"It could turn ugly": Selective disclosure of attitudes in political discussion networks

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ABSTRACT

This article documents individuals selectively disclosing their political attitudes and discusses the consequences of these communication patterns for social influence and the democratic process. Using a large, diverse sample of U.S. resident adults, we ask under which conditions do people reveal their political preferences versus keeping them close to the vest. We find Americans are more likely to share their opinions with friends and family rather than co-workers and they are more likely to share their opinions on more salient topics. More importantly, they withhold their political attitudes specifically from those with whom they disagree in an attempt to avoid conflict. This produces the experience of highly homogeneous social contexts, in which only liberal or conservative views are voiced, while dissent remains silent, and oftentimes goes unacknowledged. This experience is not the result of homogeneous social contexts but the appearance of them. Paradoxically, the mechanism of selective disclosure, whose goal is to prevent conflict at the micro-level, might lead to the perception of greater division in the larger society.

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Shelley Capito, a Senator from West Virginia advised U.S. citizens to avoid political disagreements during the holidays: "I mean, politics is dangerous...I think it can really result in some really hurt feelings" (Inskeep, 2011). Senator Capito's counsel may make holidays more enjoyable, but by systematically avoiding political disagreement, U.S. citizens may further isolate themselves in homogeneous political discussion networks in which only liberal or conservative views are voiced, while dissent remains silent, and oftentimes goes unacknowledged. By concealing their attitudes specifically from those with whom they disagree, U.S. citizens will not learn that their friend or co-worker disagrees with them.[1] Thus, social networks consisting of people with diverse attitudes will instead appear homogeneous to their members. Paradoxically, this mechanism of selective disclosure whose goal is to prevent conflict at the micro-level, fosters the macro-level perception of a greatly polarized public opinion (Baldassarri and Bearman, 2007).

In this article we focus on patterns of political disclosure: under which conditions do people reveal their political preferences? While travels, sports, children, and the weather are topics that easily come up in conversation, politics is a sensitive issue. First, we document how political disclosure varies as a function of the nature of the political issue under discussion, the type of relationship between discussants, and their level of political commitment. There is an established research tradition on political communication networks (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Zuckerman, 2005; Gerber et al., 2012). Building on these insights, we carry out a comprehensive analysis of the dimensions that facilitate political discussions, including different types of discussants. Moreover, we go beyond the generic theme of 'political discussion' and document dyadic discussions on a variety of political issues. Second, building on recent research on secret keeping and misperceptions (Cowan, 2014), we document the presence and prominence of *selective disclosure* in political discussions, a micro-level mechanism that affects individuals' experience of their social network.

To understand how selective disclosure operates at the micro-level, consider the following example: Susan initiates a discussion on affirmative action, and discloses her support for it, in two separate conversations, one with James, who is equally supportive of the policy, and the other with Walter, who, instead, opposes it (Fig. 1a). Will both James and Walter engage Susan's conversation and reveal their views? Other things being equal, James is more likely to reveal his opinion to Susan than Walter. We call this mechanism selective disclosure: discussion partners are more likely to reveal their preferences in case of agreement. The empirical contribution of this article consists in examining James' and Walter's behavior in detail. Namely, we look at survey respondents' propensities to disclose their political views contingent on them knowing the opinion of their discussion partners.

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[1] Further, in the face of this silence, they may assume political agreement (Goel et al., 2010; Laumann, 1969).
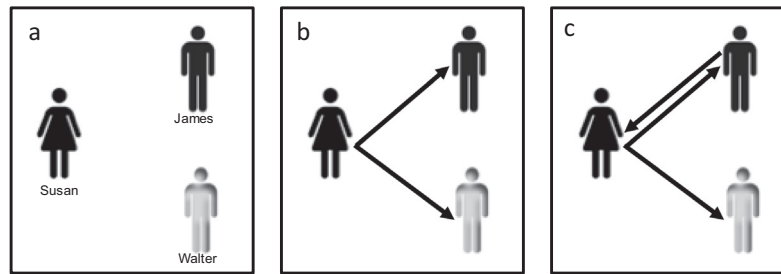
Fig. 1. Selective disclosure.

Note that we adopt a strict definition of selective disclosure, considering only situations in which an actor is aware of alter's view as James and Walter are of Susan's views, and decides whether to disclose his or her own. A similar process may also affect Susan's decision to initiate the conversation; perhaps she only initiates in the face of perceived agreement. External triggers such as a political advertisement on television or a protest, however, may also affect initiation. Given initiation is a separate and distinct behavior we do not examine it here.[2]

An important aspect of selective disclosure is that it introduces a systematic difference between the actual political composition of one's social network and how individuals experience it. If Walter decides to do not reveal his preferences (Fig. 1b), Susan's experience of her social network is different from what the network actually is: namely she receives James' positive feedback, but does not learn about Walter's opposite view on the issue.

