# Name generation in interpersonal political network data: Results from a series of experiments

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

We present results from three large scale survey experiments focused on the manipulation of political name generators. Using syntax that is widely employed outside of political science, we generate interpersonal political network data by varying the roles of alters, the time horizons of relationships, and the specific political nature of social exchanges. Across varying samples and electoral environments, we look for differences in these conditions on a wide range of common interpersonal network items, assess latency data on these treatments, and employ more detailed information on named discussants than most existing political ego-centric studies. We evaluate how well the now standard "compound" political name generator captures interpersonal political networks, finding that it does quite well save a few items of significant political importance. We discuss the implications of this research agenda for theories of social influence and the study of disagreement in democratic politics.

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## 1. Introduction

The use of name generators to populate ego-centric networks is well established in the study of political behavior. Drawing on previous work (e.g., Laumann, 1966, 1973), the *political* name generator dates to the pioneering efforts of Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) and their 1984 South Bend Study. In political science over the past twenty-five years there has been relatively little deviation from Huckfeldt and Sprague's approach, though select studies have adopted the General Social Survey's "important matters" prompt.

While existing studies have evaluated the extent to which this political name generator produces differences in the composition of networks compared to an important matters generator (e.g., Klofstad et al., 2009),[1] there has as of yet been no experimentation *within* political name generation. That is, while slightly different political name generators have been used in political science surveys, there has been no systematic comparison of their outcomes, and there has been no controlled experimentation among political name generators. Therefore, we ask the following: How representative is the standard political name generator? Does it return a good

sample of people's political networks, or does it mask systematic biases?

Our goals in this paper are twofold. First, we draw on the broader ego-centric, interpersonal network literature from across the social sciences to introduce to political science a vocabulary for discussing the components of name generators. Second, we begin the work of assessing how name generators may influence our vision and understanding of political networks, presenting the results from three large scale survey experiments manipulating name generator texts. Across the studies, we examine several key sources of variance: the *roles* of alters, the *time horizons* of relationships, and the specific political nature of the *exchanges*. The network components we examine as outcomes, including size, density, disagreement and expertise, are diverse, covering the multitude of variables with which researchers have long concerned themselves, as well as others that have not received wide airing.

Given these dimensions of concern, we argue that the widely used, "compound" political name generator provides a valid sample of political networks, though we note a few important exceptions. A compound name generator, a concept we develop below in detail, simply asks respondents to name networks that combine more than one relationship basis or form. We discuss the implications of these findings, and present a future research agenda for the study of political networks through name generation. In particular, we argue that investigations of social networks in political life could benefit from more precisely targeted instructions for how research participants elaborate their political networks. Theories of social influence harbor competing assumptions about the nature of the

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[1] Indeed, Huckfeldt and Sprague's Indianapolis-St. Louis Election Study (1996–1997) randomly assigned respondents to either a political or an important matters generator.

ties between egos and alters; gathering particularized networks that enable explicit tests of these assumptions could facilitate theoretical advances.

## 2. The nature of name generation

Although there are many ways to capture a social network (see, e.g., Bernard et al., 1990; Christakis and Fowler, 2011; Fu, 2005; McCarty et al., 1997), one of the most common ways has been the name generator used to direct respondents. First employed in the social sciences by Laumann (1966, 1973), name generators have taken on four basic forms based on the nature of the social tie that is most important to the researcher. Though sometimes described with different terms (Bernard et al., 1990), Marin and Hampton (2007) characterize generators as asking for ties based on interaction, role relations, affection, and exchange (see also Milardo, 1988; Van der Poel, 1993). Perhaps the best known social network name generator is Burt's (1984) – adopted for use in the General Social Survey – which asks for people with whom the ego discusses important matters. This is a clear example of an interaction-based approach, asking for the subset of the network with which the ego has had contact, usually over some specified period of time (Milardo, 1988). Another subset can be captured by asking for specific roles that alters may fill, such as coworkers, neighbors, friends, or family (Campbell and Lee, 1992; Feld, 1984). Other sub-networks can be characterized by some term of affection, such as closeness (Antonucci, 1986; Wellman, 1979). Lastly, other pieces of the personal network can be generated by asking about a particular exchange, whether of goods or information. For instance, exchange-based generators trying to capture a social support network might ask for alters from whom the ego might borrow a cup of sugar or one thousand dollars (Marin and Hampton, 2007; McAllister and Fischer, 1978; Wellman and Wortley, 1990).

