

Communities, Race, and Talk: An Analysis of the Occurrence of Civic Intergroup Dialogue Programs

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Why do communities differ in the strategies they adopt to address the challenges of interracial relations? In this article, I ask specifically why cities choose to pursue or forego provision of a particular type of social service, civic intergroup dialogue programs on race. I test arguments that such choices arise in response to post-materialist values, in response to conditions of racial injustice, and in communities with larger stores of existing resident-government linkages. The empirical results support the resident-government linkages model, but support the post-materialist model only among high-income cities, while supporting the social justice model particularly among low-income cities. The results suggest that community decisions to pursue dialogue are driven by the needs of marginalized racial groups as much as, if not more than, the desire among affluent community members to engage in talk about other racial cultures.

Political scientists and public policy scholars have long sought to understand the sources of variation in policy choice across political jurisdictions. While much of this literature has investigated state policy choice (Gray and Hanson 2003), a related and equally lively tradition of scholarship has focused on the local level (Kenyon and Kincaid 1991). Cities differ in the services they offer, and in the proportion of resources they allocate to redistributive policies rather than to development—often the presumed priority of cities (Peterson 1981). Explaining the sources of these differences requires understanding who is able to win the attention of policymakers (Dahl 1961; Hunter 1953) and whose interests influence which problems are discussed and addressed (Bachrach and Baratz 1970).

This article takes up questions of policy choice that focus on the increasing challenges of governance facing American cities in a context of heightened racial diversity.¹ Since the late 1960s, new waves of immigration have layered additional intergroup tensions on top of long-standing racial conflicts. These

developments have complicated coalition building, increased the range of competing demands, and complicated decision makers' perception of community priorities. How are communities responding to these challenges, and why do their responses vary across municipalities? Whose concerns and interests are reflected in these community choices?

One tactic that cities have used to respond to the challenges of racial diversity is the promotion of talk. Local governments around the country are actively encouraging civic deliberation for a variety of purposes related to race relations, from regular meetings between law enforcement officers and members of the public to public forums to decide public school issues.² In some places, cities are turning to dialogue about race to improve understanding among residents and public officials of different racial backgrounds.

Racial dialogue groups merit the attention of political scientists for several reasons. First, most of what we know about community choice is actually based on the study of choice processes *within governments*. Even when scholars account for networks of

¹I use "racial" to encompass both race and ethnicity given that the distinction between these two terms is increasingly blurred (Lee 2004). I use "marginalized racial groups" for people who classify themselves as other than non-Hispanic white, since "minority" is not always accurate (Pinderhughes 2003). I use "nonwhite" to refer to people who categorized themselves as something other than non-Hispanic white.

²For overviews of the variety of civic deliberative programs see Button and Mattson 1999; Gastil 2000; Ryfe 2002; Fung 2003; Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004.

social relations (Stone 1989)—or acknowledge forces outside government, such as citizen contacting (Sharp 1986), neighborhood organizations (Berry, Portney, and Thompson 1993), or activism facilitated by federal programs (Bachrach and Baratz 1970)—variation in public services is ultimately addressed as a matter of government choice. But many choices about whether and how to address public problems are community-level choices. Currently, civic dialogue programs are administrated by local governments in some cities, but by nonprofits in others. Thus, the study of racial dialogue groups allows us to ask why services are provided by governments in some cities and nonprofit entities in others.

Second, racial dialogue groups are a particular example of a more general phenomenon: governments (or other collective organizations) stepping in when everyday social and market transactions fail to provide a service that people in a community perceive is necessary. Open, productive talk between racial groups is difficult to achieve in everyday life (Eliasoph 1998; Walsh 2004b). But there are reasons to view such talk as an important public good. Face-to-face interaction can reduce conflict among members of opposing groups (Allport 1954) and dispel stereotypes (Pettigrew and Tropp 2000). Intercultural contact can also foster bridging social capital that can increase the capacity to address collectively future public problems or prevent conflict from occurring (Putnam 2000; Varshney 2002). Some may view dialogue as a necessary precursor to collective action (Warren 2001). Others may regard open dialogue among residents as an essential feature of a healthy community or a route to self-enhancement.

