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# TEXT, TALK, ARGUE

## How to Improve Text-Driven Political Conversations

*Don Waisanen, Allison Hahn, and Eric Gander*

In fall 2016, the authors of this essay held a public deliberation on the U.S. presidential election using the well-funded and widely endorsed “Text, Talk, Vote” tool that the National Institute for Civic Discourse (NICD) developed. Text, Talk, Vote aims to facilitate “large scale change in the behavior and ideology of people and systems [...including] media, citizens, and elected officials” (NICD, n.d., para. 1). In this paper, we use NICD’s tool to examine how the internet, social media, and new mobile technologies are changing the nature of how people argue (Harsin, 2014; Lewiński, 2010; Pfister, 2010, 2014; Waisanen, 2018), with a specific focus on how this technology may either facilitate or impede the products and processes of public argument. This analysis draws from data gathered through participant observations of approximately 95 people who engaged with Text, Talk, Vote in classrooms at Baruch College, CUNY and from a public event held collaboratively with Public Agenda, a New York based non-profit organization.

Although we report aggregate data collected during our facilitation of Text, Talk, Vote, we became most interested in the process of participation—specifically, the rhetorical or social resources that produced possibilities for argumentation during the event and how text-messages appeared to promote or hinder small-group deliberation. We begin with a description of the process of a Text, Talk, Vote event. We then highlight our findings from these text-driven conversations, including themes such as “hyperlinked argumentation,” which describe how some participants pulled out their cell phones to compare and contrast evidence with one another at key moments. Finally, we provide a brief analysis of the administered survey and provide recommendations for how modifications in the Text, Talk, Vote program might improve political discussions.

### **Facilitating Text, Talk, Vote**

In advance of the 2016 election, NICD sought to facilitate conversations among students and civic organizations such as the United Way. Text, Talk, Vote events were held during the 2016 presidential election, often in conjunction with debate watches, organizer training

sessions, or during class time. Text, Talk, Vote emerged from the prior success of Text, Talk, Act, which used the same text-message interface to encourage students and families to hold conversations regarding mental and public health services. The Text, Talk, Act program connected participants with a range of local and national service providers after they participated in conversations about mental health in their school and community. Similarly, after participating in a Text, Talk, Vote event, participants received links to opportunities for political engagement in their communities and prompts to vote in upcoming elections (Share & Knighton, 2016). The design of Text, Talk, Vote focuses on combatting online “slactivism” by having people discuss issues face-to-face (3:01).

Text, Talk, Vote employs a SMS text-message interface to facilitate a 90-minute discussion. At the beginning of a Text, Talk, Vote event, participants clustered into small groups of four to five members. Each group used one participant’s smart phone to receive a series of 20 to 25 questions such as, “What are the most important issues you believe should be addressed in this election?” Once the groups had a few minutes to talk about the question, they texted in their answers and received a new question. During the question and response period, participants took several breaks in which they could see visualizations of collective responses by other participants. At the conclusion, the Text, Talk, Vote program prompted participants to take a group selfie and post their image to Twitter using the hashtag #TextTalkVote. Hosts collected all data from Text, Talk, Vote events as anonymous, aggregate responses.

Text, Talk, Vote requires minimal set up from facilitators; it primarily relies on participants’ smart phones. While this makes an event easier to arrange, it can also produce programming problems. For example, we found that some cellular carriers experienced delays in delivering messages and, at one point, AT&T coverage was not available in the room holding the public event. While the cost of sending a text message has decreased rapidly in recent years, participants, especially students, may face constraints from shared data plans that make it difficult to send and receive multiple text messages.

### **Observations of Text-Driven Argumentation**

We used participant observation at our Text, Talk, Vote events, moving between groups and sometimes asking questions. When employing the participant observation method, researchers should ideally draw from varied experiences and theories, maintain reflexivity and a tolerance for ambiguity, and look to the embodied, behavioral dimensions in situations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Accordingly, we each made individual field notes to diversify our observations and interpretations. Due to the short-term nature of our event and to test our observations, we compared our field notes using “intensity and frequency” (Foss, 2018, p. 413) as criteria to guide the development of our analytic themes. We found three themes from our data: power imbalances in the deliberations, hyperlinked argumentation, and humor as a gateway to arguments. In considering each theme, we sought to understand the rhetorical or social resources that produced possibilities for argumentation through Text, Talk, Vote.

### **Power is in the Hands of the Beholder**

Each group used one phone during a Text, Talk, Vote session. We each observed that the person holding the phone played the “dominant voice” simply by carrying out their assigned task of reading questions out loud and texting the answers. Participants tended to defer to the person who held the phone, and often this person determined if, and when, a question had been fully answered. In this way, the grounds for argument were not equal in practice.

