

EXPERTS AND PARTISANS

An examination of social network effects on
political participation

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Abstract

For a significant period of time, the effects of the social environment in which individuals are embedded have been ignored by analyses of voting behavior. Recent analyses explore these effects, but are divided on whether social networks can promote political participation and, at the same time, offer incentives for deliberation. This thesis attempts to investigate this phenomenon in the context of the 1996 US presidential election. The hypothesis is that the effects of knowledge at the level of the network and partisan polarization will act as countervailing forces on the propensity for political involvement of an individual. By means of OLS regression with correction for clustering in standard errors applied on data from the Indianapolis – St. Louis Election Study, the hypothesis is partially confirmed. Although the two forces have opposing direction, the effects of social network level of political information significantly outweigh those of partisan polarization in the network.

Keywords: social network, participation, political information, partisanship.

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I. Introduction

This paper will clarify some of the fundamental questions regarding democracy: what is it that we want from the citizenry of a democratic state? Should it be formed of deliberative individuals, actively engaging in debate with fellow citizens on major issues, quickly followed by active engagement in campaigns, associations and interest groups in order to further their particular positions? Should these two qualities be concentrated in the same individuals, or might they be subject to differentiation and specialization? More so, can they be found in the same individual, or should some of the democratic theories of citizenship be altered in order to accommodate a trade-off between deliberation and participation?

When discussing this topic, one must approach it from the point of view of the individual seen as a social animal, and less as a political one. After all, if there is something that most post-World War II surveys of mass opinion in established democracies have shown, it is that an average person's awareness of political issues is rather dismal. Focusing on the case of the US, when measured with the yardstick offered by normative political theory, its citizenry has appeared as being one “innocent of ideology”¹ (Converse, 1964), lacking reliable political information regarding political actors, institutions, or major events. Indeed, if we were to cling to Aristotle's description of the individual as a “political animal”, we would concomitantly have to admit that he is one rather poorly equipped by evolution to deal with the challenges of the modern political jungle.

However, one of the greatest contributions to the study of voting behavior has been the

1 The assertion spawned a tremendously active academic debate. See the reply offered by Nie, Verba and Petrocik (1976), and the counter-reply attempted by Sullivan, Piereson and Marcus (1978). Similar exchanges have taken place throughout the 70s and 80s.

recognition that we do not roam this jungle alone. We are, above all, social animals², able to use cues from our fellow citizens in order to identify which media outlets provide reliable information, which is the candidate more in line with our interests, and which are the major issues of the day on which the voting decision could be based. This “collaborative” voting, of which information pooling is part and parcel, is a much more valid description of how a voter behaves during a campaign than the early models proposed under the rational choice paradigm.

Voters go into the booth carrying the imprint of the hopes and fears, the prejudices and assumptions of their family, their friends and their neighbors. For most people, voting may be more meaningful and more understandable as a social act than as a political act. (Menand, 2004).

The instrument through which we are able to extract information from others, along with their hopes, fears and prejudices, is discussion regarding political issues (and even general interaction). We engage in such exchanges preponderantly with those of similar opinions, but on occasion even with those that are of opposite political values. More so than being a choice, it is a need; whether we like it or not, we need to hear from those of like mind and from those that belong to the 'other side' (Mutz, 2006), so as to become better citizens. The particular nature of our personal experience needs to be supplanted by the experience of others, so that our decisions may be based on a 'representative' sample of events and issues. Discussion with those of different political beliefs makes us understand valid arguments for different positions, and spurs us into searching for better arguments to support our position. Or so the story goes.

This thesis is concerned with the empirical reality behind these assertions regarding the influence of a social network on the final vote choice made by an individual. For the purposes

2 See Menand (2004) for a cogent summary regarding the image of the voter entertained by political science.

of this analysis, a social network will be defined as “the people with whom a given person communicates on a direct, one-to-one basis” (Mutz, 2006: 10). A confusion in terms may appear given the similarity in name with a recent sub-field of voting behavior, which looks at the influences on participation and partisanship of new on-line communication platforms such as Facebook and Twitter³. Despite the relevance of the topic and the recent exciting findings that the field has produced, this thesis will not be concerned with these types of social networks.

It has recently become apparent that social networks are not the *panacea* that earlier studies (Kenny, 1992; Mutz, 2002a) made them out to be. Depending on the composition of the network (ideologically homogeneous or heterogeneous), a social network may augment a voter's level of political information and political participation, or depress it. An individual may find reinforcing opinions among his peers, or cross-pressures which induce ambivalence regarding the vote choice. If such an individual values social harmony and his network of friends more than his political values, one possible course of action is to devalue politics. Although he belongs to an environment conducive to deliberation, action may be precluded by his desire to maintain smooth interactions with those around him⁴.

As a result of these insights, a paradox has been proposed: having a citizenry that is both deliberative (subjected to a variety of political opinions) and participative is impossible⁵. Deliberation is best sustained in social networks that are heterogeneous, to the detriment of participation, whereas the latter is best fostered by homogeneous networks (where we find reinforcement for our beliefs), to the disadvantage of the former. The typical *locus* for the

3 See Shaheen, 2008; Kushin and Kitchener, 2009; Williams and Gulati, 2007.

4 See the discussion in Mutz (2006) regarding the countervailing effects of a heterogeneous social network on an individual.

5 Mutz (2006) proposes the trade-off; Huckfeldt and Mendez (2008) attempt a rebuttal by showing that the presence or absence of shared political preferences is irrelevant to the frequency of political discussion between members of a social network.

“deliberative network” is the workplace⁶: containing “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973) which may come from radically diverse geographical and genealogical backgrounds, entertaining political conversations in an informal yet repetitive manner, and making an individual rightfully more concerned with getting along well with others rather than defending a point of view. For the “participative network” we must examine the family and the circle of close friends and relatives with which we interact intensely; given the high likelihood that they share our biases and opinions, they are the ones with the greatest potential to reinforce our views and make political action possible. These are “strong ties”, which could withstand political controversy; sadly, there are not a lot of points on which to disagree.

Presented with a dilemma of such empirical and theoretical importance, it comes as a shock that the evidence mounted for or against this view has been rather sparse. Most attempts at studying the phenomenon have looked at disparate pieces of the puzzle (e.g. the relationship between network knowledge *or* network polarization and the expediency of the vote decision, between discussant characteristics and the vote choice⁷). When an attempt to grasp the whole picture has been undertaken, it has been done mostly through simple analyses which have ignored the complexity of the phenomenon examined⁸. This analysis attempts to correct for these oversights by directly tackling the connections between cross-cutting pressures and political information in a social network, and their effects on vote choice, in a manner which can shed some light on the phenomenon.

The significance of this endeavor can be perceived through multiple lenses. Examining the connection between an individual voter and those surrounding him, with which he engages in discussions, can shed new light on the way public opinion is formed. Political science cannot

6 See Mutz and Mondak (2006).

7 See Bélanger and Eagles (2007); Huckfeldt, Mendez and Osborn (2004); Mutz (2002); Richey (2008); Zuckerman, Valentino and Zuckerman (1994).

8 Mutz (2006) examines the trade-off in its entirety, but mainly relies on logistic regressions to make her point.

only limit itself to a top-down approach (studying media effects on public opinion), or a bottom-up one (aggregation of individually held opinions). It must also focus on the horizontal processes that act as intermediaries between individual opinions and the aggregate public opinion⁹, of which political discussion in the context of a social network is of vital importance.

At a higher level of abstraction though, the results of this inquiry have implications for the manner in which we conceptualize the internal processes of democracy. It has long been assumed by political theory that the perfect citizen is one who deliberates and quickly proceeds to action once a decision has been made¹⁰. The results presented here suggest that the image may be deformed: certain environments foster either deliberation or participation, but probably very rarely both at the same time. As a consequence of this, it is up to political theorists to respond to the challenge and potentially modify some of the demands it makes on the modern citizen.

Finally, the pragmatic aspects of this endeavor must not be overlooked; without a correct diagnostic regarding the 'ailment', how could we possibly administer the proper 'medicine'? And if the diagnosis specifies that we cannot save the entire patient, do we amputate its ability to deliberate or to participate? It is indeed a difficult decision, but one with fewer negative consequences than those entertained by the conscious decision to strive for both. Striving for more public debate on major (contentious) issues is a worthy cause, but it will most likely result in increased difficulty in reaching a decision¹¹. Increasing the extent and intensity of participation is a similar laudable aim, but it will probably mean mobilizing the electorate to a point at which deliberation is made impossible. Understanding the trade-off

9 For a skeptical view on the possibility of public opinion, see Zaller, 1992.

10 See particularly the contributions made by communitarians such as Benjamin Barber, Michael Sandel, or Alasdair MacIntyre.

11 The example of Hamlet is a telling one – self-aware to the point of inactivity, he constantly debates the appropriate course of action without ever finding one that he can decide upon (example taken from Mutz, 2006).

means moving past “how to do both?” and focusing on “which is better?”

Over the next few chapters I will present my argument in greater detail. I will first make a summary presentation of the state of the literature on the topic of social network effects on the vote choice. As will be shown, there is still a great deal of uncertainty regarding the precise conditions under which a heterogeneous social network can either help or hinder making a timely vote choice. Although the topic has been approached from many angles, there is still no consensus on whether a greater degree of polarization in the network might offset the 'gains' accrued by a higher level of political information. This is what the current work attempts to address.