Despite these many ways in which talk might function as a public good, we know very little about the conditions under which organized community actors are likely to provide it. The question is particularly intriguing because there are a variety of reasons to expect communities would *not* pursue “more talk.” Many local officials (not to mention political scientists, e.g., Fiorina 1999; Schumpeter 1950) expect that opening up governance to the broader public invites inefficiency and antimajoritarianism (Bramson n.d.; Harwood 1989). Also, the history of urban politics offers numerous examples of public officials providing talk as a way to preempt demands for other types of action (e.g., Bachrach and Baratz 1970, 71–73). Offering more talk may be a disingenuous way to include residents in the policy process (Edelman 1977; Greenstone and Peterson 1973), or a way to take visible action on a difficult public problem without really doing anything at all (Lasswell 1941; Reed

1997). Therefore, many may perceive organized public talk as merely a symbolic gesture.

Communities may be particularly skeptical of talk if the government is involved. Habermasian notions of the public sphere posit that democracies need a figurative space in which citizens discuss current policy and form opinions about its effectiveness and the shape of needed reforms; thus there are reasons to be wary of public officials’ control over this forum (Habermas [1962] 1989). On the other hand, if we take the public sphere as a space in which people forge relationships, government involvement may be justified and at times essential. Justifications of school desegregation policy, for example, have rested partly on the presumed democratic benefits of interracial interaction. With race dialogues, the involvement of public officials may signal a direct pipeline to policy change and therefore motivate some people to participate. In this way, providing for local level dialogues is one way that governments can bring citizens into the conversation that we assume underlies democracy (Kinder and Herzog 1993). Some form of organized community intervention may be necessary to ensure both interracial as well as citizen-public official talk.

In this article, I analyze why some communities around the country are pursuing a strategy of promoting talk among residents and officials of different racial backgrounds. I probe the factors that encourage choices to pursue civic intergroup dialogue programs on race and examine in particular the factors that are associated with government sponsorship. I use theories of urban public policy to conceptualize dialogue programs on race as community strategies oriented toward different race-related goals, and I examine the effects of city characteristics related to these goals.

Thus this article makes two types of contributions. First, it illuminates community-level choice, examining the characteristics that influence *whether* a community will provide this type of public good as well as the factors that influence *who* provides the good: governments or nonprofits. Second, the article focuses on a policy choice that matters greatly to democratic theorists but has seldom been addressed by empirical political science—the promotion of discussion about difficult social and political topics by people who are otherwise unlikely to talk with one another.³

³These questions are embedded in a broader project that examines cities’ attempts to enhance civic life in contexts of diversity through the use of intergroup dialogue programs on race. The present project is not focused on the effects of such programs.

The Nature of Civic Intergroup Dialogue Programs

The initiatives at the center of this study are known as “intergroup dialogue programs.” In the past 15 years, people in over 400 cities, in 46 states and the District of Columbia, have used this form of civic deliberation to try to improve race relations. (In the online appendix that accompanies this article at <http://www.journalofpolitics.org>, I explain the origins of this count.) The goal of these programs is to improve understanding and foster relationships among community residents and public officials of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The initiatives bring small (8–15 people), diverse groups of volunteers together for facilitator-led discussions over a period of several weeks. Participants meet repeatedly over time. The purpose is to exchange perspectives and personal experiences, rather than to debate (Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw 2002; Ryfe 2002; Walsh 2003).

The growth of civic dialogue has been spurred in part by national umbrella organizations such as the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC), the National League of Cities, and President William Jefferson Clinton’s Initiative on Race (Reichler and Dredge 1997, chapter 2; Sirianni and Friedland 2001, chapter 6). However, while these national organizations do promote the use of civic intergroup dialogue, they become involved only when city officials and activists contact them for help. The dialogue groups are not initiated by national organizations attempting to sell a program to a particular community.

In all such programs, local government is involved in some way. In some cities, there is *government sponsorship*: the programs are initiated by a local government that then provides a substantial share of the funding; public officials such as elected representatives, government employees, and fire and safety officials participate alongside community residents. In other cities, the programs are only *government endorsed*: public officials express support for the groups and participate with community residents, but the program is funded and administrated by non-governmental organizations.

Theories and Hypotheses

The urban politics literature suggests several models for understanding why some cities adopt racial dialogue programs and others do not. Each model can be understood as a set of specific hypotheses. The first

model stresses the *dialogue* aspect of race dialogues and centers on the values and priorities of a community. It is suggested by theories of urban policy that identify economic development as cities’ overriding goal (Peterson 1981). In this view, communities may seek to implement visible programs to improve race relations, since the quality of race relations influences whether people perceive a city as undergoing revitalization and attracting investment (Orr and West 2002). Dialogue programs might be part of a strategy of attracting investment and professionals by enhancing cultural awareness and appreciation (Florida 2002; Judd and Fainstein 1999).

