

# Who Writes to the Editor?

## Demographic and Cultural Contours of a Mediated Public Sphere

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February 1, 2010

### Abstract

This is the second paper based on my 2002 data collection of letters to the editor. I am hoping to publish it in a political science journal and, as such, framing it as one in an illustrious line of “Who ...” pieces (who votes, who governs, who deliberates, etc.). I am eager to get feedback from the APWG on the study, its approach, and its findings.

The image of the deliberative public sphere, although empirically and theoretically contested, is a central figure of democratic thought and practice. Perhaps more striking, citizens’ everyday ideas of how democracy should operate usually include a prominent place for public, inclusive debate and discussion. In other words, even though American politics does not have—and never had—a forum approximating the ideal public sphere, elites and citizens alike consistently act *as if* participation in a common public sphere were the staple of democratic practice. This paper examines one of the ways citizens seek to enact a public sphere using available means of technological mediation.

**(Change opening so it’s not the same as in *AJS*)**

Recent research suggests that citizens’ access to face-to-face deliberation is declining. Citizens now have less connection to communities and to civic organizations than they had in previous generations (Putnam, 2000), and they perceive issues of public importance as being “distant” (Boltanski, 1999; Moeller, 1999; Eliasoph, 1997) and beyond their reach. The ordinary activities

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\*I gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of the editorial page staff at the Greensboro *News & Record* in the data collection phase. This research was partially funded by a University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill Junior Faculty Research Grant. The paper has been improved by detailed discussions at the Cultural and Political Sociology Workshop at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and, particular, comments from Raj Ghoshal, Anne Hunter, and Andrew Payton. Expert research assistance was provided by Sondra Smolek, Kristin Kenneavy, Stephen Vaisey, Laura Erb, Carlos Gasperi, and Yalitza Ramos.

of citizenship—from voting to contacting representatives, running for office, and participating in demonstrations—are a decreasing part of citizens’ lives (Robinson and Godbey, 1999), a short-term increase around the 2008 election campaign notwithstanding. Previous research (Perrin, 2006) shows that an important reason for this decline is the absence of fora for political discourse. Citizens think more about politics, and participate more, when they have access to vibrant, deliberative public spaces.

One way of substituting for the absent public sphere is to use communications technologies to simulate some elements of public discourse.<sup>1</sup> This article examines one such forum in which citizens attempt to enact public communication: the letters-to-the-editor column found in virtually all newspapers. Using a unique data set consisting of three months’ worth of letters received by the Greensboro, N.C., *News & Record* and surveys answered by their authors, I offer a comprehensive portrait of the public seeking to engage in this public sphere and the ways they try to address it.

## 1 Idealized and Mediated Public Spheres

From the early days of the public sphere (Habermas, 1968a,b) and New England town meetings (Mansbridge, 1980) to more recent concerns with mass media and citizen nonparticipation (Schudson, 1995*b*; Page, 1996; Hanson, 1993), theories of democracy place a high value on political discussion. This includes traditions such as democratic deliberation (Habermas, 1962 [1989]; Calhoun, 1992) as well as less-constrained notions of communication such as “free spaces” (Polletta, 1999) and citizens’ access to disagreeing perspectives (Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague, 2004; Huckfeldt, Ikeda and Pappi, 2005; Mutz and Mondak, 2006). While an important strain of thought appropriately challenges the overly rationalist bias of deliberation theory (Benhabib, 1992; Fraser, 1989, 1997; Schudson, 1992*a*, 1997), the theoretical traditions are nearly unanimous on the importance of citizens’ ability to express their own concerns and listen seriously to the concerns of others.

One approach to addressing this problem is to seek to create strictly deliberative spaces by bringing together citizens to hold in-person discussions on matters of the day. This approach is

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<sup>1</sup>Habermas goes a step further, arguing that technological mediation need not compromise the deliberative character of public discussion (Habermas, 2006).

associated with the work of James Fishkin (e.g., Fishkin and Luskin, 2005; Ackerman and Fishkin, 2004) and others (Leib, 2004). While these approaches have met with some success, particularly at getting small groups of citizens to agree on decisions within relatively limited scopes, they do not scale to medium or large publics. More problematically, the relatively high cost and commitment of engagement means the crucial agenda-setting process must be done outside the deliberative body and threatens to reproduce existing social inequalities based on race, class, and gender (Ridgeway and Bourg, 2004) and other conversational dynamics (Gibson, 2000; Mills, 2003).