The hypothesis of the study is that a network which presents both a high degree of polarization and a considerable degree of knowledge will tend to act as countervailing pressures on the decision to vote of an individual. Whereas a high degree of knowledge in the network will tend to align the voter's vote choice to that prevalent in his social network, as well as help him reach a voting decision much faster, the effects will be canceled when such a network also displays a high degree of polarization.

The following chapter will deal with data and methodological aspects. For the models tested in this thesis by employing regression analysis with correction for clustering, the database which has been selected is the South Bend Study conducted by Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague in 1996-1997 (also known as the Indianapolis – St. Louis Election Study). Although there are other surveys that inquire about discussants, this is the only dataset that contains information for up to 5 discussants, as well as objective information about the discussants themselves and their respective discussants.

The final chapter will deal with the interpretation of the findings and their consequences for how we view democratic citizens. If indeed the benefits of having a network that is high in

level of political knowledge will be canceled in case the discussants of the respondent tend to be polarized in terms of the opinions that they hold, democratic life must be conceptualized in a different manner. It cannot be composed of citizens that will “do it all”; depending on what type of environment they find themselves in, they will either engage in deliberation or participation. However, the results point to a more reassuring conclusion in terms of the relationship between political knowledge and network polarization.

II. Literature review

We are all social creatures in every aspect of our lives, even though we may not constantly be engaged in social interactions. Nonetheless, the imprint of society is carried with us even in the most solitary of actions. For a considerable period of time the rational choice paradigm tried to argue that voting is one solitary action for which examining social context is merely a formality. This was done while completely disregarding the fact that the social aspect of politics is a tradition that originates with the work of authors that precede the advent of modern political science. Over the course of the next pages, I will discuss the importance of taking into account social context when studying vote choice, some of the results that have surfaced in recent years regarding the impact of social networks on voting behavior, as well as the limitations of these studies.

The importance of groups and social context has been, over time, continuously lost and rediscovered (Zuckerman, 2005). Starting with Aristotle, who considers the family to be the nucleus of the polity (*Nicomachean Ethics*), and continuing throughout the centuries with Thomas Aquinas, Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Gaetano Mosca and Georg Simmel, the influence of our surrounding context has unanimously been held as crucial in shaping our preferences and actions. We pick up and incorporate into our cognitive and affective framework information, cues, values and expectations transmitted purposefully or not by relatives, co-workers, friends, and parents. We do this not merely because we are inadvertently subjected to information which we cannot completely ignore; we actively engage in discussions, even when these concern political topics, by reason of our need to reduce uncertainty about the surrounding environment. Furthermore, we *want* to participate in discussions: we gain recognition from the groups we are members of as a result of successfully engaging in information transfers, and even receive some measure of

satisfaction from receiving information on a topic we are particularly interested in.

This logic is particularly relevant in the case of such mass phenomena as presidential elections, when the importance of the decision stimulates discussion, at different levels of sophistication, regarding the alternatives and their implications. In this setting, the information received from others is all the more valuable. As one of the first modern studies investigating the influence of social context on the vote choice beautifully summarized the perspective on voting of the research tradition of which it was a part:

. . . the individual casts his own personal ballot. But as we have tried to indicate throughout this volume, that is perhaps the most individualized action he takes in an election. His vote is formed in the midst of his fellows in a sort of group decision – if indeed, it may be called a decision at all - and the total information and knowledge possessed in the group's present and past generations can be made available for the group's choice. (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954: 320-321)

This collective decision aspect of any political choice was greatly emphasized by these authors. The extent to which we receive and use inputs coming from our surrounding environment prompted them to declare political preferences as being more the result of a desire to “fit” into that particular environment rather than the result of “reason and calculation” (*Ibid*, p. 311). Their work¹² represented the dawn of modern quantitative political science, but also the first in suggesting that voting should be placed in a social context. Noticing the predisposition of voters in a campaign to adopt political opinions that are highly convergent with those of the groups that they are members of, McPhee (1963) cogently argues that the proper way of understanding political preferences is to view them in their social structures, as being „inherently dynamic and responsive to social influence“ (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1987).

Although it promised an extremely fruitful research agenda, the topic gradually slipped

12 See Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944); Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954).

outside of mainstream political science, losing the battle with a competing “paradigm”: rational choice. Proponents of this theory viewed voting as an individual act of collecting information, processing it, evaluating it, and choosing the option that would yield the maximum utility pay-off, taking place in a “social vacuum” (Beck *et al*, 2002). Accelerating the transition between the two paradigms was the desire of researchers to claim for their results the kind of representativity that could only be achieved through national random sample surveys. This came at the cost of losing the descriptive validity of the act of voting that had been supplied by the Columbia voting studies. The focus on the study of independent individuals led to the use of random national samples, which made continuing the focus on social networks virtually impossible. As Gonzalez and Griffin emphasize (2000: 181-182), the “psychology of interdependence” required by the study of social networks could no longer be captured with the aid of the “statistics of independence”.

With the benefit of hindsight, we are able to recognize today that what had escaped rational choice theorists was the fact that the supply of political information and cues for political mobilization were not simply a matter of demand (the individual actively engaging in information search), but also depended on what was available in the context inhabited by the individual (supply)¹³. Its reductionist perspective on the voter completely lacked validity in the manner in which it obscured important parts of an individual's personality: “[...] we do not take into consideration the whole personality of each individual when we discuss what behavior is rational for him” (Downs, 1957: 7).

The strand of research to which this thesis belongs brings back into focus a contextual analysis of politics which was largely overshadowed by rational choice. We reach decisions and make choices enmeshed in the same reality as those around us, subjected to similar forces

13 It must be noted that Downs (1957: 229) does mention that given the high cost of acquiring political information, it makes sense for people to use their more informed friends and acquaintances as sources of information if the acquaintances share the voter's political orientations.

originating from our environment. Ignoring these external forces makes us vulnerable to both ecological and individualistic fallacies (Huckfeldt, 2007). Focusing on aggregate analysis ignores both importance patterns of interdependence among individuals and behavior that varies across diverse contextual units of aggregation. On the other hand, individual-level analyses may erroneously specify the connections between individual traits and individual behavior.

2.1. Heterogeneous networks and the effects of disagreement

I have made the case for the importance of studying social context when examining the vote choice. Although most researchers that will be mentioned in the following paragraphs share the view that social networks do have an influence on vote choice, their results have diverged at times. There is still no consensus on whether social networks are largely defined by heterogeneity or homogeneity, on the implications that this has for the manner in which political communication is carried out in these groups, or on the precise flow of information in such structures. Nevertheless, research into the range of effects of social networks on voting behavior has discovered significant influence over the opinions espoused by voters, as well as on their choices at the ballot box. Contrary to common perception, these were not the networks of discussion that were hypothesized by Downs - of individuals that engaged in interaction and information exchange only if their counterparts were of similar political orientation. They were heterogeneous groups, in which diverse levels of political information blended with a diversity of partisan views (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Huckfeldt, Sprague and Levine, 2000)¹⁴. This pattern of disagreement has also been observed in the case of Germany, Japan, Italy, and Brazil (Huckfeldt, Ikeda, and Pappi, 2005; Campus, Pasquino, and

¹⁴ In fact, the likelihood of disagreement grows directly proportional with the size of the network; even moderately sized networks seem to have significant heterogeneity (Huckfeldt, Mendez and Osborn, 2004).

Vaccari, 2008; Baker, Ames and Renno, 2006). Nevertheless, the results tend to be inconclusive, with some researchers arguing that agreement is the norm and disagreement is the exception¹⁵.

The matter is not a light one, as the introduction tried to convey: whether we are confronted with agreement or disagreement in our circle of friends and relatives has crucial significance for the way in which democratic life is carried out in a polity. This meaning was fully comprehended by the first researchers that investigated the phenomenon (the Columbia voting studies) although their results have not entirely withstood the test of time. These authors (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944; Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954) found that agreement and disagreement are conditions that describe a social network depending on proximity to a presidential campaign. Between campaigns political discussion decreases in frequency, making political preferences less socially visible; given that the pressure to conform is thus greatly reduced, political preferences become idiosyncratic as a result. As the moment of the election draws closer, there is an increase in the frequency of communication; one's political preferences are gradually surfacing in an environment that may not fully support them. Valuing social coherence more than the free expression of a political self, the individual is pressured into social conformity¹⁶. As a result of this process, the polity will exhibit intra-group homogeneity and inter-group polarization (Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague, 2004).

15 See particularly Mutz, 2006. In fact, both Huckfeldt and Mutz state that disagreement and agreement exist in networks. The difference lies in the proportions: whereas the former believes about 76% of networks exhibit heterogeneity, the latter places this proportion at around 23% (Mutz, 2006: 41).

16 This process is not the only path through which homogeneity can come about in a group. Even if there would not be such a phenomenon, an increased rate of communication facilitates the transmission of ideas in a group and homogenizes the information on the basis of which political preferences are formed.

2.2. Why homogeneity should reign supreme...

The reasons for which group homogeneity should be the norm are multiple. Given that ordinary individuals would incur high costs in the process of gathering political information, they are willing to pass on the costs of acquiring such information to the political experts in their group. Over the course of the campaign voters will communicate with these experts in the groups at a higher rate compared to other members. Nonetheless, not all experts will be sought after with equal interest: the rational course of action is to find those experts which share an individual's political biases (Downs, 1957). Given that the same information is passed around, and that it is “tainted” by the same biases that an individual already entertains, the natural outcome is homogeneity.

