outcomes and quality of the discussions may vary drastically depending on which "framed" message serves as the source of discussion.

## **The Deliberative Approach to Political Communication**

As mentioned earlier, deliberative theorists view democracy as “a process where citizens voluntarily and freely participate in discussions on public issues. It is a discursive system where citizens share information about public affairs, talk politics, form opinions, and participate in political processes” (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999, p. 361). Many scholars have reinforced the importance of deliberation in democracy (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2004; Barber, 1984; Bryce, 1888/1973; Carey, 1995; Cohen & Arato, 1992; Dewey, 1954; Habermas, 1984, 1996; Lasker, 1949; Oakeshott, 1991; Tarde, 1899/1989). By redefining democracy as a deliberative process, democratic citizenship becomes a year-round participatory role. Beyond voting, citizens are expected to stay fully informed on the issues and then use that knowledge to actively discuss politics in the public sphere. The discussion, ideally aimed at achieving consensus, should be rational and policy-based. In order to achieve this form of citizenship, the individual citizen must be reconceptualized.

This reconceptualization casts the individual as a rational and moral actor. As Shawn Rosenberg (2007) has argued, “In their rationality, individuals are assumed to be able to consider and order their specific preferences and values relative to their overall life plan and their sense of higher-order good” (p. 6). This understanding is very much in line with rational choice theory that claims individuals will rationally choose options that benefit them the most (Downs, 1957). Beyond rationality, deliberative theorists believe that individuals can also act morally. However, the key to fully unlocking the potential for moral action lies in deliberation. As Rosenberg has

argued, “The desired critical self-reflection and fair orientation to the other can only be realized in an actual encounter with the beliefs, values and arguments of other citizens” (p. 7). From this perspective, citizens are viewed as rational individual actors who become moral actors when confronted with differing opinions during discussion.

By viewing discussion as the key to unlocking an individual’s rational and moral potential, it makes sense that deliberative theorists’ goal is to create political communication that informs an ongoing citizen discussion based on inclusiveness, rationality, and equality (Barber, 1984; Dewey, 1954; Gundersen, 2000; Habermas, 1984). As Habermas (1984) explained, the intended goal of this conversation is the creation of consensus/mutual understanding. Deliberative theorists are, therefore, as concerned with the means of communication as they are with its results. In other words, deliberation as a process yields important benefits including: providing greater legitimacy to the governmental process, validating political decisions, and increasing a sense of shared interests, social connectedness, and political efficacy (Gastil & Levine, 2005; Gundersen, 2000).

Out of these goals and a rational conception of the voter grow deliberative theory as a practice. The work of deliberative pollsters might be the most visible application of deliberative theory. Deliberation-based polling was created in response to typical public opinion polling, which relies on gathering the public’s current opinion through surveys. However, as both deliberative theorists and practitioners admit, this opinion is hardly ever fully informed. Therefore, deliberative theorists aim

to determine and report what the public's opinion would be if they were given the time and information necessary to think about and deliberate over the pertinent information. Essential to the distinction between the practitioner approach and the deliberative approach is the input individuals receive. As discussed earlier, practitioners produce messages constructed around condensational symbols, myths and framing. In turn, these messages have high emotional value, but lack any serious substantive information. On the other side of the spectrum, deliberative studies provide participants with their ideal democratic situation: "Instead of getting their information from sound bites, they read briefing materials, listen to policy experts and political leaders, and in many cases are inspired to seek additional information on their own" (McCombs & Reynolds, 1999, p. 4).

So what happens when citizens are given substantive information and time to deliberate? On the highest level, public deliberation allows for the cultivation of "enlarged" or "representative minds" (Arendt, 1958). Thinking with a representative mind means that one is able to set aside personal interests and instead judge from a universal perspective that is concerned with what everyone has in common. This in turn can lead to impartial reciprocity, or acting without regard to one's potential loss or benefit (Chambers, 1996; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1996; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1991). On the micro level, public deliberation serves as an opinion testing ground. Popkin (1991) found, for instance, that conversation serves a two-fold purpose. First, conversation can serve as the source of political information. Popkin explains that when a voter is uninformed, he or she will rely on a "trusted

person” for information. Second, conversations serve to give meaning to information acquired elsewhere. “The campaign and the media only send the initial messages; until these messages have been checked with others and validated, their full effects are not felt” (Popkin, 1991, p. 46). Focusing specifically on opinion formation, Zaller (1992) and Zaller and Feldman (1992) explain that through conversation individuals are able to test their “idea elements,” which allows them to reduce cognitive inconsistencies. The end result of this testing is that individuals enhance their opinions and arguments (Billing, 1996; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1991; Kuhn, 1991, Lasker, 1949).

The influence of deliberation extends beyond opinion formation. Deliberation has also been found to increase issue knowledge, political efficacy, political interest, and opinion formation (Gabor, 2007; Min, 2007). Moreover, deliberation has been shown to partially debunk a longstanding criticism of large-scale democracy: the citizen’s inability to comprehend and function in the political sphere. Using the deliberative polling design, scholars have been able to conclude that citizens do indeed possess the ability to rationally handle political matters. They have found that this ideal form of political deliberation leads to substantial knowledge gain and often produces significant opinion change (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Iyengar, Fishkin, & Luskin, 2005; Luskin, Fishkin, & Jowell, 2002), as well as limiting or eliminating elite message framing effects (Druckman, 2001, 2004; Druckman & Nelson, 2003).

### **The Need for a New Approach**

Shifting slightly from the format followed in the previous two sections, I begin this section by explaining how the conflicted findings and theoretical shortcomings of the other two approaches create a need for a new form of political communication. From that point, I will introduce agonism as a form of political communication that utilizes the strengths of the previous approaches while also directly addressing their limitations.

By comparing the practitioner and deliberative approaches, one can assess the advantages and disadvantages of each. Beginning with the practitioner approach, it is obviously correct in its conception of the individual as an emotional being. As the political cognitive psychology literature has clearly illustrated, emotions make up a large portion of the political arena. Practitioners and psychologists alike have found that citizens, even after reviewing policy information, will choose to vote for the candidate opposite their policy stances if they connect with that candidate on a gut-emotional level (Sosnik et. al., 2007; Lakoff, 2004; Westen, 2007). This sort of values-first approach directly contrasts with the established idea that voters begin the candidate evaluation process on the policy level and use that to inform their value judgments.

However, the fact that voters may start by evaluating values does not imply that the process always results in the ideal decision. The ideal decision in this context refers to the conclusion (or candidate) the voter would choose if given all the pertinent policy information. Pertinent policy information refers to any information

that informs or relates to the decision at hand. Instead, gut-level impressions serve the same function as the short cuts, or heuristic cues, described by Popkin (1992). While effective, these shortcuts do not always lead to the ideal decision. The levels of opinion change after informed deliberative discussion strongly illustrate the potential failure of these shortcuts. During the 1996 National Issues Convention, a four-day in-person deliberation-based poll that used a national random sample of 450 individuals, James Fishkin and Robert Luskin found that participants experienced significant net policy attitude change on topics such as welfare, foreign policy, the economy and whatever issue they considered to be the biggest problem facing America (McCombs & Reynolds, 1999). Fishkin and Luskin summarize that “participants changed positions significantly on 25 of 49 policy issues and on 5 of 10 empirical premises” (McCombs & Reynolds, 1999, p. 25). So it becomes clear that emotion alone does not always lead to the ideal decision. It is also important to note that academics are not the only ones asking for more substantive political communication. Lipsitz, Trost, Grossmann and Sides (2005) found that politically involved citizens actually desire more substantive campaign communication as well. While politically involved citizens desire increased substance and while it has been shown to create more ideal decisions among voters, one must ask: does substantive policy information engage and motivate the voter enough to actually enter the political arena in a natural, everyday setting?

American politics is complex and difficult to understand even for the most educated and ardent citizen. However, this is by no means a current development.

