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When We Stop Talking Politics: The Maintenance and Closing of Conversation in Contentious Times

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Despite the democratic significance of citizen talk about politics, the field of communication has not considered how that talk is weathering stresses facing our civic culture. We examine political talk during an archetypal case of political contentiousness: the recall of Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin in 2012. Pairing qualitative and quantitative methods, we show that a fracturing of civic culture took place in which many citizens found it impossible to continue political discussion. Individuals at fault lines of contention, by nature of occupation, geographic location, or other personal circumstance, were most prone to this breakdown. Our results call into question the ability of talk to bridge political and social differences in periods of polarization and fragmentation, with implications for democratic functioning.

In the field of communication, informal political talk among citizens is heralded for its capacity to connect citizens, improve the quality of their opinions and make them aware of those of others, incentivize news consumption, and spark civic engagement. As such, citizen talk contributes positively to societal integration and civic culture (Dahlgren, 2002). The tenor of the field is consistent with the claim that citizen talk is

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the "soul of democracy" (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999, p. 362; Shah, 2016; Walsh, 2004). Although some question whether all political talk is democratically beneficial, the opportunity to be exposed to cross-cutting perspectives is heralded by most scholars of deliberative democracy (Mutz, 2006; Schudson, 1997).

This positive view of talk's integrative capacities stands in contrast to evidence that societies in the United States and some other developed democracies are fracturing along multiple lines. Widening gaps between the policy positions of political elites (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2008), the major parties' platforms (Levendusky, 2009), and citizens' opinions (Abramowitz, 2011), as well as rising animosity toward partisan opponents (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012) illustrate components of this divide. Evidence for balkanization within media choices, rising economic inequality, and diverging life experiences is equally robust (e.g., Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Murray, 2013; Piketty, 2014).

These trends would seem to make political talk fraught, but research on informal political talk has not taken this into account; rather, it has generally been quite sanguine about talk's ability to accommodate and overcome difference (Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007). If we understand informal political talk to play an integrative function and form part of the raw material of civic culture, we must examine how it is faring under these circumstances and the consequences of its potential disruption.

In this article, we explore how talk fared in the context of a particular case, one with symbolic and practical relevance to the larger American polity: the state of Wisconsin in 2012, in the lead-up to the recall election of Governor Scott Walker. In February 2011, Governor Walker introduced a "budget repair bill" (Act 10) that struck a powerful blow to unions and public-sector employees in Wisconsin. A climate of intense political disagreement followed that, we show, extended beyond the formal political domain, deep into many citizens' occupational, media, and interpersonal talk networks.

Our selection of this particular time and place serves several purposes. Most of all, it is emblematic of larger processes of contention: The social-structural and economic conditions in which Wisconsin's discord occurred are rooted in global trends of political and financial stress. Similarly, the reality that a significant part of political contestation in the United States has shifted to the state level (Confessore, 2014) means that state-level politics deserve more attention in the academic literature than they receive (Masket, 2009). In this respect, the case of Act 10 in Wisconsin is especially important because it was part of an explicit strategy to test conservative policy influence at the state level, and was closely watched nationally for what it portended (Mayer, 2016; Stein & Marley, 2013). Scott Walker's later (brief) run for the Republican nomination, and Donald Trump's cooptation of some of Walker's core messages (Cramer, 2016b) and approach (DeFour, 2016), further illustrate the larger significance of this case.

Moreover, working at the scale of an American state allows us to respond to calls for research that better connects analytic levels (Friedland, 2001; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Whereas the size and diversity of the national context—a "macro" level at

which most research on polarization is conducted—obscures many dynamics that shape actual citizens' experiences of politics, at the more "meso" scale of the state, those patterns are more visible. Here, a state-level focus enables us to be mindful of nuanced aspects of history, economics, and social structure; relate them to citizens' experiences; and trace how discord at elite political levels seeped out of that arena and into the field of informal citizen interaction (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

We ask: Can talk and its benefits tolerate fierce partisanship and contentiousness of the kind that dominated Wisconsin politics in 2011–2012? If so, how? If not, how does the closing of political talk occur? Who is most affected? And with what consequences? Our approach to these questions is one of data-driven theory building. The theory we construct is informed by existing research on political talk's role in civic culture and fragmenting trends in American society, which begin our discussion below. The evidence we contribute comes from ethnographic fieldwork on cultures of political talk throughout the state of Wisconsin informing, which informs the generation of hypotheses, and the testing of core relationships using representative statewide surveys. Combining these allows us to investigate both the *quality* of talk—what it feels like, how it works, and how it constitutes small-scale democracy (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004)—and the contours of talk in quantitative, *sociostructural* terms—where talk occurs and where talk that previously existed is *ending*, an indicator of stress in the civic fabric that has not previously been investigated.

What we find is concerning from the perspective of a deliberative civic culture. A widespread breaking down of political talk occurred in Wisconsin, reminiscent of significant political polarization, but in fact extending beyond it. Our data indicate that the politicization of certain experiences, especially occupational identities and perceptions of economic hardship, led many citizens to experience this moment in painfully personal terms. For others, the magnification of political difference, such as by being a political minority in a workplace or home county, led to avoidance of disagreement by cutting off talk. In short, we saw several avenues by which talk communities that had once accommodated substantial social and political difference were strained, sometimes to the breaking point. These findings raise questions about the future of civic culture in contentious times.

The value of political talk: Integration, tolerance, and participation

Political talk's importance is often understood in terms of its contribution to the normatively desirable outcomes of social integration, tolerance, and civic participation; in a word, to civic culture. Scholars have long been interested in the problem social integration (Friedland & McLeod, 1998): the set of interlocking and intersecting interactions in daily life and institutions that allow members of a highly differentiated society to work in a complex division of labor (Durkheim, 1893/2013) and function as what Parsons called a "societal community" (Parsons, 2007). The "societal" side recognizes that society is a complex, plural, heterogeneous collection of groups and (increasingly) networks of individuals (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). The community

side recognizes that for such a differentiated society to be democratic, groups have to resolve their differences, if only to agree to disagree, and recognize others as *members* of a common society. This problem has often been operationalized as a question of individuals' *tolerance* for people with views different from their own (Mutz, 2006; Sullivan, Pierson, & Marcus, 1993).