Recent research has pointed out that individuals do have the ability to use resources made available by their positioning in a social network in order to improve their levels of political information. They are able to recognize the political experts in the network based on their real level of information, and trade information with them at a higher frequency compared to their other discussants (Huckfeldt, 2001). This does not happen irrespective of the position of the individual: if he is a member of the political minority in that network, his chances of encountering dissonance-producing information increase, while majority status increases his chances of mis-perceiving information that originates with members of the political minority (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1987)¹⁷.

An additional reason for considering disagreement in social groups as endangered lies in the so called “conformity model” (Asch, 1955). Drawing from a series of experiments, Asch attributes the tendency of his subjects to side with the group decision even when it is clearly

¹⁷ Leading the authors to conclude that we are dealing with a phenomenon of „informational coercion of political minorities achieved through mechanisms of social interaction“ (p. 1213).

the wrong one to the powerful effects of social conformity. There is a certain level of psychic discomfort (Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague, 2004) that is caused by disagreement, dubbed “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger, 1957). In an attempt to reduce this level of dissonance, individuals are willing to exercise self-censorship if their opinions are not supported by their group; this could apply even in the case of political preferences. The person subjected to a diversity of opinions in the network of which he is a member tends to be less forward regarding his true opinions, accepting that stating them clearly might exacerbate the conflict and intensity of arguments in the network (Kingwell, 1995). The combined effect of the desire to reduce costs for acquiring political information and that of reducing social conflict would seem to spell the end for diversity within groups.

2.3. ... and why it does not

The models presented above can be attacked on numerous empirical grounds¹⁸. In the case of the first, there is a great likelihood that an individual does not have sufficient discretion to be able to choose the type of informant that is most like himself. There are few cases of 'ideal informants'¹⁹ which can be tapped for knowledge: characterized by joint presence of shared biases and political knowledge. Generally, we have to make a trade-off between people who share our political opinions but have just the same amount of information as we do, or political experts that may have opinions that are markedly different from ours. Recent studies have shown that the presence or absence of shared political preferences does not manage to predict well the frequency of political communication among citizens (Huckfeldt and Mendez, 2008), which bodes well for democratic vitality. It seems that individuals are willing

18 For an excellent review of the literature regarding homophily in groups, see McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook (2001).

19 For an interesting study of information seeking among a social network and its costs using experimental research, see Ahn, Huckfeldt and Ryan (2007). The term is borrowed from them.

to risk cognitive dissonance in the search for sources of alternative information on political matters (somewhat contradicting the conclusions of Mutz, 2006), in the course of such a search preserving intra-group diversity of political opinions²⁰.

The “conformity model” can be challenged on grounds that it applies to political preferences with difficulties. Ross, Bierbrauer and Hoffman (1976) show that the intensity of the social pressure was given by the particular experimental situation. The subjects in the Asch experiment were placed in a group of confederates; the group was shown 3 lines and asked questions about the relative length of the lines. The confederates always answered before the subject, and all answers were given out loud. Asch's discovery was that when all the confederates gave an obviously wrong answer, the subject tended to side with the rest of the group and also offered a wrong answer. In such a situation the unsuspecting subjects had no reason to dismiss the answers given by the confederates; nor could they find a rational explanation for those answers. The situation becomes rather different in the case of political preferences which can be (and, in fact, regularly are) easily discounted: an individual holds an opinion because he comes from a particular background, because he is not very informed etc. Cognitive dissonance need not be a pressure toward conformity if we can find rational reasons for why this diversity exists. Even more to the point, Asch's results showed that when an individual finds even the least amount of support for his opinion in his social group, he will maintain his opinion in the face of 'adversity'. In the case of political opinions, a network that completely opposes an individual's preference is highly unlikely.

Finally, one must take into account the low salience of political issue for the average individual (Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague, 2004: 23); for most people political issues are rather peripheral (Sears and Funk, 1991). Pressures for conformity will be greatest when

20 As Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague (2004) point out, there is the additional issue of social context: even if we may actively search for such experts, the composition of our social context determines if we will find them.

political passions are intense; however, very few individuals are situated in such environments. Most of us inhabit groups where political apathy is the norm; in such environments, disagreement does not imply the danger of social marginalization, discomfort and cognitive dissonance. All these point to the fact that disagreement may be more pervasive in the context of social networks than Mutz (2006) predicts, with important consequences for the way in which political discussion is carried out.

2.4. Consequences of heterogeneous groups

The influence of groups composed of diverse opinions and biases on the attitudes of individuals is impressive. Mutz (2002a) shows that exposure to dissonant views tends to increase tolerance in respondents and the likelihood of considering legitimate policies and candidates that are not in accord with one's personal beliefs. Such repeated interactions in the context of a diverse network have the ability to do more than induce ambivalence in opinions²¹ – they can even result in intra-group similarity. It is sufficient for a respondent to believe that the persons around him have a certain position on an issue (for example by listening to media reports) for that respondent to tend to gravitate toward that position (Mutz, 1992)²². From this point of view, it is not entirely clear whether a behavior such as voting turnout would increase as a result of being embedded in a heterogeneous network²³, would decrease as a result of cross-pressures and the need to constantly argue for one's choice in front of one's peers, or would simply be unaffected. The latter is the conclusion of Nir (2005), who finds that ambivalence for a respondent is indeed associated with a lower extent of participation, but that external cross-pressure was a non-significant predictor of participation,

21 This effect leads to discouragement from political involvement (Mutz, 2002b) and even less satisfaction with the decision reached.

22 This is conditional on the intensity of the respondent's view regarding the issue.

23 In the case in which his discussants are partisans and regular voters, such behavior being emulated.

voting, and vote decision timing (*apud* Lup, 2006).

Even if it does not result in conformity and adopting the majority's position, encountering disagreement has the potential to induce significant changes at the individual level. It can force individuals to re-consider their reasons for supporting a particular side of the argument and even find additional reasons for their position (Green, Visser and Tetlock, 2000). Support for this is offered by the experiments in deliberative polling undertaken by Fishkin (1991, 1996), who discovers that supplying information on a particular issue to citizens and then placing them in a deliberative position where they are forced to argue for their point does change opinions on that particular issue²⁴. A second benefit refers simply to being introduced to legitimate reasons for an opposite side of the argument. Even though most discussions might never reach the level at which logically constructed arguments are put forth, the process might still take place at an intra-personal level: the individual thinks about plausible reasons for why another person might hold different views (Mutz, 2006: 64).

There is, nevertheless, a complementary 'dark side' to entertaining mixed political company (Mutz, 2006). Being subjected to cross-pressures might result in apathy, loss of interest in politics²⁵, and ambivalence; these effects were observed early on in the study of the impact of social groups (Hovland, Janis and Kelley, 1953). Political participation might also be suppressed by cross-pressures, as an individual finds it difficult to choose sides and prefers to retreat altogether from political life²⁶. Even if he continues his political engagement, choosing a course of action might be made difficult by the opposing arguments that he is constantly faced with; the situation has been dubbed “analysis paralysis” (Mutz, 2006: 103).

24 Mutz (2006: 59-62) is skeptical about the experiments given that they cannot truly measure the effects of deliberation, increased level of information or simply the experimental situation on opinion change. This inability is a direct result of simultaneous manipulation of all these variables. Tóka and Lup (2007) fail to find an effect of political information on correct voting and believe that it does not improve practical political knowledge.

25 A rational tactic of diminishing the value of an object when it is the cause of conflict, if maintaining social harmony is more important than the benefits of winning an argument regarding the object.

26 See Parsons, 2007.

2.5. Political information and participation

The social approach to voting behavior comes as a complement to a number of explanations for why people get involved in politics that have been proposed over the decades. Starting with rational choice theory²⁷, continuing with models emphasizing social-economic status, civic orientations, and resources²⁸, and finishing with mobilization models²⁹ and models stressing the genetic bases of political behavior³⁰, all have treated the impact that our peers have on our social behavior as (at most) a marginal issue. This dismissal was made manifest even in the face of mounting evidence that the models proposed were missing a large part of the explanation for why people participate, and the realization that social structure might offer a key part of the answer³¹. Whereas rational choice theory could not explain why rational people still choose to participate despite the high costs and small benefits of becoming informed³², SES models could not account for the behavior of people without 'appropriate' resources that still engaged in voting (Leighley, 1995). Meanwhile, mobilization theory could not explain how even the less informed and less interested in the campaigns, or those that have not been subjected to political stimuli still decide to participate.

Mutz (2006) emphasizes the inhibiting effects that cross-cutting networks may have on the willingness to engage in political participation. Nevertheless, other authors have pointed out the influence that other variables may have on this phenomenon, such as the presence of a

27 See Downs, 1957.

28 See Nie and Verba, 1972; Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995. In this account, SES has an impact on political orientations as well as on resources relevant for political participation (cognitive skills, time, and money).

29 See Rosenstone and Hansen, 2003. These models consider stimuli coming from the outside environment under the shape of political communication and partisan cues (Tilly, 1978) as determinants of participation.

30 See Alford, Funk and Hibbing, 2005; Alford, Funk and Hibbing, 2008; Alford and Hibbing, 2004; Fowler and Schreiber, 2008; Fowler, 2006.

31 In 1973 Carl Scheingold argued for a resurrection of the social tradition in voting behavior, pointing to the inability of the Columbia studies to ascertain a critical question: how information flows through a social structure (see Scheingold, 1973: 712). His call is mirrored 8 years later by Eulau and Siegel (1981), which also offer one of the first analyses of the characteristics of social networks (partisanship) and how these impact individual voting behavior.