Citizens and political theorists have long discussed the difficulty of citizenship in large-scale democracies. As Lippmann (1922) noted, American democracy had become so complex that most citizens feel like deaf spectators sitting in the back row. Since Lippmann's time, American democracy has only grown larger and more complex. The increasing size of the democratic state puts the individual citizen "under a strange form of psychological pressure" (Allen, 2004). While building up individuals as sovereigns, the sheer size of the state simultaneously undercuts the individual's sovereignty (Allen, 2004). So what would motivate normal citizens, concerned with the daily grind of ensuring their own economic stability and trying to develop an enriching emotional life, to jump into politics? The deliberative theorists do not offer much on these grounds. While it may be rational for citizens to involve themselves in the ongoing construction of the laws that regulate their lives, the payoff is usually too evasive or delayed to serve as a strong motivator. Therefore, from the rational actor perspective, citizens would be better off pursuing personal wealth and goals outside of politics. Moreover, Danielle Allen (2004) explains, "Habermas's theory of discursive practice cannot explain how reason, stripped of all affect, can motivate people to action or secure social integration" (p. 56). So the question arises again, what would motivate citizens to involve themselves in politics? The answer to this question comes from the practitioner perspective. In order for citizens to see value in the difficulty of politics, they must first have an emotional stake in the issue. For instance, knowing the nuanced policy issues concerning the economic recession is not enough for a citizen to become involved. Instead, it is important for them to

make an emotional connection with the issue. They must know how it affects them and those they care about. Additionally, a politician is more than a set of policy stances. He or she is also a representative leader. Therefore, politicians must do more than spout policy positions; they must inspire in the electorate a sense of trust and belief in the possibility of democracy. Given those complications, it becomes clear that while the use of rationality and substantive policy information may answer one question, it leaves others unanswered. What is needed, then, is a middle way between the practitioner and deliberative approaches.

Before introducing agonism as a new form of political communication, it might be helpful to summarize the argument that has been developed up to this point. First, practitioners view voters as predominately emotional thinkers. Thus, they produce content intended to create high levels of emotional resonance. In turn, this communication is light on policy information as it only stakes out vague policy positions. Furthermore, this communication seeks to create antagonistic divisions within the electorate along a moral (right/wrong) distinction. As for the deliberative approach, deliberative democrats seek to create consensus through rational discussion. Underlying this approach is a belief that citizens possess the ability to be rational actors and the belief that consensus is possible. However, as the review of the different approaches illustrated, voters are both rational and emotional actors. While they need emotional cues to become engaged, they also desire increased substance in communication.

## **The Theoretical Foundation of Agonism**

Agonism, as proposed by Chantal Mouffe (2005), represents a new organizing principle for democracy. However, before one can truly understand agonism, it is necessary to briefly explain the current state of theory underlying our conception of politics and Mouffe's critique of it. Mouffe explains:

Sociologists claim that we have entered a 'second modernity' in which individuals liberated from collective ties can now dedicate themselves to cultivating a diversity of lifestyles, unhindered by antiquated attachments. The 'free world' has triumphed over communism and, with the weakening of collective identities, a world "without enemies" is now possible. Partisan conflicts are a thing of the past and consensus can now be obtained through dialogue. Thanks to globalization and the universalization of liberal democracy, we can now expect a cosmopolitan future bringing peace, prosperity and the implementation of human rights worldwide. (p. 1)

As touched on above, liberal/deliberative theorists conceptualize 'the political' "as a space of freedom and deliberation" and its goal of reaching consensus through rational discussion (p. 9). In this context, 'the political' is the theoretical space where individuals interact to discuss and solve problems. This is similar to Habermas' theory of the public sphere. On the other hand, politics "is the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political" (p. 9). It is Mouffe's argument that liberal/deliberative theorists, while claiming the creation of a post-political world that

transcends division, partisanship and conflict, simply end up denying the combative nature of 'the political.' This denial causes the natural combative nature of human interaction (i.e., the political) to shift from the realm of the political to the "moral register." By shifting to the moral realm, the we/they distinction becomes a distinction of right/wrong and not right/left. Once here, the danger is that the majority can exclude the minority from politics and justify any action against them on moral terms.

To correct this issue, Mouffe argues that the political needs to be reorganized around the idea of agonism. Agonism proposes that we accept that a rational consensus among all parties is not possible. This in turn necessitates a reconceptualization of the political. In agonism, the political ceases being a place of "freedom and deliberation" and instead becomes "a space of power, conflict and antagonism" (p. 9). Allen (2004), while not using the same terminology, also addresses the conflictual nature of democracy. Allen explains that the democratic ideal of consensus is never fully achieved because every decision requires one party to sacrifice so that others may benefit. In reality then, democracy is built on the principle of sacrifice, and the necessity of sacrifice in a system promising freedom naturally brings rise to conflict. By accepting the combative nature of the political, agonism allows for its expression in the political realm. By allowing the expression of conflict in both the political and in politics, an agonistic political distinction develops between right/left and not an antagonistic distinction in the moral realm between right/wrong.

As well as proposing the political as a permanently combative environment incapable of producing consensus, Mouffe challenges the idea that passion and collective identity are no longer important:

Mobilization requires politicization, but politicization cannot exist without the production of a conflictual representation of the world, with opposed camps with which people can identify, thereby allowing for passions to be mobilized politically within the spectrum of the democratic process. (p. 25)

Here, Mouffe asserts that in order for individuals to engage politics, politics must first be politicized. This means that clear distinctions must be drawn between the conflicting political parties. Only then can individuals develop the political identification and emotional attachment necessary for political mobilization.

In summary, agonism argues that rational consensus is neither possible nor desirable. In its place, clear divisions based on political differences and not moral condemnation, should serve as the foundation to democracy. These divisions would in turn help mobilize citizens.

### **The Agonistic Approach to Political Communication**

With the theoretical grounding for agonism developed, we can finally establish agonism as a form of political communication. To begin, the goals of agonistic political communication are multiple. First, agonistic political communication aims to create clear distinctions between parties. These distinctions serve both to clearly represent the conflictual nature of the political realm and also to simplify the electoral choice as described in the practitioner approach. Again, these

distinctions should be based on agonistic and not antagonistic divisions. Second, agonistic political communication aims to develop collective identities within the electorate. By rhetorically constituting the people, political communication can help develop the collective associations important to democracy (Charland, 1987; McGee, 1975). Democracy, after all, must be learned. As Charles Taylor (2007) explains, “Democracy always is, and must be, imagined in one historically specific way or another” (p. 125). In other words, before a people can fully form a democratic nation, they must first be able to form a common understanding of their surroundings and a shared sense of legitimacy, which makes common action possible. While collective understandings of democracy are important, they must be balanced by the development of social and institutional trust (Allen, 2004; Taylor, 2007). Therefore, the agonistic approach also aims to create citizen identification with the free institutions of a given society. Finally, the agonistic approach aims to engage emotions with the intention of motivation and inspiration, and engage the mind with substantive policy information with the intention of promoting critical thinking. The policy information functions to both ground emotions and encourage critical thinking because as John Zaller (1992) noted, “People are able to react critically to the arguments they encounter only to the extent that they are knowledgeable about political affairs” (p. 1). The above goals necessitate that agonistic communication reconceptualizes the voter. In this approach, the voter is both rational and emotional.

Similar to the conceptualization of the voter, the content of agonistic political communication utilizes aspects of both practitioner and deliberative approaches. First,

agonistic communication employs maxims, political myth and framing. These tools allow a politician to engage a voters' emotion to the extent necessary to inspire political action. Specifically, the use of maxims allows a politician to construct the logical part of his or her argument around general principles (Allen, 2004, p. 146). This serves to both simplify the politician's logical (i.e., policy) argument and to convey his or her character. Allen (2004), while explaining Aristotle's approach to rhetoric, states, "Demonstrative argument about general principles brings to the fore a speaker's ethical commitments concerning the treatment of others, allowing an audience to assess these principles easily and to decide whether they render a speaker reliable" (p. 146). This is directly in line with the practitioner's goals discussed earlier.

Furthermore, political myth aids in the construction of agonistic distinctions. Political myths help form the substantive policy information into comprehensible, passionate and persuasive narratives. To accomplish this, the myths construct a collective identity for voters. Mouffe (2005) notes, "political discourse has to offer not only policies but also identities which can help people make sense of what they are experiencing as well as giving them hope for the future" (p. 25). As well as constituting a collective identity, the myths also function to reinforce the values of a given society's free institutions.

While it is important to note what is in agonistic communication, it is also important to note what is not in it. Agonistic political communication avoids value and character attacks in the moral realm. However, agonistic political communication

does not eliminate divisive rhetoric all together. Instead, these divisions are shifted out of the moral realm and into to the political realm. This shift is vital because it still allows for the practitioners' goal of dividing the electorate to enhance the ease of electoral choice. However, by creating the division in the political realm, agonism avoids the long-term individual and institutional damages caused by morally divisive communication.

