Is influence mightier than selection? Forging agreement in political discussion networks during a campaign

Jason Bello, Meredith Rolfe *

Department of Management, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

A B S T R A C T

Is political agreement in social networks the product of selection or influence? We investigate this question using the first large, general population sample survey to track changes in the political discussion partners named by respondents over the course of an election campaign. We identify two social processes at work during the nine months prior to the election: "selection", or the likelihood that people choose discussion partners based on their political views, and "influence", or the likelihood that respondents exposed to political disagreement change their intended vote choice. We find evidence of both positive and negative selection for political agreement, as well as evidence that people are influenced by their friends and family.

© 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Most people hold political views similar to those of friends and family members. Considerable evidence demonstrates that friends, family members and coworkers are likely to agree on political matters, including political partisanship (Jennings and Richard, 1981; Kenny, 1994), vote choice (Berelson et al., 1954; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1991, 1995; Pattie and Johnston, 2000; Nieuwbeerta and Flap, 2000), and other political attitudes (Bienenstock et al., 1990; Huckfeldt et al., 2004a,b; Pattie and Johnston, 2000). The question remains as to *why* such high levels of agreement exist: is it sign of some process of influence, in which individuals' choices are in part a function of the choices of others around them? Or does agreement more often result from selection, in which people choose to discuss politics with like-minded others? This paper contributes to the ongoing debate over the roles played by selection and influence in contributing to high levels of observed political agreement, looking closely at changes in both self-reported political discussion networks and vote choice during an election campaign.

Several previous attempts to study the relationship between political discussion networks and vote choice have been unable to separate influence from selection. Such studies used a cross-sectional sample survey design, in which main respondents provide the names, political preferences, and other information about their own political discussion networks at a single point in time. Main respondent vote choice is modelled as a function of the preferences

of named political discussants, while statistically controlling for the impact of shared interests as captured by key demographic attributes and other factors relevant to vote choice. Studies of this kind, however, cannot control for the potential effects of selection: it may be that respondents have chosen to discuss politics only with others who already agree with them. Similar criticisms have also been levelled at research using aggregated contextual information to study the impact of the broader social context on individual vote choice (Pattie and Johnston, 2000; Huckfeldt, 1979).

Longitudinal survey data and quasi-experimental designs have proven more effective at teasing apart the impact of selection and influence. Klofstad (2007) finds social influence may drive increased participation among college students randomly assigned to dorms, while Nickerson (2005) finds evidence of spillover effects of voter mobilization experiments. However, neither of these studies addresses the impact of social context on partisan preferences. Two large survey studies with a panel component isolate the impact of social influence, but only amongst marital and familial dyads (Jennings and Richard, 1981; Zuckerman et al., 2005). Finally, experimental work offers evidence that networks, whether or not a source of social influence themselves, may condition the effectiveness of persuasive messages. People with more diverse networks scrutinize persuasive messages more carefully than those with homogeneous networks (Levitan and Visser, 2008), and are ultimately more likely to change their attitudes (Levitan and Visser, 2009). This study draws on longitudinal panel data from a general population sample, offering generalizable insights into the broader social processes of selection and influence on partisan choice during an election.

This paper takes advantage of a new multi-wave election study conducted during the 2010 British general election cycle as part

* Corresponding author at: Department of Management, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. Tel.: +44 (0)20 7107 5325.

E-mail address: m.r.rolfe@lse.ac.uk (M. Rolfe).

of the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP). The British CCAP includes measures of vote choice and political discussion networks on four different waves of the survey conducted over a nine month period. We use methods that allow us to isolate the dynamic impact of selection (i.e., changes in self-reported discussion partners) and influence (i.e., changes in self-reported vote choice conditional on exposure to political disagreement) during the election. We stress that our results apply only to the processes of selection and influence that operate during the campaign, and therefore undoubtedly underestimate the contribution of both process to already high levels of political agreement in discussion networks prior to the study.

Surprisingly, we find evidence for influence as expected, but relatively little evidence of selection. While respondents with politically diverse networks are more likely to change their anticipated vote choice during the lead-up to the election, most respondents do not appear to actively select like-minded political discussants during the same nine month period of study. While some respondents with strong partisan identities and high levels of political interest may be more likely to retain discussants with whom they agree, the majority of respondents with weaker partisan identities and lower levels of political interest continue to discuss politics with those who do not support the same party. Also contrary to expectations, we find that the family is an important source of persistent political disagreement. While people have more disagreements with peripheral contacts, these peripheral contacts are much more likely to drop out of the network than familial contacts. Finally, we find that political disagreement may in some cases encourage sustained interaction and political engagement, once again contrary to previous findings. Thus, at least in the case of the lead-up to the 2010 UK general election, there was more evidence of influence than selection.

