

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

U·M·I

University Microfilms International
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

PREVIEW

Order Number 9415997

**Communication in the public sphere of a community conflict:
The case of locating a nuclear waste repository in Boyd County,
Nebraska**

Thomas, Larry Lee, Ph.D.

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1993

Copyright ©1994 by Thomas, Larry Lee. All rights reserved.

U·M·I
300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

PREVIEW

**COMMUNICATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE OF A COMMUNITY CONFLICT:
THE CASE OF LOCATING A NUCLEAR WASTE REPOSITORY
IN BOYD COUNTY, NEBRASKA**

by

Larry Lee Thomas

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Communication Studies & Theatre Arts (Communication Studies)

Under the Supervision of Professor Jack Kay

Lincoln, Nebraska

December, 1993

DISSERTATION TITLE

COMMUNICATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE OF A COMMUNITY CONFLICT: THE CASE OF

LOCATING A NUCLEAR WASTE REPOSITORY IN BOYD COUNTY, NEBRASKA

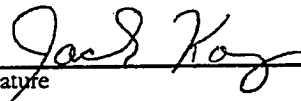
BY

Larry Lee Thomas

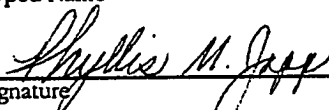
SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

APPROVED


DATE


Signature
Jack Kay

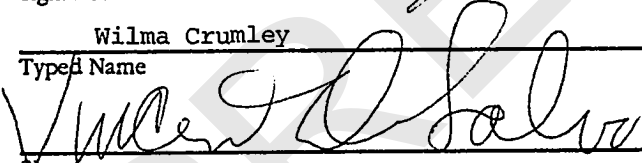
December 3, 1993


Signature
Phyllis M. Japp

Dec. 3, 1993


Signature
Wilma Crumley

Dec 3, 1993


Signature
Vincent DiSalvo

Dec 3 - 1993

Signature

Typed Name

Signature

Typed Name



COMMUNICATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE OF A COMMUNITY CONFLICT:
THE CASE OF LOCATING A NUCLEAR WASTE REPOSITORY
IN BOYD COUNTY, NEBRASKA

Larry Lee Thomas, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1993

Adviser: Jack Kay

The paradigm case of political communication in late 20th Century democracies is the mediated public sphere suggested by Jürgen Habermas. However, a less obvious discursive space opens when decisions made at higher levels of government are forced upon an unwilling community. The resulting controversy creates an ad hoc public sphere, i.e., public meetings at which a single divisive issue is argued. This study investigated an exemplar case of public discourse at the community level in Boyd County, Nebraska, where a low-level radioactive waste disposal facility was proposed in 1989. The purpose was to describe communication and to determine explanatory utility of extant communication theories in the context of an ad hoc public sphere.

Textual analysis of utterances by ordinary citizens in extended personal interviews and transcripts of public meetings found that principal arguments fell into three broad categories: demonization of supporters and officials, victimization and valorization of opponents, and dichotomization of views regarding science and technology. Images of nuclear holocaust suggested in many historical, psychological and sociological studies constituted only a small part of the discourse.

Discursive characteristics identified in the analysis are best explained by Symbolic Convergence Theory. Argument fragments found in public meetings are analagous to Bormann's "cryptic allusions to symbolic common ground." Hidden political motives and conspiracy can be explained as interpreting events in terms of human action. Strong group self-images are produced as opponent and proponent rhetorical communities seek to distinguish insiders from outsiders. Dichotomization of views on science and technology can be understood as mirror image rhetorical visions.

Complexity and richness of discourse found in this exemplar case of an ad hoc public sphere suggest that further study by political communication scholars is needed. Bormann's Fantasy Theme Analysis is proposed as the most appropriate analytical method for future research.