Danielle S. Allen argues that the popularity of the deliberative ideal in America rests on a prior false hope: the ideal of “wholeness.” American political culture, she claims, places undue value on viewing the public as a unified whole and, therefore, on erasing substantive differences among citizens and groups (Allen, 2004).<sup>2</sup> Political speech that reinforces this sense of communal continuity falls more into what James Carey calls “ritualistic” communication (as opposed to the more utilitarian “transmission” form; see Carey (1989)). Recent entries in the debate over deliberation have, similarly, emphasized disagreement. Cass Sunstein’s provocative discussion of group polarization (Sunstein, 2000), for example, argues that successful deliberative institutions should support a mix of like-minded and disagreeing groups. One important element of such public spaces is access to disagreement: the possibility that a citizen will encounter, and consider, opposing viewpoints (Sunstein, 2000; Mutz, 2006; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague, 2004; Huckfeldt, 2007).

There is ample justification, therefore, for the contention that American politics does not have a forum approximating the public sphere, and furthermore that no such forum has ever actually existed. Nevertheless, elites and citizens “think with” (Schudson, 1992*b*) the public sphere as a democratic ideal. Citizens valorize “moderate” positions as compromises among social extremes. They advocate democratic decision-making through active debate and discussion, not through the clash of opposing interests, nor through the benign leadership of elites (Morone, 1990; Perrin, 2006, 2005*b*). Indeed, “special interests” is an epithet in American politics, used to label opponents as beholden to something other than the collective polity. The democracy Americans imagine looks strikingly like the normative theory of the public sphere.

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<sup>2</sup>Vanessa Beasley’s excellent study of presidential rhetoric (Beasley, 2004) shows, in detail, how presidents have sought to reinforce this value.

## 2 Letters to the Editor as Semideliberative Interventions

American newspapers have long carried letters to the editor columns as part of their editorial pages. Michael Schudson reports that 19th-century newspapers contained reader-to-reader communications on everyday issues, although generally offering advice more than opinion on the issues of the day (Schudson, 1995*a*, 50). The general practice of publishing information in the form of letters was a staple of newspapers even in the colonial era (Bleyer, 1927, 74, 79) and was practiced in the British press in the early 18th century (Bromley, 1998, 148).

From the perspective of newspaper editors, the letters serve a dual purpose: they offer readers an opportunity to respond *to the newspaper itself*, and they offer a “public forum” for discussion of issues of the day. These dual roles—and the dual audiences they imply—sometimes come into conflict with one another. In a formal sense, the letters column is supposed to be about the newspaper it appears in: comments about articles, editorials, and other material. The guidelines of the Greensboro *News & Record* require that letters “respond... to columns, editorials, other letter writers, or stories in other parts of the [paper]” (Editorial Page Staff, 2002), although this rule is honored more in the breach—indeed, of the letters in this study that were printed, fully 71% did not refer to any identifiable prior item in the paper. Thus while editors often say they seek letters that are directly relevant to the newspaper, in practice readers and editors alike understand the column as a forum for more general commentary on the public the paper both serves and constitutes. Thomas Feyer, letters editor of the *New York Times*, is explicit in welcoming “the thousands who write about what gets them worked up, or what moves them. And no subject is off-limits, within the bounds of good taste” (Feyer, 2003). Echoing the sentiments of other editors, Feyer continues: “. . . my core belief as letters editor is that healthy, informed debate is the lifeblood of a strong democracy” (Feyer, 2004). Richardson and Franklin take issue with the assumption that letter writers are “regular people,” providing anecdotal evidence of collaboration among letter writers during during British electin campaigns (Richardson and Franklin, 2004). Similar anecdotes abound—including that of a group of talented high-school students required to write for class who achieved a high acceptance rate at the *New York Times*, which usually accepts approximately 2% of letters received (Radosh, 2004)—and activist organizations routinely encourage supporters to write.