These efforts have been subject to challenges. Each tack is an imperfect measure of the overall social ("global") network – or even just the full social support network – though some, especially interaction generators, perform better in representing the full support network than others (Marin and Hampton, 2007).[2] In a way, this relates to an important, ongoing debate about whether name generators capture the *absence* of a network – the proportion of GSS respondents claiming to have zero "important matters" discussants. Comparing the 1985 and 2004 GSS studies, McPherson et al. (2006) argue that America is becoming more socially isolated (based on nearly a quarter of 2004 respondents naming no discussants, versus less than 10 percent of respondents in 1985). Fischer (2009) questions this portrait of the public, arguing that the high portion of 2004 "zeroes" is likely due to either respondent fatigue or technical error. One additional possibility, we will argue, is that specific reminders are necessary for respondents to fully elaborate their networks.

Validity is also at stake in various approaches. Many of the terms employed can have different meanings to different populations. For instance, Bearman and Parigi (2004) famously found that "important matters" included such seemingly unimportant topics as cloning headless frogs. Even the more expected examples people provide bear little obvious connection to instrumental ends with which important matters networks are often correlated. Other studies indicate that interaction-based generators are often invalid measures of actual contact since they suffer from recall problems if the time period specified is long or vague, as in "a typical day" (Marin and Hampton, 2007). Role-based name

generators also can suffer in terms of concept validity, as the definition of such a common role as "friend" can vary across groups (Burt, 1983). That said, location or organization-based roles may be less problematic because they are less subjective. And some work has been more reassuring – in one study a significant variation in the wording of the important matters generator (the change to "significant people") and the inclusion of a probe for negative encounters produced little shift in resultant networks (Straits, 2000).

Marin and Hampton (2007) argue that exchange-based generators may suffer the fewest validity and reliability problems, given that the role is often quite concrete (e.g., borrowing a cup of sugar). However, exchange networks can suffer from the same problems as the others. For one, exchange networks can be unstable as payoffs become biased over time, though this may not have to do with the name generator itself (Dogan et al., 2009). And, certain kinds of exchanges can be quite variable in their interpretation as well. For example, in survey after survey, clergy understand the term "political" to be quite narrow in definition, including only candidates, parties, and elections; these religious leaders distinguish issues like abortion, environmental protection, and gay rights – which academics would certainly define as political – preferring to give these a "social" label (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert, 2003).

## 3. Capturing political networks

The text of the political name generator has changed very little from that first implemented by Huckfeldt and Sprague in 1984 in their South Bend Study:

> We are interested in the sort of political information and opinions people get from each other. Can you give me the FIRST names of the three people you talked with most about the events of the past election year? These people might be from your family, from work, from the neighborhood, from church, from some other organization you belong to, or they might be from somewhere else.

Huckfeldt and Sprague's 1996 Indianapolis-St. Louis study randomly assigned respondents to *either* the important matters or a political matters generator, the wording of which is as follows:

> From time to time, people discuss [government, elections and politics/important matters] with other people. I'd like to know the people you talk with about these matters. These people might or might not be relatives.

That same text was also employed in the 2000 American National Election Study (and several others since). However, the wording was changed for the 2008–09 ANES Panel Study to a two-part question:

> During the last six months, did you talk with anyone face-to-face, on the phone, by email, or in any other way about government or elections, or did you not do this with anyone during the last six months? [If so] What are the first names of the people who you talked with about government or elections during the past six months? Please be sure not to type the same name for two different people. If two people have the same name, please be sure to type two different names below, like "John" and "John Junior" or "older John" and "younger John."

We focus our attention on the character of these generators, and they were quite well-designed. With limited space for social network batteries in political surveys – surveys in which questions conceptually close to government, parties, candidates, and issues are prized – Huckfeldt and Sprague designed a compound name

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[2] By full social support network, we mean the set of alters that provides "emotional aid, instrumental aid, and companionship" (Marin and Hampton, 2007:168).