PREVIEW

My deep appreciation for their unfailing support goes to my mother and to my father (whose hope that he live to see his son a Ph.D. was not fulfilled); to the members of my committee, especially Jack Kay who stuck with me long after he had taken on pressing responsibilities elsewhere, and Wilma Crumley who interrupted her retirement to read and offer advice; to Susan Beebe and her parents, Fritz and Darlene Lechtenberg, whose assistance in making initial contacts in Boyd County was crucial to the success of this project; and finally to The People of Boyd County who not only were willing to tell me their stories but often went out of their way to help.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
THEORY	8
The Peculiar Context of Political Communication	9
The Influence of Contemporary Democratic Theory	12
Discourse as Participation in an Alternative Model	15
The "Community" in "Community Involvement"	19
The "Public" and its Special "Sphere"	23
Perceived Risk as Trigger for the Public Sphere	26
Applicable Theory From Other Disciplines	31
Risk Assessment in "Hard" Science	31
Psychology of Risk and Controversy	33
Anthropological and Sociological Approaches	35
The History of Images	37
Communication Research Approaches	39
Image	39
Myth	41
Narrative	43
Research Questions	44
METHODS	46
Case Background	46
Research phases	50
Phase 1 -- Background and secondary data acquisition	51
Phase 2 -- Primary data acquisition	55
Phase 3 -- Analysis	56
Phase 4 -- Reinterviewing and followup	58
Instrumentation	64
Interview questionnaire	64
Transcripts	65
Data Analysis	66
Trustworthiness	68
DATA AND ANALYSIS	76
The Boyd County Site is a Product of Politics	80
This is a Republican Waste Dump	88
They've Tried to Portray Us as "Kooks, Crazies, Radicals and Ignorant Farmers"	103
This Was a Flawed Process from the Beginning	107
Raymond Peery was not the only corrupt official	162
The Legislature is Controlled by High-paid Lobbyists	165
Outsiders Want to Make Nebraska Their Dumping Ground	168
Community Consent Was Promised, But Not Given	174
Law Enforcement Has Been Used as a Political Weapon	182
The Media are Political Pawns or Weak and Lazy	208

The People of Boyd County, Pro or Con, Have Suffered From This Controversy	214
We've run the rascals out of office	214
Flawed Character Has Given the Siting Interests an Opening	219
Save Boyd County Is a Unique Organization	249
The People of Boyd County are special	264
The Social Impact of the Controversy Is Devastating	272
You Can't Trust Radioactive Waste or the Experts Who Claim To Know About It	283
Effects of Radiation	283
Wetlands: The law and the reality	295
You Can't Trust Experts	301
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	311
Summary of Findings and Atheoretical Conclusions	311
Summary of Typology	311
Atheoretical Conclusions	313
Limitations	325
Interpretation and Editing	325
Peculiarities of Boyd County	327
Time Period of the Study	331
Theoretical Approaches	334
Image	336
Myth	338
Narrative	340
Fantasy Theme Analysis and Symbolic Convergence Theory	343
Future Research	347
Appendix A	350
Appendix B	351
References	375

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the 1992 U. S. Presidential election, approximately 54 percent of registered voters cast ballots ("Election," 1992). At best this figure indicates a modest uptick in an otherwise downward trend that has extended through most of the 20th century. Critics of the American political process cite voter turnout statistics hovering near the fifty percent mark as evidence that many Americans are alienated from a system that they do not believe is truly representative (Chen, 1992). The focus of voter dissatisfaction is most often taken to be elections to national office, particularly the Presidency. For example, during the 1992 campaign, the stated purpose of United We Stand America, the grass roots movement initiated by Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot, was to bring discontented voters back into the system by forcing presidential candidates to deal with the "real issues" confronting the country. Perot and the press he gleefully maligned seemed to agree at least upon one point: that recent elections had been dominated by the artificial constructions of consultants and spin doctors intent upon weaving and endlessly embroidering ephemeral images designed to seduce the unwitting electorate into casting its ballots without knowing the real consequences of its selections, in terms of concrete candidate issue positions.

With the attention of most scholars directed towards the national level, a curious dichotomy of interpretation has arisen regarding "local", i.e. "non-national", political activity. On the one hand, voters are regarded as being discontented with the political process in general, and with Washington in particular, leading them towards lethargy and indifference. On the other, as decisionmaking has been forced downward by a combination of gridlock and fiat in the federal government, frustration and desperation have energized politics at the community level. When programs are mandated from above, communities almost inevitably experience conflict. Proponents welcome promised economic or political benefits, or simply believe that national

welfare should take precedence over the local "good." Opponents employ activism, resistance and legal and legislative maneuvering in order to protect themselves from what they perceive as threats to their health, safety, livelihood, or way of life. This study centers upon the theoretical implications for political communication studies of the discursive space opened by these community conflicts.