Conceived of this way, one would expect civic dialogue to be pursued by cities whose development priorities have centered on high-tech and other creative industries. Such contexts have been described as “new political cultures” or “post-material cultures” and tend to exist in places that have younger, more educated, and affluent populations (Clark 1994, 23; 1996; Inglehart 1977, 1990, 1997), and relatively small African-American populations (Clark 1996). Scholars argue that these cultures have arisen in response to post-industrial economies, new technologies, and globalization (Bennett 1998; Clark 2002; Inglehart 1990). Politics in such places do not center on class and race or form through voluntary groups, but turn toward consumption and lifestyle concerns and take shape through individual motivation (Bennett 1998; Clark 1994, 1996).

Civic dialogue programs might provide a forum for people to pursue what is expected to be the big political project in such contexts—figuring out where one fits in an increasingly complex world (Bennett 1998, 755; see also Hecl 1996). Local governments may choose to foster race dialogues to enhance the city’s image and meet residents’ desires to live in a community that facilitates engaged talk with other residents. Given evidence that liberal citizen lobbying groups have shifted toward post-material concerns (Berry 1999), we might expect nonprofit organizations to pursue such a project because it is consistent with their organizational values.⁴ Thus we have Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 1: If civic dialogue is best understood as an activity that expresses the post-materialist values of new generations of relatively affluent residents, then dialogue programs should be more likely in cities

⁴This model is also consistent with evidence that deliberative forms of action may have greater appeal among whites than among people of color (Poletta 2002; Ryfe 2002).

with higher levels of median household income among whites, larger proportions of whites holding bachelor's degrees, and a lower median age.

A second model for explaining the presence of dialogue programs stresses the *racial* aspect of racial dialogues. Rather than conceptualizing civic dialogue programs as a policy oriented toward enhancing affluent residents' quality of life, we can posit that these race-focused dialogues are more akin to redistributive policy (Peterson 1981, 158–62). In cities with less affluence and more inequality, we can expect politics to be rooted in the traditional dimensions of class and race (Clark 1996).

If dialogue programs express a yearning for social justice, we might expect them to occur in places where there is a large store of racial resources. Research on the election of black mayors and black city legislators shows that it is only in the presence of relatively strong political and economic resources—organizations and capital that enable racially marginalized groups to organize and articulate their desires to government—that we should expect policies to reflect the interests of marginalized racial groups (Karnig and Welch 1980). In this investigation, I examine the presence of such resources among African Americans and Latinos, as well as the recent rate of growth in the nonwhite population. The changing demographic composition of U.S. cities within the last several decades has sparked policy innovations that address these changes (see Schneider and Teske 1992, 743).

Although some work on participatory democracy suggests that nonwhites view deliberative efforts as “all talk and no action,” it is nevertheless plausible that racial resources have a positive relationship with the presence of civic dialogue. Some contemporary activism among people of color uses talk as an integral part of organizing (Polletta 2002, chapter 7; Warren 2001). In addition, relationships between whites and members of marginalized racial groups are a form of power that may be a necessary precondition for securing redistributive policy (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Stone 1989, 2001, 2004).

Thus we can derive a clear set of hypotheses from a second model that identifies civic intergroup dialogue programs as responses to desires for *social justice*.

Hypothesis 2: If civic dialogue is best understood as the pursuit of social justice, dialogue groups should be pursued more often where we find racial resources and greater group-based economic inequalities, namely larger gaps between the median household incomes of

non-Hispanic whites and Blacks and Latinos,⁵ larger percentages of nonwhites holding bachelor's degrees, higher percentages of nonwhites within the city population, larger recent increases in the nonwhite population, the presence of civil rights groups, and the presence of a media outlet targeted to nonwhites.

A third model casts civic dialogue as a way to advance democracy and, hence, suggests hypotheses related to *government form*. Regardless of whether post-material values or concerns for social justice drive the desire for civic dialogue, we might expect communities to pursue programs that put public officials and residents in direct contact when they have already chosen to provide more substantial linkages between local leaders and residents. Local government forms such as district elections, an elected mayor rather than a city manager (hired, not elected), a smaller ratio of residents per council member, and links between civic organizations (such as neighborhood associations) and local government are all indicators of existing linkages (Davidson and Korbel 1981; Engstrom and McDonald 1981; Hirlinger 1992; Karnig and Welch 1980; McManus 1978; Welch 1990; Welch and Bledsoe 1988).⁶ Thus, we have a third set of hypotheses related to *government form*.