### Chapter 3: Hypotheses and Methods

#### Hypotheses

Building on these theoretical arguments, the researcher proposes six hypotheses regarding the influence of practitioner, deliberative, and agonistic messages on measures of political knowledge, efficacy, social trust, institutional trust, and party favorability. Regarding the practitioner style, researchers have discovered that it can communicate political knowledge (Brians & Wattenberg, 1996; Denton & Woodward, 1998; Johnston-Cartee & Copeland, 1997; Holbrook, 1996), but this knowledge is usually vague issue positions (Joslyn, 1980; Kern, 1989). Furthermore, the practitioner style utilizes strong emotional language to advance one party and condemn the other. This usually results in a division within the moral arena. Based on these findings, the researcher advances the following hypotheses for the practitioner message:

H1: *Discussion of the “practitioner” message will increase party favorability, and political knowledge across Patterson and McClure’s Issue Awareness scale and Iyengar, Fishkin and Luskin’s political party ideology placement scale.*

H2: *Discussion of the “practitioner” message will not increase political knowledge on the Political Information Scale, political efficacy, social trust, or institutional trust.*

Concerning the deliberative message, researchers have found that the deliberative message style can lead to increased levels of political knowledge (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Iyengar, Fishkin, & Luskin, 2005; Luskin, Fishkin, & Jowell, 2002).

Furthermore, this approach can lead to impartial reciprocity, or acting without regard to one's potential loss or benefit, which is a key component to social trust (Chambers, 1996; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1996; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1991).

These results suggest the plausibility of the next two hypotheses.

H3: *Discussion of the “deliberative” message will increase political knowledge across all three measures, and increase social trust and institutional trust.*

H4: *Discussion of the “deliberative” message will not increase political efficacy, or party favorability.*

Finally, the theoretical approach to agonism attempts to combine key elements of both the practitioner and deliberative messages. First, agonism utilizes the emotional language and myth found in the practitioner messages to engage and motivate citizens. Second, agonism relies on factual information and reasoned argument to persuade listeners. Drawing on this theoretical approach, the researcher proposes the last two hypotheses.

H5: *Discussion of the “agonistic” message will increase party favorability.*

H6: *Discussion of the “agonistic” message will increase political knowledge across all three scales, political efficacy, social trust and institutional trust.*

## **Methods**

### **The Participant Sample**

A total of 126 undergraduates, 92 female and 34 male, from a large state university in the Midwest participated in the study. This sample included participants

from the following ethnic categories: Non-Hispanic (Caucasian) 86.5%, Multi-racial or mixed race 4.8%, African American 3.2%, Spanish or Hispanic origin 3.2%, and Asia or Pacific Islander 2.4%. The mean age for participants was 20, with a maximum of 52 and a minimum of 18. The age range was 34, with only six participants over the age of 22, and one participant not reporting. Participant pretest party identification was balanced with 42.9% identifying as Democrats, 34.9% Republican, 15.9% Independent, and 6.3% identifying as other. A total of 12 discussion groups were conducted, four for each message type, with each discussion group having between 7-13 participants. Participants were randomly assigned to each discussion group.

All participants received research credit for taking part in the study. Before participating, students had to provide their name and the name of their COMS 130 instructor. This information was used only to inform the instructors of their student's participation. After notifying the instructors, this information was dropped from the data. It is important to note that participants were enrolled in COMS 130, a public speech class, at the time of the study. The course's focus on public speech and critical listening may have primed the participants to be more critical than normal when presented with a message.

### **Experimental Design**

The researcher constructed three political campaign messages using the three approaches outlined thus far (see Appendix). Each message was constructed in such a way that it accurately reflected theoretical and practical elements discussed

throughout the paper. Furthermore, the researcher consulted the communication of actual political organizations in order to ensure the accuracy of the language in the deliberative and practitioner messages.

Upon arriving for the study, participants were randomly seated around the discussion table five minutes before the start of the study. At the start of the study, participants were asked to fill out a written consent form and sign an attendance sheet. Once participants gave their consent to participate in the study, they were given a brief introduction to the study and an explanation of what they would be doing during the hour and a half meeting time. After the introduction, the researcher distributed the pretest survey and gave oral instructions. Participants then had roughly twenty minutes to complete the survey. Once all participants completed the survey, they received one of the constructed political messages along with the short-answer questions and a half sheet of paper for note taking throughout discussion. The participants were given roughly 15 minutes to read the message and answer the short-answer questions. When all of the participants completed the short answer questions, the researcher collected the short-answer sheet and allowed the participants to keep the political messages.

After completing the pretest and short-answer questions, participants engaged in a 45-minute, videotaped discussion led by a facilitator. The facilitator started the discussion by having everyone briefly introduce him or herself by first name only and state the job they hoped to have upon graduation. In order to ensure discussion, the facilitator followed a list of eight questions. The questions remained constant through

all of the groups. After the discussion group finished, participants completed a posttest containing the same questions as the pretest.

### **Measurements**

This study relied on a standard pretest-posttest design to gauge the influence of the message and discussion. Prior to beginning the discussion session, participants completed a 36-question pretest survey covering a wide range of measurements including political knowledge, efficacy, party identification, party favorability, social trust, and institutional trust.<sup>1</sup> Upon completion of the survey, participants received the political message and three short answer questions meant to probe their feelings towards the message and prime discussion. Immediately after discussion concluded, participants completed a posttest consisting of the same 36 questions used in the pretest.

### **Political Knowledge**

This study utilized a multi-dimensional conception of political knowledge. In order to assess general issue and party position knowledge, this study used parts of Patterson and McClure's Issue Awareness scale (henceforth called Issue Awareness Scale). For this study, the Issue Awareness Scale reported an  $\alpha = .37$ . This scale is based on knowledge of political parties' stands on a series of campaign issues (Robinson, Shaver & Wrightsman, 1999, p. 632). Furthermore, this study used a political party ideology placement scale developed by Iyengar, Fishkin and Luskin (2005). This scale measured an individual's ability to correctly place the Republican

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<sup>1</sup> Survey items appear in Appendix, page 72

and Democratic parties on four issue scales concerning trade, military, and social policy (original  $\alpha = .91$ , this study  $\alpha = .60$ ). Henceforth, this scale will be referred to as the Ideology Placement Scale. Using the Political Information Scale (Iyengar, 1986; Zaller, 1986), this study also tested for factual issue knowledge. The three-item economic information scale was designed to “test current public affairs knowledge instead of ‘textbook’ knowledge” (original  $\alpha = .59$ , this study  $\alpha = .66$ ) (Robinson, Shaver & Wrightsman, 1999, p. 622).

### **Efficacy**

This study understands political efficacy to be made up of both internal and external forms of efficacy. The first measures the belief that an individual can influence the political sphere; the latter measures whether or not the individual believes the political sphere is open to their influence. In order to measure both internal and external political efficacy, this study employed a seven-question measurement outlined by Niemi, Craig, and Mattei (1991) (original  $\alpha = .80$ , this study  $\alpha = .83$ ).

### **Party Favorability**

Similar to party identification, practitioners put a great deal of importance on managing an individual’s feelings towards a given party. Therefore, this study measured party favorability using the feeling thermometer scale employed by Iyengar, Fishkin and Luskin (2005). Originally used in the ANES surveys in 1964, the Pearson  $r$  correlations between the party thermometer difference and the ANES

Party Identification scale ranged from .55 to .76 (Robinson, Shaver & Wrightsman, 1999, p. 702).

### **Social Trust and Institutional Trust**

Social and Institutional trust are central to the success of a democracy. In order for a government of the people to succeed, individuals must believe that their fellow citizens are trustworthy. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, democracy is based on sacrifice. With every decision, one group inherently sacrifices for others. In light of this, it becomes important that individuals maintain a healthy belief in democratic government. To test social trust, this study used a three-part questionnaire utilized by Zmerli and Newton (2008) that combines the original trust question created by Noelle-Neumann and an additional two by Rosenberg (1956, 1957) (original  $\alpha = .71$ , this study  $\alpha = .89$ ). Craig, Niemi, and Silver's (1990) regime-based trust scale was employed to test institutional trust (original  $\alpha = .47$ , this study  $\alpha = .66$ ). The content of this four-item scale "refers to evaluations of and willingness to change the form of government" (Robinson, Shaver & Wrightsman, 1999, p. 509).

## Chapter 4: Results

To test the study's hypotheses, paired-samples *t* tests were conducted on participants' pre-and post-test scores from measures of political knowledge, efficacy, social trust, institutional trust and party preference to evaluate whether there were significant changes in the means after exposure to and discussion of the three political messages (practitioner, deliberative, agonistic).