As such, talk between citizens is a core constituent of civic culture: It forms the social substrates on which civic and political relations can be built, and undergirds the civic duties and participatory norms such as voluntarism, voting, and civil discourse that characterize a democratic society (Almond & Verba, 1963). Scholarship emphasizes the extrainstitutional nature of these norms: Civic culture is held not in statutory law or government agencies, but must be practiced by citizens, reflected both in their acceptance of the authority and fairness of the state and participation in everyday civic activities including discourse (Dahlgren, 2002; Fine, 2012; Habermas, 1962/1989; Tarde, 1898/1989; Tocqueville, 1863).

Today, writing in our field tends to depict "everyday political talk" as indispensable to acquainting citizens with political news and perspectives, developing their understanding of others' opinions, enhancing tolerance of political opponents, interpreting the content of mass media, improving the coherence of opinion, and connecting to civic engagement (e.g., Cappella, Price, & Nir, 2002; Gamson, 1992; Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Kim et al., 1999; Mutz, 2006; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Walsh, 2004). Dissenting from this perspective, some scholars question the quality of much citizen talk (Mutz, 2006; Schudson, 1997) and the negative consequences for knowledge of increased talk by citizens with little informed awareness of politics, especially during high-intensity elections (Hardy & Scheufele, 2009).

Encountering disagreement in political talk
One aspect of talk about which there is little disagreement is the importance of citizens encountering views different from their own, that is, disagreement. The paradox of disagreement in political talk is that whereas encountering disagreement is essential to talk's deliberative and integrative capacities, it also is uncomfortable for citizens (Schudson, 1997), which leads them to avoid it — a phenomenon described from various theoretical vantage points, including the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), psychology and personality (Hibbing, Ritchie, & Anderson, 2011; Lyons, Sokhey, McClurg, & Seib, 2016), and cognitive dissonance (see discussion in Huckfeldt et al., 2004). Given this, it is reasonable to ask why citizens encounter disagreement in political talk (Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007; Eliasoph, 1998; Huckfeldt et al., 2004). How can talk communities maintain this uncomfortable but highly important practice?

A key answer to this question lies in the fact that informal political talk is not only a civic and political phenomenon but a social one as well. We talk politics not only with carefully selected compatriots but with people who are around us because they work with us, or live nearby, or are otherwise proximate to us socially (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). And because the preponderance of everyday life rests on social,

not political, comity, we have great incentive to maintain those relationships despite political difference: If you need help with a flat tire, it hardly matters whether your neighbor is liberal or conservative (Macgregor, 2010). It helps that most of us are not very good at—or interested in—assessing the ideological makeup of our discussion networks, as the phenomenon of false consensus makes clear (Goel, Mason, & Watts, 2010).

Additionally, where cross-cutting talk occurs, participants constantly *manage* politics' role (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002). This management can have normatively positive outcomes that allow for relationships of political difference to continue, but can also result in the evaporation of political talk for the sake of preserving social relationships or individuals' sense of agency (Eliasoph, 1998; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012; Huckfeldt et al., 2004).

These dynamics help to explain the findings that despite increasing polarization and difference at the macrosocial level, and although citizens recognize that polarization, many people find their own networks to be quite congenial much of the time (Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007; Huckfeldt et al., 2004). There is little evidence—and no record in the literature—of widespread breaking down of talk over political disagreement.

This suggests a sort of beneficial gap between sociopolitical levels: Although the macroscale of elites and aggregate opinion may be bitterly divided, there may be a more placid "lifeworld" in which citizens live and breathe, and where actual experiences of politics are shaped (Habermas, 1985). But as we show, this gap can break down, and the divides of the larger polity reach into everyday conversational networks, creating disagreements that threaten talk.

Societal community under threat

Political polarization and social segmentation

Let us take a moment to consider those growing divisions. There is agreement that partisan politics at elite levels has become more divided in recent decades. American political parties have undergone a transformation involving an emptying of the ideological center and declining ideological overlap of Republican and Democratic officials (McCarty et al., 2008; Shor & McCarty, 2011).

The debate over whether this polarization extends to the mass public is also closing. Some argue that citizens have become more ideologically oriented (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Carsey & Layman, 2006; Hetherington, 2001), while others contend that apparent polarization is in fact a result of *sorting* of members of the public into more ideologically coherent parties (Fiorina, 2005). Regardless, attitudes toward ideological opponents are becoming more extreme: Iyengar et al. (2012) demonstrate the increasing social (as opposed to policy) antipathy between Democrats and Republicans (see also Abramowitz, 2014). All of this adds up to circumstances in which partisan opponents in power are always distrusted, making even processes of basic governance a great challenge (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015).

Social, work, and other networks have also been shown to be subject to the force of homophily (Bishop & Cushing, 2009; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Mutz, 2006). Such forces may undermine political talk's contribution to integration by diminishing the common ground required for informal political talk across lines of difference to take place.

Media balkanization

A parallel concern is that individuals' experiences of media increasingly correspond to their previously held beliefs, creating a situation in which one's attitudes are too rarely challenged. There is little doubt that some media have become partisan as the media landscape has widened; there is less agreement as to which way the causal arrows point between content and audiences. Stroud (2011) and Levendusky (2013) see reason for concern that publics are becoming polarized as a result of encountering consistently affirming messages. But others hold that audience polarization is due more to viewer selection than media influence (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Edgerly, 2015), and that politically motivated viewers encounter a diversity of views owing to their omnivorousness (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Prior, 2013).

The story is somewhat more optimistic when it comes to social media. Despite concerns that online networks would reinforce trends toward informational homophily (Himelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013; Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010; Sunstein, 2001), growing evidence suggests that because social media networks are built out of a variety of types of ties, many citizens experience a fairly high degree of informational heterogeneity there (Bode, 2016; Granovetter, 1973; Kim, Hsu, & de Zúñiga, 2013; Messing & Westwood, 2014). However, it does appear that heterogeneity falls as discussion spaces become more politicized (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). It is also important to note that heterogeneity does not ensure balance or normatively desirable responses on the part of users: Many may simply use the cues they find in social media to refine the sources and individuals with whom they interact (Hampton, Shin, & Lu, 2016).

Inequality and economic precariousness

The increasing concentration of wealth and income in the United States and elsewhere is well documented: In the United States from 1979 to 2007, 36% of all gains in household income went to the top 1% of earners. During the same period, the top 0.1% received over 20% of all after-tax income, and the bottom 60% only 13.5% (Hacker & Pierson, 2010).

Americans have experienced these trends in daily life in the form of increasing precariousness of their economic situations. To maintain the quality of life they expect for themselves and their families, many citizens take on increasing debt loads and add jobs and working hours (Schor, 1998); household debt rose from 55% of household income in the 1960s to 138% by 2007 (Reich, 2010). This debt left many homeowners "underwater" following the financial crash, and eliminated the equity of others.

