Empirical research into the possible positive consequences of deliberation increasingly reveals that there is a complex relationship between deliberation and its effects on citizens. In this experimental study I examine the relationship between internal political efficacy and one type of deliberation: deliberative decision-making. I also test whether different structures of decision-making mediate between deliberation and internal political efficacy. The data suggest that deliberative decision-making had no direct effect on a global measure of internal political efficacy. Participants in face-to-face deliberative decision-making, though, had higher scores on a situation-specific measure of internal political efficacy than participants who only voted. The structures of decision-making had no effect on either measure of internal political efficacy. These results support claims that deliberation will not necessarily lead to direct, positive effects on citizens’ internal political efficacy, but they also highlight the likelihood that face-to-face deliberation can lead citizens to feel more competent in their deliberative abilities.

Key words: deliberation; deliberative democracy; internal political efficacy; situation-specific political efficacy; democratic theory.

Drawing upon a review of the empirical research on the effects of democratic deliberation, John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse conclude that “real-life deliberation can fan emotions unproductively, can exacerbate rather than diminish power differentials among those deliberating, can make people feel frustrated with the system that made them
deliberate, is ill-suited to many issues, and can lead to worse decisions than would have occurred if no deliberation had taken place” (2002, p. 191). Thus, they argue, “getting people to participate in discussions of political issues with people who do not have similar concerns is not a wise move” (2002, p. 190). In a recent review essay, Michael Delli Carpini, Fay Lomax Cook, and Lawrence Jacobs take a less pessimistic view of deliberation, but they point out that “empirical research on deliberative democracy has lagged significantly behind theory” (2004, p. 316). Instead of reaching the conclusion that promoting deliberation is not a wise move, they argue that it is more complex than either theorists or political scientists have generally imagined. The possible positive effects of deliberation are dependent upon many factors about which we have limited understanding; we need clearer investigations to determine more precisely how and when deliberation might be beneficial for a democratic system. My aim is to clarify a small piece of this puzzle by examining the effects of deliberation on internal political efficacy.

In an earlier work, I demonstrated that the structures of democratic participation and deliberation are likely to affect citizens’ perceptions of the democratic decision-making process (Morrell, 1999). Here I examine whether these different structures also affect deliberation’s influence on internal political efficacy. Internal political efficacy refers to citizens’ feelings of their own personal competence to participate in politics (see Mattei and Niemi, 2005), and scholars have demonstrated that it has important consequences for democracy by influencing citizens’ political participation (see e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, pp. 141–145). More recent research continues to demonstrate its importance in understanding, to cite just a few examples, the role of emotion in campaign involvement (Rudolph, Gangl, and Stevens, 2000), voter registration and turnout in the United States (Timpone, 1998), and voter turnout in semicompetitive elections in China (Shi, 1999). Without a sense of internal political efficacy, citizens will likely become apathetic about, indifferent to and disengaged from the democratic process.

While the nature of my study requires that we interpret the results cautiously, the data suggest that deliberation can have positive consequences for citizens’ internal political efficacy. It is likely, though, that these effects are neither guaranteed nor as direct as deliberative theorists expect. The structures of deliberation do not matter as much as whether citizens deliberate face-to-face, and deliberation will probably initially increase situationally specific internal political efficacy. Ultimately, democratic theorists and political scientists should take more seriously the question of how positive experiences in specific deliberative situations can translate into broader feelings of political competence.