Hypothesis 3: Civic dialogue programs on race are more likely to emerge in contexts of greater resident-government linkages, namely, the presence of district elections, a mayor as chief operating officer, a smaller number of residents per council member, and links to neighborhood associations on the local government web page.

In addition to these primary hypotheses reflecting different views of the nature of civic dialogue, I explore several other hypotheses that have the potential to broaden our understanding of policy choice. First, to the extent that we view the history of race relations in the United States as relevant to the strategies communities have pursued, we might expect southern states, with their distinctive histories as

⁵I analyzed relationships between program presence and income gaps between non-Hispanic whites and all Census racial groups. Only the white-Hispanic and white-black gaps exhibited statistically significant relationships in multivariate specifications.

⁶Other predictors of resident-government linkages were collected, including previous experience with mandated citizen participation in the policy process [i.e., vestiges of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act or former participants in the 1966 Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act (Karnig and Welch 1980)] and citizen seats on boards and commissions. Both are omitted due to lack of variation (few cities exhibited the former; 90% had the latter).

former slave states, to constitute a special case (Black and Black 1987). Are communities in this region more or less likely than cities in other parts of the country to implement dialogue programs? Do choices to promote racial dialogue reflect a different set of underlying forces in the South?

Hypothesis 4: The choice to pursue race dialogue is distinctive in southern cities.

Second, are cities more likely to adopt dialogue programs if they are located in a state where a non-profit or government agency such as the state League of Women Voters or the state human relations commission has decided to promote dialogue groups across the state? Such professional organizations (and entrepreneurs within them) can actively facilitate the spread of policy innovations like civic dialogue (Balla 2001; Mintrom 1997; Walker 1969) and are sometimes cited as an infrastructure promoting the spread of civic engagement (Skocpol et al. 1993). Accordingly, I expect the following:

Hypothesis 5: Civic dialogue programs are more likely to emerge in states in which a statewide government agency or nonprofit organization promoted the use of these programs.

It is possible that all of these models offer insight into local decisions to promote dialogue groups but that the models operate in different ways in different types of cities. The post-materialist model predicts that dialogue will be used in areas of greater affluence, where residents are focused on higher-order needs, while the social justice model suggests it is communities of lower affluence, inequality and a large store of racial resources that will turn to dialogue to address long-standing conflicts. In fieldwork related to this project, in-depth interviews with administrators and public officials have suggested that the post-materialist and the social justice models may fit in different contexts. In more affluent, predominantly white cities, civic dialogue programs seem to arise in response to the desires of well-educated residents desiring greater interracial harmony. In less affluent cities with more diverse populations, they seem to arise as one strategy in a long line of attempts to reduce inequality. Thus, in order to understand the conditions that give rise to civic dialogue, we need to test for the possibility that different patterns of influence produce dialogue programs in low-income versus high-income cities.

Hypothesis 6: In higher-income communities, the use of dialogue will be more associated with variables linked to post-material values, while in lower-income

communities, it will be more associated with variables associated with inequality and racial resources.

Finally, since government involvement in the public sphere may either be regarded skeptically or may be welcomed as a necessary component of these race dialogues as discussed earlier, it is important to investigate whether the conditions that give rise to government-sponsored programs differ from those motivating merely government-endorsed programs (programs sponsored by nonprofits). To understand how we get dialogue groups and what we might expect them to achieve, I test the following:

Hypothesis 7: The types of conditions that produce government-sponsored dialogue programs differ significantly from the conditions that produce mere government endorsement.⁷

Data and Methods

To test the hypotheses outlined above, I collected data on medium-sized census-designated central cities in a sample of 18 states representative of the entire United States. I chose to focus on central cities because they are comparable in terms of residential and economic centrality in a metropolitan area (Hill, Brennan, and Wolman 1998; Ottensmann 1996). Cities are designated as “central cities” if they meet a threshold of population density and employment centrality set by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. There can be more than one central city in a metropolitan area. I chose to focus on medium cities, those with populations between 50,000 and 250,000, to limit the scope of the study and to control for the different nature of political processes that may occur in cities of different size. Focusing on medium-sized cities in these states limits my ability to generalize these results to urban political processes in larger and smaller cities. However, medium-sized cities constitute important sites of population growth and demographic change. Understanding the conditions that may lead such communities to choose to address race relations through dialogue programs serves as a step toward