One consequence of this status hierarchy was that some participants stopped paying attention to the discussion. Some even signed into the Text, Talk, Vote program on their own phones and began answering the questions individually. We also observed non-dominant participants using their phones to conduct research during the event, to fact check other group members, or to non-verbally exit from an awkward or heated discussion by using their phones in ways that had nothing to do with the Text, Talk, Vote application. Regardless of their power position, some participants simply became disinterested during the event. When the questions did not inspire participants, they quickly lost interest, which reduced the possibilities for argumentation. This was particularly true for those who participated during in-class facilitations where individuals spoke in groups with known classmates.

Yet the majority of the participants, especially those grouped with new acquaintances, started leaning in and grew interested once they "got it." As their discussions developed, participants shared both their claims and evidence. Often, participants reflected on their use of new and social media to find political information. For example, one participant said, "I Googled one [campaign ad] six months ago." Another provided backing for an argument regarding presidential candidate Donald Trump ridiculing a person with a disability: "I YouTubed it."

This sharing of information seemed to work best in small, subgroup discussions where two-person conversations often emerged. Sometimes the subgroups would report back to the larger group and move on to the next question. On some occasions, however, the subgroup broke off from the discussion entirely. Given these power imbalances and distributions over the course of using the Text, Talk, Vote program, future organizers should give greater thought to how active or passive participants are during these discussions, and how smaller subgroups might promote quality arguing.

### **Hyperlinked Argumentation**

Throughout the events, we observed participants searching for facts and argumentative backing during their discussions. We saw one participant using a smart phone to search for information on the Fox News website. Another found and displayed examples of Trump's tweets to group members. When consulting the internet, participants appeared to have several goals. Some simply wanted to prove that a citation existed for their arguments. Others wanted to ensure that they were correctly representing a certain point, while others used their phones to find visual evidence.

Once participants saw the Text, Talk, Vote format as an occasion for turning to their phones and hyperlinking claims and evidence, attention to the process of argumentation also became a noticeable part of the deliberations. The content of these discussions ranged from the presidential debate formats to the communicative responsibilities of the candidates themselves. One participant said that "politics needs to involve something different than rallies," clarifying the potential usefulness of a "more town hall style" format, while recognizing that a "town hall is [still] not enough." Other groups provided inventive ideas for candidates' speech practices. One participant highlighted how "Trump should have to answer to the other side of the spectrum." In these examples the process of argument became part of the discussion, apparently by participants prompted to try out a new way of arguing via the Text, Talk, Vote format.

Throughout the process, the NCID and Text, Talk, Vote partners aggregated responses and, when possible, projected those responses onto a large screen for participants to see and comment upon. In our events, participants generally enjoyed seeing the aggregate answers revealed during the event. For example, in the public event, a good deal of discussion occurred when the screen showed the aggregated "Top 3 Issues" in the election.

Being able to text in their answers and then see the surprising, real-time results also appeared to build engagement with the platform. We noticed that members of breakaway subgroups generally rejoined the discussions after viewing the aggregate data. One qualification is worth mentioning, however. When prompted to take a selfie at the end, those attendees at our public event seemed to like the feature, but students in the class facilitation asked, "Do we have to do that," or simply ignored the request and reported that they had finished using Text, Talk, Vote.

### **Humor as a Gateway to Argument**

We observed how the use of humor often preceded substantive insights in the conversations, and therefore propose building more playful actions into the texting technology to advance argumentative processes (for the use of similar strategies, see Palczewski, 2002). Throughout the Text, Talk, Vote public event, the participants engaged in copious laughter and side conversations. The occasionally awkward gaps between the technological ideal, on the one hand, and actual practice, on the other, of using SMS text-messages to facilitate face-to-face deliberation prompted the use of humor at times.

Humor also emerged in answers to some of the Text, Talk, Vote questions. For example, when answering a question concerning what kind of traits they most wanted to see in a politician, one participant said, "good hair, an orange complexion, and likes to swear a lot." These jokes worked to move the conversation along and, at other times, to express the limited options provided by the Text, Talk, Vote application. Feeling overwhelmed by the election, one participant at the public event asked the others, "Is there any option for terrified?" In response to the question, "Do you have any other ideas about how the political process should involve citizens," another person remarked, "Give them money."

Far from a frivolous diversion at the events, these pockets of humor and laughter largely drove arguments forward. Yet the productivity of these moments and the inventional moments they could have inspired were frequently cut short by the Text, Talk, Vote program's next question, moving the discussion in a new and at times awkward direction. Additionally, the situated use of humor at these events, as in all events, occurred in cultural and linguistic groupings. More instances of humor happened at the public event, which was diverse in age, but not in race and ethnicity. The in-class facilitation included students from many cultural, ethnic, and national groups, which could have contributed to the more limited uses of humor. Or, the formality of classroom exercises as opposed to an evening, public event may have contributed to the lack of humor during the in-class facilitation.