32 In fact, according to Fowler and Smirnov (2005), people going to the polls in the US have a much higher likelihood of getting into a car accident than casting a vote that changes the outcome in an election.

high level of political information in a network. McClurg (2006: 748) reveals that a network high in political information is able to facilitate the respondent in making a decision in the course of a presidential election; he hypothesizes that this occurs because experts are able to reduce a voter's ambiguity regarding the perception of the political process. This effect is clearly noticeable in the case of networks in which there is a high degree of dissonance for the voter due to polarization in partisanship of the discussants (the network is heterogeneous)³³.

Not all connections seem to have the same influence when it comes to influencing the opinions of a voter. At first glance, it would seem likely that the ones that exercise the most influence would be the more intimate discussants, with which the respondent has the closest and most frequent contact (spouse, kin etc). Studies³⁴ have seemed to confirm this, although they have also suggested that among the “non-relatives“, friends and regular contacts have a higher influence compared to close friends. This pattern seems to be explained by the fact that regular contacts are more likely to be the persons with which we share an office space, or regularly come into contact; this reinforcement, which is sustained over time, seems to lie at the basis of the results (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1991: 147). This points to the influence of what could be called “weak ties”³⁵. Because they tend to be situated at the intersection between networks composed of “close ties”, such as those between kin or close friends, they have the ability to disperse information across large sets of networks through which information would otherwise not circulate.

Kenny (1992) finds that there is an increased probability of electoral participation from individuals that have discussants with high levels of campaign participation. The effects are

33 Richey (2008) discovers that this increase in convergence of vote choice between respondent and discussant as a result in an increase in political knowledge of the discussant only holds if the other members of the network have a comparatively lower level of information. When this is not so, the effect disappears.

34 See Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1991.

35 See Granovetter, 1973.

most likely transmitted through both argumentation and social pressure (Kopacz and Volgy, 2005: 9). The effects of these exchanges can sometimes be even more important than the influence of the media or, in the case of new democracies with weak party system institutionalization, than direct partisan appeals (Baker, Ames and Renno, 2006, in the case of Brazil). Given that not a lot of people receive their political information directly from political news, articles, and media reports, they also rely on their peers to provide them with information. Beck *et al* (2002) discover that in the context of the 1992 US presidential election, the factors that exerted the greatest influence over vote choice were discussants, secondary organizations and editorials; they assume that the reason for this is the fact that discussants tend to have continuing relationships with the voter, which makes the information received from them “matter“ more. The influence of the social context seems to be stronger in the case of less politicized voters, which appear to rely more on their network of discussants for opinions and information³⁶.

Lake and Huckfeldt (1998) suggest an additional avenue through which political participation could be stimulated by social networks, apart from social pressure: social capital. In their interpretation, joining voluntary associations and social capital are mutually reinforcing through the mediation of social interaction: we join associations which puts us in contact with many more people who share our particular world-views and increase our levels of trust, which leads to increased membership. Their results offer support for the view that politically relevant social capital is generated by repeated interactions in social groups and that it depends on the political expertise that the group has, as well as on the frequency of political communication among the group members.

36 In fact, it could be argued that these voters don't really receive *objective* information; given that it is first being collected by a discussant and then transmitted further, it is likely to be biased.

2.6. Limitations

The study of effects of social networks on political behavior has not been without its fair share of issues, particularly tied to the importance of perceptions and of causal connections. Concerning the latter, it must be recognized that it is fairly difficult to ascertain the causal connection between decision to vote and engaging in information searching. Although it is improbable for disinterested and unaffiliated individuals to actively seek out information for the purpose of reaching a voting decision, the possibility should not be ruled out³⁷. The former problem concerns whether we should study the phenomenon of influences of discussants' political knowledge and information on turnout by using perceptions of such traits and not their actual levels. Although the possibility of a 'false consensus' effect³⁸ is quite real, research has shown that survey respondents tend to be quite accurate in their assessment of their discussants' levels of information and political attitudes (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995).

Unfortunately, the studies presented above do not really focus on the situation of political expertise and partisanship, even more so in the context of a cross-cutting social network. There is reason to believe that there is a cognitive component to partisanship (Gant and Luttbeg, 1987), and that feeling close to a party would create an interest in gathering information about the party and the political system in general. In this interpretation, partisans and experts would roughly form the same group: those that feel they have a higher stake in the system would have higher incentives to collect information. The analysis is made even more complex by the fact that respondents surrounded by knowledgeable discussants tend to be themselves more knowledgeable; while they would tend to receive more diverse

37 A study on the differences between these two sets of individuals would most certainly yield interesting conclusions.

38 Believing that a peer's political attitudes are closer to one's one than they really are (Huckfeldt, 2007).

and accurate information about political events and actors, they would also tend to have much more solid beliefs about the same events.

In her work, Mutz does reveal the consequences of dissonant networks on voters, but does not also investigate whether this effect is not mitigated by the presence of political experts, which might still convey accurate information on the basis of which a voting decision could be made. Although Richey (2008) looks at the level of knowledge of a discussant as well as the residual level of knowledge in the network, he does not investigate whether his findings also hold in the case of networks that are polarized. In similar fashion, McClurg (2006) does not address the case of experts possibly being strong partisans, in which case the gains caused by the accurate information that they convey might be outweighed by the fact that the respondent is placed in a network from which he gets contradictory opinions.

The methodology presented in the following chapter attempts to correct for some of the limitations presented above and to give a much more precise test of whether cross-cutting groups are indeed damaging for political participation.

III. Hypotheses

The hypothesis which guides the analysis of this thesis tries to correct for the deficiencies of the studies presented in the previous section. I assume that there is, indeed a trade-off between the benefits of a network with a high degree of political information and the costs of it being polarized in terms of partisanship of the members. The effect occurs due to the characteristics of the information which is being transmitted in such networks: even though it is high in quality, it is contradictory and has a significant potential of inducing ambivalence in an individual.

The main hypothesis is that a network which presents both a high degree of polarization and a considerable degree of knowledge will tend to act as countervailing pressures on the willingness of the individual to participate in the electoral campaign. Whereas a high degree of knowledge in the network will tend to stimulate the political involvement of an individual (by reducing the costs of making a vote decision and providing information as to opportunities for participation), as well as help him reach a voting decision much faster, the effects will be canceled when such a network also displays a high degree of polarization.

The counteracting effects of political knowledge at the level of the network and partisan polarization also extend to vote choice convergence between an individual and his discussion partner. Whereas a high degree of political knowledge of the discussant will bring the vote choice of the individual in accord to his, this effect is canceled in two instances: when the residual level of political knowledge in the network is also high³⁹, and when the partisan polarization in the network is high (it is evenly split between partisans for opposing factions).

More importantly for the defenders of the social paradigm in voting behavior, these effects

³⁹ Given that an individual has alternative sources of quality political information.

will be distinguishable even after taking into consideration widely used predictors of political involvement or vote convergence between two individuals, such as education, race, age, political interest, individual political information etc.

IV. Methodology

This chapter will outline the model which will be tested in the following chapter, the variables used and the way in which they were constructed, as well as the origins of the database. Although the original intention had been to use a multilevel model in order to test the relationship between partisan polarization in a social network and its average level of political information, a number of problems appeared in the process.

Multilevel models (see Raudenbush and Bryk, 1992; Snijders and Bosker, 1999; Jones, Johnston and Pattie, 1992; Luke, 2004; Steenbergen and Jones, 2002) have been a regular tool of academics doing educational research. Their use in political science, and particularly voting behavior, has been slow to take off, but recent years have seen a proliferation of such a method⁴⁰. There are numerous advantages to using it, particularly in terms of avoiding model misspecification, and the ability to explore causal heterogeneity and the generalizability of findings (Steenbergen and Jones, 2002: 219). A model that takes into account predictors at both the individual and the context level has a smaller chance of being misspecified; at the same time, our confidence in the accuracy of the parameter estimates increases and we are able to increase the amount of variance explained. Having the ability to specify cross-level interactions directly translates into the possibility of noticing variation in effects across higher-level units of analysis (such as geographical units, voting districts, schools or, in this case, social networks). This, in turn, means that we are able to directly verify whether our results are generalizable over different contexts and under what specific conditions.

Although the original intention was to apply such a model to the dataset, the particular nature of the data made it impossible to test more complex relationships and or include more than

40 See Yang, Goldstein and Heath (2000), Ferrao Barbosa and Goldstein (2000), Western (1998), Steenbergen, Killburn and Wolak (2001) for an example of time nested in individuals, Charnock (1997), Quillian (1995), Duch and Stevenson (2005), Nieuwebeerta and Ultee (1999), Lubbers and Scheepers (2000; 2001).

three or four predictors for political participation or vote convergence in a dyad. The superiority of such a method over the analysis used in this thesis is evident: ability to distinguish between direct and indirect effects of network-level variables on the dependent variable, automatic correction for clustering in the data etc. Nevertheless, the demands made by the method in terms of data quality could not be met even by the ISLES study.

The main limitation was the requirements of the method in terms of sample size, which should be considerable larger than one for a simple OLS regression. Although the survey conducted by Huckfeldt and Sprague had the potential to overcome this difficulty (with interviews of both main respondents and their discussants), problems arose from the fact that variables that had been measured for respondents were not also measured for discussants. This made it impossible to create a sample sufficient to trust any results that a multilevel model would have provided us with. Faced with the choice between sacrificing the model for the sake of the method (by eliminating crucial variables or relying on questionable proxies in order to maintain sample size) and opting for a different method, I decided to 'save' the model. As a result, the models were tested using logistic and multivariate linear regressions, with corrections for clustering of standard errors due to nesting in the data.

