

Technical Appendix to “Parallel Public Spheres: Distance and Discourse in Letters to the Editor”

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Abstract

This appendix contains technical information regarding our article, “Parallel Public Spheres: Distance and Discourse in Letters to the Editor,” published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, November, 2008. Section 1 contains details on the data collection protocol (see note 7). Section 2 contains the results of additional analyses testing the influence of particular “hot button” issues on the paper’s central localism thesis (note 13). Because these results did not undermine the overall thesis, they were not included in the paper itself.

1 Data Collection

Roughly half of the letters the paper received came via electronic mail; the remainder came on paper. Each weekday, the newspaper staff forwarded all electronic letters to a special e-mail address set up for the purpose. An automatic program stored the text of the letter in a database and entered the author’s e-mail address in the list of potential survey participants. Two weeks after the letter’s receipt, the system generated an e-mail request to the letter’s author, requesting her or his participation in the survey.¹ Authors were directed to a personalized website to fill out the survey, and were offered the opportunity to receive the survey on paper and return it via

¹The two-week delay was requested by the newspaper, and served to emphasize to authors that their participation in the survey would neither help nor harm their letters’ chances of publication.

the mail if they preferred. Two weeks after the first contact, authors who had not yet responded received a reminder email. If they still did not respond, no further contact was attempted.

Once a week, newspaper staff mailed photocopies of paper letters to study personnel. Letters were scanned and/or transcribed into text files, then entered in the same database as the electronic letters. Between two and five weeks after the paper’s receipt of the letter, study personnel mailed, via bulk mail, a paper survey and a self-addressed, postage-free return envelope to the address used in the letter. The survey contained an invitation to visit the project’s website if the author preferred an online survey. Two weeks after mailing the survey, authors who had not yet responded were sent a first-class reminder postcard. The postcard served two purposes: in addition to reminding potential respondents, the first-class postage guaranteed that the postcard would be returned if undeliverable, thereby providing a measure of respondent eligibility. If authors failed to respond after the postcard, no further contact was attempted.

Finally, in order to provide a control sample, the newspaper provided the names and addresses of a 1,500-person random sample of people who subscribed to the paper on a daily basis. These subscribers were bulk mailed a very similar survey to that received by the letter authors; it was missing only the questions that pertained specifically to the authors’ letters. A reminder postcard was mailed to non-respondents two weeks after the original survey, and no further contact was attempted.

As an incentive to participate, all those who returned surveys were entered in a drawing for a prize

Table 1: Nonlocal “hot button” topics’ effects on hostile tone

Predictor	OR
Local scope	.637*
<i>Author’s political identification:</i>	
Right	1.125
Left	.688
Religious involvement	.799*
Political efficacy	.781*
Age	.999
Female	.572**
Education	.745**
Anger as a motive to write	2.273***
<i>Hot button topics</i>	
Iraq war	1.747
George W. Bush	2.325*
Terrorism	.726
Sept. 11 attacks	1.091
Cragg and Uhler’s $R^2 = 0.187$	
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$	

worth roughly \$50. Eight participants were awarded these prizes.

2 Supplemental Analysis

To insure that our results were not the result of a few specific letter topics, we looked for effects of “hot button” topics at the local and nonlocal levels that might skew the results. Table 1 shows the effects of four such nonlocal topics on the likelihood of a letter using hostile tone. The four topics are the Iraq war; George W. Bush; terrorism; and the September 11 attacks. We also include self-reported anger as a motive to write the letter to distinguish between topics and motivations. Mentioning George W. Bush is an independent predictor of hostile tone, but the other “hot button” issues are not.

Next we isolate the effects of three additional topics: the military (which has a large presence in North Carolina), the proposal to build a new stadium in town, and the proposal to expand the local airport to build a new hub for FedEx there. Table 2 shows the

Table 2: Nonlocal “hot button” topics’ effects on hostile tone

Predictor	OR
Local scope	.398***
<i>Hot button topics</i>	
Military	.349
Stadium	1.700
FedEx hub	3.882*
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$	

Table 3: Nonlocal “hot button” topics’ effects on hostile tone

Predictor	OR
Local scope	.427***
<i>Author’s political identification:</i>	
Right	1.110
Left	.719
Religious involvement	.821
Political Efficacy	.751*
Age	.997
Female	.568**
Education	.750**
<i>Hot button topics</i>	
Military	.234
Stadium	1.425
FedEx Hub	4.026
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$	

results of this analysis. The FedEx hub is marginally significant, the other two topics not significant at all.

Finally, we include these in the general model to estimate the effects they might have on the overall consideration of local vs. nonlocal scope. Table 3 shows the results of this analysis. After controlling for the other predictors, the FedEx hub is no longer independently predictive of hostile tone.