⁷This distinction runs across a range of partnerships. I use a dichotomy for the purposes of these analyses because government-sponsorship is distinct from government endorsement in its symbolic importance and in its connection to policy decisions. Both facets suggest differences in the factors associated with sponsorship as opposed to mere endorsement. For example, in the racial justice model, we would expect particularly large stores of racial resources to be associated with government sponsorship as opposed to merely government endorsement.

understanding the role of deliberation in urban civic life.⁸

The sample of 18 states was constructed by randomly choosing two states from each of the nine Census-designated regions. All medium-sized Census-designated central cities in these states were included in the study.⁹ Research assistants and I then conducted internet searches, text-searches of local newspapers, and called city clerks, newspaper city editors, civil rights organizations, and local human rights commissions to determine whether a community-wide dialogue program on race relations had taken place in each of these 141 cities within the past 15 years, the time span in which most programs have arisen.¹⁰ I defined a community-wide dialogue program as a program in which (1) volunteers from across the community (not just public officials), had been recruited to participate in (2) face-to-face conversations about (3) intergroup relations (including race, ethnicity, and immigration), (4) over more than one session within a three-month span.

When gathering this information, I determined whether a local government such as the city government (including a city agency such as a civil rights department), or a county government (including an agency such as a human relations commission), administered the program, or whether it was conducted by a nonprofit organization. In all but three cases in which the program was not administered by a local government, public officials participated alongside residents.¹¹

Information on the independent variables was gathered from U.S. Census data, searches of internet and newspaper resources, and extensive calls to local officials and activists. Details on variable construction are included in the online appendix at <http://www.journalofpolitics.org>.¹²

⁸The hypotheses tested here are derived from theories developed in relation to larger cities. Their applicability to medium-sized cities is an important empirical question that has received far too little attention. This article is an important step toward such a test.

⁹The states include California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Please see the online appendix for a list of cities.

¹⁰Diagnostics indicated that one city, Fort Collins, Colorado, exerted undue influence on the results. Fort Collins is therefore omitted from the multivariate analyses that follow.

¹¹To maximize the number of cases, these three cases are retained. When these cases are omitted, individual coefficients do not differ in their direction or significance, and tests for the significance of sets of coefficients stay the same.

¹²A second research assistant conducted reliability checks on the presence of programs, the presence of civil rights organizations, media targeted to marginalized racial groups, and government forms by independently gathering the information and checking the findings against the initial results. All discrepancies were settled with

Results

Of the 141 cities investigated in this study, 68 (48%) had an intergroup dialogue program within the last 15 years, sponsored by either a local government or nonprofit organization, in which volunteers from the community and public officials discussed race relations over a period of several weeks or months. In 33 of these cities (23% of the whole sample), the programs were sponsored in whole or in part by a local government through financial support or administrative assistance.

Preliminary bivariate analyses revealed that median household income is not related to the presence of these programs.¹³ The average median household income among cities with programs was \$40,103, as compared to \$39,038 in cities without programs ($t = .580$, one-tailed $p = .282$). However, the characteristics associated with race dialogue in high-income cities appeared to differ from those in low-income cities. The following multivariate models test (1) the power of the various models predicting community choices to pursue dialogue, (2) whether the constellation of conditions driving such choices differs across high- and low-income cities, and (3) whether different conditions explain the pursuit of government-sponsored as opposed to government-endorsed programs.

Turning to the first two questions, Table 1 presents a binary logit model predicting the presence or absence of a racial dialogue program (of any type) using the full range of hypotheses outlined earlier as well as a set of interaction terms capturing differences in effects for high- versus low-income cities.¹⁴ Preliminary analyses of a fully interactive model suggested several effects differed significantly for high-income cities.¹⁵ The model includes interactions for these conditions.

additional research. We paid close attention to cases in which no program or civil rights organization could be identified. These were researched until at least three independent sources confirmed the absence of a program or civil rights organization.

¹³The results are provided in the online appendix at www.journalofpolitics.org.

¹⁴Interactions are between the dichotomous indicator of status as a high-income city and the independent variable. All variables except those indicating presence of civil rights organizations, nonwhite media, location in the south, and location in a state with statewide promotion of programs were rescaled such that the mean = 0 before computing the interaction. Thus, the "main effect" coefficient for "High-Income City" represents the effect of that independent variable when the values of other interaction variables are zero.

¹⁵Interactions were retained only if they added explanatory power to the model. A test for improvement of fit showed that inclusion of the entire set of deleted interactions would produce no significant improvement in model performance ($\text{Chi}^2 = 2.06$, 6 d.f., $p = .914$). See the online appendix for the full model results.