The first pair of hypotheses concerned the effects of the practitioner message. Hypothesis one predicted that party favorability and political knowledge of issues and party ideology would increase after exposure to and discussion of the practitioner message. As Table 1 reports, results from the paired samples *t* test partially support the political knowledge section of hypothesis one. Analysis of the results indicates that participants' level of political knowledge, as measured by the Issue Awareness Scale, increased significantly,  $t(43) = 2.11, p = .04$ . The effect size *g* of 1.57 indicates a large effect, and the 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between the pre and posttest was 1.18 to 12.82. Results for the practitioner message groups indicate that there were no significant changes between participants' pre-and post-test scores for measures of the political knowledge party ideology. The party favorability section of hypothesis one was not supported. Results for the practitioner message groups indicated that there were no significant changes between participants' pre-and post-test scores for favorability of republicans or democrats. Paired samples *t* tests were run separately for each political affiliation (republican, democrat, independent, other).

Hypothesis two predicted that political information knowledge, political efficacy, social trust, and institutional trust would not increase after discussion of the practitioner message. Hypothesis two was supported in that participants showed no increase in political information knowledge, political efficacy, or social trust and institutional trust (see Table 2). Furthermore, analysis of the results indicated that participants' level of institutional trust decreased significantly after exposure to and discussion of the practitioner message,  $t(43) = -3.73, p = .001$ . A large effect size was detected ( $g = -.80$ ). The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between the pre- and post-test was -1.47 to -.44.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for the Practitioner Message

	Pretest	Post Test
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Issue Awareness	19.05 (5.68)	17.43 (5.63) *
Republican ideology placement	13.70 (3.75)	13.70 (3.00)
Democrat ideology placement	14.08 (3.23)	14.33 (3.68)
Political Information	1.22 (.53)	1.14 (.48)
Efficacy	21.11 (5.90)	21.10 (6.25)
Social Trust	13.55 (5.01)	13.02 (5.58)
Institutional Trust	8.59 (2.84)	9.55 (2.99) ***

Note: N = 44. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 2: Party Favorability of Practitioner Message Recipients

Self Identified Party Affiliation	View of Republican Party		View of Democratic Party	
	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)
Republican	71.25(14.94)	71.67 (15.13)	33.18 (17.50)	34.55 (17.10)
Democrat	40.12 (22.01)	41.29 (20.65)	75.94 (16.06)	75.39 (15.04)
Independent	39.20 (27.12)	39.20 (27.12)	41.00 (30.90)	41.00 (30.90)
Other	50.00 (n/a)#	50.00 (n/a)#	50.00 (n/a)#	50.00 (n/a)#

# Denotes n value equal to 1

The second set of hypotheses concerned the effects of the deliberative message. Hypothesis three claimed that following exposure to and discussion of the deliberative message the following areas would increase: political knowledge, social trust, and institutional trust. As Table 3 shows, the results from the paired samples *t* test partially support the political knowledge section of research hypothesis three. Analysis of the results indicates participants' level of political knowledge increased significantly on three measures: Issue Awareness Scale  $t(40) = 3.04, p = .004$ , the Democratic political party ideology scale  $t(24) = -2.74, p = .011$ , and the Political Information Scale  $t(30) = -10.80, p < .01$ . The Issue Awareness Scale effect size *g* of 5.89 indicates a large effect, and the 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between the pre and posttest was 5.56 to 12.44. The Democratic political party ideology placement scale effect size *g* of -.77 indicates a large effect. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between the pre and posttest was -2.17 to -.30. The Political information Scale effect size *g* of -2.74 indicates a large effect, and the 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between the pre and posttest was

-1.65 to -1.12. Results for the Republican political party ideology place scale were not significant. Results from the paired samples  $t$  test did not support the social and institutional trust portion of hypothesis three, as there were no significant changes between participants' pre- and post-test scores.

Hypothesis four predicted that political efficacy and party favorability would not increase following the deliberative message focus groups. The results from the paired samples  $t$  test support the efficacy portion of the hypothesis. Results indicated no significant change between participants' pre- and post-test scores for efficacy (see Table 4). There was partial support for party favorability as analysis of the results showed participants' levels of favorability towards the Republican Party did not significantly increase after exposure to and discussion of the deliberative message. However, analysis of the results showed that self-identified Republicans did view the Democratic Party significantly more favorably after exposure to and discussion of the deliberative message,  $t(9) = -2.53, p = .032$ . The effect size  $g$  of -1.13 indicates a large effect. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between the pre- and post-test was -7.95 to -.49.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for the Deliberative Message

	Pretest	Post Test
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Issue Awareness	17.83 (4.75)	16.05 (4.81) **
Republican ideology placement	12.38 (4.00)	12.28 (4.03)
Democrat ideology placement	14.40 (3.85)	15.64 (3.33)*
Political Information	1.45 (.62)	2.84 (.45) **
Efficacy	20.95 (5.50)	20.95 (5.49)
Social Trust	14.70 (5.25)	14.28 (5.49)
Institutional Trust	9.55 (2.96)	9.68 (2.81)

Note: N = 41. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 4: Party Favorability of Deliberative Message Recipients

Self Identified Party Affiliation	View of Republican Party		View of Democratic Party	
	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)
Republican	69.70 (14.50)	67.70 (12.32)	38.50 (13.13)	42.70 (14.60) *
Democrat	36.93 (21.74)	36.00 (18.77)	76.07 (14.76)	78.07 (14.30)
Independent	48.90 (11.22)	45.70 (10.67)	53.90 (11.16)	57.20 (11.67)
Other	22.33 (24.83)	20.67 (25.72)	52.00 (37.60)	53.75 (39.45)

Note: N = 41. \*  $p < .05$ .

The third set of hypotheses concerned the effects of the agonistic message. Hypothesis five claimed party favorability would increase after exposure to and discussion of the agonistic message. The results indicate that exposure to the agonistic message demonstrated no increase in party favorability (see Table 5).

Hypothesis six claimed that political knowledge, political efficacy, social trust, and institutional trust would increase after exposure to and discussion of the agonistic message. In regard to political knowledge, there was partial support as participants' scores increased significantly on the Political Information Scale,  $t(29) = -10.93$ ,  $p < .01$ . The effect size  $g$  of  $-2.82$  indicates a large effect, and the 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between the pre and posttest was  $-1.54$  to  $-1.06$ . Results indicated no significant change for other political knowledge measure, efficacy, social trust and institutional trust.

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations for the Agonistic Message

	Pretest	Post Test
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Issue Awareness	19.49 (4.54)	18.78 (4.47)
Republican ideology placement	13.03 (3.86)	12.19 (3.49)
Democrat ideology placement	14.50 (3.34)	14.43 (2.97)
Political Information	1.57 (.68)	2.87 (.43) **
Efficacy	21.22 (4.50)	21.59 (5.11)
Social Trust	14.42 (5.10)	13.73 (5.56)
Institutional Trust	9.33 (2.65)	9.65 (2.20)

Note:  $N = 41$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 6: Party Favorability of Agonistic Message Recipients

Self Identified Party Affiliation	View of Republican Party		View of Democratic Party	
	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)
Republican	70.94 (14.90)	64.82 (20.35)	38.24 (18.38)	43.41 (19.00)
Democrat	39.84 (15.24)	42.05 (18.40)	69.63 (14.21)	72.00 (10.38)
Independent	60.00 (42.43)#	60.00 (42.43)#	55.00 (21.21)	50.00 (28.28)
Other	47.50 (3.54)	40.00 (14.14)	67.50 (24.74)	70.00 (28.28)

# Denotes n value equal to 1

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The two-part purpose of this study was to build the theoretical foundation for a third type of political communication known as agonism and then validate the approach through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative analysis. To achieve this end, the study constructed three political messages (practitioner, deliberative, agonistic) based on each of their respective theoretical approaches. Each political message then served as the basis for separate small discussion groups. The possible effects of the messages on a number of measurements were analyzed through a pretest/posttest design. Sufficient empirical evidence was found to partially support the hypotheses for the influence of practitioner, deliberative, and agonistic political communications on voter decision-making.

