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The Discussion Atmosphere of Democracy:
The Dynamic Process of Political Deliberation
in Web Forums
民主的討論氛圍：網絡論壇政治協商的動態過程

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Abstract

The practice of political deliberation on the Internet is not static but has its own dynamics that can lead to deliberative ideals. The current state of online political discussions is not as ideal as normative theories envisioned; however, it might approach those ideals through durable communications. Merely evaluating the aggregate state is insufficient to understand the present nature and possible future of online discussions. The current study conceives online political discussions as an autonomous and self-organized system in which discussion atmosphere (i.e., opinion climate, opinion heterogeneity, and cross-cutting debate) plays an important role in recruiting discussants, organizing conversations, and producing common ground. Instead of comparing the state of deliberation practice with normative ideals, the study evaluates the democratic potential of online political discussions through exploring whether the self-organized system is driven by the mechanisms of interpersonal communication towards political deliberativeness. In particular, the study asks whether the existence of diverse opinions in discussions can foster durable political deliberation, whether cross-cutting debate is an independent organizational rule of online political discussions, and whether online discussions produces common ground for further deliberation.

In doing so, two data sets were collected from web discussion forums. The first dataset consists of 329 political discussion threads (comprising 5,358 messages) randomly sampled from five popular discussion forums in the United States. The second dataset consists of 2,372 discussions threads (totaling 175,960 messages) that populate the discussion threads about 2012 U.S. presidential election on debatepolitics.com. The first dataset is used to answer more general questions, while the second dataset is used to
answer the questions that require complete network information. This study combines human coding content analysis and computer-assisted text mining techniques, with the resulting data analyzed by event history models and longitudinal social network models to examine the dynamic role of discussion atmosphere in the process of forum discussions. Following the literature on political conversation, a complete process of political deliberation is composed of three moments: recruitment (the context and likelihood of participating in online political discussions), organization (how users communicate with each other and to what extent online discussions satisfy deliberative requirements), and production (the impacts of political discussions on deliberative outcomes).

In the recruitment moment, discussion atmosphere serves as a criterion for collaborative filtering of homogenous discussions in web forums. Discussion threads including heterogeneous opinions and a high proportion of cross-cutting debates are more likely to attract further replies. Opinion climate functions as the basic environmental cue for user expression of agreement or disagreement. Generally, users are more inclined to reply when the opinion climate is congruent with their own. Concurrently, opinion heterogeneity attenuates the tendency of congruent expression and prevents durable conversations from moving towards the dominance of a single opinion. Furthermore, cross-cutting debates increase the expression of neutral replies, implying a process of moderation.

At the organization moment, discussion atmosphere functions as a basic rule of organizing forum discussions in addition to purely structural mechanisms (e.g., reciprocity, transitivity, and popularity effect), conversational norms, and common
interest. Forum users are more likely to discuss with politically dissimilar ones. Cross-cutting debates, in this study, appear to be a unique principle of forming discussion networks. In this process, congruent expression exerts its influence in two ways: First, messages containing incongruent opinions are less likely to be posted and, if posted, replied to by other users. Second, a congruent opinion climate is likely to promote users to engage with users who are not like-minded.

In the production moment, users who send more cross-cutting messages are more inclined to participate in future discussions, whereas those who receive more cross-cutting messages are less likely to participate in the future. The results also suggest that threads with a greater proportion of cross-cutting debates are less cohesive in term of network structure than those with more intra-ideological discussions. Finally, the semantic similarity increases and a cohesive interpretive framework emerge over a sufficient long period of discussions.

In addition to examining the process separately at each key moment of forum political discussions, the study suggests the existence of a coevolution process between discussion organization and production at the individual level. Political debates could produce commonly acceptable interpretive frameworks which would further facilitate communication among the participants.

The study makes several contributions, both empirical and theoretical, to the knowledge of political deliberation. First, the study underscores the role of interpersonal communication mechanisms in structuring online political discussions, which has largely been neglected in previous studies. Second, the study shows that discussion atmosphere as a coevolving contextual factor plays an important role in the process of political
discussions. A set of controversial measures of contextual factors in previous studies is summarized, re-conceptualized, and carefully operationalized in the context of web-based forum discussions. Third, the dynamics of seeking and producing commonality are examined for the first time by using text mining techniques in a large discourse dataset. Fourth, the study suggests an alternative explanation for the long-standing debate concerning the impact of cross-cutting debates on political participation. Actively sending cross-cutting messages could foster participation, whereas passively receiving cross-cutting messages might thwart further participation. Finally, this study proposes a novel perspective to evaluate the potential of online political discussions for deliberative democracy in a dynamic way.