Employment and income instability are prime conditions for frustration and anger, though it is often not clear toward whom that anger should be directed (Cramer, 2016a). We also know that inequality has direct depressive effects on the quantity and quality of political involvement: Solt (2008) shows that income inequality reduces frequency of political discussion, and McCarty et al. (2008) demonstrate a direct connection between inequality and polarization.

Wisconsin, 2011–2012

These larger social trends, as well as its local history, shaped our particular case. Like other Midwestern "rustbelt" states, Wisconsin's economy has suffered from mechanization, offshoring of manufacturing, and the consolidation of agriculture. Feelings of deprivation and unfairness were magnified by the recession of 2008–2009, which hit Wisconsin hard and forms the immediate backdrop to our episode. Shortly after taking office in 2010, Gov. Scott Walker introduced a "budget repair bill" that became Act 10. The policy required public-sector employees (state and university workers) to pay larger portions of their pension and health benefits, and most controversially, ended collective bargaining rights for public-employee unions, a frontal attack on a longtime Republican adversary.

Debate of the bill was highly contentious: Protesters occupied the state capitol, national new media descended on Madison, and at one point, Senate Democrats actually fled the state. Following the bill's passage, opponents circulated petitions to recall Governor Walker and four state senators. On 15 November, Walker's opponents turned in at least 900,939 petition signatures—a number representing more than one in five adults in Wisconsin; the Government Accountability Board set a recall election date of 5 June 2012 (State of Wisconsin Government Accountability Board, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

Analytic approach

Clearly, this was a moment in which elite-level contention reached a new magnitude. It also erupted in citizens' personal talk networks, as anecdotal evidence from news accounts and both our sources of data make clear. In what follows, we employ ethnographic observation in talk communities to describe how political disagreement emerged in citizens' networks, and what strategies citizens employed to cope. We then present results from surveys of Wisconsin residents to map the occurrence of discursive practices and outcomes. This combination of methods lends itself to testing both established relationships in a new context, and describing an uncharted area of political communication: the dynamics of political talk under strain.

Conversational fieldwork

Over several years preceding and following the specific period described here, one researcher conducted observations of 39 regularly occurring small discussion groups taking place in coffeeshops, gas stations, churches, etc., in 27 communities across Wisconsin. The researcher sampled municipalities to offer geographic, political,

and economic diversity around the state, then asked local informants to identify gatherings in places to which she could get access. Starting in May 2007, she would walk into these places at the suggested time, introduce herself, pass out business cards and tokens of appreciation, ask permission to turn on her recorder, and then ask open-ended questions. She let the participants set the agenda, but occasionally inserted questions, with the interpretivist goal of coming to an understanding of her respondents' perspectives, how they understood the world, and the categories most significant to their worldviews (Geertz, 1974; Soss, 2006). She revisited the groups multiple times through November 2012. (For further details on the method, see Cramer, 2016a.)

Evidence from conversations

Prior to 2011, most of the groups observed readily talked about politics; political matters were one set of a variety of issues that underpinned the social interactions within each group (cf. Gerber et al., 2012). However, when 10 of these groups were revisited after the protests began, a newfound *reluctance* of participants to talk about politics was evident. The state's political contentiousness had affected citizens at the level of their interactions with their conversational groups. But how had this taken place? How were political events in Madison reaching into groups that had previously, for the most part, spoken frequently, even avidly, about politics? And how were citizens adapting to the circumstances discursively?

Sources of political tension

Given what we know about growing polarization, an obvious place to look for political tension is in partisan identity: Democrats versus Republicans. And as people made sense of ongoing events, they did occasionally mention partisanship. But more often, they talked about themselves in terms of occupation and place. They would introduce themselves as real estate agents, or lawyers, or retired school teachers, and they would reference the place they lived in and its relations to the rest of the state. As three loggers in northwestern Wisconsin described their community, one commenting after the other: "No industry up here." "Only thing we have up here is lumbering." "We're all a bunch of sawdust heads."

But the emphasis on identities that were not overtly political did not circumvent the problem of talking about politics: On the contrary, our conversational data reveal the *politicization* of identities that previously held little political salience. Surely because of their position at the epicenter of the contested policy, this was especially true for public employees such as teachers and union members. In fact, we saw that *partisan* identities were somewhat malleable as their relations to *occupational life* shifted: For example, one man was ribbed by friends for being a stalwart Republican before Walker attacked teachers, his wife's profession. What is more, because discussion networks had previously accommodated diversity in occupational identity, when these identities took on political valence, discursive discord was one result—sometimes to the extent that previously existing talk about politics became troubled.

One group was explicit about their avoidance of the topic of recent contention, with one member stating: "You know, we just haven't talked about it … we'll talk about anything else." Another explained: "You know, you've got farmers here, you've got public school teachers here," indicating a divergence of perspective based on occupation that was too painful to bridge.

In another group, asked about whether talk had become difficult, a logger noted: "Well, in my household it is 'cause my wife works for the school system." Another added: "And my daughter is a teacher. We're 180 degrees different." We thus saw evidence that politicized occupational difference drove division into intimate social networks, even families.

Social differences and resentment

One reason occupational divides could quickly become inflamed is that Wisconsin has a history of division between rural and urban, private and public sector that has grown in recent years. Studies of conversation among rural residents of Wisconsin have revealed a perspective among many rural residents that divides state politics into rural versus urban (Cramer, 2016a). This "rural consciousness" includes a perception that rural residents do not get their fair share of public resources, decision-making power, nor cultural respect. In political contests over scarce resources, these perceptions can give way to *resentment* (Feather & Sherman, 2002). In Wisconsin and elsewhere, this resentment can take the form of a feeling that urban and public-sector elites take more than their share and tend to redistribute resources to undeserving (often minority) communities and government programs (Skocpol & Williamson, 2011).

Elites also contribute to the size and shape of resentment's role in politics. While we do not claim that elites, on their own, create the underlying conditions of contention, they do make choices about how they interact with the existing social landscape, how they formulate responses to problems, and how they communicate about them. And to be sure, Walker and the Republican Party worked hard to portray state workers as an "elite" undeserving of the benefits that the Act 10 would partially repeal. (We now know that the policy was part of a concerted experiment in conservative state-level politics; Mandel, 2011; Mayer, 2016.) Walker enunciated his position during the second debate preceding the 2010 election: "We can no longer have a society where the public sector employees are the 'haves' and the people who foot the bill, the taxpayers, are the 'have nots'." Such elite statements both built on existing frustrations among the public and fed them, heightening the tension in some conversational groups. One farmer explained his father-in-law's alienation from a usual conversational group: "I'm glad Walker did what he did. It's about time someone takes something away from those bastards [public workers]."