The dataset in question belongs to the Indianapolis – St. Louis Election Study (1996-1997) (henceforth, ISLES) conducted by Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague. Although it can be considered a bit 'outdated' from the point of view of contemporary political realities, it still represents the best dataset on which more intricate analyses regarding social network effects in a campaign setting can be tested. This is because it focuses particularly on patterns of social communication over the course of a presidential campaign. As such, it collects information on up to five discussants of the main respondent, but also manages to directly

interview the discussants mentioned and gather information about their own discussants⁴¹. More recent datasets have included sections with questions regarding the social network of the discussant (among others, the 2000 American National Election Study, or the 2008-2009 ANES Panel Study). Nonetheless, these have only a marginal focus on social networks and do not collect sufficient information for an adequate number of discussants in order to test more sophisticated hypotheses. For example, the 2008 study asks for information such as political knowledge, partisanship, expected vote choice, education and closeness of the relationship for only a maximum of three discussants.

The information in the ISLES dataset was collected in four waves, over the course of the 1996 presidential campaign (March 1996 – January 1997), using computer-assisted telephone interviewing⁴². 4352 interviews were completed using two separate samples: 2612 main respondents were randomly drawn from voter registration lists in the St. Louis and Indianapolis metropolitan areas, and 1740 discussants were sampled through a one-stage “snowball” design out of the discussion partners mentioned by the main respondents. The main respondent samples were randomly selected from registration lists of Marion County, Indiana (which includes the Indianapolis metropolitan area) and St. Louis County, Missouri (which includes the St. Louis metropolitan area). In terms of discussant interviews, these were completed at a rate of about 30 per week in the pre-election period, followed by 639 interviews after the election.

The sample was randomly divided into two halves, with one asked to provide up to the names of five people with which they discuss “important matters” and the other half asked to provide names of people with which they discuss “government, elections and politics”. The

41 A “discussant” is defined as a person with whom an individual regularly discusses political matters.

42 Two waves ran before Election Day (5th of November), and two afterwards. For more information on the data collection protocol, see Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague (2004). One final wave of interviews were done in the fall of 1997. This analysis uses the respondents and discussants interviewed in the 3rd wave.

distinction was included to check for the possibility that political information networks are distinct from social communication networks. Nevertheless, as Huckfeldt and Mendez (2008) show, there are no significant differences between discussants for important issues and political issues. Therefore, this analysis will use both types of discussants without taking into account their type.

The main respondents were asked to provide contact information for their discussants, and a largely similar survey instrument was also applied to them: both discussants and respondents were interviewed regarding opinions on the state of the economy, on main presidential candidates (for the first two waves) and on vote intention. Information was also collected about a host of demographic characteristics, membership in organizations, partisanship, political participation, and issue stances. More importantly, respondents were also asked about the perceived partisanship, level of political information, and intended vote choice of their discussants. For the purposes of this analysis I am using the data collected in wave 3, for main respondents and discussants.

The method employed in this paper has the benefit of relying on a dataset in which discussants of the main respondents were also directly interviewed. Given this, we can test the models proposed on a larger sample of dyads⁴³ than would be common with other surveys with social network batteries of questions. The two groups of models that will be tested examine relationships at the level of the dyad and the individual level. In the first case, I am interested in the determinants of vote choice convergence between members of dyads that are embedded in social networks. In the second one, I examine the effects of political information and partisan polarization at the level of the network on an individual's tendency for political participation during a presidential campaign.

43 The dyad is a connection between a respondent and his discussant.

4.1. Variable descriptions for models testing effects on dyads

Vote convergence is measured by a dichotomous variable (“VoteConv”), coded “1” if both members of the dyad intend to vote for the same candidate and “0” if they intend to opt for different candidates⁴⁴. The item in the questionnaire that inquires about the vote choice has only 5 alternatives: “Bill Clinton”, “Bob Dole”, “Other”, “Did not vote” and “Ineligible”. For the purposes of constructing my variable, the last two categories were considered to be missing cases, whereas “Other” was assumed to represent the same candidate in the cases in which both ends of a dyad reported “Other”⁴⁵. In order to test for any possible sources of error stemming from erroneously assuming a vote choice for one's discussant, where possible I have also included the declared vote choice of the discussant.

The level of political information for each main respondent and his discussants was computed in a different manner. For discussants, I relied on the perceived level of political information reported by the respondents, ranging from “a great deal” to “not much at all” on a five-point scale. For the respondents themselves, there was no such measure available; instead, three items measuring specific political information were asked⁴⁶. I recoded the answers so that a correct one received a value of “1” and a incorrect one a value of “0”. Thus, an index of political information was obtained, with values from 0 to 3; in order to make it compatible with the scale for the discussant's level of political information, 0 and 1 were collapsed in the same category (the equivalent of “not much at all”). For an added measure of safety I also compiled an index of political information using the same method and questions for the

44 For the purpose of this study, the ratios will always be computed with the respondent as a numerator and his discussant as the denominator.

45 I am unable to refine my measure further without more information as to what “other” refers to in the case of each respondent. Even so, there is a high likelihood that the cases in which the variable would be coded as “1” when in reality it should have been “0” are very small.

46 The particular items were whether the first 10 amendments of the US constitution are called the Bill of Rights or not, whether the President, Congress or the Supreme Court has the right to declare a law unconstitutional, and whether the majority required in Congress to override a presidential veto is two thirds or another.

discussants.

The frequency of political talk (“FpolTalk”) represents a measure of how often the two members of the dyad discuss political topics, and was measured directly by the ISLES. The disagreement in political views between the respondent and the discussant (“PoITalkD”) is based on a question that measures how often the respondent and discussant disagree when discussing political issues. The ideological distance between the members of a dyad (“IdeoDist”) is operationalized by using a rough measure of partisanship, based on a question that taps whether an individual regularly supports candidates that are Republicans, Democrats, or Independents. On the basis of this, the person was coded as being a partisan or not. My measure of ideological convergence subtracts the score of the discussant from that of the respondent; the values range from -2 (when the respondent is a strong Democrat and his discussant is a strong Republican) to 2 (the converse situation). For the purposes of this study, its square was used.

At the level of the network, the residual level of knowledge (“ResLeKno”) represents the level of knowledge in the network when the knowledge of the two members of the dyad is taken out. I follow Richey (2008), in expecting that a higher level of residual knowledge in the network will reduce the vote convergence between the ends of the dyad. The degree of ideological polarization in the network (“PaPolNSq”) takes into account only the relative numbers of partisans, and is constructed as a sum of the partisanshipes of the members of a network (“-1” for Democrat, “0” for Independent, “1” for Republican). A maximally polarized network is one in which individuals with differing partisan identifications find themselves in equal numbers. The degree of polarization drops as the ratio between these two sides becomes closer to 0 or infinity; given this, the square of the values were used.

“ResFrTlk” represents the residual frequency of political discussion after the one between thr

two ends of a dyad is taken out. Finally, “RelType” measures the predominant type of relationships at the level of the network. If this is mainly constituted out of “strong ties” (spouse, siblings, relatives), my expectation is that the discussion among them will be more frequent, contributing to a higher degree of vote convergence. The analysis will be conducted using R for UNIX, version 2.9.0, by using the “Design” package for logistic and multivariate regressions with corrections for clustering.

4.2. Variable descriptions for models testing effects on individuals

For the models looking at network effects on an individual's level of political involvement during the campaign, I created a new set of variables, but also relied on some that had been constructed for the previous analysis: the measure for partisan polarization at the level of the network and the average level of political discussion in a network are constructed in a similar manner to those used in the previous group of models.

The dependent variable is an additive index of political participation (“PolPart”), with a six-point scale, from 0 to 5. It was constructed on the basis of 5 questions tapping specific behaviors that the respondent may have engaged in during the campaign, such as trying to persuade a friend to vote for a particular candidate, working for a campaign, displaying a bumper sticker or a button which advertised a particular candidate or a party, donating money to a campaign, or attending meetings or electoral rallies.

At the individual level, the interest of the respondent in the 1996 campaign (“CampInt”) is measured by a direct question with responses on a scale from 1 to 5. As in previous models, I have used the squared measure of individual partisanship (“PartSq”); partisanship was operationalized as a variable with only 3 categories: -1 (Democrat), 0 (Independent), or 1 (Republican). A measure of the financial situation of an individual and his family at the

moment of the election compared to the previous year (“FinSit”) was also introduced, ranging from 1 (the individual and his family are better off) to 5 (they are worse off). Political knowledge (“PolKno”) is measured by an additive index of individual political knowledge, borrowed from the one used to determine the ratio of political knowledge in the previous group of models.

At the network level, apart from the two variables mentioned above, I have included a measure of average level of political knowledge (“PolKnoN”) and one of disagreement in network political discussion (“PolTlkND”). The former is computed as an average of the levels of political knowledge of the discussants for a particular respondent, while the latter represents the average of disagreement in political talk which the respondents report having with their discussants.

As control variables I have introduced a respondent's gender (“Gender”), level of education (“Educatio”), religiosity (“Religio” - measured as the frequency with which he attends church) age, and whether he is part of a minority ethnic or racial group or not. In the case of age, the questionnaire only asked for year of birth. Given that interviews were conducted in both 1996 and 1997, I chose to keep the year of birth as a measure of age.