### **The Usefulness of Text, Talk, Vote**

Approximately one week after the Text, Talk, Vote public event, an instructor invited students in a public address class at Baruch College to share in the same experience. A week after that, the professor administered a three-question survey to this class to elicit their impressions of the usefulness of Text, Talk, Vote as a tool for increasing and improving political discussions. A total of 54 students completed the survey, which used Likert scale questions to gauge engagement with the Text, Talk, Vote tool. We understand the limits of this sample-size and are cautious about drawing any grand conclusions, but found it useful nonetheless.

The largest plurality of students had a neutral response to the prompt, "I found that the 'Text, Talk, and Vote' application enhanced my ability to participate in political discussions," with slightly more respondents agreeing versus disagreeing. This answer confirmed

our suspicion formed at the public event that the tool may have a limited range of engagement. When answering the statement, "I would use the 'Text, Talk, Vote' application again," students were largely optimistic, however. Relatively few respondents gave up completely on the Text, Talk, Vote application, suggesting that tweaking the tool might improve text-driven political conversations.

During both the public and student events, users of Text, Talk, Vote seemed mildly curious about its potential, and somewhat interested in the way it operated. However, they were generally not convinced that the tool would dramatically change the way that they or others participated in political discourse.

## Conclusion

Much funding has facilitated the development and scaling of Text, Talk, Vote. We remain cautiously optimistic about the tool's potential and, following the analytic themes developed here, we offer the following recommendations for improving the tool's ability to facilitate productive argument.

First, the platform itself needs to incorporate more egalitarian and interesting features for its users. We recommend using fewer questions for these forums and building more engagement around the interface itself. Given the power struggles we observed within the groups, users clearly want more individuals involved in determining when an argument is complete before the group moves on to the next question. The "hyperlinked" argumentation we observed in our public event demonstrated that most people in each group wanted to talk, look for data on their phones, argue, and so on. Perhaps the tool could add a question every few steps that prompts users to search for information on their phones. With some slight, inexpensive tweaks, the platform could encourage much more hyperlinked argument and deliberative engagement.

Since we observed that humor often preceded substantive insights in the conversations, we also advise building some brief, strategic opportunities for humor into the platform's structure. Perhaps the Text, Talk, Vote tool could include a humorous anecdote between some questions, or it could ask participants to write captions for a political cartoon or meme. Such additions would work with rather than against what seemed to happen naturally in these events. Additionally, participants enjoyed seeing the revelations of collective results on the screen, suggesting that the occasional presentation of what's going on in other groups could also drive engagement. Critically, more research needs to examine how Text, Talk, Vote might contribute to (or perhaps undermine) the so-called "bandwagon effect"—that is, the tendency of individuals to agree with the views of the majority on any given issue, once an individual knows those majority views (see Kiss & Simonovits, 2014).

Along these same lines, our second suggestion concerns the way in which this platform has the potential to combat the pernicious effects of "confirmation bias," or the tendency of individuals to credit evidence and arguments that confirm their pre-existing beliefs and prejudices (see Plous, 1993). Confirmation bias may occur if like-minded groups of individuals arrived together and then stayed together at a given Text, Talk, Vote event. Organizers could address this potentially negative situation by asking participants to answer one or more questions anonymously on their own phones at the beginning of the event. Based on these initial responses, organizers could construct groups in which participants hold different opinions on important issues (for similar methods, see Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013).

The screen in the room could also provide cues suggesting that participants search for diverse sources, or even provide a range of credible sources directly. In this way, the host could reassure participants that using their phones is acceptable, while still encouraging attendees to encounter diverse viewpoints as a regular, structural feature of the event. The goal would be to foster, not impede, reasoned discourse, and start the participants on more equal footing in terms of their contributions to the argumentation from the outset.

In the end, we want to remain realistic about the possibility that applications like Text, Talk, Vote could improve our political discourse. Our findings lead us to believe that enough bright spots exist in the use of such technologies that they may be able to play a significant part in making some public deliberations accessible and engaging. Indeed, compared with purely face-to-face or online methods, citizens may now have arrived at a place where the workings of programs like Text, Talk, Vote are more in line with their everyday life experiences. As “public screens” increasingly constitute the horizons in which citizens can see, debate, and imagine their social worlds (DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012), argument scholars should continue to theorize the rhetorical and social resources that can promote the most valuable ways of practicing argumentation in hybrid, face-to-face, and technology-mediated conditions.

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