At a time of widespread dissatisfaction over the quality of democracy and public discourse, Democracy’s Voices shows how simple conversations which cross social boundaries offer solid grounds for hope. On the basis of sustained research, Robert M. Fishman argues that where connections across social boundaries take the form of conversations, they enable public actors to articulate rhetorics and proposals which genuinely engage contemporary challenges. Building on one of sociology’s core ideas—that social ties can shape collective outcomes—this book demonstrates that connections across class boundaries can thoroughly remake public rhetorics in a way that fits the policy challenges of a globalized world. The basis for an engaging democratic politics, Fishman argues, is to be found not only in the deeds of prominent politicians and the nature of official institutions but also in the existence and the character of social connections among ordinary citizens. Fishman’s book, based on long-term fieldwork and systematic survey research in Spain, identifies the special contribution to democratic quality made by conversations between intellectuals and workers.

Fishman focuses on what he calls the “discursive horizons” of local leaders and communities, that is the actual location of the problems and proposed remedies articulated in political rhetorics. Democracy’s Voices shows how social ties shape discursive horizons and how the nature of those ties may accentuate or diminish their power to reshape rhetorics. Fishman argues that whereas conversations are able to remake public rhetorics, those ties that take the form of power-oriented “brokerage” lack that ability. The book also offers a general critique of social capital theory and argues for the importance of distinguishing in useful ways among types of ties and subculturally based understandings of the meaning of ties.

Robert M. Fishman is Professor of Sociology and Fellow of the Kellogg and Nanovic Institutes, University of Notre Dame. He is the author of Working Class Organization and the Return to Democracy in Spain, also from Cornell. For an interview, contact Professor Fishman at rfishman@nd.edu.

Advance Praise for Democracy’s Voices:
“Democracy’s Voices is brilliantly conceived, carefully researched, elegantly written, and captivating in its conclusions. It will establish Robert M. Fishman as one of the major sociologists of democracy in our generation. For those, such as myself, who have been skeptical of the importance of deliberation for democratic politics, he shows not only that it matters, but also how it matters. This book will be of interest to scholars of democracy throughout the social sciences, and it deserves a wide readership beyond the walls of the academy as well.”
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