Strategies for coping with discursive tension

Consistent with earlier research, a common tactic for managing tension when it occurred was humor (see Eliasoph, 1998). When talk about politics got uncomfortable, often someone cracked a joke to diffuse the tension. Usually these jokes

recognized political differences but avoided perpetuating the discomfort by making everyone laugh. For example, when one member of a group meeting in the morning in a service station reported that someone had stormed out and not returned, another joked that it was due to the lack of good donuts to go with the coffee.

A similar response was to reorient the conversation to a target of blame the speakers could hold as a common enemy. When the conversation turned to divisions internal to the group, it was common for someone to start criticizing the news media, the role of money in political campaigns, or politicians in general. An example comes from a group of men meeting in the morning before the workday to play dice in the back of a restaurant. On a research visit the day of the gubernatorial recall election, one regular had recently quit attending the daily meet up, and there were clear disagreements about Walker and his policies among the remaining members. After disagreeing about what they expected to be the outcome, one man pivoted toward the media and politics in general. "You know, with the way communication and the media … the way it is now, do they need to campaign for a whole God-blessed year?! … With the methods of communication, I mean, if someone doesn't know what's going on in the country today, they're living in a hole in the ground, you know. You don't need to spend a whole God-blessed year campaigning, because you just hear the same shit over and over."

These discursive strategies were employed to head off more drastic, damaging outcomes that nonetheless did take place in some instances: the ending of political talk. The more common form of the closing of political talk was a collective tacit agreement not to talk about recent events because members valued friendships too much to allow political toxicity to intervene. Sometimes a person would quietly approach the researcher to explain why: One participant explained that his group was avoiding discussion about Act 10 and Walker because members' opinions on events in Madison were so intense. This is a form of cutting off political discourse that Baldassarri and Bearman (2007) would surely recognize: Participants saw that political talk had become fraught, so they cut it off to salvage personal relationships—though at the cost, of course, of a vital element of the civil sphere.

The more extreme version of ending political talk was the full ceasing of interaction between individuals. Although the researcher did not directly witness any such events, several cases were reported by participants. For example, in the group that met in the morning to play dice, one of the regulars stopped attending after a political disagreement, despite years of daily conversations with the others. In other groups, members related stories about family members who had stopped talking with or "unfriended" them on Facebook because interaction about the recent political events had made it clear they were on opposing sides. There was thus substantial evidence that political battles' impacts were felt beyond the political sphere.

Survey data

Evidence from observational data collected before and during the contentiousness surrounding Act 10 reveals several things. For one thing, despite academic

concern over polarization, political identities were not highly salient to most citizens. Instead, occupational and place-based identities were more important. At the same time, the sociocultural underpinning of tension between occupational classes was already in place, especially in the form of the resentment that many rural residents and private-sector workers felt toward the urban centers, and by extension public-sector workers. Such tensions appear to have been strained past the breaking point in some talk communities that prior to Act 10 had accommodated occupational diversity. When that occurred, individuals did their best to preserve social comity, often changing the subject or joking, but occasionally needing to cut off the political talk.

We now turn to the questions: How widespread were these sorts of discursive rupture in Wisconsin, and where, sociostructurally, were they focused? As a project of data-driven theory building, here our analysis is guided by the ethnographic evidence just presented, as well as earlier research on political talk and trends toward fragmentation. We present the evidence as a set of testable hypotheses about two outcomes: the *occurrence* of talk, and its *ending*.

Note that our focus here is on where and how talk occurs, rather than the outcomes of talk, which are well established. In addition to serving our specific research goals, this responds to concerns in the field that the political and sociostructural conditions under which talk occurs have not received nearly the attention that *outcomes* have (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011; Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004).[1]

Background conditions

National and regional background conditions framed our case, including most prominently political polarization and economic crisis. The phenomenon of polarization suggests that we should consider how the strength of individuals' partisanship is associated with their talk behavior. It is well established that stronger partisans will engage in more talk behavior (H1; McClurg, 2006); but expectations compete as to whether they will be more likely to cut it off. Partisans might be more likely to get into discussion situations that lead to talk being cut off, for example, by making strong partisan statements that are off-putting to others. On the other hand, as strong partisans, they may feel the need to stick to their positions and continue talking even in the face of discomfort. We leave this as a research question (RQ1).

Individuals' experience with the financial crisis should also impact talk behavior. Those citizens who found themselves personally affected may well have gone through politicization from that experience, and as a result prompted to engage in more political activity. This should lead to greater political talk among this group (H2a); it will likely also lead them to situations in which talk must be cut off, because the topic is especially personal for them (H2b).

Community features

Both the ethnographic data we shared above and broader sociological research note differences between urban and rural communities. Fischer's (1982) analysis in

particular notes that rural residents exercise less choice over the set of people in their personal networks, because they have fewer options in smaller communities; there are greater "constraints on supply" (Huckfeldt et al., 2004, p. 21). As a result, rural residents' networks tend to be made up of relatively more family members and neighbors, whereas those of urban dwellers include more friends with many shared interests. As a result, rural residents may encounter more disagreement in their networks of political discussion—because those networks are less finely sorted according to political belief. This leads us to expect that political talk may be a more risky activity for rural residents: Increased talk may be more likely to lead to cutting off talk for rural residents than for others (H3).

In addition to the overall character of communities, mesolevel relationships between individuals and their local communities are also likely to impact individual talk behavior (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Our ethnographic data illustrated how being the lone representative of a political perspective can be alienating in a group setting. In a larger sense, individuals who are politically out of step with their local communities may be less likely to talk in general (H4a), and more likely to encounter disagreement that leads them to shut down political talk (H4b).

Work life and occupation

Act 10 was aimed at a particular category within Wisconsin's socioeconomic structure: public employees and union members. Our conversational data documented how teachers, other public employees, and union members found their work identities to be at the center of political discussions. Overlaid as it was on existing tensions and resentments, this framed politically the role of three sets of workers: Members of public employee unions were the most directly targeted by the policy; nonunion government workers were also targeted; and union members in the private workforce were only indirectly targeted. We might expect individuals from all three groups to see enhanced levels of political talk (H5a) and enhanced cutting off of talk (H5b) owing to the politicization of their work identities.