However, in my view this phenomenon is not a threat to considering letters valid representations of public thinking for two reasons:

1. There is no evidence that organized letter writing is particularly widespread—or, certainly, that *published* letters tend to be the result of such campaigns; indeed, evidence in this paper (see table 3) shows that only a small minority of letters (4.7%) were written at the urging of an association. Also:
2. Even letters written at the urging of an organization must be signed and sent by individuals, and there is no reason to assume these individuals do not actually believe what they put in the letters. Letters, in other words, are cross-sectional representations of individuals' opinions during an over-time process of opinion formation. Organizations are legitimate parts of many individuals' opinion formation, so the grounds for dismissing organizationally-based letters are thin. Letters, in other words, represent public discourse, if not necessarily aggregated individual opinion (Adorno, 1964 [2005]; Perrin, 2005*a*)

Rosenau's (1974) classic investigation of nonelectoral political participation refers to letters to the editor only in passing, and combined with the discursively quite distinct practice of writing letters to representatives. Early studies (e.g., Buell, 1975; Volgy et al., 1977) refuted the commonly-held notion that letter-writers were simply cranks and eccentrics, arguing instead that the forum provided a space for serious political talk. Hart (2001*b*) found that letter writers were significantly older and more politically engaged than nonwriters in their communities, but did not consider the relationship between letters' content and the public they addressed.

Letters to the editor have rarely been used on a large scale as social scientific data. There have been some small-scale studies of local letter-writers' opinions on specific issues (Hill, 1981; Kinloch, 1997) and cultural patterns (Halkias, 1998), but no study has sought to consider the general tone or content of the Letters column. Recent work in North Carolina considering letters published in eight North Carolina newspapers represents a great step forward and suggests that the letters column is biased demographically if not politically compared to the state in general (Cooper, Knotts and Haspel, 2009), but lack of access to unpublished letters means these biases cannot be precisely measured.

Other work has concentrated on the biases involved in *selection* of letters to the editor. Small-town newspapers like those studied in Hart (2001*b*) tend to publish over 90% of the letters they receive, making the gatekeeper function nearly irrelevant. Most medium- and large-size dailies, such as the one studied here, are more selective. Renfro (1979) found that the gatekeeping filter introduced little actual bias in a sample of letters received and published at one important newspaper. Sigelman and Walkosz (1992) found that published letters to the editor reflected the general dimensions of public opinion surrounding the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday debate in Arizona. Grey and Brown (1970), by contrast, found that the gatekeeping function of editors significantly biased the contents of the letters published.

A review of trade publications and ethnographic experiences by Wahl-Jorgensen (2002*b*) established four rules characterizing the selection of letters for publication: relevance, brevity, entertainment, and authority. Civility, in particular, was not a criterion, as editors explained that excluding uncivil voices would violate their image of public deliberation (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004), even though Wahl-Jorgensen (2002*a*) also noted that the San Francisco-area editorial staff she observed often wrote letter writers off as “insane.” A recent study of editorial page contents in general (including, but not limited to, letters to the editor) found that the scope of opinions expressed in letters was similar to that in the op-ed columns (Hoffman and Slater, 2007).

We know remarkably little about who seeks to participate in dialogue in the letters column. Recent public opinion polls suggest that roughly 10-12% of Americans write letters to the editor each year—a small minority, to be sure, and likely overreported, but nevertheless substantial. Most political surveys, if they ask about letter-writing at all, combine letters to the editor with letters to government officials: a very different kind of activity. The National Election Studies asked specifically about letters to the editor between 1964 and 1976, but have not done so since then. An early study using those data (Buell, 1975) found that letter writers were relatively representative of the general population demographically, but somewhat more liberal in politics. Buell argues for understanding letter-to-the-editor writing as “the logical activity of the political activist” (448). In contrast, a 1977 local survey in Pima County, Arizona, found letter writers to be substantially older, more male, and more ideologically polarized than registered voters (Volgy et al., 1977).

The question of gatekeeping—what sorts of letters are more likely to be printed than others—is not central to this paper. <sup>3</sup> I am interested in evaluating what kinds of letters citizens use to *seek* audience in the mediated public sphere; as such, we do not evaluate their likelihood of publication. There is presumably a feedback effect, whereby keen observers who read the letters column learn to use the styles of argument that populate it, so the decision to publish is more than a simple gatekeeping process; rather, it constitutes an iterative intervention in citizens’ attempts to deliberate. However, experience suggests that many writers are not good at gauging that style of argument, perhaps because of pluralistic ignorance (Perrin and Vaisey, 2008; Merton, 1957).

Here, then I conceptualize letter writing as a form of political participation. While we have good information on who votes (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980), signs petitions (Caren, Ghoshal and Ribas, 2009), and even has access to disagreement (Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague, 2004), we have little information about who seeks entry into a public dialogue through letters to the editor. This paper addresses that shortcoming.