Statistical analysis showed that participants receiving the practitioner message demonstrated increased political knowledge on one of the three political knowledge scales, the Issue Awareness Scale. The Issue Awareness Scale requires participants to identify the Republican and Democratic parties on traditional issues based on the likelihood that the party would either support or not support the issue. Given the practitioner approach's highly partisan message, it is not surprising participants increased their ability to place the parties correctly. Furthermore, statistical analysis revealed that participants in the practitioner group also showed a decrease in institutional trust. While the study originally hypothesized no change on this variable, it is understandable why institutional trust decreased after receiving the practitioner message. As outlined in the first part of this paper, the practitioner message seeks to

create divisions in the moral arena by utilizing a highly divisive, negative tone. This approach can then cause citizens to question the integrity of politicians, institutions, and the political process, which can easily result in a loss of institutional trust (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Patterson, 2002).

Concerning the deliberative message, statistical analysis showed strong support for the deliberative message's ability to increase an individual's political knowledge. Participants scored higher on the Issue Awareness Scale, Political Information Scale, and the Democratic portion of the Ideology Placement Scale. These findings further support the growing body of evidence demonstrating that the deliberative message's substantive approach can greatly increase an individual's political knowledge (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Gabor, 2007; Iyengar, Fishkin, & Luskin, 2005; Luskin, Fishkin, & Jowell, 2002; Min, 2007). Furthermore, results revealed that self-identified Republicans viewed the Democratic Party more favorably after exposure to and discussion of the deliberative message. This finding is especially important in that it was the only instance of significant shift in party favorability. This shift might be explained by the fact that the deliberative message was the only message to offer a direct, factual comparison between the two parties. Thus, viewers were given the chance to instantaneously compare the parties on the same items. Furthermore, the absence of highly partisan language may have made the recipients more receptive to the information.

The statistical results for the agonistic message were limited. The only significant finding showed that participants demonstrated increased political

knowledge on the Political Information Scale. This scale required participants to remember such facts as the unemployment rate and inflation rate. This finding supports the agonistic message's goal of increasing the individual's factual knowledge. The long-term goal is then to have individuals incorporate this factual information into their decision making process. However, as a whole, the statistical analysis did not show support for agonism on any of the remaining variables.

While quantitative analysis can certainly give us insight into how the three messages influence voter decision-making, a look at the qualitative data offers a more nuanced understanding of these influences. From a theoretical perspective, this paper proposed a two-step argument. First, the dominant forms of political communication, practitioner and deliberative, contain fundamental weaknesses that necessitate a third way of political communication. Specifically, practitioner communication creates acrimonious divisions while imparting little knowledge, and deliberative communication, while imparting substantive policy information, does little to help citizens understand how the facts affect them and in turn motivate them to participate. In order to address these broader concerns, a more qualitative approach is necessary.

As noted above, the first step of this paper concerned itself with establishing the shortcomings of current practitioner and deliberative political communication. An examination of the open-ended questions and the group discussions offers some evidence of the problems inherent in the practitioner and deliberative approaches to political communication. When asked whether or not the message was informative, the answers from participants in the practitioner groups consistently demonstrated

four important themes: distrust in the facts provided, criticism for the lack of argumentation depth, desire for both sides to be heard, and strong emotional backlash against the sponsoring party.

Concerning the distrust in the facts, a self-identified moderate Republican provides a typical answer, “It was more opinionated than informative. Because I can see the bias in this message, I am hesitant to believe these are all reliable facts.” Moreover, numerous participants, regardless of party affiliation, described the message as “propaganda” and “deceptive.” For example, a moderate participant identifying party affiliation as “Other” wrote, “It seems to be unfairly bashing democrats without giving specific examples. Seems like BS.” Furthermore, another participant identifying as a moderate conservative added, “It is informative but I’m not sure if it is reliable. Where are they getting their facts from? Just because they say Democrats are this way doesn’t mean they are in reality.”

The second theme emerging from the practitioner message groups was a criticism of the message’s lack of depth. Participants explained that the message “lacked strong examples supporting the statements,” which “can be misleading to readers.” More specifically, when asked if the message was informative, one participant identifying as slightly liberal asserted, “Not in any way shape or form. Obviously the arguments were lopsided and had no explanation why the Republican message is better.” Moreover, another participant identifying as liberal explained, “This message was barely informative. There is too much focus on bashing the opposite viewpoint as well as upholding the viewpoint represented to give much

information...it's basically an over-dramatized ad – that persuades, NOT [emphasis in original] informs.” Additionally, one self-identified liberal participant answered a short-answer question regarding whether or not the message was informative by writing, “Not really informative. The Republican Party says what they want to, however, they don't tell you why they're going to do it or how they plan to do it.” Last, one participant identifying as slightly liberal responded to the message by writing, “I felt it was slander and mainly persuasive. There was no true information in its message, just plans and insults.”

A desire to hear both sides of the argument was the third theme arising out of the practitioner message groups. At the beginning of the discussion group, one participant identifying as slightly liberal stated, “I'm sick of all these one-sided campaign ads bashing each other. I just wish someone would give me both sides of the story.” Another participant identifying as Republican added, “I feel the message was very one-sided. I would like to see the Democrats support their own view instead of Republicans talking about it.” These two quotes highlight the common desire for both sides to be heard.

Last, participants in the practitioner groups also demonstrated strong emotional backlashes to the sponsoring party. For instance, one participant, identifying as slightly liberal, stated, “They seemed to forget that a Republican was in office when [emphasis in original] the stock market crashed and when the plans for the bailouts began. Also, if they hadn't spent trillions on a war to find weapons that were never there, we might have more money for our country, not that were suffering.

And maybe they should stop giving tax breaks for outsourcing our jobs.” Again, these characteristic answers offer support to the criticisms of the practitioner approach.

Concerning the deliberative message, participants resoundingly agreed that the deliberative message was informative. However, participants also levied two main criticisms: the message assumed too much prior knowledge, and the message failed to explain how the facts translated to real life effects impacting their lives. When explaining the difficulty in understanding the message, one participant wrote, “It gives a lot of information and statistics that I didn’t know. Some of it is a little confusing for me because I don’t understand what the statement implies.” Another participant felt that the message was informative, but went on to say that, “it was a lot of statistics with very little reasoning and that made it difficult to attempt to understand the other point being placed forward by the other party.” Last, when asked if the message was informative, one participant answered, “Yes, it stated the facts in a listed manner which made it easy to read and understand but at the same time no, because it was pretty basic with its descriptions and if you are not in the know of what is going on, then you wouldn’t be able to understand what the message was talking about.”

The second concern the participants raised dealt with the message’s inability to explain how the facts influenced their lives. One participant noted that the message, “didn’t explain how those prices or budgets will effect the public.” Another participant added, “I feel that this definitely was informative, but now I just want to know more and where the money is going specifically. I want to know the projected

effects of all the extra money the democrats plan to use.” Moreover, one participant explained, “I feel that this message does give valuable information but lacks the detail of how the money will directly impact Americans.” These representative statements illustrate the validity of the critiques against the deliberative approach.

The second step of this paper focused on overcoming the shortfalls of the practitioner and deliberative approaches by developing agonism as a possible third way of political communication. While the quantitative analysis did not strongly support the potential of agonism as an alternative, a more qualitative approach demonstrates that agonism certainly began to fulfill its theoretical purpose and potential. First, the majority of participants described the message as informative. When asked if the message was informative, one participant responded, “Yes, I believe it briefly describes the issues we need to address and also gives logical solutions to these issues” Furthermore, another participant added, “Yes, it offered solutions and explained them well.”

In addition to providing substantive information, agonism strove to create division in the political realm and not the moral realm. After examination of both the short answer questions and the discussions, it appears that participants were in fact less likely to demonstrate outrage or disgust towards the other party. When discussing the message, one participant identifying as slightly conservative explained, “I feel like it was informative, but it was obviously biased...Plus, I disagree with the article, I don’t think that reducing corporate tax will help create more jobs.” When describing the message, one participant, who rated herself a 10 on a conservative-liberal scale

(0= Conservative, 10=liberal), answered, “It was informative, but I still believe the democratic way of thinking (government in control of money issues, not the people) is a much smarter and safer play.” These statements are representative of the type of disagreement in the agonistic groups. When disagreeing with the message or other group members, participants in the agonistic groups were less likely to condemn the message as libelous or the source as ill intentioned, which was common in the practitioner groups. While it is certainly difficult to assess the overall success of an approach after a single study, these results certainly offer hope that agonistic political communication can fulfill its theoretical goals.