Moreover, the experiences of speakers within each of these groups likely varied according to the sociological realities of their occupational niches. Private union workers are an especially interesting case: Only indirectly targeted by the Act 10 policy, these workers also tend to be situated in communities of blue-collar conservatism, with a result that blue-collar unions were divided on the issue (Stein, 2015). We expect talk among private union members to be especially challenging for the subset of private union members who identified as liberals and aligned with the anti-Walker movement. This group likely cut off talk due to their relative isolation. The opposite may be true for public employee union members and nonunion government workers. These individuals were so directly targeted that dissenting voices, the conservatives among them, may have found themselves marginalized. We therefore anticipate interaction effects between respondents' occupational roles and their ideology (H5c).

Media use

Above, we noted the role of a fragmenting media system, including the rise of one-perspective news outlets and social media. Past findings that media use is often antecedent to political talk (Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005; Shah et al., 2005) lead us to expect that newspaper use, Internet news use, and the use of social media for news will be associated with political talk (H6a). The literature's equivocal findings on the benefits of television lead us not to make a prediction with respect to television news. When it comes to cutting off conversation, expectations are more complex. Mutz (1998) contends that mass media use (newspaper, television, possibly Internet news) creates opportunities to hear opposing perspectives and develop tolerance; these experiences may prepare individuals for the experience of disagreement, and thus reduce the likelihood of cutting off talk (H6b).

Social media present further complications when it comes to closing off talk. In our conversational data, though Facebook did facilitate exposure to opposing views, it also carried normatively questionable outcome of conversational closure (and "un-friending"). This comports with other recent work suggesting that exposure to otherwise unknown diversity of opinion within one's digital social networks may lead some citizens to avoid offline conversation (Hampton et al., 2016). Thus, social media users should be more likely to cut off talk (H7).

Survey method

Our survey data come from the Marquette Law School Poll, a sample of Wisconsin registered voters and eligible voters who said they would register by Election Day. The sample was stratified within geographic regions of the state to ensure proportionate representation of all areas of the state. Live interviewers spoke to respondents contacted via a combination of landline and cell phone using random digit dialing (RDD) with stratification by media market.[2]

Here, we focus on data from four waves of the poll during the lead-up to the recall election: one in late April, one in early May, one in late May, and one in early June. Our analyses combine respondents from these waves into a single dataset, with dummy variables for collection period to control for variation in dependent variables over time. This moment (the recall election) is the political bookend of the contentious period; the retrospective survey items thus gauge respondents' experience of the 2011–2012 period.

Outcome variables

Our analyses examine two talk outcomes. The first is aggregate political talk, measured by asking respondents about talk with family and friends and talk with coworkers, each of which was answered on a 0–4 scale running from "*never*" to "*more than once a week*" (for family/friend talk, $M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.29$; for coworker talk, $M = 1.77$, $SD = 1.60$). The two items were correlated ($r = .375$) and combined into a single measure ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.20$) of total political talk in Table 1.[3] Survey respondents were also asked whether they had "stopped talking about politics due to disagreements over

Table 1 Linear regression predicting political talk.

	Model 1 B(SE)	Model 2 B(SE)	Model 3 B(SE)	Model 4 B(SE)
Early May wave	−.011 (.067)	.015 (.063)	−.045 (.059)	−.047 (.059)
Late May wave	.067 (.067)	.095 (.063)	.046 (.059)	.041 (.059)
Early June wave	−.113[#] (.067)	−.081 (.064)	−.101# (.059)	−.101# (.059)
Age		−.009*** (.001)	−.013*** (.001)	−.012*** (.002)
Gender (Female)		−.369*** (.045)	−.314*** (.043)	−.305*** (.043)
Education		.089*** (.013)	.051*** (.012)	.042** (.012)
Income		.075*** (.012)	.046*** (.012)	.042*** (.012)
African American		−.021 (.114)	.000 (.112)	.032 (.112)
Hispanic		.009 (.140)	.031 (.130)	.046 (.130)
Follow politics			.537*** (.033)	.501*** (.034)
Ideology (Liberal hi)			.015 (.025)	.008 (.025)
Party (Democrat hi)			−.006 (.016)	−.005 (.016)
Partisan strength[a]			.198*** (.035)	.193*** (.035)
Recession effects[a]			.113*** (.026)	.112*** (.026)
Rural residence			.017 (.051)	.028 (.051)
Urban residence			−.057 (.063)	−.050 (.063)
Political outsider[a]			−.180* (.082)	−.175* (.082)
Public union member[a]			.528*** (.067)	.511*** (.067)
Private union member[a]			.069 (.061)	.059 (.061)
Non-union govt worker[a]			.270*** (.075)	.261** (.075)
Newspaper use[a]				.014* (.008)
TV news use				−.012 (.008)
Internet news use[a]				.025** (.008)
Social media news[a]				.017* (.009)
R^2	.003	.109	.238	.246
		N = 2576		

[a]Indicates the use of a one-tailed test for a directional hypothesis.
***p < .001 **p < .01 *p < .05 #p < .1.

the recall elections or Scott Walker." In Table 2, the dependent variable is a binary outcome with 1 indicating that the respondent *did* cut off talk with someone.

Demographic controls
Our models include standard demographic variables, including age ($M = 56.07$, $SD = 15.95$), gender (51.3% males), education (the median respondent had completed a 2-year, but not 4-year, college degree), household income (median category $40,000–$50,000), and race/ethnicity (92.3% white, 4.8% African American, 3.1% Hispanic). [4]

Table 2 Logistic regression predicting the ending of talk with at least one person.