V. Analysis and interpretation of results

The first model that I ran contains the basic predictors for my independent variable (vote convergence): difference in levels of political information between respondent and discussant, frequency of political talk between the two, level of disagreement when discussing politics, closeness of the relationship, and the ideological difference between the two⁴⁷.

$$\text{VoteConv} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{DifInfSq} + \beta_2 * \text{FpolTalk} + \beta_3 * \text{PolTalkD} + \beta_4 * \text{RelType} + \beta_5 * \text{IdeDisSq} + e$$

In order to test for multicollinearity between the independent variable, I ran a multiple correlation; this showed that they are not correlated (all Pearson's r are below .12), with the exception of my measure of disagreement in political talk, which is moderately correlated with the square of ideological distance between members of a dyad ($r = -.441$). The correlation comes as no surprise given that political disagreement is bound to intensify with an increase in partisan polarization between two individuals. Taking this into consideration, I decided to exclude the squared ideological distance between two individuals from future models.

The results of this model largely confirm the findings in the literature, as can be seen from the coefficients presented in Table 1⁴⁸. Model A includes only dyad-level variables and does not correct for clustering (the *glm* function, with which it was estimated, does not provide an adjusted R^2); model B includes the same variables, but estimates coefficients with a Huber-

47 The difference in level of political information and ideological distance were squared given the nature of the variables: from -4 to 4, and from -2 to 2. I expect that values closer to 0 would lead to vote similarity, and values closer to the extremes would create divergence between the vote choices of the two members of a dyad.

48 Significance codes: 0 '***'; 0.001 '**'; 0.01 '*'; 0.05 '.'

White heteroskedasticity and clustering corrected standard error adjustment⁴⁹.

| Variables | Model A | Model B | Model C |
|-------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| <i>(Intercept)</i> | 0.01920 | 0.51421*** | 0.56617*** |
| <i>DifInfSq</i> | -0.02065 | -0.00410 | -0.00470 |
| <i>FpolTalk</i> | -0.32999** | -0.05426* | -0.04739 . |
| <i>PolTalkD</i> | 1.15243*** | 0.19630*** | 0.19207*** |
| <i>RelType</i> | -0.24524*** | -0.03920*** | -0.04133*** |
| <i>ResLeKno</i> | - | - | -0.00568 |
| <i>ResFrTlk</i> | - | - | -0.00419 |
| <i>PaPolNSq</i> | - | - | 0.00816 . |
| Adjusted R² | - | 0.152 | 0.158 |
| N | - | 1221 | 1161 |

Table 1: Models estimating predictors of vote convergence in a dyad

The only coefficient which does not achieve significance is the one for my measure of difference in political information. Given that the measure does not correlate with the other variables in the model, I can only find two explanations for the phenomenon. The first is a potential lack of validity of the measure, given that it was constructed with reported data for the discussant and with objective data for the main respondents (an index constructed from the answers to 3 political knowledge questions). The second explanation concerns the potential role of political information in the process of choosing a candidate. It may be the case that differences in political information are not as crucial for choosing a candidate as it

49 See Hayes and Cai (2007).

was hypothesized by political theorists. Individuals with low levels and high levels of political information seem to vote for the same candidates, which might be the result of effective use of cognitive heuristics by the low-information voters to supplant their relative lack of political knowledge⁵⁰.

The more often individuals talk politics, the more likely that they will opt for the same candidate on Election Day. Of course, causality cannot be inferred with this research design, given that people who would tend to choose the same candidate might discuss politics at higher rates during the campaign. Disagreement in political discussion also has a predictable effect: people that see eye to eye in political matters also tend to vote “eye to eye”. Finally, the type of relationship that connects the members of a dyad also seems to have the effect that most of the literature finds: discussion with close relatives has a larger influence on our vote choice than discussion with co-workers and other unrelated persons. This would seem to go against the hypotheses of authors such as Granovetter (1973), which sees a significant role played by “weak links”: given that we interact infrequently with these individuals, there is a much higher likelihood of finding out new information from them rather than from our closest discussants (Pattie and Johnston, 2002).

One way through which the closeness of the relationship may influence the convergence in vote choice between members of a dyad is suggested by Straits (1991): closeness influence the frequency of political conversation, which, in turn, influences convergence. We rely more on close connections because they are easily available⁵¹ and also because we reduce the risk of “losing face” by admitting political ignorance or various extremist views⁵².

I continue by running two variations on this model: one that takes into account clustering in

50 See Kuklinski and Quirk, 2000; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001.

51 In essence, they reduce the costs of getting political information (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1987; Weatherford, 1982).

52 See Hays (1989). Nevertheless, he did not compare relatives with friends, but close friends with casual acquaintances.

the data and another that uses an objective measure of discussant level of political information, computed in exactly the same manner as for the main respondents. For the clustering correction, I used the “robcov” function in the “Design” package for R, which allowed me to control for clustering at the network level. Although the package also contains the “bootcov” function, which provides the same type of correction while using bootstrapping, the former function has the advantage of providing the same results every time it is run. Both functions are particularly appropriate for cases in which there are numerous clusters and small numbers of units in each cluster. The results for model B present a rather different picture than those of the previous analysis.

The R^2 of the model is 0.152, a considerable proportion given the relative low number of variables used. The signs of the coefficients are the same as in the previous analysis, giving us additional confidence in the reliability of the relationships observed. What has changed is the strength of the relationships: the frequency of political discussion and type of relationship between members of a dyad has minor but significant effects on the tendency to vote for the same candidate. The only variable which maintains a considerable effect is disagreement in political discussion, in the expected direction. Given the superiority of this method compared to a simple logistic regression on a pooled sample, all the subsequent models presented in this chapter will be tested using it.

Model C includes, in addition to the variables already mentioned, network-level measures of residual knowledge of political information, residual frequency of political discussion and partisan polarization⁵³. The adjusted R^2 of the model is 0.1589, practically the same as the previous model tested, and it is tested on a slightly smaller sample compared to model B.

53 As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the variables that measure the residual level of information and political discussion refer to the network-level information and discussion that 'remain' in the network after taking out the information and level of discussion between the members of the dyad. The measure of partisan polarization has been squared due to similar considerations as in the case of the individual-level difference in information and ideological distance.

My constructed measures of residual level of information and residual frequency of political discussion have the expected direction of effect: increases in both tend to reduce the influence of one particular discussant, as reflected in the vote choice convergence between himself and the main respondent. This points to the autoregressive effect that these have (Richey, 2008): when surrounded by people with high levels of political information, the influence of any one of those persons is diminished. Nevertheless, they do not achieve statistical significance. The single network-level variable that does achieve significance is my measure of partisan polarization in the network, although its effect is barely discernible. This may occur because of the particular way in which the variables were constructed: as a ratio between two individual-level measures. As such, I cannot examine the interaction between the discussant's partisanship and that preponderant in the network, when it comes to their effect on the respondent's vote choice.

Although I also attempted to run the models presented above with the objective vote choices of discussants and their objective level of political information, that was impossible given the limited number of cases which remained in the sample (N=371); none of the coefficients that remained in the model (with the singular exception of the one for frequency of political discussion) achieved statistical significance. Such an analysis certainly deserves exploration on a bigger sample given the potential differences it might uncover; in my case, the correlation (ϕ coefficient) between the original measure of vote convergence and the measure constructed using the self-declared vote choice of the discussants was only .656. Such a difference might result in significantly different values for the estimated coefficients in the regression model.

In order to correct for these *lacunae* and to study the effects of a polarized social network on

the political participation of an individual, I have tested similar models on a database in which cases are **individuals** and not dyads. As table 2.2 shows, three models were tested: one with only individual level predictors of political participation (A), one with both individual and network level variables (B), and one with a restricted set of variables to correct for possible multicollinearity issues (C). A multivariate correlation table performed in SPSS showed that there are no variables with correlation coefficients larger than 0.31, which allows for their introduction in a regression analysis.

Before moving on to the analysis, I ran a series of descriptive statistics which helped clarify some of the possible relationships between variables, but also gave me additional assurances regarding the validity of my constructed measures. Table 2.1 presents the distribution of partisan polarization across social networks (where 0 means a network which is equally divided between partisans of opposite political partisanship).

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|----|----|----|----|
| Partisan polarization | -5 | -4 | -3 | -2 | -1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Number of networks | 6 | 7 | 24 | 43 | 124 | 170 | 137 | 64 | 42 | 22 | 15 |

Table 2.1: Distribution of political partisanship across networks

What the numbers tell us is that most people encounter diversity in political views, in their groups of friends, relatives and acquaintances. Despite the existence of some coding issues (e.g., “1” might mean a network of five discussants with three Republicans and two Democrats, or a network of one discussant which is Republican), it does nevertheless show us that most individuals receive their political information with a varying degree of bias⁵⁴.

A number of correlations present a much more detailed picture of the possible phenomena

⁵⁴ One must exercise restraint in interpreting these results too far: the low number of networks with complete or quasi-complete partisan homogeneity may be due to the relative rarity of this occurrence, or to the fact that very few people could name 5 discussants and they tended to fall into the trap of “false consensus”.

that occur at the network level⁵⁵. There seems to be no correlation between the level of partisan polarization in a network and the frequency with which political discussion is carried out ($r = -0.096$). This indicates that political topics are not necessarily avoided in networks in which there is a high chance of encountering disagreement; despite the possibility of opposition and social discord, political topics are still approached. In terms of the influence of education, the findings of previous studies are confirmed: a network higher in educational level does lead to a higher frequency of political discussion, although the relationship is rather weak ($r = -0.231$ ⁵⁶).