Some democracy theorists have concluded that the representative model seems to lead inexorably to concentration of power at the apex of the political pyramid, disenfranchising and discontenting voters. Many of these scholars, particularly those operating from the perspective of the activist 60's, have proposed alternative participatory models to palliatively restructure the distribution of political power and to adjust for this evolution of the American political system away from what they suppose was its original constitutional intent. A few have suggested that the system itself might be in the process of evolving further, of self-adjusting to compensate for its inequalities.

By contrast, the field of political communication generally remains narrowly fixated on the waning paradigm of democracy theory which dictates that the quintessential expression of the peoples' power in the American system is their election of a President. Thus, the utterances of pretenders to the presidential throne, and particularly of successful candidates are carefully parsed. Rhetorical deities are constructed (Reagan, the "Great Communicator"), then deconstructed and demystified (a bumbling ex-actor, incapable of expressing anything not first penned by a platoon of gifted speechwriters and then scrolled in gigantic TelePrompter fonts; a dangerous loose cannon who, without carefully rehearsed briefing sessions was liable to blurt out embarrassing and even dangerous answers to press conference questions).

Of lesser, but contributory importance to this Presidential preoccupation, is the study of election campaigns conducted by candidates for other national offices, e.g., senators and

representatives; or of the process of presidential appointments and legislative approval of cabinet officers, administrative heads of agencies and Supreme Court justices. Occasional note is even made of election campaigns for offices of state Governors (who, after all, might one day *become* a presidential candidates à la Bill Clinton of Arkansas, thereby making them actually *important*).

In most of these analyses, political communication is simplistically viewed as what the candidate says to the public. (The reverse flow of communication, from electorate to candidate has generally been relegated to the field of public opinion polling, the province of sociologists.) This candidate utterance bias, when coupled with the undeniable fact that in a modern society politicians mostly rely upon the media to disseminate their claims, leads to a narrow analytical focus: the notion that what is said in and by the media constitutes most, if not all of the important political communication in the United States. Undeniably, mass media led by television, *are* in a singularly powerful position to convey--one way (down) and in linear fashion--the utterances and activities of politicians from Washington's power centers out into the hinterlands. However, the marriage of political communication studies to investigations of mass media messages produces an inevitable analytical emphasis upon form over substance, image over issue, political personality over public policy. The resulting value judgments and lamentations regarding the role of media in the democratic process have, I suggest, led us into a cul-de-sac from which further endless parsings of the media record will not help us to emerge.

Restrictive notions of what constitutes the "public sphere", based largely upon Habermas' critical theories, have contributed to a predominant view that diminishes, nearly to the vanishing point, the significance of local community-level political activity. Habermas (1962/1989) posited that a powerful and effective public sphere flourished in pre- and early Industrial democracies, then shriveled and declined with the arrival of capitalist-driven mass communication media. Did his idealized public sphere, with its informed electorate engaged in learned discourse on primary

issues of concern to the public, ever in fact exist? Or was it merely a convenient contrastive touchstone against which Habermas could chronicle his supposed dissolution of the democratic ideal? Either way, his argument for a "weakened" or ineffective public sphere has influenced much scholarly thought about how political communication is conducted in late capitalist societies. Such musings almost inevitably lead to depressing conclusions that public policy in the world's greatest democracy is increasingly driven by powerful special interest groups and their paid lobbyists while the public is poorly informed, encouraged to rubberstamp the process, and, in turn, reacts with increasing apathy and discontent.

A key premise of the present study is that significant political decisionmaking occurs at the community level, and that to ignore such non-national politics is to misconstrue how public policy is actually made in late 20th Century America. Further, I suggest that discourse in the public sphere, the legitimate realm of inquiry for political communication investigators, *does occur*, but not alone at the national level where we usually look for it.