	Model 1 B(SE)	Model 2 B(SE)	Model 3 B(SE)	Model 4 B(SE)	Model 5 B(SE)
Constant	−.862*** (.087)	−1.562*** (.286)	−3.435*** (.405)	−3.375*** (.408)	−3.750*** (.419)
Early May wave	.313** (.120)	.316** (.121)	.276* (.123)	.279* (.124)	.295* (.125)
Late May wave	.331** (.119)	.341** (.121)	.307* (.123)	.297* (.124)	.295* (.124)
Early June wave	.062 (.122)	.090 (.124)	.074 (.126)	.076 (.126)	.093 (.127)
Age		−.002 (.003)	−.003 (.003)	.001 (.003)	.003 (.003)
Gender (Female)		.114 (.086)	.117 (.186)	.123 (.090)	.182* (.091)
Education		.034 (.024)	.001 (.025)	−.015 (.026)	−.024 (.026)
Income		.086*** (.023)	.072** (.024)	.067** (.025)	.059* (.025)
African American		−.086** (.273)	−.835** (.286)	−.773** (.288)	−.790** (.289)
Hispanic		−.237 (.277)	−.266 (.282)	−.247 (.283)	−.248 (.283)
Follow politics			.352*** (.077)	.297*** (.079)	.184* (.082)
Ideology (Liberal hi)			.078 (.052)	.063 (.053)	.061 (.053)
Party (Democrat hi)			.031 (.033)	.034 (.034)	.036 (.034)
Partisan strength			.184* (.075)	.169* (.076)	.129* (.077)
Recession effects[a]			.121* (.053)	.121* (.054)	.098* (.054)
Rural residence			−.052 (.106)	−.024 (.107)	−.033 (.107)
Urban residence			−.204 (.134)	−.194 (.135)	−.195 (.135)
Political outsider[a]			.253[#] (.170)	.268[#] (.171)	.309* (.172)
Public union member[a]			.452*** (.133)	.428*** (.134)	.335* (.137)
Private union member[a]			.417*** (.124)	.399*** (.125)	.401*** (.126)
Non-union govt worker[a]			.430** (.150)	.415** (.151)	.367* (.152)
Newspaper use[a]				.019 (.017)	.016 (.017)
TV news use[a]				−.039* (.018)	−.037* (.018)
Internet news use[a]				.024 (.017)	.018 (.018)
Social media news use[a]				.056** (.018)	.053** (.018)
Family/Friend talk					.137** (.041)
Coworker talk					.083** (.030)
Nagelkerke R^2	.007	.031	.072	.085	.097

Interactions	B(SE)	R^2
Private union × Ideology[a]	.283* (.124)	.100
Non-union government worker × Ideology[a]	−.284* (.139)	.099
Union government worker × Ideology[a]	−.003 (.120)	.097
Rural × Talk with family and friends[a]	.298* (.118)	.101
	N = 2540	

[a]Indicates the use of a one-tailed test for a directional hypothesis.
***p < .001 **p < .01 *p < .05 [#]p < .1.

Political variables

We included standard measures of political interest (1–4 scale, $M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.76$), ideology (very conservative to very liberal, 1–5 scale, $M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.04$), and partisanship (1–5 scale, strong Republican to strong Democrat, $M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.66$). To test H1 and RQ1, we created a measure of strength of partisanship by folding partisanship over on itself to create a 0–2 scale, independents to strong Democrat/Republican ($M = 1.53$, $SD = 0.63$).

Sociostructural variables

To measure economic precariousness of respondents (H2a, H2b), we asked whether their personal finances had been affected by the recession begun in 2008: 39.6% indicated they had not; 32.1% reported they had felt a "major effect," though their finances had since recovered; and 28.4% reported a "major effect" from which they still had not recovered. This measure was treated as a 3-point scale, from no effect to a large and continuing effect.

We also included a measure of the density of respondents' counties, whether rural (22.9%), suburban (61.9%), or urban (15.2%). Counties not part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) according to the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) were coded as rural; those with a metro area greater than one million residents (only Milwaukee County) were coded urban; all others were coded as suburban. To test H3, we created a term interacting rural residence and total quantity of talk.

To measure individuals' experiences of political difference in their community (H4a, H4b), we created a measure of "political outsiderness" by calculating the distance between a respondent's reported partisanship and Governor Walker's margin of victory in the respondent's county (Wisconsin Government Accountability Board, 2012). To calculate a distance not unduly weighted by either variable, we standardized both variables, then normalized the range of each to 1, then subtracted and took the absolute value, yielding a 0–1 outsiderness score in which larger numbers reflect greater difference between an individual and the general political leaning of her county ($M = 0.38$, $SD = 0.27$).

To understand how membership in groups targeted by Act 10 affected individuals' discursive participation (H5a, H5b), we asked respondents whether they or another member of their household was a member of a labor union or worked for a local, state, or federal government. This yielded four categories of households: those that included both union and government workers (11.0%), those that included private union members (11.7%), those that included nonunion government workers (9.5%), and those that included no union or government workers (65.0%; total does not equal 100% because of nonresponse).

To test the differential effects of political leaning on cutting off talk within different occupational categories (H5c), we created terms interacting respondents' ideology with each of the three occupational categories of interest.

Media variables

To investigate the remaining hypotheses, we gauged respondents' media use by asking "how many days in the past week" respondents read a daily newspaper ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 2.89$), watched the local news ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 2.76$), read news at news websites or blogs ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 2.89$), and read about news on social media ($M = 1.71$, $SD = 2.64$).

Survey data results

Table 1 presents a linear regression predicting total quantity of political talk, and Table 2 a logistic regression predicting the act of cutting off talk with at least one person. Note that the components of the outcome variable in Table 1 are included as controls in Model 5 of Table 2. Hypothesized interactions are included at the bottom of Table 2; each interaction term was included in a separate regression with the controls of Model 5.

When asked whether they had stopped talking about politics with someone over disagreements about Walker and his policies, nearly a third of our respondents (32.1%) responded in the affirmative. Although few points of comparison for this statistic are available, one is the finding that 12% of respondents had *ever* stopped talking to someone because of political differences (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014). That the rate was nearly three times as high over a short period in Wisconsin speaks to the intense division felt by citizens.

Partisanship

The test of H1 can be found in Table 1, where we see that partisan strength is indeed a prominent predictor of political talk. However, once we control for total quantity of talk in Model 5 of Table 2, partisan strength is not significantly related to ending talk (RQ1). It appears that partisans are talking more, and are no more or less likely to stop, than their moderate peers.

Economic circumstances

The predictions that distressed economic situations would increase both the quantity of talk (H2a) and the likelihood of closing off talk (H2b) were confirmed. It may be that those who perceived the recession to have affected them directly experienced an enhanced emotional connection to the issues raised by Act 10 — causing them both to engage in more talk, but also to be more susceptible to cutting it off when that talk turned unfriendly (Valentino et al., 2011).

Community type

Hypothesis 3 predicted that talk in rural communities would be more fraught than those in other areas. Although we saw no direct relationship between rural living and cutting off talk, we did find the hypothesized interaction: Increased talk raises the likelihood that some talk will be cut off for rural residents more than it does for others (Figure 1), in support of H3.