### 3 Data and Methods

I draw my data from the Greensboro *News & Record*, the largest-circulation newspaper in Greensboro, North Carolina. The study began on September 1, 2002, and continued through November 30, 2002. Working in collaboration with the staff of the *News & Record*, I gathered, catalogued, and analyzed all the letters *received* by the newspaper during a three-month period in 2002, regardless of whether they were eventually published. Using a modified version of Dillman’s “total design method” (Dillman, 2000), I also conducted a survey of the authors of those letters and of a comparison group of seven-day subscribers to the newspaper who did not write letters during the study period.<sup>4</sup> The letters and survey responses constitute the data for this article.

Newspaper staff provided copies of all letters. Letter writers were contacted with a request to complete the survey in exchange for entry in a drawing for a small prize.<sup>5</sup> The survey contained

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<sup>3</sup>A future paper will address the demographic and rhetorical predictors of publication.

<sup>4</sup>One person originally in the nonwriting subscriber sample wrote a letter to the editor during the study period so was converted to the writer sample.

<sup>5</sup>Details on the data collection can be found on the first author’s website, <http://perrin.socsci.unc.edu/letters>.

demographic background questions, as well as questions about respondents' political engagement and beliefs. It asked about their interest in local and national politics, as well as their sense of political self-efficacy (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995) and their attention to print, internet, and broadcast media. It also asked a series of questions about the decision to write: how long authors spent writing, why they decided to write, and other actions they may have taken regarding the issue they wrote about. In addition, many respondents provided unsolicited commentary beyond the scope of questions on the survey.<sup>6</sup>

In total, 1,113 letters were received and coded in the course of the project. These were written by 970 unique individuals. There were 106 repeat writers. For letters beyond the first, authors received an abbreviated questionnaire that asked only about the most recent letter. Analyses of letters use the letter as the unit of analysis, not the author—multiple letters written by the same author are all included. Twenty letters were written by authors determined to be ineligible for the survey because email or postcards were returned as undeliverable. We received 730 surveys back from letter writers, for an effective adjusted response rate of 66.8% (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2004). Of the 1,113 letters received, 524 were printed in the newspaper, for an acceptance rate of 47%.<sup>7</sup>

Anonymized letter texts and survey responses were entered into a database. Research assistants added information about each letter, including whether, and when, it was published in the paper, and to what items from the newspaper (if any) it referred. Finally, using a custom web-based coding system built in part around CodeRead (Perrin, 2001), the letter texts were coded for topic, scope, coherence, and several other dimensions. In this paper I concentrate on the topic and scope of the letters.

To identify topics, coders worked inductively. For each letter, the web-based coding system presented options consisting of all topics that had been identified in previous letters; coders could

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<sup>6</sup>The analysis of this commentary will be the subject of a future article.

<sup>7</sup>This rate is substantially higher than those at elite, national papers such as the *New York Times* as well as at papers with larger catchment populations. Since the amount of space reserved for letters varies little among papers, but papers' target populations may differ by as much as two orders of magnitude, it follows that publication rates will be higher in papers with smaller target populations. Accordingly, the 47% rate is substantially *lower* than that experienced in many small-town newspapers, which print virtually all non-libelous submissions (Cooper, Knotts and Haspel, 2009; Lauterer, 2006; Hart, 2001*a*).

also add additional topics that had not yet been identified. Later, topics that were substantively identical were collapsed into single topics, but all meaningful distinctions were maintained. All other codes were determined *a priori*. Letter scope points to the largest area to which a letter refers (the newspaper, local area, state, region, nation, or world). These are mutually exclusive values.

For the comparison group, surveys were sent by mail to a total of 1,500 seven-day home delivery subscribers to the *News & Record*. These were a simple random sample drawn from the newspaper's subscriber list. None were returned as undeliverable; a total of 496 were completed, for a response rate of 33%.

### **3.1 The Setting: Greensboro, North Carolina, and Fall 2002**

The nature of these data make it appropriate to consider the specific setting in time and place in which these letters were collected. Greensboro (population 229,000) is the largest city in the surrounding Piedmont Triad region (1.27 million) and the third largest in the state. North Carolina has long been held to be among the most “progressive” of the southern states “. . . especially [in] industrial development, education, and race relations” (V. O. Key, 1949, 205). Its mid-20th-century economy was built on agriculture (particularly tobacco, sweet potatoes, poultry, and hog farming), textiles, and furniture manufacturing (Luebke, 1998, 77–92). By 1990, though, declines in these sectors had paved the way to economic growth in banking (particularly in Charlotte) and high technology (particularly in the so-called “research triangle” of Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill).