For whatever reason, be it the advent of substanceless mass mediated political campaigns, diversity of competing ethnic, racial and special interest groups, complexity of technological society, or a new breed of elected representative that is unwilling to take direct political heat resulting from hard decisions, more and more individual communities in the United States are finding that unwanted decisions are being thrust upon them. Tichenor, et al. (1980, p. 13), note that, since World War II, a wide range of programs and facilities have been imposed by state and national government upon communities under "that part of our credo which obliges a small portion of individuals and citizens to sustain a certain amount of hardship for the greater societal good." They explored a broad category of controversial issues distinguished by the contravention of community wishes: environmental restrictions, siting of nuclear power plants, use of eminent domain for utilities, highways and parks. Whereas earlier in our history communities dealt with

their own *problems* (Coleman, 1957), now increasingly the *solution* to one jurisdiction's problem *becomes* another community's problem, leading to conflict. Such controversy, in turn, opens a discursive space. For want of a better term, I have labeled such single-problem-driven community-level discursive spaces *ad hoc public spheres*.

The most obvious question posed by the existence of an ad hoc public sphere is, what theory (or theories) best describe and/or explain it as communication phenomenon? Put another way, perhaps less flattering to the communication field, do *any* of our extant theories adequately explain what occurs in this arena of discourse? Do we even have a useful frame of reference that covers such a notion of public sphere, when our de facto definition of "political communication"--*communication in the political context*--is simply "communication by and with politicians?" After all, politicians of the kind we generally think about--senators, representatives, governors, presidents--are usually out of the loop of community-level discourses. Indeed, elected officials are often perceived as the enemy and thus play only a distant adversarial role in the ad hoc public sphere. Communication with prominent elected leaders might be confined only to barbed sound bites and caustic printed quotes contained in angry media exchanges.

From a practical standpoint, many millions of dollars are being expended in attempts to cope with communication problems flowing from the imperiled community syndrome which masquerades under a variety of acronyms: LULU (Locally Undesirable Land Use), NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard), and even BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything.) Grass roots movements stir "community involvement" to block planning and construction while government and industry watch in helpless frustration as project costs mount and tax- and rate-payers, who ultimately foot the bill for the resulting impasses, grow increasingly impatient.

Scholars in the social and physical sciences have explored scattered aspects of communication problems related to the ad hoc public sphere, for example: siting controversies

(geographers, public planning, policy and risk analysts); nuclear power risk and controversy in public opinion (sociologists, political scientists); nuclear, environmental and technological risk (economists, psychologists, historians, sociologists and physicists); nuclear activism and community conflict (political scientists, sociologists); risk stress (public health specialists, sociologists and psychologists); etc. Each group has its own agenda, usually to arrive at prescriptive communication strategies aimed at ameliorating specific problems, for example to persuade the public to accept a particular technology or project. None has dealt with communication as a unitary concept in the context of the discourse of community conflict.

This study investigates a prototypical case of communication at the community level in Boyd County, Nebraska, where a low-level radioactive nuclear waste disposal facility was proposed in 1989. Through analysis of utterances of ordinary citizens in extended personal interviews and in public meetings, the study seeks to answer the general question, "What, if any, communication theory best describes and/or explains the political communication process in the ad hoc public sphere?" The latter term is defined as "an arena of public discourse that is formed when a significant number of citizens perceive that their community is threatened by change mandated by the government of a political subdivision that has broader powers than those of the local jurisdiction whose citizens will be directly affected."

In Chapter Two, I will discuss in greater detail the research literature pertinent to this study, its theoretical base, and the specific questions to be answered. Chapter Three describes the methods employed in engaging respondents and gathering and analyzing data, and explores issues of trustworthiness, a term which subsumes concepts of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity in qualitative studies such as this. In Chapter Four the results of analysis of interviews and public meetings transcripts are discussed. Finally, Chapter Five provides an overview of significant findings and considers their relevance in light of previous research studies

and implications for current theory, as well as inconsistencies between data and conclusions, the study's limitations, and suggestions for further research.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER 2

THEORY

One of the few general articles of faith with which most communication scholars would probably agree is that there is no broad unifying theory in our field. Indeed, general principles that can be said to apply across all contexts are few and exhibit an unsettlingly tenuous purchase on reality. When a scholarly community cannot even agree upon how to define what it is that they study, it is not surprising that they are unsuccessful at constructing all-encompassing theories for whatever the thing is that they are presumed to be studying!