Experience of political disagreement

Table 1 reveals that being outside of the political norm of one's county has an unequivocal depressive effect on political talk, confirming H4a. What is more, while starting from a lower baseline of talk, political outsiders are also more likely to cut off the conversation in which they are engaged, confirming H4b — see Model 5 of Table 2.
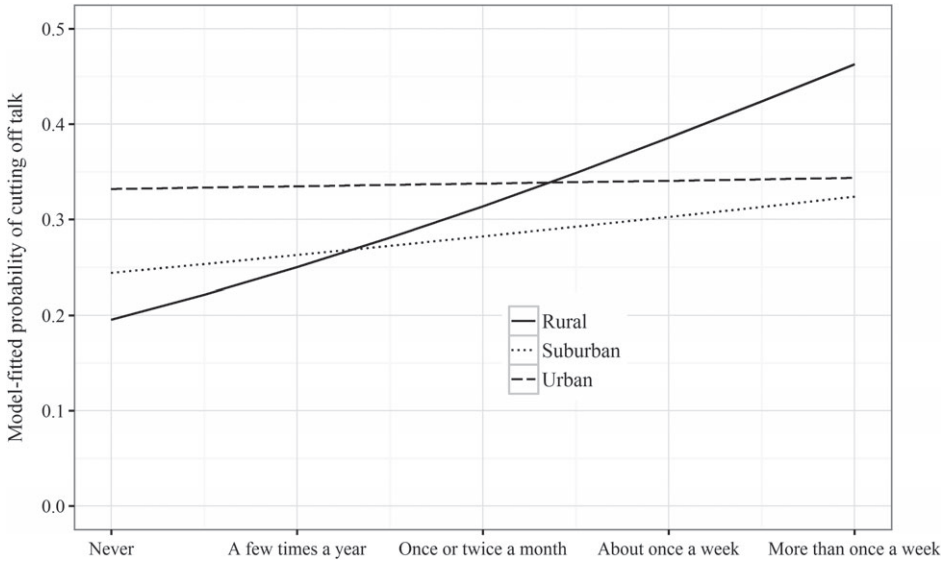
Figure 1 Interaction of community type with frequency of discussion in predicting cutting off talk. Increased quantity of talk was more strongly associated with increased likelihood of cutting off talk for rural residents than for residents of suburban and urban communities.

Occupational position

We expected that union members and government workers would be spurred to talk about politics by the fact that it had been brought to their door (H5a); presumably, they also would be relatively likely to end conversation because of its intensely personal nature (H5b). Table 1 confirms that government workers, whether in or out of unions, were engaged in more talk activity; but no significant effect was detected for private union workers. Table 2 demonstrates that members of all three occupational categories were disproportionately likely to cut off political talk with someone when compared to the general public, supporting H5b. In fact, in comparison to the overall sample, in which 32.1% reported cutting off talk, among private union members, this rate was 38%, among public union members, 42%, and among nonunion government workers, 43%. Again, in comparison to what little figures we have for comparison (Mitchell et al., 2014), these rates are extremely high.

We also anticipated differential rates of cutting off talk according to the relationships between individuals' predispositions and their occupations. In particular, we expected more liberal private union members, and more conservative public union and nonunion government workers to experience greater conversational rupture (H5c). The interaction terms found at the bottom of Table 2 mostly confirm this hypothesis: The effect of being a private union member on cutting off talk was magnified for more liberal workers. The opposite was true for nonunion government workers, though we found no significant interaction for public union members (see Figure 2).
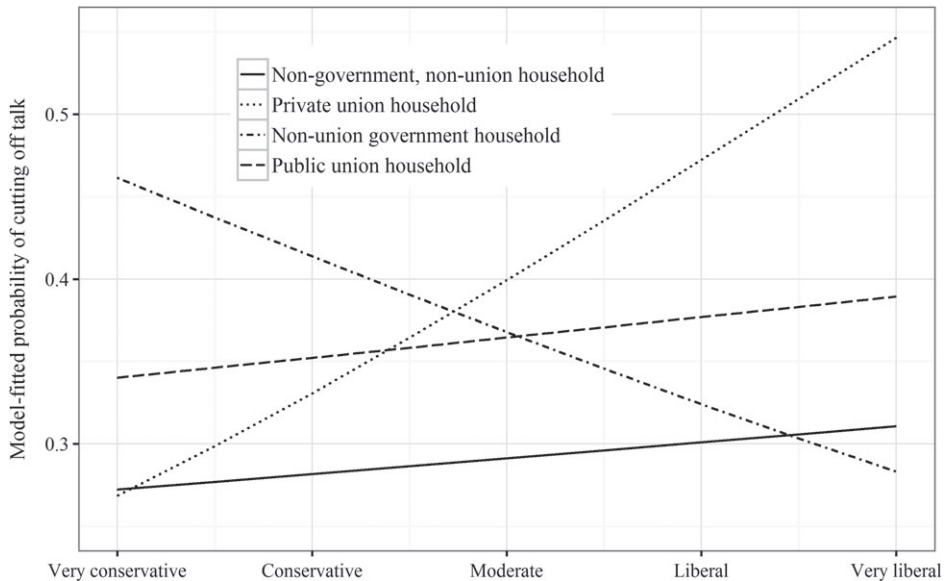
Figure 2 Interaction of occupation with ideology in predicting cutting off talk with at least one person. More liberal individuals from private union households, and more conservative individuals from nonunion government households were more especially likely to report that they cut off conversation.

Media use

In support of H6a, we saw significant associations between newspaper, Internet news, and social media use and political talk (Table 1, Model 4). Lending partial support to H6b, television news consumption was associated with a reduction in likelihood of cutting off talk, though newspapers and online news showed no significant relationship. And our data confirm H7, that social media use was associated with an increased likelihood of closing off talk (Table 2, Model 5), implying that respondents did indeed encounter difference in their online social networks—to an extent that they sometimes ended conversations with contacts.

Discussion

In a society that is polarized and fragmenting, informal political talk among citizens stands as an attractive bulwark against societal disintegration. But our case shows that in at least some instances, informal political talk itself breaks down. Why did the beneficial separation of elite rancor and everyday citizen discourse fail in this case? Our analysis points to a confluence of factors, including simmering historical divisions and resentments; a severe economic crisis; and elites pressing their partisan advantage.