The systematic occurrence of selective disclosure in micro-level interactions may produce the experience of politically homogeneous social networks even when individuals' discussion partners carry different political views. For instance, consider a network of 10 people. For simplicity's sake, 5 are Democrats and 5 are Republicans, and each person talks about politics with two members of the same party and one member of the other party. Let's also assume that the chance of revealing one's political view is 100% in case of agreement, and 70% in case of disagreement. Under these circumstances, some people reveal their political view to a disagreeing interlocutor but they do not hear about that disagreement. In our example, the result after all of the conversations is that, on average, 3 out of 10 people experience no disagreement when in fact, disagreement exists but is kept hidden.

Selective disclosure prevents individuals from hearing opposing viewpoints and this is believed to affect the democratic process. Political discussions help form and modify political attitudes (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Huckfeldt et al., 2004, 2005; Huckfeldt, 2007; Mutz, 2002a; Mutz, 2002b, 2006; Sunstein, 2009; Baldassarri, 2009). In particular, conversations among like-minded individuals breed extreme opinions whereas cross-cutting conversations – conversations between people who disagree with each other – are a bulwark against these extreme opinions (Sunstein, 2009; Mutz, 2006). That Susan only hears James' confirmatory opinion may strengthen her own. Had she heard Walter's disagreement, she may have taken a more moderate view. When this process occurs repeatedly, broad polarization can occur specifically because selective disclosure reduces cross-cutting conversations. A few scholars have documented the rarity of cross-cutting conversations in contemporary US public opinion (Mutz, 2002a; Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Klofstad et al., 2013), however, such infrequency has been mainly explained by the fact that indi-

viduals live in politically homogeneous networks and as such have little opportunity to experience disagreement. Here, we provide evidence for an additional reason inhibiting cross-cutting conversations: selective disclosure.

Finally, the biased experience introduced by selective disclosure complicates not only our treatment of political discussion networks, but also our understanding of interpersonal influence dynamics. Existing literature on networks and interpersonal influence largely assumes that individuals accurately know the attitudes of their discussion partners (Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Mutz, 2006). However, if people systematically withhold their political attitudes then individuals will have a biased exposure to their acquaintances' attitudes, thus affecting dynamics of interpersonal influence. This consideration is in line with Brashears and Gladstone (2016) recent call for attention to "how the human 'relays' in a network actually process and manipulate information that they are passing on" (p. 34) in their study on error correction in social networks.

To elicit and measure the mechanism of selective disclosure we follow Cowan's novel survey method to detect systematic bias in the perceptions of concealable characteristics (Cowan, 2014) and develop a new set of questions that capture the selective disclosure of political views. The general strategy we use to capture and measure the extent of selective disclosure can be applied to other fields of inquiry, thus enriching the core discussion networks toolkit.

This article proceeds by reviewing the relevant literature on political discussion networks, social selection and interpersonal influence, and conversation. On the basis of this literature, we have formed a series of hypotheses regarding disclosure patterns and test them with a large and diverse sample of American adults. We find that in the face of disagreement, these Americans often do not share their political beliefs. Instead, they selectively disclose their attitudes in an attempt to avoid conflict. We discuss differences in these tendencies across issues and party identification as well as across domains of social life–family, friendship and work networks. We conclude by outlining the implications of these findings for theory on interpersonal communication, political discussion networks, social selection and influence, and public opinion polarization.

1. Political networks and conversations

Theorists celebrate cross-cutting social ties and political conversations, particularly among citizens who disagree with each other, as central to a healthy democracy (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Lipset, 1996; Mill, 1859; Arendt, 1968; Dahl, 1961; Habermas, 1996). Ideally, citizens would be exposed to different viewpoints and logics, would develop an informed and moderate set of opinions and tolerance for those with whom they disagree. In practice, evidence shows both positive effects of discussion for political deliberation (Luskin et al., 2002) and the limits of deliberative discussion (Jackman and Sniderman, 2006; Mendelberg, 2002; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002).

Citizens' scant political interest, knowledge and engagement is often regarded as an obstacle to political deliberation (Converse,

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[2] By not considering this additional opportunity for selective disclosure we may underestimate our phenomenon of interest. However, since our primary goal is to document the presence of selective disclosure in political discussions, it is preferable to underestimate it than running into the risk of over-estimating it.