The bane of communication studies is the relentless ubiquity of the communication phenomenon. It occurs in the seemingly endless variety of contexts comprising the full range of human activity. Chameleon-like, communication changes its appearance and behavior when it is transplanted from one environment into any other. Communication is so context-sensitive that it seems to operate under different rules wherever it goes. Searching for commonalities is a frustrating "yes, but" process that engages only the most adventuresome, and that seldom on a full-time basis. The resulting compartmentalization of the field is legendary. Students of interpersonal communication attend the same conventions as those of mass communication, but they seldom see each other except when passing in hallways; organizational communication scholars pick and choose from the experimental results of interpersonal and small group investigators, but must adapt the conclusions, and once they conduct their own similar studies in the organizational setting, those data are likely to pass into a realm that is considered too narrow and specialized to be applicable to broader interpersonal situations.

Against this backdrop of fragmentation, it might seem curious that the principal argument I wish to advance in support of this study is that we know too little of communication behavior

in still another context, and that we ought to. I argue for study of communication in the context of a community facing perceived threat, for two reasons. The first has utilitarian social implications, the second is significant to the notion of communication theory-building:

1.) Ignorance of this relatively narrow context of political communication at best leads to an incomplete understanding of the political process. At worst, inadequate knowledge of how citizens communicate when they believe their community to be threatened could lead to severe miscalculation in the formulation of public policy.

2.) Until we have a more thorough understanding of as many communication contexts as possible, general unified theory-building will always risk running afoul of unforeseen circumstances which must be "roped off" as special cases. The more often this happens, of course, the less generalizable the body of theory, and the greater the likelihood that communication study will encompass an ever-expanding and disharmonious collection of what Bormann (1989) calls "special theories."

The Peculiar Context of Political Communication

If political communication can be said to exist as a subspecies of communication study the boundaries that set it apart from the broader field are marked by the context of public policymaking. The roots of political communication study are tangled in three defining antecedents: first, that studies of the utterances of politicians literally formed the basis for rhetorical study extending all the way back to Plato and Aristotle; second, that communication in politics flows one way, from politicians to their "publics"; and third, that in modern post-capitalist societies characterized by great technological development, the principal means of dissemination of this one-way flow are the mass media. I suggest that these defining notions have influenced

political communication scholars to pay insufficient attention to public policy discourse that directly involves neither politicians nor their mass media-disseminated messages.

In her review of political communication research in the 1980's, Johnston (1990) divided the literature into five principal headings: (1) General frameworks, history and methods; (2) Analytic approaches, which included symbolist and dramaturgical analysis, examination of rhetoric and language, and analysis of political communication effects; (3) Forms of strategic political communication by candidates and officials in political advertising and in debates; (4) News and political communication; and (5) Women and politics. Her taxonomy is consistent with a linear top-down paradigm of political communication in which analytical priority is given first to politician utterances (the "sender"), then to the media which convey or distort in some way those utterances (the "channel"), and finally to the public (the "receiver") upon which some "effect" is presumed to have occurred as a result of the communication activities of politicians and media acting in combination.

In this model, little or no attention is paid to the citizen other than as a receptor of mediated messages. This citizen-receiver's activities are confined to cognitive processing, learning (socialization), and evaluating candidates and issues. Presumably, the only communicative behavior in which the citizen actively engages is to express the results of all these influences via two narrowly restricted means: by stating an opinion, if one is lucky enough to be selected as respondent for a public opinion poll (in which, more than likely, the citizen will be confined to a straightjacket of "appropriate" responses on a pigeon-holed scale), or by the act of voting, which is essentially an expression of "yes" or "no." Zarefsky (1992) notes the recent addition of a dubious third avenue of citizen self-expression introduced by Ross Perot in the 1992 presidential campaign: placing a telephone call to a "900" number. Lateral communication between citizens regarding issues and candidates is acknowledged and encouraged, but only as a preliminary step

towards fulfilling public opinion or voting roles. In short, communication behaviors by ordinary citizens in the political process are bludgeoned into preconceived shapes or they are simply ignored.

The discussion that follows explores the theoretical base for the object of this qualitative study, what I have labeled the *ad hoc public sphere*. Anderson (1987, p. 246) notes that the inductive emphasis of qualitative research does not eliminate the need for a theoretical base, but rather uses it "to define its objects of interest," which is my purpose here.