Under these circumstances, many citizens were spurred to talk about politics, others cut off talk because of disagreements, and some did both. Exploring two prominent patterns of discourse from our data may help to explain the dynamics of the

closing of political talk. First, public-sector employees, whether union or not, and individuals personally impacted by the financial crisis, shared the pattern of *both increased talk behavior and increased likelihood of cutting off talk*. These individuals apparently experienced a politicization of their circumstances that heightened their level of engagement with politics: an increase of passion, in Huckfeldt et al.'s (2004) terms. This activation both spurred them to talk more and made it difficult to continue conversation when it turned disagreeable.

This was the expansion of political conflict into previously apolitical domains. In a sense, Act 10 enabled social identities to mediate political identities, channeling polarization into social networks. Whereas work on polarization tends to assume that contention occurs because of the activation of political identities, our qualitative and quantitative data showed the limited capacity of partisanship to explain conversational breakdown. Rather, the discussion groups we observed had not previously seen a great deal of conflict over occupation, which had not been politically salient. After Act 10, certain identities, in this case occupational ones, were politicized. This may be the opposite of what Eliasoph (1998) called the "evaporation of politics"; rather than citizens working hard not to see the politics in a situation, a feature of our case was that politics invaded occupational life for certain people.

The use of social media also followed the pattern of both stimulating political talk and leading to its closure. Thus, whereas Hampton et al. (2014) show evidence of a "spiral of silence" effect on social media, resulting in a generally depressive effect of social media use on offline conversation (Hampton et al., 2016), our findings demonstrate that under certain conditions people decline to silence themselves even in social media spaces populated by politically diverse contacts, which leads to the closure of (at least some) cross-cutting discourse. Troublingly, awareness of differences in that context led at least some citizens to employ social media as a sort of sorting mechanism (Hampton et al., 2016): the end result of enhanced overall conversation coupled with the cutting off of specific people should be to generate more *like-minded* conversational interaction, potentially adding to polarization and balkanization at the level of citizen experience.

But not all citizens experienced stimulation toward talking with like-minded others while closing out disagreement. In a second discourse pattern, private sector union members and individuals politically out of step with their communities saw *no enhancement of talk activity* (opinion dissenters actually talked less), but *were more likely to cut it off*. This pattern appears to be more one of alienation—of being the odd person out; no more or less likely to talk, but often finding talk disagreeable and uncomfortable when it occurs. This appears to be the classic "spiral of silence" pattern (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). This is notable in the context of research suggesting the workplace to be a place in which individuals encounter more political difference than they do in other spaces (Mutz & Mondak, 2006); in this contentious climate, such heterogeneity may have been too painful to support political discourse.

Unfortunately, the expansion of political contention onto dimensions of difference that were previously accommodated, the sorting function of political social media

use, and the silencing of political minorities, may compromise the few strands of common experience and interest citizens have with one another. As we have argued, civic culture is undergirded by layers of citizen interaction that include sociality, civic cooperation, and political recognition (Putnam, 2000); though our analysis has concerned but one slice of that culture—talk specifically about politics—our findings suggest a rupture occurring in Wisconsin's civic culture. Future research is clearly needed to better understand the qualities, extent, and permanence of this transformation.

We also must keep in mind that though prominent, cutting off political talk altogether was only one of a variety of responses citizens applied to the contentiousness they found in their midst, as our qualitative method detailed; future research might consider these more carefully, as each has its own implications for social congeniality and civic culture. Individuals were sometimes able to diffuse moments of political tension with humor or the redirection of criticism. This sort of "safety valve" appears to be the most adaptive, as it allows for the continuation of both social interaction and political discussion.

In a second response type, citizens agreed to continue interacting but not talking about the political issue that had stirred controversy. Halting political talk is thus adaptive in that individuals will continue to interact, but they will no longer gain exposure to opinion differences for which we so value political conversation; the civic has been sacrificed to preserve the social.

In a third outcome, all social interaction was cut off, representing both civic *and* social rupture. Potential implications of this outcome are many—from reinforcing individuals' perceptions that political opponents are unreasonable and cannot be dealt with, to social fragmentation, to declining civic culture and participation as individuals retreat from public life.

This typology of responses to discursive contentiousness raises new questions, which future research must address. First, we are unable to systematically determine whether these outcomes persisted, and under what conditions social interaction or political talk resumed. It is likely that in the case of a tacit agreement to end political talk, it might return. This may be less likely where friendships have been severed; but we are unable to assess this here. We also have little ability to gauge the aggregate prominence of these responses, as our survey measure picked up a mix of the second and third varieties; these are areas further research must develop. Finally, as noted earlier, in this essay we have concentrated on talk and its occurrence, not on outcomes; nonetheless, future research should investigate whether a reduction in political talk, itself, has the sorts of unfortunate consequences we might expect from the talk literature. Still, this limitation little affects our larger project of studying contentiousness as a stress in the civic fabric: Both forms of the ending of political talk represent a disruption of civic life as it is understood in the literature on political talk.

Conclusion

We have made the case that Wisconsin's experience in 2011–2012 has significant implications for the fortunes of political talk under conditions of political contentiousness. We have focused on local political, social, and historical detail for a granularity of data that has allowed us to examine a specific polity in detail. At the same time, larger processes of globalization, postindustrialization, and polarization clearly played roles in our case, and the data and insights we share here have implications for broader political contexts, especially in the United States following the 2016 presidential campaign. That election cycle, with its deep divisions and extreme contentiousness, has sharpened social cleavages and curtailed cross-cutting discussion. The toll to civic culture has likely been felt along various fault lines of occupation, location, and circumstance comparable to those that have defined Wisconsin politics. In periods of polarization and fragmentation, political talk may break down, unable to tolerate differences that reveal deeper divides.

Notes

1 Even the most comprehensive work on the topic (Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2009) accounts for major demographic variables, ideology, and social capital, but pays less attention to the sociostructural position of individuals in economic and community life.

2 Detailed statements about the method can be found at https://law.marquette.edu/poll/results-data/. (Online question lists are for reference purposes, and may not reflect exactly the mix of items on each wave of the survey.) The poll has a strong record when comparing its estimates of public opinion with corresponding election outcomes. The poll estimate for the recall election was a 7-point Walker lead, while the final result was Walker by 6.8 points. The poll also had an excellent record for the 2012 recall primary and 2012 general election for president and U.S. Senate.

3 For parsimony and simplicity of presentation, we show results for the combined talk variable in Table 1. Running the regressions separately for the two types of talk yields substantially the same results.

4 In reports of population estimates, the sample was weighted by age, sex, and education to approximate known demographic characteristics of registered voters. In regressions, these factors were entered as controls, and no weighting was used.

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