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Interpersonal Networks and Democratic Politics

Some of the most fundamental concerns about democratic politics involve information – who has access to it, how do they get it, and of what quality and type is it? The answer to each of these questions invariably involves other people, and it is for this reason that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of social networks.

Fully understanding democratic politics requires us to wrestle with the choices and constraints that individuals face as they navigate the political world and acquire political information. By “choice” we are referring to the decisions that individuals make about what environments to inhabit – what neighborhood to live in, what church to join, and what people to befriend. Individuals frequently make those choices for reasons unrelated to politics and then live within the “constraints,” or range of available information defined by those choices. The distribution of politics in socially-defined contexts – geographical or otherwise – then limits subsequent political decisions; for example, the neighborhood may be politically homogenous but dissimilar to the individual, and the trusted friend might be ignorant of politics.

In this essay, we consider the choices individuals make and the constraints that follow as we discuss what social network research has taught us about 1) how citizens form reasoned opinions and attitudes, and 2) acquire the resources and motives necessary to participate in public life. We then move beyond the state of the literature to suggest ways to further integrate a networks approach into the study of political behavior. We note the advantages of a more developed networks approach, including linking disparate research traditions, linking different levels of politics, and ultimately, clarifying what “choice” really means in a democratic society.

The Informed Citizen

Combining social and psychological perspectives, the scholars of the “Columbia School” viewed social groups as independent bases of political information and pitted interpersonal

communication against other sources of influence, particularly mass media (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). Three key refinements to the Columbia approach have produced the rich complexity of findings we have today regarding citizens and information: First, instead of assuming the political content of groups from personal attributes (e.g., class or religion), the distributions of relevant political opinions or behaviors have been examined in contexts (e.g., Huckfeldt 1984, 1986; Leighley 1990; MacKuen and Brown 1987; Putnam 1966; Weatherford 1982) and, later, directly in individuals' social networks. Second, these evolving distinctions between social contexts and networks have opened doors for highly complex, multi-level investigations that integrated citizens into their various information environments (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Lastly, sparked by Granovetter's (1973) work on social ties, networks have come to be seen not solely as independent sources of information, but as more or less open conduits for larger information streams (Huckfeldt et al. 1995; MacKuen and Brown 1987).

Importantly, the continued development of explicitly political measures of social units has led to the refinement of the mechanisms of social influence (see Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993). By the mid-1990s, many studies had found a social influence on the vote (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Gilbert 1993; Key 1949; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Segal and Meyer 1974), but just how that influence occurred was of some debate. One important tension in studies of vote choice involved the degree to which interaction was necessary for influence. Models based on social cohesion argued that the explicit communication of persuasive information was necessary (Kenny 1998); those patterned on Burt's (e.g., 1987) work on structural equivalence (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995) focused on the fact that people are frequently flooded with political cues in their environments, many of which are only passively observed (see also Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988).

Since networks are distinct entities from contexts, it has become imperative to know how they are structured and how individuals use them. Key questions have emerged, and many are still in the process of being addressed: Are political networks distinct from general purpose contacts? What affects rates of political discussion? And, what affects the effectiveness of social communication? Over 25 years ago, the political science literature began to move away from the employ of social context measures and focused instead on the measurement of discussion partners and related attributes. Borrowing from sociology, political science surveys began incorporating “political” name generators to capture interpersonal networks. Interestingly, research comparing these to “important matters” networks has found only slight differences (Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe 2009; Huckfeldt and Mendez 2008; though see Djupe and Sokhey 2009), thus suggesting that core political networks are not special purpose. Many core network members share close familial ties (Mutz 2006; see also Zuckerman et al. 2007), and the supply of political discussion partners in a context constrains selection, even when there is a strong preference for a particular type of individual (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; though see Finifter 1974). In other words, considerable research has found that individuals do not perfectly self-select agreeable discussion partners, and according to Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague (2004: 19), disagreement is “the modal condition” in the United States (though see Mutz 2006).

The Participatory Citizen

Observers have long noted that social organizations constitute the backbone of a participatory democracy (Tocqueville 1994[1840]); more recent work has codified this, noting the importance of the recruitment of engaged and resourceful individuals (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Social network research has enriched and qualified this account of citizen participation by conceptualizing political activity as an extension of social

relations, and by emphasizing the flow and content of political information in institutions of adult life (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Mutz and Mondak 2006).

Early work in this vein modeled political activity in terms of social contagion. Without network measures per se, these efforts found individual participation more likely in areas where participatory norms are conveyed (Tingsten 1963; Huckfeldt 1979). Of course, a natural extension of this logic was that social ties should only affect political activities with a social dimension, though research has only found limited support for this notion (Huckfeldt 1979; Giles and Dantico 1982; Kenny 1992; Leighley 1990; Zipp and Smith 1979).