This shift from quantitative to qualitative analysis raises additional insights that necessitate discussion. Beyond offering support for the theoretical argument, examination of the group discussions reveals a gap between participants’ political knowledge, as tested by the various scales, and their functional political knowledge. The term functional political knowledge is used to describe the basic cumulative knowledge necessary to hold a political discussion. This knowledge includes an elementary understanding of government, history, and current political events.

While the mean scores on first two political scales (Issue Awareness scale and Iyengar, Fishkin and Luskin’s political party ideology placement scale) demonstrated a basic grasp of politics, participants’ self-disclosures and comments during discussion illustrate a critical lack of functional political knowledge. Concerning self-disclosures, it was extremely common for at least two participants in each discussion group to admit their lack of knowledge. For example, when asked about how the

major parties planned on handling the recession, one participant simply said, “I am not knowledgeable in any way, shape, or form.” Furthermore, another participant added, “I am not very knowledgeable either. I don’t have any idea what’s going on right now and I’m embarrassed to say that. When I watch the news, I don’t understand what they are talking about. So it’s discouraging, so I just turn it off.” These self-disclosures begin to illustrate the participants’ inability to engage in a political discussion. However, self-disclosure is only one sign of this issue.

Throughout the discussions, participants also illustrated little understanding of the U.S. governmental system, American history, and current political events. For example, when discussing the current financial crisis and the role of government, one student explained that this current situation was not a big deal. This judgment was based on the student’s belief that the Great Depression occurred in the 1950’s and that the government did not have to do anything to pull the country out of the depression. Additionally, during a discussion about possible governmental action concerning the current recession, a student in another group added that stimulus checks would not work because people would spend them instead of save them. The importance of these examples lies in the fact that these misunderstandings of political basics severely hinders the participant’s and group’s ability to maintain a constructive political conversation. This finding may suggest that more comprehensive political knowledge scales such as Delli Carpini and Keeter’s (1996) Political Knowledge Scale may offer a more accurate measure of political knowledge. Furthermore, this issue seems to increase the importance of providing individuals with more substantive

information if one hopes to push individuals past their misunderstandings and pre-conceived political assumptions.

The above discussion introduces the third point necessitating further analysis: the importance of substantive information in political communication. From both a quantitative and qualitative perspective, the deliberative message was associated with important findings. From a quantitative perspective, the deliberative message groups were the only ones to see significant increases on all measures of political knowledge. Additionally, the deliberative groups were the only groups to see a shift in party favorability (self-identified Republicans become more favorable towards the Democratic party). This finding supports the growing literature illustrating how substantive policy information can both increase political knowledge and cause shifts in political decision-making (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2004; Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Iyengar, Fishkin, & Luskin, 2005; Luskin, Fishkin, & Jowell, 2002; McCombs & Reynolds, 1999).

Qualitatively examining the group discussions further reveals the benefits of providing substantive policy information in political communication. Groups receiving the deliberative message demonstrated increased likelihood to critically challenge their political assumptions and those of other participants. For example, after reviewing the deliberative message, a self-disclosed Republican explained that she originally thought the Republican stimulus plan was the best because it was half the amount of the Democrats' plan. After participating in the group, she now felt the Republican plan did not go far enough in important areas such as human capital and

infrastructure. Such fundamental changes in what individuals believed raise an important question: what is the goal of political communication?

As discussed earlier, this paper conceptualizes one of the goals of political communication as helping citizens arrive at decisions that best represent their thoughts and values. In a representative democracy, a form of government built upon citizen self-rule through party affiliation, it seems vital that citizens understand which party and candidates best represent them. In light of this study's findings coupled with other scholars' work, it appears that substantive policy information inarguably plays an essential role in that thought process. Therefore, it seems imperative that scholars and practitioners alike reassess their study and practice of political communication.

The final point requiring further analysis comes from the quantitative findings in the practitioner message groups. Participants in these groups were the only ones to show a decrease in institutional trust from the pretest to the posttest. More specifically, the statistical analysis reported earlier showed that a large portion of the variability in institutional trust was not due to chance but instead caused by exposure to and discussion of the practitioner message. While this is certainly not enough support to sound an alarm, it does raise important questions as to the importance of institutional trust in a large-scale democracy and the nature of the practitioner message.

Democracy was originally envisioned as a form of government best suited for small-scale populaces. Based off the principle of self-rule, democracy required

individuals to understand their surroundings. However, in modern times, this task becomes much more difficult as democracies grow in size and scope. Couple that difficulty with the fact that as democracies grow, the citizen's autonomy decreases simply due to the increased number of people with a say in government.

These two effects then increase the importance of institutional trust. In a small-scale democracy, citizens could know and trust each other. However, in a large-scale democracy, institutions become the focus and connecting point for widely dispersed and unknown others who compete over shared resources. As Taylor (2007) explains, institutional trust is imperative for large-scale democracy because citizens are bound to be on the losing side of the democratic majority. In those situations, the individual's institutional trust is one of the major determinants governing whether the individual accepts the decision. The individual must believe the system is fair and that it can work to his or her advantage in the future. Without that belief, there is little reason for people to accept democratic decisions that rule against them.

Furthermore, institutional trust is a significant determinant of whether or not citizens actively participate in politics. It seems simple that citizens must trust in institutions if they are going to use them as a vehicle for change. Therefore, it is disturbing that the most common form of political communication, practitioner, was on the only message type associated with a significant drop in institutional trust. In summary, for the long-term health of American democracy, it seems necessary to ensure that political communication builds trust in our democratic institutions.

## **Chapter 6: Study Limitations and Future Research**

Although this study revealed some important findings about how different forms of political communication influence voter decision-making, these findings need to be understood in light of a number of limitations. First, a major purpose of this study was to establish agonism as a third way of political communication. While the researcher feels great strides have been taken towards building the theoretical foundation, the tangible political communication output is still in its initial stages. Therefore, future research can focus on constructing and refining how agonism manifests itself as real-world political communication. Additionally, researchers could check whether the participants understand the agonistic approach in the intended fashion by performing a manipulation check. These steps can further develop agonism in the realm of political communication.

Second, this study provided participants with a single message, from a single source, the Republican Party. Future researchers can broaden this approach by providing participants with messages that represent both sides of the political spectrum, Democrat and Republican. By utilizing this more balanced approach, researchers can better mimic the back-and-forth nature of real-world political communication.

Third, this research study employed a single exposure research design to examine how differing message styles effect voter decision-making. Future research into this area can alter this approach by exposing participants to the message(s) multiple times within a single discussion group. This approach may better mirror the

political communication environment participants are accustomed to. Moreover, voter decision-making is a long-term process. Therefore, researchers may use a longitudinal approach to examine the long-term effects of multiple exposures over a greater period of time. This research design seems best equipped to examine whether or not agonism can fulfill its long-term theoretical goals.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusions**

As I reflect on this project, I cannot help but to return to my original belief that American democracy is capable of something better. It has been widely documented that Americans have little interest in politics and only about 50%-60% of them turn out to vote in presidential elections (U.S. Census Bureau, 1991,1998). I firmly believe this failure is partially attributable to how we communicate politics.

The first part of this study set out to analyze what seemed to be part of the problem: the practitioner and deliberative approaches. I believe that the practitioner communication style stunts the growth of our democracy. By relying on highly emotional, substantively shallow communication, practitioner communication deters citizens from moving beyond simple emotional instincts and partisan ideology. While this style may be effective in achieving the short-term goals of winning elections, it seems to disregard the long-term implications of such communication. Simply put, if we are stuck talking about the complexities of our vastly interconnected nation and world in mere emotionally charged slogans, we are certain to misunderstand and mistreat one another. However, the solution offered by the deliberative approach takes us too far in the opposite direction. Politics is more than substantive policy information and objective reasoning. Politics is about the belief that we can form a more perfect union. Politics is about aspiring for a better day. So we as a nation cannot settle for a form of political communication that removes these fundamental components of politics.

At the outset of this study, I believed the theoretical arguments underlying the agonistic approach offered a better way. Having completed this study, I still believe this. I still believe that the average American voter is capable of approaching politics with a wider, more complex array of analytical tools. They are capable of balancing subjective emotions with objective reason, but we must first give them the necessary tools. By weaving together reasoned debate, emotionally engaging language and substantive policy information, agonistic political communication attempted to incorporate these very tools.

While this study did not shake my support of agonistic political communication, it did give me a broader understanding of our current political situation. The discussion groups highlighted just how little college students know and care about politics. That said, I do not believe this is a permanent state. Instead, I believe it is a clear call for better civic education. I cannot blame the participants for their lack of political knowledge because it was also clear that they simply did not understand the wide and extensive impact of political decisions on their lives. Beyond necessitating better civic education, this finding reinforces the importance of the explanatory function of agonism. Individuals not only need the facts, but they need them explained in a way that is meaningful to their lives. Yet, it is important that this explanation is not reduced to a point where it oversimplifies the truth.