Greensboro's economic base is largely in manufacturing, and textiles in particular were central to the city's growth. Thus the massive outmigration of textile industry jobs out of the state (and the country) hit the city hard. The county's major employers are now mostly health care agencies and financial services companies, although some manufacturing remains, both high-tech and in traditional industries such as textiles and tobacco. The city's other claim to fame is its key role in the civil rights movement of the 1960s—the site of some of the earliest sit-ins, the boycott of the local Woolworth's, and (less salubriously) the 1979 massacre of civil rights demonstrators by members of the Ku Klux Klan (Andrews and Biggs, 2006; Ghoshal, 2009; Magarrell and Wesley, 2008).

The *News & Record* is the largest newspaper in the city and the region, with a daily circulation at the time of the study of 63,612 households, or 36.8%, in Guilford County (where Greensboro is located) and 75,607 households, or 14.8% in the Piedmont Triad region. It reached 37% of Triad households receiving any newspaper (Standard Rate and Data Service, 2003). The *News & Record* was the product of a merger between two older party-based newspapers. The younger of these papers, the Republican-leaning *Daily News*, carried letters from readers addressed to the entire readership within its first year of publication in 1909. The Democratic paper, the *Daily Record*, founded in 1890, carried advertisements in the form of letters to the general public from early on, but only began publishing letters on matters of public concern in 1927.<sup>8</sup> The *News & Record* was bought in 1965 by Landmark Communications, a diversified media company owning a few other newspapers along with broadcast and internet companies.

During the three months the data collection was active, two important national events happened, which provided the focus for many letters: the first anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and the 2002 midterm elections. In addition, North Carolina held a contentious race for the U.S. Senate seat vacated by the retirement of Jesse Helms, and there were several local races as well, including one for a state senate seat to which Kay Hagan—now a U.S. Senator—was reelected in 2002. Finally, there were several controversial local issues regarding city development and employment, including the construction of a shipping hub for FedEx at the local airport and a proposal for downtown revitalization centering on a new baseball stadium.

## 4 Results

I begin by presenting descriptive information on letter writers as compared to newspaper readers and the general population. I then continue by describing why letter writers choose to write and the process of writing. Finally, I present a multivariate analysis predicting who writes letters based on demographic and political background information.

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<sup>8</sup>Letters were introduced in the *Daily Record* with no fanfare or introduction, suggesting that the editors expected readers to have experienced the form before.

## 4.1 The Letter-Writing Population

The data collected for this paper allow for a comparison among letter writers, nonwriting newspaper subscribers, and the population of the area the newspaper serves. A summary of this comparison is found in table 1. Consistent with expectations, letter writers were significantly older than the region's population, although somewhat younger than the population of subscribers. Disproportionately few women subscribe to the paper, and they are represented among the letter writers in similar proportion.<sup>9</sup> Both subscribers and writers are significantly more likely to be white than are residents of the region. Educational attainment is generally similar among all three groups. Both subscribers and letter writers are more likely to be wealthier than are citizens of the region in general. Letter writers are also more likely to be very low income, perhaps reflecting the frequency with which college students write. College students' writing frequency is also the principal exception to the rule that writers are generally older than the population at large.

Politically, letter writers are much more likely to be "very conservative" than are members of the general population; in stark contrast, subscribers are much *less* likely to be "very conservative." Subscribers were much more likely to label themselves "moderate" than were letter writers or members of the general population. Letter-writers report greater interest in both local and national affairs than do their nonwriting peers. They spend somewhat less time watching television. Interestingly, they read the *News & Record* with somewhat less frequency than the reader sample, although this may be an artifact of the sampling (the readership sample was drawn from seven-day subscribers). Finally, substantially fewer writers than readers listed the *News & Record* as their principal news source; radio and internet sources made up the difference.

## 4.2 Writing Letters

Letter writers reported a wide range of amounts of time spent writing their letters, from less than 10 minutes to over three hours (table 2).