TABLE 1 Predicting the Presence of Civic Dialogue Programs on Race

	Total Effect, High-Income Cities	
POSTMATERIALIST VARIABLES		
White income	-.35 (.13)	
White education	-7.43 (4.06)	
Average age	.21 (.09)	
SOCIAL JUSTICE VARIABLES		
Change in nonwhite population	-.17 (.28)	
Racial income inequality	.36 (.14)	
Nonwhite education	38.95 (10.03)	
Percent nonwhite in 2000	7.79 (2.54)	
Civil rights organizations	-1.83 (.93)	
Nonwhite media	.74 (.57)	
RESIDENT-GOVERNMENT LINKAGES		
CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES		
Southern state	1.06 (.69)	
Statewide promotion of programs	.14 (.69)	
CITY INCOME and INTERACTIONS		
High-income city	-3.23 (1.51)	
White income*High income	.57 (.16)	.22 (.08)
Racial income gap*High income	-.30 (.14)	.06 (.06)
Nonwhite education*High income	-38.45 (10.10)	.50 (3.74)
Percent nonwhite*High income	-12.79 (3.61)	-5.00 (2.53)
Civil rights organization*High income	4.45 (1.58)	2.62 (1.13)
Resident-government linkages*High income	-.82 (.48)	.62 (.35)
Constant	-6.46 (4.87)	
N	140	
Wald Chi ²	39.76	
Percent correctly classified	80.00%	

Note: Entries are logit coefficients, robust standard errors in parentheses. Entries in the right-hand column reflect the combined effect of each variable and its interaction with "High-Income City." Significance tests in this column are relative to a null hypothesis of $b = 0$ in a high-income city. Bold results are significant at $p < .05$, one-tailed test.

The results in Table 1 reveal that the models that fit in low-income cities differ from those that explain adoption in high-income cities. The model includes six significant interaction terms, indicating a variety of discernible differences between the processes at work in high- and low-income communities. For the variables used in the interaction terms, the main-effect coefficients indicate the relationship between a city characteristic and the adoption of a dialogue program in low-income cities. The interaction terms indicate how effects for a given variable differ in high- versus low-income cities. The right-hand column displays the overall effect of a given variable in high-income cities (calculated as the main effect plus the interaction term).

Table 1 suggests that while resident-government linkages appear to be an important determinant of program adoption across all cities, the social justice and post-materialist models fit differently in low- and high-income cities. In low-income cities, the data

support the social justice explanation. In high-income cities, there is only weak support for the social justice explanation, but the post-materialist model receives some support.¹⁶ In low-income cities, communities are more likely to adopt dialogue programs under conditions that are the *opposite* of those predicted by the post-materialist model: lower white incomes, less-educated whites, and older populations. There is support for the social justice model in the form of positive coefficients for racial income inequality, nonwhite education, and nonwhite population

¹⁶The cities are clustered by state, potentially violating the assumption of independent observations. To the extent that this violation is due to the diffusion of information through a statewide organization, my model includes an adequate control variable. Nevertheless, to minimize any inefficiency due to resulting heteroskedasticity, all multivariate analyses use Huber/White (robust) standard errors. The small number of cases prevents computing weighted least squares with the cluster command in Stata.

percentage. Contrary evidence comes from the negative coefficient for the presence of civil rights organizations.¹⁷

Among high-income cities, the social justice model receives mixed support: there is a significant predicted coefficient only for the presence of civil rights organizations, and the coefficient is significant in the wrong direction for the proportion of the population that is nonwhite. In contrast to what I find among low-income cities, there is some support among high-income cities for the post-materialist model, in the form of a positive and significant overall effect for white income.¹⁸

These results appear to support the expectation that the structure of relationships that lead to the pursuit of dialogue programs differs significantly across high- and low-income cities. A joint test of the interaction terms and the main effect for high versus low income confirms that this is the case.¹⁹

If the conditions underlying dialogue programs differ for low- versus high-income cities, it seems even more reasonable to ask whether different forces may be at work in cities where local governments *sponsor* these programs—partially or entirely funding them and providing administrative support and participation of public officials—as opposed to just endorsing them verbally and through officials' participation. To pursue this question, I employ a multinomial logit analysis that makes it possible to simultaneously and separately test the conditions that predict adoption of government-sponsored and government-endorsed dialogue programs. This model allows coefficients for each variable to differ according to government's level of involvement. It also makes it possible to test whether the entire structure of relationships, or possibly just individual coefficients, differ significantly across equations. For each equation, I employ the same model reported in Table 1, including interaction terms.