Through the employ-use of social network batteries – and hence measures of information transmission – the literature began to view political participation as being conditional on citizens learning about choices and procedures. Thus, many studies have found that larger, more politicized social networks produce higher rates of involvement (which presents citizens with more cheap information sources) (Kenny 1992; Knoke 1990; Leighley 1990; Lake and Huckfeldt 1998; McClurg 2003, 2006a). If information is the currency of political participation, then the primary mechanism is political talk, and more political discussion leads to more political activity (McClurg 2003, 2006a; Mutz 2002a, 2006).

At the same time, some discussions are more productive than others, which is why additional research has emphasized the importance of discussion with political experts (Huckfeldt 2001; McClurg 2006a; Richey 2008a). But while it may be rational to seek information from an agreeable expert (Downs 1957), individuals are constrained by their social supply and may simply choose to withdraw from political life in the absence of trusted social information sources (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Mutz 2006). Other work finds that individuals seek out information about other recruiting agents, such as interest groups, when they are faced with disagreement in their

social networks (Djupe 2010); Klofstad (2007) argues that the effects of political talk on participation are actually due to recruitment.

Finally, it is important to note that social networks also affect whether people acquire participatory resources, as well as the extent to which they apply them to political participation. Whereas Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) find that organizational involvements build civic skills, network research has argued that the social composition of those organizations will shape who is able to exercise skills – in particular, those less like the majority of group members tend to be shut out of skill building activities and recruitment into politics (Djupe and Gilbert 2006), a dynamic which affects women disproportionately (Djupe, Sokhey, and Gilbert 2007).

Toward a Social Understanding of Democratic Politics

As one of the more developed, “relational” literatures in political science, the study of social networks has taught us much about how citizens form opinions and enter civic life. However, much can be achieved by addressing remaining descriptive, theoretical, and methodological hurdles. In terms of description, we still do not know very much about how political relationships work, what they look like, and what they talk about. On the theoretical side, one existing puzzle is composed of the disjuncture between established network effects on opinion and participation. In very broad brush, vote choices and opinions appear to be formed less by discussion and more by the result of the passive absorption of cues from the network and environment, whereas political participation has been found to be facilitated by discussion – especially with political experts – that is assumed to convey information suitable to support political choice. Finally, from a methodological standpoint, choosing sampling frames carefully could mean opportunities to collect more information on social exchanges, to collect longitudinal data, and to potentially piece together full networks, thereby employing the full strength of SNA as a theoretical vantage and statistical methodology. We elaborate on these concerns in the sections that follow.

1. [Descriptive Hurdles] The seminal Columbia voting research was primarily remembered for its focus on the consistency of messages and their effects on political engagement – inconsistency of messages (i.e., cross-pressures) promotes political apathy (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; see also Festinger 1957). The notion of cross-pressures has been revived in the last two decades to profound effect, and building from political theorists' work on deliberative democracy, (e.g., Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Habermas 1989), a variety of scholars have investigated the effects of encounters with political disagreement in social network exchanges (Barabas 2004; Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002; MacKuen 1990; Price, Capella, and Nir 2002; see Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004 for a review). In a series of works, Diana Mutz (2002a, 2002b, 2006; 2006) argued that discussion with disagreeable partners produces conflicting effects – it tends to demobilize participants by driving up ambivalence (see also Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn 2004; McClurg 2006a), but it also helps to depolarize views and boost political tolerance.

Different scholars have come to differing conclusions about the presence of disagreement (at least in the American electorate; e.g., contrast Mutz 2006 and Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004), part of which is due to the employment of different, but blunt measures of disagreement. But, we actually know relatively little about what it means to disagree about politics (Klofstad, Sokhey, and McClurg 2010).

Using a generic measure, politics is an occasional discussion topic for Americans. While recent works have examined dynamic processes of discussion and disagreement (Huckfeldt and Mendez 2008) and discussion rates with political experts (Huckfeldt 2001), most research efforts have focused instead of the effectiveness of communication. Discussion partners communicate more effectively when it is clear, agreeable, and accessible, and when the political context provides abundant political information and motivation (Huckfeldt, Beck, et al. 1998; Huckfeldt, Levine, et al. 1998; Huckfeldt, Sprague, and Levine 2000). However, aside from generic items tapping the

frequency of discussion and disagreement, we know very little about what political discussion looks like in networks – that is, about what is discussed, about the content of political discussion and disagreement, about the extent to which discussion is directed versus reciprocal, about the extent to which communication is frequent and part of an ongoing exchange versus being particular to a time, topic, or context, and about how previous patterns of communication affect subsequent ones (if at all). These unexplored concerns bear on the effectiveness of communication, on whether discussion is influential, and on how political discussion contributes to particular choice situations; they are central in efforts to answer such questions as: Can networks help people to make “good” decisions? And, are networks simple heuristics, real learning opportunities, or both? (Sokhey and McClurg 2010).