Letter writers were asked to list the reasons they chose to write their letters. They could choose as many options as they wished from the list presented. The results of this question are in table

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<sup>9</sup>Because newspapers are often read by several members of a subscribing household, but letters are usually written by an individual person, direct comparison between the groups should be attempted with caution.

Table 1: Demographics of Letter-writers, Nonwriting subscribers, and Region

	<b>Letter-writers</b>	<b>Non-Writing Subscribers</b>	<b>County/Region</b>
Median age	53	60	35 <sup>a</sup>
% Female	40	44	52 <sup>a</sup>
<i>Race (%)</i>			
White	88	91	64 <sup>a</sup>
Black	3.5	7.3	29 <sup>a</sup>
Other	8.4	1.9	4.7 <sup>a</sup>
<i>Education</i>			
Grade school or less	6.3	1.2	5.4 <sup>a</sup>
Some high school	1.9	2.2	11.7 <sup>a</sup>
Completed high school	6.3	15.4	25.1 <sup>a</sup>
Some college	18.6	21	27.6 <sup>a</sup>
Completed college	24.5	23.6	21.3 <sup>a</sup>
Some post-college	11.1	14.3	
Graduate degree	31.3	22.2	9 <sup>a</sup>
<i>Household Income</i>			
≤\$15,000	15.5	4.0	14 <sup>c</sup>
\$15,000–\$25,000	4.7	9.6	13 <sup>c</sup>
\$25,000–\$40,000	9.4	14.7	20 <sup>c</sup>
\$40,000–\$55,000	12.9	15.4	
\$40,000–\$59,999			20 <sup>c</sup>
\$55,000–\$70,000	10.4	15.8	
\$60,000–\$75,000			10 <sup>c</sup>
\$70,000–\$100,000	17.4	21.4	
\$75,000–\$100,000			10 <sup>c</sup>
≥\$100,000	19.2	17.4	13 <sup>c</sup>
<i>Number of Children (%)</i>			
0	19	13	31 <sup>b</sup>
1	25	19	18 <sup>b</sup>
2	31	37	25 <sup>b</sup>
3	15	20	14 <sup>b</sup>
4+	10	11	12 <sup>b</sup>
<i>Political Outlook</i>			
Very conservative	20.5	6.3	13.3 <sup>d</sup>
Conservative	25.2	35.2	38.3 <sup>d</sup>
Moderate	30.0	43.6	24.2 <sup>d</sup>
Liberal	21.8	13.8	18.3 <sup>d</sup>
Very liberal/radical	2.5	1.0	5.8 <sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Source: United States Census, 2000

<sup>b</sup>Source: IPUMS (U.S. Census), 1990, for Greensboro-High Point MSA

<sup>c</sup>Source: United States Census Summary File 3

(SF-3), 1-in-6 sample, 2000, for Guilford county

<sup>d</sup>Source: Carolina Poll, Fall 2000, for Piedmont Triad region.  $N = 120$

Table 2: Time spent writing

Less than 10 minutes	7.3%
10-20 minutes	20.2%
20-40 minutes	23.1%
40 minutes-1 hour	20.0%
1-3 hours	17.2%
More than 3 hours	12.1%

Table 3: Reasons for choosing to write

Comment on public affairs	32.6%	Urged by an organization	4.7%
General comment	23.3%	Agree with a news item	4.0%
Angry with a news item	18.6%	Agree with an editorial	3.8%
Angry with an editorial	12.3%	Agree with a letter	3.3%
Angry with a letter	11.0%	Doing civic duty	2.9%
I write regularly	10.3%	General comment on the paper	2.7%
Professional/position	6.3%	Required for school	1.0%
See my writing in print	5.2%		

3. Consistent with the idea of the letters column as a general forum for public speech, the top two reasons for writing were to “comment on public affairs” and to offer “general comment.” Thus over half the letters received were intended, at least in part, to address concerns that lay outside the boundaries of the newspaper.

Many fewer said they had written because they agreed with an item in the paper than because they were angry with an item in the paper: 41.9% vs. 11.1%. That suggests an important difference between ideal deliberation and the letters column. If citizens are much more likely to engage in deliberation when they are unhappy with a prior intervention in the debate, the aggregate discussion will be heavily biased toward negative comments—precisely the kind of adversarial logic deliberative democracy seeks to avoid (Mansbridge, 1980).