From this study, a clearer, more complex picture of political communication has arisen. Political communication has not caused all of our problems, nor will it fix

all of our problems. However, as communication scholars, I think we can all agree that communication matters.

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## Appendix

### Informed Consent

**Approved by the Human Subjects Committee University of Kansas, Lawrence Campus (HSCL). Approval expires one year from 2/3/2009. HSCL #17810**

#### INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Constructing the Message: The Influence of Practitioner, Deliberative, and Agonistic Political Campaign Messages on Voter Decision Making

#### INTRODUCTION

The Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this unit, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how differing political message styles influence voter decision-making.

#### PROCEDURES

You will be asked to fill out a 36 question online pretest related to different aspects of politics. After completion of the pretest, you will be asked to engage in a 45-minute discussion with up to 11 other participants regarding your thoughts and feelings about the American economy. Expertise in the area of politics and economics is **not** required for participation in this study. The discussion will be overseen and facilitated by the researcher. Furthermore, the discussion will be video taped for use by the researcher for analysis purposes only. In no way will your image appear in the research or anywhere else. When not in use, the tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet. After completion of the discussion session, you will be asked to complete a 36-question online posttest related to different aspects of politics. The entire process should take approximately 90 minutes.

#### RISKS

There are no risks anticipated during this research.

## BENEFITS

By participating in this research you are helping researchers gain a better understanding of how differing styles of political communication affect voter decision-making. This will aid both researchers and practitioners of political communication in the development of a more effective form political communication.

## PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS

While there will be no monetary payment, you might receive course credit for participating in this research.

## PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY

Your name will not be associated in any way with the information collected about you or with the research findings from this study. The researcher will use a study number or a pseudonym instead of your name. The researchers will not share information about you unless required by law or unless you give written permission.

Permission granted on this date to use and disclose your information remains in effect indefinitely. By signing this form you give permission for the use and disclosure of your information for purposes of this study at any time in the future.

## REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

## CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to:

Carl Walz  
The University of Kansas  
Communication Studies  
Bailey Hall  
1440 Jayhawk Blvd., Room 102  
Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7574.

If you cancel permission to use your information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about you. However, the researcher may use and disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation, as described above.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION should be directed to:

Carl Walz  
Principal Investigator  
Communication Studies  
102 Bailey Hall  
University of Kansas  
Lawrence, KS 66045  
785 864-1160

Jay Childers Ph.D.  
Faculty Supervisor  
Communication Studies  
116F Bailey Hall  
University of Kansas  
Lawrence, KS 66045  
785 864-1474

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL) office at 864-7429 or 864-7385 or write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7563, email dhann@ku.edu or mdenning@ku.edu.

**KEEP THIS SECTION FOR YOUR RECORDS. IF YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE TEAR OFF THE FOLLOWING SECTION AND RETURN IT TO THE RESEARCHER(S).**

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Constructing the Message: The Influence of Practitioner, Deliberative, and Agonistic Political Campaign Messages on Voter Decision Making

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(Project/Study Title)

HSCL # 17810 (Provided by HSCL office)

**PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:**

If you agree to participate in this study please sign where indicated, then tear off this section and return it to the investigator(s). Keep the consent information for your records.

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study and the use and disclosure of information about me for the study.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

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Type/Print Participant's Name

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Date

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Participant's Signature



## Political Knowledge

### *Patterson and McClure's Issue Awareness Scale*

8. The Republican Party favors spending more on domestic social programs such as Medicare and Social Security.

Extremely Likely	Quite Likely	Slightly Likely	Not Sure	Slightly Likely	Quite Likely	Extremely Likely
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9. The Democratic Party favors spending more on domestic social programs such as Medicare and Social Security.

Extremely Likely	Quite Likely	Slightly Likely	Not Sure	Slightly Likely	Quite Likely	Extremely Likely
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10. The Republican Party favors spending less money on the military.

Extremely Likely	Quite Likely	Slightly Likely	Not Sure	Slightly Likely	Quite Likely	Extremely Likely
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11. The Democratic Party favors spending less money on the military.

Extremely Likely	Quite Likely	Slightly Likely	Not Sure	Slightly Likely	Quite Likely	Extremely Likely
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12. The Republican Party favors a "flat tax" policy that taxes all individuals equally, regardless of their income.

Extremely Likely	Quite Likely	Slightly Likely	Not Sure	Slightly Likely	Quite Likely	Extremely Likely
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13. The Democratic Party favors a "flat tax" policy that taxes all individuals equally, regardless of their income.

Extremely Likely	Quite Likely	Slightly Likely	Not Sure	Slightly Likely	Quite Likely	Extremely Likely
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*Ideology Place Scale (Iyengar, Fishkin and Luskin (2005))*

14. Some people think the federal government should provide fewer services, such as health and education, in order to lower taxes. Suppose those people are at one end of the scale, at point 1. Other people feel it is important for the federal government to provide more services even if it means higher taxes. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. People who are exactly in the middle are at point 4, and of course other people have positions at points 2, 3, 5, or 6. Where would you place the Republican and Democratic Parties or haven't you thought much about this?

Republican Party: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Haven't thought much about this

Democratic Party: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Haven't thought much about this

15. Some people believe that we should spend less money for defense and focus much more on solving domestic problems. Suppose these people are at one end of the scale, at point 1. Other people feel that defense spending should be greatly increased even if it means reduced spending on domestic problems. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. People who are exactly in the middle are at point 4, and of course other people have positions at points 2, 3, 5, or 6. Where would you place the Republican and Democratic Parties or haven't you thought much about this?

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*Political Information Scale (Iyengar, 1986; Zaller, 1986)*

17. What do you think is the current unemployment rate?

18. What do you think is the current rate of inflation – that is, by what percent have prices increased this year over last?

19. Is the federal budget deficit larger or smaller than it was when George W. Bush took office in 2000?

**Efficacy***Niemi, Craig, and Mattie (1991)*

23. I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics.

Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
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24. I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.

Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
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25. I feel that I could do as good a job in public office as most other people.

Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
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26. I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people.

Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
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27. Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.

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28. People like me don't have any say about what government does.

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29. I don't think public officials care much what people like me think.

Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
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## Social Trust

*Zmerli and Newton (2008)*

30. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? (Can't be too careful: need to be wary or always somewhat suspicious.)

You can't be too careful trusted													Most People can be trusted
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		

31. Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance or would they try to be fair? (Take advantage: exploit or cheat; fair: in the sense of treat appropriately and straightforwardly.)

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You can't be too careful trusted													Most People can be trusted
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		

## Institutional Trust

*Craig, Niemi, and Silver (1990)*

33. Whatever its faults may be, the American form of government is still the best for us.

Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
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34. There is not much about our form of government to be proud of.

Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
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35. It may be necessary to make some major changes in our form of government in order to solve the problems facing our country.

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36. I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of.

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18. What do you think is the current rate of inflation – that is, by what percent have prices increased this year over last?

19. Is the federal budget deficit larger or smaller than it was when George W. Bush took office in 2000?

**For questions 20-29, please circle your level of agreement**

20. Limited government and free markets are the best way to ensure America's prosperity.

Agree  
Strongly

Agree  
Somewhat

Neither Agree  
nor Disagree

Disagree  
Somewhat

Disagree  
Strongly

21. Government should cut spending on social programs such as Medicare and Welfare in order to reduce overall spending.

Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
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22. The government should reduce spending on social programs such as Welfare and Medicare.

Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
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23. I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics.

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28. People like me don't have any say about what government does.

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Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
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**For questions 30-32, please circle one**

30. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? (Can't be too careful: need to be wary or always somewhat suspicious.)

You can't be too careful trusted												Most People can be trusted
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

31. Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance or would they try to be fair? (Take advantage: exploit or cheat; fair: in the sense of treat appropriately and straightforwardly.)

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33. Whatever its faults may be, the American form of government is still the best for us.

Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
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34. There is not much about our form of government to be proud of.

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36. I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of.

Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
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## Discussion Group Questions

- I. Introduction to study (1-2 minutes)
  - a. Facilitator: Welcome everyone. Today we are here to talk about the economy. This doesn't mean you have to be an expert on politics or the economy. Instead, the goal is to find out what normal college students know and think about the economy. This is an informal discussion, but I would still like you to keep some basic rules in mind. First, please do not hold side conversations during the group discussion. Second, since this is an exploratory discussion, I would like everyone to actively participate.
- II. Participant Introductions (1-2 minutes)
  - a. Now I would like to begin by having everyone briefly introduce him or herself.
  - b. **Question:** What is your first name and as of today, what kind of job would like to have after you graduate? (Going around the room in a designated order)
- III. Discussion of the economic situation (40 minutes)
  - a. We are all college students around the same age. In a short time, most of us will be out on the job market looking for jobs, and some of you may currently be working your way through college. With this in mind...
    - i. **Question:** Do you think the economy is headed in the right direction?
    - ii. **Question:** How has the current economic situation affected you or your family and friends?
    - iii. **Question:** What do you think led to the current economic downturn?
    - iv. **Question:** Do you think the Republicans or the Democrats have a better plan for the economic recovery?
    - v. **Question:** What roles should the political parties play in the economic recovery?
    - vi. **Question:** If your state representative asked you what you thought needed to be done to right the economy, what would you say?
    - vii. **Question:** Do you think there is anything that you can do about the economic situation?
      1. **Question:** Let's just say that you could do something, what would you do?
    - viii. **Question:** What do you think the economic situation will look like by the time you graduate?

## Posttest Survey

Survey ID Number (below, place the *first 3 letters of your last name*, and the *last 4 digits of your primary telephone number*).

\_\_\_\_\_

(first 3 letters of last name)

\_\_\_\_\_

(last 4 digits of your primary telephone number)

1. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a conservative or a liberal? (Please circle one)

Conservative												Liberal
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

2. We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale [or haven't you thought much about this]? (Please circle one)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate: Middle of the road	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative

0. Haven't thought      8. Don't know

3. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or other? (Please circle one)

c. Republican      b. Democrat      c. Independent      d. Other

**For questions 4-6, please circle one.**

4. If Republican, would you call yourself a strong Republican or not a very strong Republican? (If not Republican, please skip this question).

Not very strong												Strong
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

5. If Democrat, would you call yourself a strong Democrat or not a very strong Democrat? (If not a Democrat, please skip this question).

Not very strong												Strong
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	



12. The Republican Party favors a “flat tax” policy that taxes all individuals equally, regardless of their income.

Extremely Likely	Quite Likely	Slightly Likely	Not Sure	Slightly Likely	Quite Likely	Extremely Likely
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19. Is the federal budget deficit larger or smaller than it was when George W. Bush took office in 2000?

**For questions 20-29, please circle your level of agreement**

20. Limited government and free markets are the best way to ensure America's prosperity.

Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
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**For questions 30-32, please circle one**

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You can't be too careful trusted	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Most People can be trusted
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36. I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of.

Agree  
Strongly

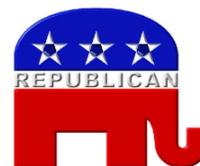
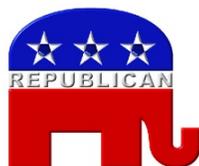
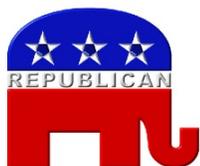
Agree  
Somewhat

Neither Agree  
nor Disagree

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## Practitioner Message



## The RIGHT Way to Fix the Economy

### America's Economic Troubles

Wall Street has squandered *our* money, and Washington was forced to bail them out with *our* money. Combine that with America's rising unemployment, a crumbling housing market, and falling wages and you see that America's economy is in trouble. The Democratic Party wants to dig the hole deeper with new taxes, new spending, and new debt. The Republican Party believes in a pro-growth agenda based on tax cuts and fiscal responsibility. This common sense plan will secure the economic future of your family and your country.

### Democrats will Make the Problem Worse

The Democrats want to **take more money out of your pocket** by raising taxes because they don't trust you to use it wisely. And what exactly would the liberals in Washington do with your money? The Democrats would use your hard earned money to continue to bail out Wall Street rather than Main Street. We call that stealing, and this is not the time to be **stealing from hard working Americans** just to give bailouts to the rich. New taxes, new spending, new debt. It will make the problem worse.



### The Republican Solution

Economic prosperity lies at the intersection of individual trust and economic development. If elected, the Republican Party will fix the economy by:

- **Cutting Income Taxes:** Low taxes puts more money in your pockets. We trust you, not some distant Washington bureaucrats, to spend your money the way you want it spent.
- **Cutting Business Taxes:** This will allow businesses to create new jobs right here in America.
- **Financial reforms:** Reforming the financial industry will help protect your economic future.
- **Eliminate pork barrel spending:** Cutting wasteful government spending will save tax payers millions of dollars every year.

### Support the Republican Party

The Democrats want to create a massive government with a spend first philosophy that will steal your money and drive our country into a crushing debt. Now is the time to restore fiscal reason and responsibility to Washington. With lower taxes and fiscal responsibility, we can make a better tomorrow. Support the Republican Party because we are the only party working for *you*.

## Deliberative Message

C C E



# Center for Citizen Education

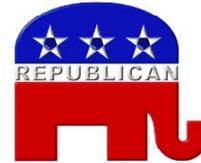
### Economic Stimulus Plans

**The Center for Citizen Education is a non-partisan organization dedicated to providing all citizens with current political information.**

The American economy is currently in a recession. The unemployment rate is 7.6%, up 3% from last year and the inflation rate for 2008 was 3.85%, its highest point this decade. Below are the major parties' proposed stimulus plans to aid you in your political choices.

Party Economic Plan	Democrats	Republicans
<b>Stimulus Plan</b>	\$819 billion plan	\$455 billion
<b>-Tax cuts</b>	-Temporary tax reduction-\$99 billion -Tuition tax credit-\$10 billion -Business expensing tax breaks-\$90 billion -renewable-energy tax credit-\$20 billion	-3.1% employee payroll tax reduction -Cut corporate tax rate from 35% to 25% -20% tax deduction for small business -Reduce the two lowest individual income tax rates by 5% to 10% and 5% -No tax increases to pay for spending
<b>-Relief</b>	-Expanded unemployment insurance-\$42 Billion -Health insurance of unemployed-\$40 billion -welfare-\$3 billion	-Provide a \$7,500 home-buyers credit for buyers making a minimum down-payment of 5% -Provide health insurance tax credit to individuals purchasing health care on their own
<b>-Infrastructure</b>	Highways-\$30 billion School Renovation-\$20 billion Accelerated deployment of broadband-\$5.6 billion Transportation projects-\$16 billion	-Not part of stimulus plan
<b>-Human Capital</b>	-Education Programs-\$29 billion -Pell grants-\$18 billion	-Not part of stimulus plan

## Agonistic Message



## Common Sense in a Time of Uncertainty

### Our Current Economic Situation

The health of the economy *is* the financial health of your family, your city, your state, and your country. With 1.2 million people losing their jobs in December and January, raising our current unemployment to 7.6%, up 3% from this time last year, and the rate of inflation at 3.85% in 2008, its highest point this decade, the Republican Party knows things have gotten harder for Main Street. With difficult economic times come difficult political decisions, and what we face in months ahead is a choice between two conflicting political approaches.

### The Democratic Proposal

The Democrats believe that government is the answer. First, democrats intend to strengthen our economy by increasing government spending. **We reject the practice of deficit spending.** This approach will make our already historic national debt worse, leaving your family an enormous financial burden for generations to come. Second, democrats want to increase government regulation in our financial markets. This, coupled with increased corporate tax rates, hinders a company's ability to invest in America and create new jobs.

### The Republican Solution

Fundamentally, the Republican Party believes that you, not the government, know what to do with your money. That is why we propose this 3-part solution.

- **Make individual income tax cuts permanent.** By lowering individual tax rates, Americans will have more money to spend and invest as they see fit. This process of spending and investing will quickly revitalize America's economy. And because the tax cuts would be permanent, it would provide long-term economic stability.

- **Cut the current corporate income tax rate:** reducing the corporate tax from 35% to 25% will allow companies large and small to invest more money in their businesses, which will create more quality jobs in America.
- **Reduced government spending:** By reducing government spending, we can begin to lower the country's historic national debt. A lower national debt will help restore America's financial standing worldwide.

### Support the Republican Party

The economic down turn has affected us all, but now we must choose the way out, and the best way out is the Republican way out. By lowering taxes and reducing government spending, we can restore **economic strength to the country** and **economic security to your family.**