Table 2 displays the results of this analysis. The interaction terms again allow for an examination of how the conditions supporting dialogue groups may vary across low- and high-income cities. Turning to the main comparison in Table 2, across levels of government involvement, we find a clear pattern in regard

to the overall structure of relationships. The relationships associated with each type of government involvement are very similar, as confirmed by the mostly insignificant Chi² tests for differences between individual coefficients across equations and by a test for difference in the overall structure of relationships in the two equations (see last column).

Nevertheless, several coefficients do differ significantly across the two types of involvement. Older populations encourage local adoption of government-endorsed programs but not government-sponsored programs. By contrast, location in the South and smaller increases in the nonwhite population both encourage government-sponsored programs while having no effect on adoption of government-endorsed programs. Finally, focusing on the effects of nonwhite education, we find that the difference in effects across high- and low-income cities is greater where city governments have endorsed dialogue programs than where city governments have sponsored these programs.

These isolated differences may signal some meaningful points of divergence in the political processes underlying government sponsorship versus endorsement. For example, consider the fact that location in the South significantly increases the odds that a city government will sponsor a dialogue program, but there is no parallel effect of southern location for non-profit sponsorship. This pattern raises the possibility that perhaps, in this region of the country, officials are turning to dialogue as a way to avoid taking more radical action—or alternatively, they may feel forced to step in more often because civil society actors do not.

However, such findings—intriguing though they may be—are clearly footnotes to the larger story of similarity. Two points might reasonably be taken from this dominant pattern. First, the pursuit of dialogue groups seems to result from *community* choice processes. With a few interesting exceptions, there is little here to suggest that we should distinguish sharply between “action by government” and “action through civil society” when it comes to the conditions that promote civic dialogue initiatives. Second, if one suspects that governments fund and administrate dialogue programs merely as an expedient way to appear to do something about a difficult problem (while actually doing nothing), these results would seem surprising. The conditions that prompt governments to sponsor dialogue groups are generally similar to those that prompt nonprofit organizations (which are often focused on civil rights and racial justice agendas) to do the same.

¹⁷Separate analyses indicate that the negative sign of this coefficient was not driven by the presence of a particular type of civil rights organization.

¹⁸Checks for multicollinearity and alternative specifications support the robustness of the results in Table 1 and Table 2, below.

¹⁹Chi² = 24.43, 7 d.f., *p* = .001.

TABLE 2 Predicting Presence of Dialogue Programs, by Government Involvement

	Government- Endorsed	Government- Sponsored	Test of Difference (Chi ²)
POSTMATERIALIST VARIABLES			
White income	-.36 (.14)	-.33 (.15)	.05
White education	-4.99 (4.82)	-10.38 (5.22)	1.00
Average age	.28 (.11)	.03 (.11)	4.01
SOCIAL JUSTICE VARIABLES			
Change in nonwhite population	.15 (.35)	-1.73 (.83)	5.02
Racial income gap	.28 (.16)	.48 (.17)	1.33
Nonwhite education	41.67 (11.17)	38.57 (11.77)	.21
Percent nonwhite in 2000	8.70 (2.58)	5.97 (3.62)	.70
Civil rights organizations	-1.74 (1.10)	-2.23 (1.00)	.27
Nonwhite media	1.04 (.77)	.51 (.58)	.51
RESIDENT-GOVERNMENT LINKAGES			
	1.30 (.43)	1.90 (.46)	2.51
CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES			
Southern state	.48 (.87)	2.44 (.81)	4.49
Statewide promotion of programs	.01 (.74)	1.03 (.72)	2.37
CITY INCOME, INTERACTIONS			
High-income city	-3.90 (1.60)	-2.50 (1.84)	.82
White income*High income	.59 (.16)	.58 (.19)	.01
Racial income gap*High income	-.21 (.16)	-.48 (.18)	2.31
Nonwhite education*High income	-49.57 (12.44)	-32.57 (10.94)	4.11
Percent nonwhite*High income	-15.88 (4.34)	-12.15 (4.37)	.71
Civil rights organization*High income	4.43 (1.52)	4.70 (1.97)	.03
Resident-government linkages*High income	-.50 (.53)	-1.20 (.57)	1.65
Constant	-9.18 (5.78)	-2.93 (5.24)	
N		140	
Wald Chi ²		75.32	
Chi ² test of differences in two structures			19.85 (<i>p</i> = .404)

Note: Entries in first two columns are multinomial logit coefficients, robust standard errors in parentheses. Bold results are significant at *p* < .05, one-tailed test.