### 4.3 Predicting Letter Writing

Who actually decides to write letters to the editor? To approach this question I combine data from the survey of letter writers with data from the survey of nonwriting subscribers. Using a logistic regression predicting letter writing, I investigate the effects of political and demographic

characteristics on the likelihood of letter writing.

The dependent variable for this analysis is having written one or more letter(s) during the study period. The following independent variables are used to predict a respondent's having written a letter:

**Registered to vote:** Does the respondent report being registered to vote (0/1)?

**Voted in 2000:** Does the respondent report having voted in the 2000 presidential election (0/1)?

**Voted in 2002 primaries:** Does the respondent report having voted in the 2002 primary election (0/1)?

**Voted/Plans to vote in 2002 general:** Does the respondent report planning to vote, or having already voted, in the 2002 general election (0/1)?

**Voter:** For model 1, does the respondent report having voted in any of the three above elections?

**Liberal/Conservative:** Respondent's self-reported political outlook (1=conservative or very conservative; 2=moderate; 3=liberal or very liberal)

**Local Efficacy:** Sum of 0-3 scale responses to local attention and local influence questions; total scale 0-6.

**National Efficacy:** Same as local efficacy for national questions.

**Total Efficacy:** Sum of local and national efficacy.

**Education:** 0=no high school; 1=high school diploma; 2=college degree or above

**Age:** Age in years in 2002

**Sex:** Male or Female

**Income:** For model 2, reported in categories:  $\leq$  \$15,000; \$15,000–\$25,000; \$25,000–\$40,000; \$40,000–\$55,000; \$55,000–\$70,000; \$70,000–\$100,000;  $\geq$ \$100,000. For model 1, treated as a continuous variable.

Table 4: Correlation matrix for reported voting

	2000	2002 Pri	2002 Gen	Registered
2000		0.287	0.570	0.618
2002 Pri			0.299	0.226
2002 Gen				0.574

Table 5: Results of logistic regressions predicting letter writing

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Est.	OR	Est.	OR
Age	-0.026	0.974***	-0.028	0.972***
Male	0.742	2.100***	0.768	2.155***
Race:				
White	—	—	—	—
Black	-0.672	0.510*	-0.701	0.496
Other	0.248	1.282	0.307	1.359
Education:				
No High School	—	—	—	—
High School	0.444	1.559	0.605	1.831
College	0.697	2.007	0.775	2.171
Registered to vote	1.695	5.448*	1.625	5.077*
Voted	-1.640	0.194*		
Voted 2000			-0.470	0.625
Voted 2002 Primary			0.439	1.551*
Vote(d) 2002 General			-1.404	0.246**
Politics:				
Conservative	—	—	—	—
Moderate	-0.008	0.992	-0.700	0.932
Liberal	0.880	2.411***	0.820	2.270***
Income:	0.018	1.018		
≤ \$15,000			—	—
\$15,000–\$25,000			-0.438	0.645
\$25,000–\$40,000			-0.149	0.862
\$40,000–\$55,000			0.103	1.108
\$55,000–\$70,000			-0.426	0.653
\$70,000–\$100,000			-0.121	0.886
≥\$100,000			0.071	1.074
Total Efficacy	0.103	1.108**		
Local Efficacy			0.239	1.270**
National Efficacy			-0.019	0.981
AIC	1099.5		1095.1	

$N = 820$  due to missing data.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*  $p < 0.05$

## 5 Discussion

(Still gotta write a Discussion...)

### 5.1 Limitations

To my knowledge, these data are the first complete population of letters *received* by a newspaper, which offers the opportunity to assess who seeks to engage this particular mediated public sphere prior to the influence of editors' judgment and space constraints. Nevertheless, like any study, this one has important limitations as well. First, the study took place entirely in Greensboro, a second-tier city in the American south. As such, the regionally-bound character of the newspaper determines what topics are of local concern. As a regional newspaper, though, the *News & Record* more closely approximates a public sphere—to which all members of the polity have access, bounded by community membership instead of ideology or socioeconomic status—than would a national paper such as the *New York Times*. Second, the institutional configuration and cultural tradition of American newspapers are significantly different from papers in other countries (see, e.g., Ferree et al., 2002; Benson and Saguy, 2005). Third, the study is based on letters received between September 1 and November 30, 2002. This too structures the list of topics that are salient, most prominently the 1-year anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks and the campaign for the U.S. Senate seat.

## 6 Conclusion

(Still gotta write a Conclusion)

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