First, I suggest that the emphasis on candidate elections to the near exclusion of other potentially productive lines of inquiry in political communication research is at least partially a result of the limitations of contemporary representative democracy theory. After briefly exploring the alternative participatory democracy model, I touch upon the related notions of community and community involvement, noting definitions of community pertinent to this study, followed by a discussion of two key concepts: the *public* and the *public sphere*. The latter construct, particularly Habermas's interpretation of it, serves as the point of departure for my conceptualization of an *ad hoc public sphere*, which I propose comes into existence as a result of perceived threat to a community. Next, I examine the defining aspects of the exigency that gives rise to the particular sort of public sphere investigated in this study: technological controversy, the NIMBY syndrome and community conflict. Finally, I discuss pertinent studies and theoretical approaches, beginning with so-called "hard science", and progressing through related social science specialties to communication theory, all of which help to frame the research questions that conclude this chapter.

The Influence of Contemporary Democratic Theory

Contemporary democratic theory *allows* for the notion that citizen participation in any discourse beyond the electoral arena might have an influence on public policy. However, not only is such participation a secondary influence, it is regarded with some suspicion by democracy theorists. Many political scientists are still influenced by Schumpeter's (1943, p. 283) observation that "the electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede." The prospect of a mass of voters exercising any but very limited control over the direction of the modern state was anathema to early 20th Century scholars of American democracy. Weber, for example, viewed passivity of the masses as integral to modern democracy, suggesting that it was the inevitable product of a bureaucratic world in which voters do not have sufficient power to make their participation worth while (Held, 1987). Furthermore, Weber (1972, p. 129) asserted that the "emotionality" of the masses prevented them from understanding public affairs, much less making rational judgments regarding public issues. Weber assigned to voters the limited role of making choices between possible leaders, who, with the aid of bureaucratic administrators, would be qualified, as the uninformed masses could never be, to deal with complexities of modern society (Held, p. 161). Milbrath (1965, p. 147) projected that high levels of political participation would politicize social relationships, leading to such dire consequences as political considerations determining a person's opportunities for education, job, advancement, housing, and goods.

Echoing Schumpeter's disdain for strong, continuous participation by an active electorate, Dahl (1956, p. 3), in his list of characteristics by which a democracy is defined, emphasized his belief in the electoral process as the principal mechanism by which leaders are controlled by non-leaders: "Democratic theory is concerned with the processes by which ordinary citizens exert a relatively high degree of control over leaders." Thus the power of the collective citizenry was kept carefully tethered to the ballot box in contemporary democratic theory.

Scholars have performed an awkward high wire act to accommodate on the one hand the notion that informed citizens *ought* to discuss the issues of the day in a modern democracy, but on the other hand, that the results of such discussions should influence only elections. Berelson (1952, pp. 322-323), for example, suggests that

[An]...important requirement of democratic process is *communication and discussion*; the electorate is required to engage in discussion and communication on political affairs. Democratic decision-making requires free examination of political ideas, and this means discussion. Democratic citizens are supposed to listen to their political leaders arguing with one another, to listen to them when they speak directly to the electorate, to talk back to them, and to discuss among themselves the public issues of the day.

Elsewhere in the same article (p. 316), however, Berelson preempts the idea that a majority of voters ought to engage in discourse, favoring instead an involved elite:

Political democracy requires a fairly strong and fairly continuous level of interest from a minority, and from a larger body of the citizenry a moderate-to-mild and discontinuous interest but with a stable readiness to respond in critical political situations.

Pateman (1970, p. 7) concludes, "limited participation and apathy have a positive function for the whole system by cushioning the shock of disagreement, adjustment and change."

Thus, as the 20th Century wound down, editorialists and agitators (Nagel, 1987, pp. 22, 101) bemoaned the continued steady decline in the percentage of eligible U. S. voters participating in national elections. Until recently, however, most political theorists remained relatively sanguine regarding this apparent erosion of democracy, explaining and justifying it as a means of stabilizing the modern democratic state. Sartori (1962, pp. 87-90) went so far as to suggest that the average voter could not be expected to be interested in subjects for which s/he had no personal experience