Other relationships are also in the direction expected, although their intensity is minor. Partisan polarization does seem to induce a certain measure of ambivalence when reflected in the moment at which the decision to vote was made. The sign of the coefficient ($r = 0.147$) indicates a small tendency on the part of individuals situated in polarized networks to arrive at a decision to vote closer to the moment of the actual election than their peers situated in more politically homogenous networks. Political knowledge in the network, on the other hand, seems to have a minor stimulating effect on both the level of campaign interest of an individual ($r = 0.154$), and tends to be associated with a higher level of political participation in the members of the network ($r = -0.196$).

Finally, I manage to find support for Mutz's (2006) assertion regarding the depressant effect that partisan cross-pressures have on the willingness of an individual to engage in political participation. A simple correlation between the level of political participation in a network and the level of partisan polarization of that network indicates that a higher level of polarization is indeed associated with a lower rate of involvement in the presidential campaign of 1996 ($r = 0.228$). Although care should be again exercised in interpreting these

55 The use of the word „possible“ is spurred by the potential disappearance of some of these effects when all the variables are included in a model and adequate controls are introduced.

56 The negative sign is due to the coding of frequency of political discussion on an inverted scale.

results too far, they do seem to point toward a relationship which does not bode well for a polity's vitality in the context of a democratic system.

| Variables | Model A | Model B | Model C |
|-------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| <i>(Intercept)</i> | 0.822879* | 2.058329*** | 2.043565*** |
| <i>Gender</i> | -0.017042 | -0.017498 | -0.019254 |
| <i>FinSit</i> | -0.006762 | 0.042761 | 0.046359 |
| <i>Religio</i> | -0.044236 . | -0.080879* | -0.082570* |
| <i>CampInt</i> | -0.247562*** | -0.215601*** | -0.211679*** |
| <i>PartSq</i> | 0.254491*** | 0.002806 | - |
| <i>Educatio</i> | 0.051017*** | 0.031216 | 0.030771 |
| <i>YearBorn</i> | -0.000101* | -0.000106* | -0.000107* |
| <i>MinorDum</i> | -0.047768 | -0.082137 . | -0.084603 . |
| <i>PolKnow</i> | 0.102064 * | 0.037324 | 0.038876 |
| <i>PolTlkN</i> | - | -0.312672*** | -0.310462*** |
| <i>PolTlkND</i> | - | 0.066501 | 0.079564 |
| <i>PolKnoN</i> | - | -0.137405* | -0.143622* |
| <i>PaPolNSq</i> | - | 0.033222*** | 0.032586*** |
| Adjusted R² | 0.1393 | 0.2006 | 0.2008 |
| N | 1244 | 560 | 569 |

Table 2.2: Models estimating predictors of political participation in individuals

Although certainly revealing, the results presented above cannot be fully trusted until all significant variables have been tested in a regression model. Comparing the three models from table 2.2 with each other, we can see that with the exception of my measure of an individual's financial situation at the moment of the election compared to the previous year, none of the coefficients for the variables change sign (*FinSit* never manages to achieve significance though). There is also a considerable improvement in the amount of variance explained by models which include network-level predictors when comparing with models without such variables (as table 2.2 shows, including network-level predictors improves the adjusted R^2 by approximately 50%). Looking across rows at the variables we can see that there are no meaningful changes in terms of significance apart from religiosity, which improves its significance when taking into account clustering in the data.

Gender and the change in financial situation of the individual do not manage to achieve statistical significance in my models. Given the vast literature on economic voting⁵⁷, the results for the latter case come as a surprise; the only explanation that can be offered is that pocketbook voting was not used in the course of the 1996 election, and that voters paid attention mainly to the national economy (sociotropic voting)⁵⁸. In addition to these two, my measures of partisanship and education actually lose significance when taking into account clustering of observations.

Interest in the campaign is in the direction expected and exerts a meaningful influence on the tendency to get involved in the campaign. The variable is coded on an inverted scale (1 meaning a high degree of interest and 5 denoting a low level), so a higher score means a lower level of interest, which translates into a lower level of political involvement. The age of the respondent also has an effect on his willingness to participate: a younger person exhibits a

57 See, among others, Lewis-Beck and Paldam (2000), Lewis-Beck (1986), Dorussen and Taylor (2002).

58 Godbout and Bélanger (2007) reach a similar conclusion regarding the relative lack of pocketbook considerations when analyzing US presidential elections between 1988 and 2004.

tendency for lower participation, as can be noticed from the negative coefficient for the variable (the magnitude of the coefficient is explained by the fact that a mere 1-year change does not impact one's tendency to participate in a noticeable manner, whereas 20 years do). The fact that age still has an effect on the propensity to participate of an individual even after taking into account strength of partisanship, education, and political interest strengthens the conclusions of Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980: 58-60). The authors suggest that a possible explanation for this phenomenon lies in accumulated life experience, which can improve the level of political skills, motivation and even political knowledge beyond that acquired in a classroom. Individual levels of political knowledge lose significance between models, although they do maintain the direction of the effect: a higher level of education increases the level of political participation during the campaign.

Turning to the network level factors, we see that these have an influence on an individual's tendency for political participation even after taking into account the most common individual-level determinants of political involvement. The average frequency of political discussion in an individual's social network influences him in the direction expected: a higher level of discussion is associated with a greater degree of involvement⁵⁹. In this case however we have reasons to doubt causality given that it is entirely plausible that an individual who is already involved in the campaign will tend to bring up political topics in his discussions with his friends and acquaintances at a higher rate.

Finally, turning to the last two network-level variables, we see that the hypothesis on which this thesis is based fails to find support. Although small (possibly because of having squared the variable), the effect of my measure of partisan polarization in the network is in the opposite effect than the one expected: a higher degree of polarization leads to a slightly

⁵⁹ This variable is also coded on an inverted scale, with a 5 denoting a high level of political discussion and 20 a very low one.

higher level of political involvement. The effect of the average level of political knowledge in the network is in the direction expected, with a higher level of political information leading to a higher level of participation⁶⁰. Although the two variables do have the countervailing effect hypothesized in the beginning, the effect of network political knowledge greatly surpasses that of partisan polarization.

Despite the fact that the results will not be reported here, I have also tried to run a model with the same predictors but with a dependent variable measuring the moment at which the decision to vote had been made (ranging from the week before the campaign to before the general campaign had begun). Sadly, the sample size dropped even further and the adjusted R^2 of the model (0.0639) did not allow a reliable interpretation of any coefficients that resulted.

⁶⁰ Variable coded on an inverted scale, with 1 denoting a great deal of knowledge about politics and 5 denoting a low level of political information.

VI. Conclusions

The results presented in the previous chapter seem to strengthen the position of those that believe in the ability of a network high in political information to stimulate participation beyond what would be expected from just analyzing individual resources and psychological involvement. At the same time, they would seem to contradict those that view democratic politics as a field in which the citizenry cannot completely fulfill the criteria with which it is judged by political theorists; it cannot be simultaneously participative and deliberative, given that in the context of one's social network, exposure to contradicting information suppresses participation, whereas a homogeneous network stimulates it but does not offer the proper setting for deliberation (Mutz, 2002a, 2002b, 2006).

If the degree of partisan polarization in a social network can be considered a proxy for the supply of political information coming from diverse points of view, the results this analysis has provided would suggest that participation is not necessarily depressed by partisan cross-pressures. The key factor appears to be the level of political information in the social network in which an individual is embedded. Having discussants that are knowledgeable about politics and, presumably, consider political discussion as important has the tendency to promote political involvement even in the context of a polarized network. The mechanism might very well be the one hypothesized by Abrams, Iversen and Soskice (2005) in the context of the social rational choice model of political behavior: individuals desire social recognition from the members of the groups of which they are a part of. This desire can be a potent incentive to collect political information, engage in political discussion and be involved if the group surrounding them values such activities. Although it is entirely accurate that the effects partisan polarization and level of political information are countervailing, the one exhibited by the latter surpasses the former. Given that, as was previously mentioned, we

have reasons to believe that there is also a cognitive component to partisanship (Gant and Luttbeg, 1987), a politically diverse social network might actually provide the individual with the political information needed to participate more effectively (at a lower cost to him).

At the same time, at the level of a network the persons that seem to exert the largest influence on a voter (as measured by convergence in vote choice) seem to be those with which he has more frequent political discussions. Although the method employed in this analysis does not allow for discerning between the effects of political discussion on future vote choice and of previous political choices on current levels of discussion, it does suggest that political discussion has a significant effect on both political participation (by transmitting the knowledge of the group to the voter) and vote choice. An individual might be able to overcome his potential 'aversion' of interacting with individuals of opposite partisan orientation if he is in need of political information which cannot be obtained from "ideal informants". The results presented above support some of the conclusions of newer analyses on the topic of social network effects (Nir, 2005): external cross-pressures do not seem to be a significant predictor for the extent of political participation.

6.1. Limitations of the research

The results presented must be viewed through the lens of their limitations. These refer, in particular, to the method employed in the analysis, the sample on which this was conducted, and issues of construct validity.

As has been previously mentioned, the initial goal of this study was to employ a multilevel model, which would have been able to accurately identify the direct and indirect effects of network-level characteristics on the dependent variable in my model (extent of political participation). Sadly, the nature of the data collected by Huckfeldt and Sprague precluded

such an approach, which had to be replaced by a much more common set of logistic regressions with corrections for clustering in the data. If this inability manifests itself even in the case of the most extensive study of social networks and voting, I am left wondering whether such a method could even be applied to the study of social network effects without undertaking a new data collection effort which would focus on an extended network of discussants (perhaps by taking the logic of the ISLES one step further and also directly interviewing the discussants' discussants). The relevance to my analysis is that the method used is not able to separate the direct effect of network-level variables on the dependent variable from the indirect one. Nevertheless, there are considerable reasons to believe that a variable such as the degree of partisan polarization at the level of the network would also influence vote convergence by influencing the extent of political discussion at the level of a dyad. This would make discussions with other members of the network easier and therefore limit the influence that one discussant in the network may have on an individual.