2. Reaching agreement: selection and influence

This paper focuses on two mechanisms believed to underlie the high levels of observed political agreement: selection and influence. People may *select* political discussion partners on the basis of political opinions. Citizens may avoid undesirable discussants, and seek out compatible ones, in multiple ways. Directly, citizens may choose to avoid those with whom they disagree, and instead associate or discuss politics only with those who share their political views. Selection of political discussants does not necessarily mean ending pre-existing relationships or befriending all Liberal Democrats that one meets; it can be as simple as choosing to sit at the opposite end of the table from politically conservative Aunt Edna at family gatherings. Indirectly, people make many other choices that shape their pool of available discussants. For example, one might choose to live in a neighborhood or city with a reputation for being conservative, or pursue an academic career in the hopes of spending time around other liberals.

However, political agreement is not likely to be the foundation of most marriages, let alone most social interactions. Citizens who do not or cannot indirectly avoid dissent through choices of where to live and who to marry may instead try to avoid conflict by avoiding political discussion, either completely or at least with those who do not share the same political views (Ulbig and Funk, 1999; Eliasoph, 1998; Mansbridge, 1980; Fitton, 1973). In focus groups, people have reported avoiding discussion because "people are gonna think you're a terrible person if you don't believe exactly what they believe" (Conover et al., 2002). Selection of political discussants may be motivated by a general fear of revealing preferences to others who are not trusted: "I'm just not that brave" volunteered one participant (Conover et al., 2002).

Even assuming some degree of selection of friends or discussion partners on the basis of political views, however, does not preclude the possibility that people might be exposed to other views through social interaction. Relationships can rarely be turned on and off like a television, and it is much easier to change channels than to change discussion topics. As Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) point out, it is much easier to selectively choose media exposure on the basis of political agreement than it is to limit social relationships on the same basis, as politics often "comes up unexpectedly as a sideline or marginal topic in casual conversation." The authors provided numerous examples of the pervasive nature of political discussion in everyday life, ranging from families influencing one another to a waitress who switched her vote after overhearing "bits of conversation that were not intended for her" (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968, p. 153).

If two people do not see eye to eye on a political issue, then there is a chance that they may *influence* each other. One partner may introduce new information that serves to shape or change the other's views. Both partners may seek a middle ground or compromise position to allow them to continue amicable discussions. Or combined social pressure may push one of the partners to a new political position even where reasoned discussion fails. We define influence quite broadly as any time the decision of one person is conditional on the decision of others (Rolfe, 2009). Thus, influence is not tied to particular motivations to conform, and the person who is influenced may not even be aware that his or her opinion has been influenced (Rolfe, 2012).

How often is observed agreement in political discussion networks the result of broadly defined influence, and how often does it result from selection? In this section we outline the ways that influence and selection are expected to change agreement during the course of a single election campaign. Due to the limited time frame of the study, we cannot observe earlier events where influence and selection forged high levels of pre-existing agreement in political discussion networks. However, we can observe a series of decisions made by many individual citizens over the course of an election: decisions about both political discussion partners and partisan support. The discussion below highlights how we might identify the processes of selection and influence at work during an election.

2.1. Selection

Do people talk about politics to the same people throughout a campaign, or do they more actively select discussion partners from among those available? In our research, we find that people change who they talk to about politics (or at least remember talking to) fairly frequently during the course of a single election campaign. Just over half (53–59%) of the discussants named in one survey wave re-appear in a subsequent wave. What factors may affect the likelihood of retaining discussion partners for a longer period of time? People may select on political similarity, preferring to talk about politics only or primarily with those who prefer the same political party. Other aspects of the relationship, such as marital or familial ties, or shared close friends, may also increase (or decrease) the likelihood of ongoing discussions.

Selection, as noted above, can consist of both direct and indirect choices that might impact political agreement. We may increase the availability of like-minded partners through choices of where to live, work or marry, and/or choose to discuss politics with the friends with whom we already agree. In the relatively short nine month campaign period under consideration, it is unlikely that many respondents are making major decisions (e.g., changing jobs, getting married) that will affect their pool of potential political discussants. Therefore, we expect that selection during a campaign