2. [Theoretical Challenges] The literature on networks and political participation has largely settled on information provision as a mechanism, with effects from political discussion, discussion with political experts, and large networks interpreted as helping “people recognize and reject dissonant political views, develop confidence in their attitudes, and avoid attitudinal ambivalence, thereby making participation more likely” (McClurg 2006a: 737). At the same time, the study of network effects on public opinion and the effectiveness of social communication has shown how contextual cues strongly shape perceptions of the network, undermining the simple notion that network discussion effects are everything, and suggesting that the passive absorption of cues plays a large role (e.g., Huckfeldt, Beck, et al. 1998); the former literature extols the efficacy of discussion (the social cohesion model), whereas the latter undermines it (a structural equivalence perspective).

Until now, these approaches have been disjointed upon entry into political science – in reality, they may be perfectly consistent with one another, and a challenge for the next generation is to reconcile them, developing a coherent framework that addresses both aspects of civic capacity and involvement. In part, Mendelberg (2005) suggests a way forward, arguing for a fuller integration

of the truly social in social psychology. While network research has never ignored insights from psychology (rather, it has been rather creative in its applications – see, e.g., Huckfeldt, Levine, et al. 2008), most work has been focused on issues of supply, studying discussant selection, communication frequency and quality, and to a lesser extent, network structure. As we continue to think about the distinct effects of – and relationships between – contexts and networks, we press for more attention to the demand side of social network interactions, which focuses on the acceptance of social information. Specifically, these concerns apply to theorizing about the nature of dyadic relations (an under tilled area in network study), potentially drawing on work on power differentials, gender, and conflict avoidance.

3. [Methodological Approaches] In 1963, William McPhee published what was to become a fixture of social network research on American political behavior (see also Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Sprague 1982). His model of opinion formation involved several plausible steps starting with the reception of new information, the forming of an initial opinion, the testing of it among peers, the re-sampling of opinions (upon disagreement), and the testing and re-testing among peers until agreement is reached. Overall, McPhee’s model combines elements of choice and constraint, and provides the potential to illuminate several thorny problems in network research – these involve questions of causality, as well as the roles played by motivation and network history (i.e., previous patterns of engagement).

Thus far no research design employed has been able to fully test this model – in a sense, it remains only of heuristic value. But more generally, the problems in testing McPhee’s work highlight the complexity of the problems that network researchers face. Researchers cannot back down from these challenges, but trade-offs may need to be made (see the introduction in this symposium). Fortunately, once again the Columbia scholars offer a starting point: instead of worrying about national representativeness, progress may come from going in-depth within smaller settings.

Networks are nested in contexts, and these overlapping environments influence one another through processes of choice and constraint (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Huckfeldt 1986; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; McClurg 2006b). More detailed, but perhaps not nationally-representative studies may be able to better capture these understudied dynamics. Existing research provides valuable starts: information environments affect discussion (Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, and Levine 1995; Mondak 1995), and individuals use the distribution of opinions in a social context as a heuristic to gauge the opinions of social intimates (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Huckfeldt, Beck, et al. 1998; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Combining this perspective with a look at how these processes evolve within the broader context of electoral cycles (Huckfeldt, Sprague and Levine 2000; Huckfeldt, Levine, et al. 1998) and nonpolitical events (Mondak 1995) is critical. In short, our lesson is that we cannot think of networks in isolation, since other forces moderate their effectiveness – this is something we must remember in empirical work, but which can also be exploited in the laboratory. At the same time, multiple levels of analysis need to enter the equation as we think through the links between individuals and collectives – networks may provide the missing puzzle piece when it comes to the “miracle of aggregation” (Page and Shapiro 1992).

Choosing sampling frames carefully could mean opportunities to collect more information on social exchanges, to collect longitudinal data, and to potentially piece together full networks, thereby employing the full strength of SNA as a theoretical vantage and statistical methodology. While well-executed designs and better methodological techniques continue to yield increasing evidence that interpersonal interaction has causal effects (e.g., Nickerson 2005; Klofstad 2007; Lazer et al. 2007), there is no substitute for more detailed data and for temporal leverage – this will be the key to understanding how networks are formed, evolve, and cause political behavior. Sacrificing some external validity may go a long-way towards bridging the gap between network science and behavioral political science.

Conclusion

In sum, fully understanding choice and constraint means knowing more about the range and depth of interpersonal communication, and about the construction, reach, and fluidity of social networks. This is particularly important now when technology is changing not only how individuals communicate and acquire information (e.g., Papacharissi 2004), but definitions of citizenship itself (e.g., Chadwick 2006; Sunstein 2008). A sustained focus on filling descriptive gaps, resolving theoretical puzzles, and addressing methodological challenges will force us to develop more sophisticated designs that meld our best insights with those from psychology and the study of electoral institutions. Together, this will tell us about why individuals make choices, about where those choices fall with respect to the specter of social determinism, and about how individual actions produce collective outcomes.

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