Research related to this project corroborates this interpretation. My interviews with public officials administering these programs suggest that government sponsorship is not just a way to appease critics while taking no substantial action. When city council or commission members, leaders of human rights departments and other related city agencies talk about their reasons for implementing a dialogue program, they typically describe the program as a necessity in the city's attempts to improve race relations. Of the 26 interviews I have completed with public officials conducting and participating in dialogue in these and other cities around the country, none of the respondents spoke of the program as a recreational activity. Many claimed that face-to-face communication among residents and public officials was the only way to increase understanding across racial lines and incorporate marginalized racial groups into the power structures of their city. In at least two of the cities with city-sponsored programs, elected public officials in

the city government were far from unanimous in their support for the program, and at times elected officials seemed less enamored of the prospects of the programs leading to real policy change than were the nonelected agency heads administering the program. Nevertheless, these interviews combine with the results reported above to suggest that it is erroneous to assume that publicly funded intergroup dialogue is an empty gesture toward social justice.

Discussion and Conclusion

This examination of the conditions under which interracial dialogue programs arise offers clues to both their origins and their nature. The evidence gives little support to claims that this form of public talk is primarily an expression of affluent residents' desires for self-actualization or their concern for lifestyle issues. Instead, explanations that center on social justice—

that suggest civic dialogues on race will arise in cities with high levels of inequality and large stores of racial resources—receive more support. This is especially the case in low-income cities. In addition, I find that civic dialogue programs, in which members of the community engage in face-to-face conversations with public officials, are more likely in cities characterized by more direct institutionalized linkages between local leaders and the public. I find that many of the social, economic, and political conditions that promote dialogue groups *do* vary significantly across high- and low-income cities, but *do not* vary nearly so much across cities with government-sponsored programs versus nonprofit-sponsored programs.

Taken together, these results suggest that the emergence of civic dialogue programs on race are driven by the needs of a community's marginalized racial groups just as much if not more than by the desires of affluent community members to engage in talk about other racial cultures. Such a result challenges complaints that civic dialogue programs are "all talk and no action" or that members of marginalized communities see little utility in deliberative democracy. While it is likely that in some locations, public officials do opt for dialogue programs as a politically expedient way to appear to do something about race relations, the evidence presented here is hard to square with blanket assertions that dialogue groups are "merely symbolic."

Since the use of talk as a response to tense race relations cannot be easily dismissed as an empty gesture on behalf of public officials, or a strategy people turn to only when other basic needs are addressed, we have reason to give more consideration to civic deliberation as a component of urban public policy and urban civic life. This is not a type of policy or strategy we normally notice. However, communities are increasingly using public talk in a variety of forms, not just racial dialogue programs. This study has made use of a unique data set to reveal when one aspect of deliberative democracy is likely to arise in contemporary U.S. cities. Students of politics have much to learn from the way in which communities are turning to talk as a way to address public problems and what these types of efforts are accomplishing.

Indeed, focusing on the innovative ways that communities are using deliberation to address conflict provides a counterpoint to debates about polarization. Administrators of the programs under investigation in this study claim that the race dialogues build common ground, but that they also involve listening to people who may hold divergent perspectives. In other words, these programs are an example of people around the

country making an attempt to address divisions within their communities in a productive fashion. Participants in these programs are choosing to focus on the different identities, perspectives, and experiences across people in their communities, rather than ignoring or demonizing them (Walsh 2004a). These conversations are not about partisan polarization per se, but they are a more hopeful indicator of the way people are dealing with conflict than much of the rhetoric around polarization conveys.

These programs are also an example of communication between public officials and ordinary citizens that is part of a wider shift in the provision of public services, and deserves further attention on that basis. Government involvement in the public sphere is often regarded skeptically, but a greater role in fostering public discussion may be required to ensure that the shift toward public-private collaboration in governance nourishes democratic life and citizenship rather than dampens it (Smith and Ingram 2002). Moreover, deliberative practices that are rooted in government institutions may be required to provide the incentive and resources to engage low-income as well as affluent residents in the practice of deliberative democracy.

This article has shown, however, that a socioeconomic model of participation only incompletely captures the use of civic dialogue programs at the community level. Although lower-income individuals may not have the resources necessary to volunteer for these programs, it is not the case that the programs are only flourishing in wealthier communities. Instead, even in lower-income cities, and particularly in lower-income cities with substantial economic inequality, people have turned to intergroup dialogue as a strategy for improving race relations.

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