The second limitation concerns the size of the sample on which the main analysis was conducted. The fact that the sample size was approximately 550 (about 900 respondents were excluded due to missing cases) induces doubt regarding the size of the coefficients and the direction of the effects (although most did achieve statistical significance). A bigger source of concern is the variables that did not achieve significance, and which were considered not to have an effect on the dependent variable; if it is the case that this happened because of the small sample size, then we have discounted variables which do influence political participation in an individual (an obvious example would be education, which in my analysis barely manages to achieve significance at the 0.1 level).

The last limitation which I will discuss is the possible lack of validity of my imperfect measure of partisanship. Given that respondents were never directly asked about the partisanship of their discussants, such a measure had to be derived from a question tapping

whether they regularly support candidates that are Democrats, Republicans, or independents. This rough measure could only provide us with a similarly coarse measure of whether the discussant himself might be a Democrat, a Republican or an independent. While it might do an acceptable task at cataloging strong partisans, it is less effective at describing weak partisans, which may be included in the “independent” category. This reverberates into my measure of network partisan polarization, which similarly under-estimates networks of weak partisans and considers them to be formed of independents.

A word of caution, and at the same time a limitation of the results, must be offered before proceeding: these results have been obtained in the context of the 1996 US presidential election, and should be interpreted as being applicable at most to the US political context. Beyond this context there is a lack of systematic evidence on which similar conclusions could be based⁶¹. What evidence there is suggests that social networks are not similar in terms of homogeneity across countries (Richardson and Beck, 2007), which precludes any interpretation beyond the US election context⁶². Although the phenomenon is beginning to be investigated in other countries as well (Italy, Japan, Mexico, Brazil, and Hungary), there is a lack of comparative studies outside of the Anglo-Saxon world regarding the differences in network composition or partisan polarization, or communication patterns within networks (with the potential exception of Liu, Ikeda and Wilson, 1998).

6.2. Suggestions for future research

Given the almost natural extension of the method to the study of how network-level characteristics impact individual-level behaviors, it is surprising that no attempt has been made to apply the multilevel modeling technique. One explanation for this phenomenon,

61 Except for the possible case of the United Kingdom.

62 See Lup (2006) for evidence in the case of Hungary.

supplied in the previous paragraphs, is that the data on which such a model could be tested has not yet been collected. Even the most comprehensive survey that focuses on social networks (the ISLES) has avoided collecting the variables needed for this undertaking. This avenue for research has so far been left uncharted, despite its potential to address numerous controversies that exist in the literature regarding social network effects.

A second area of inquiry which would result in important insights is the study of partisans and their exact status in a social network. The role of partisans in a social network is still not entirely clear; are they really able to transmit the added information that they possess about the political process when they are surrounded by less knowledgeable and less involved peers? And if 'average' citizens tend to benefit from the existence of partisans in their social network (receiving better political information at a lower cost than that incurred by having to look for it themselves), the same could probably not be said about the partisans. Do partisans placed in largely apathetic networks exhibit a reduced level of political involvement? The logical extension of these endeavors is to observe the behavior of networks in time, in the course of an election campaign, through the use of a panel design. This would allow the observation of campaign effect on a social network and how information first penetrates a network and then disperses in it.

Finally, I believe the discipline should move past the use of ego-networks with information supplied by a main respondent in the study of voting behavior, and focus more on the types of networks that are generally the object of study of sociologists. Although still valuable, ego-networks are rapidly reaching their limit in terms of what results they can offer; focusing more on their extended structure, on the hubs that act as gatekeepers through which political information can flow to numerous other members of the network, could move the study of networks in a direction from which exciting insights might arrive. This would require new and potentially very demanding methods of data collection (the use of snowball sampling as a

primary method), and would not achieve the national representativity that is sought after in contemporary political science, but would revive an 'ailing' field.

These new avenues should be pursued particularly in contexts beyond the United States and Great Britain, but also from a cross-country perspective. Currently, the field is composed of numerous small islands of results corresponding to the countries in which the phenomenon has been studied (each with its particular social context); what is required are the bridges that connect these islands, but also expanding the archipelago beyond the region of North America and Western Europe. There are reasons to believe that in the context of new democracies, social networks would have more powerful effects. Where citizens have weak partisan connections and the political parties themselves are underdeveloped, two forces might provide cues valuable in an election campaign: media and political discussion among groups of friends (Baker, Ames and Renno, 2006). Out of these two, social networks have been left unexamined, although they might prove to be particularly influential where the media is considered as 'captured' by political parties. Given these considerations, I consider it tremendously important for the discipline to focus on democracies with various social contexts and extend the range of social network effects on voting behavior beyond the political system of the United States.

6.3. Final remarks

There has been a tendency of political theory to view the modern citizen as a “neat package of characteristics that all fit comfortably into a single composite portrait” (Mutz, 2006: 125). Although this image has come under closer scrutiny in the past half a decade, there are consistent reasons to doubt that the posited conflict between deliberation and participation might actually hold under every circumstance. If reality were so we might justifiably wonder

why democracy hasn't broken down yet as a result of a constant struggle between two casts: the 'participators' and the 'deliberators'. While the former side makes the cogs of the democratic system move, by promoting their favorite candidates, wearing buttons to show their support for them and trying to convince friends and neighbors to vote in support of those particular candidates, the latter are the ones that watch the system function and identify the flaws and qualities of each cog.

If the 'typology' created by Los Angeles Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda for baseball players (there are three types: "those who make things happen, those who watch it happen, and those who wonder what happens"⁶³) applies to democratic citizenship, then we can easily see how 'participators' and 'deliberators' fill the first two groups. The third is reserved for the large category of democratic 'shirkers', avoiding participation or deliberation either because they do not possess the interest, or the information, or the participatory friends which can sometimes drag them along, but generally all three at the same time. This distinction makes democratic life difficult: a constant tug of war between those that know what should be done⁶⁴, and those that do what they want to be done.

When examining reality however, we see that democratic life has not broken down, although it may have lost some of its vitality (Putnam, 2001; but see Norris, 2002). Citizens continue to act, although over time they may have found other avenues for participation, and political discussion still occurs. Those that meet disagreement in political views can either 'retreat in their shell' at the sight of disagreement and avoid further discussion and even participation for the sake of maintaining group coherence, or they can become more entrenched in their views and find alternative avenues of participation, possibly still maintaining the group intact. The

63 <http://schoolweb.missouri.edu/stoutland/Athletics/Baseball/Famous%20Qoutes.htm>.

64 Of course, an idealized position: more information does not automatically result in a better solution. As was mentioned in a previous chapter, it may lead to ambivalence and the impossibility of making a choice. Nevertheless, I would argue that if a decision is to be made, more information will result in a better decision given that all the trade-offs would be taken into consideration.

role of “weak links” seems particularly important here, as they can offer the citizens in the situation presented above a much needed partner for discussion⁶⁵, as well as act as a source of alternative information.

This thesis has attempted to provide an answer to why this paradox is fallacious. Although partisans, if they are present in equal numbers in a social network, do seem to have a negative effect on the predisposition to participate of an individual, this is not powerful enough to depress the beneficial effect of the political information which these partisans possess. It has the ability to counteract the ambivalence potentially induced by the presence of partisan cross-pressures in the network. Although political theorists have tended to treat partisans as veritable villains of the political spectrum (Muirhead, 2003), the results presented in this work suggest that we should not automatically consider partisanship (and particularly partisan polarization) as a negative trait at the level of one's circle of friends and acquaintances.

Partisans may not only be the ones that “stuff envelopes”, “drive people to the polls”, “cheer in joy” or “mourn in sorrow on election night” (Muirhead, 2005: 2); they may also be the ones that possess the information to make political participation less costly for an individual. This effect was understood by, among others, J. S. Mill, which saw the conflict between partisans as not amounting to much in terms of convincing one of the partisans of the superiority of the arguments espoused by the other side. The benefits of the arguments targeted the “calmer and more disinterested bystander”, which profits from the information that is being tossed around in the heat of the fight⁶⁶. From this perspective social networks may yet be have the beneficial effects that were originally hypothesized.

65 Given that they have a much higher likelihood of having a different partisan orientation than compared to one's close friends and relatives.

66 Mill (1956: 53) as cited in Mutz (2006: 131).

Finally, if one were to turn to the empirical relevance for democratic life of these findings, it would be clear that we are in a much better position to offer suggestions for re-vitalizing political discussion among social networks. It would appear that political participation is stimulated most when discussion occurs in a social environment with a high degree of political information, irrespective of the level of partisan polarization in the network. From this point of view, a lower rate of participation could not be pinned on an individual's unwillingness to disrupt social harmony in his social network; the actual culprit probably lies in the low level of political information that the network possesses. Although participation would probably be indeed a little easier for these individuals, it has no specific direction since they probably do not possess the information necessary to make it meaningful: times of rallies, opportunities to donate time or money to campaigns etc.

John Adams once famously stated that his principle “never to be the tool of any man, nor the partisan of any nation”, would exclude him “from the smiles and favors of courts”. If we were apply this saying to political partisanship, we would readily see that there is nonetheless a benefit to be gained from being embedded in an environment polarized from a political point of view: one can receive the “smiles and favors” of quality political information, and thus enrich the quality of his political participation.

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