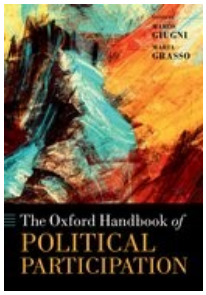

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CHAPTER

41 Mobilization and Political Participation

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Abstract

This chapter provides an assessment of the current research on how people are mobilized into political action. We consider three key mobilization spheres: voluntary associations, informal social ties, and digital networks. Each of the three mobilizational spheres is discussed in detail and the findings, strengths, and weaknesses of empirical work is assessed. Within each sphere, we elaborate mobilization and demobilization processes including socialization of trust and cooperative norms, recruitment, civic skills, identities, information, and network characteristics such as composition. Finally, the chapter evaluates gaps in the research agenda and concludes with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: political mobilization, voluntary associations, social ties, digital networks, political participation, socialization

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The 2020s have started with a political bang. Tens of thousands of protestors marched repeatedly in Belarus to demand the resignation of President Alexander Lukashenko despite a brutal crackdown. In January 2021, Trump supporters rioted and forced entry into the House of Representatives. Anti-lockdown protests against quarantine measures designed to limit the spread of COVID-19 were rampant throughout the world. And hundreds of millions cast ballots in local, regional, and national elections. These diverse political actions were taken by individuals mobilized in a variety of ways. Examining the arenas and processes by which people came to participate politically is central to understanding politics more broadly.

There are clearly different perspectives on political mobilization. Downs (1957) offered an early theorization of the irrationality of participating in elections as a single ballot cast is unlikely to make a difference. Olson (1965) built on this to argue that people are not likely to contribute time, money, or effort to public goods without

other incentives. Brady, Schlozman, and Verba (1999) moved beyond these rational choice perspectives to add that people need time and resources such as money to participate in politics (see also Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). They also highlighted how participation is a social act—people often participate in politics simply because they are asked to do so.

Social networks, whether they are found in formal associations or in informal networks of friends, neighbors, or work colleagues, or those of the digital type such as social media provide opportunities for people to be recruited and mobilized to participate in political activism (Teorell 2003). Social networks are also an important source of political information, civic skills, socialization of collective values and more (Granovetter 1973; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Klofstad 2007; Jang 2009). While politics does not play a central role in most people's everyday conversations, the people with whom we communicate regularly help inform our political orientations, values, and political behaviors (Eliasoph 1998). Of course, social networks do not just have mobilizing effects and they can also exert social pressures that might contribute to refraining from participation. We explore these different roles here.

In doing so, this chapter provides an assessment of the current state of research on political mobilization in three important social arenas: voluntary associations, informal social networks, and digital networks. We
p. 704 elaborate several processes that link these social arenas ↳ to political participation, including learning cooperative values and civic skills, acquiring political knowledge, developing trust, and forming social identity, accountability, and social pressure. We focus on literature examining institutional forms of participation such as voting or donating to campaigns and non-institutionalized forms such as protests and boycotts. However, we also highlight other expressive forms of participation such as writing political comments in digital networks. This chapter seeks to provide patterns of existing research and the state of the discipline in studying how these three social arenas impact political mobilization and ultimately political participation.

Voluntary Associations

Voluntary associations have been seen as some of the most important drivers of political mobilization over the last decades (Maccoby 1958; Almond and Verba 1963; Olsen 1972; Rogers, Bultena, and Barb 1975; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978; Hanks and Eckland 1978; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Putnam 2000). We have identified here the most important linking mechanisms that have been studied in this area, building on the work by Guigni and Grasso 2020: 1) the attitudinal socialization in groups, including learning how to trust, cooperate, and solve collection action problems; 2) recruitment into political action by other association members, the group, or political activists external to the group; and 3) the learning of tangible civic skills and political efficacy, and their potential utilization in politics outside of the group setting[1]. We briefly discuss each of these processes in turn.

First, memberships in voluntary associations are thought to foster norms of trust and reciprocity (Putnam 1993). Associations teach how to cooperate and to reach out for one another and they transmit a sense of civic duty and responsibility towards society, which are resources that spur political participation (Curtis, Grabb, and Baer 1992). Although Putnam does not value voluntary groups for their ability to politically mobilize, he claims that horizontally structured face-to-face groups are particularly good at the socialization of a civic spirit and overall engagement (1993; Paxton 2007). There was also an assumption—equally true for online and offline social networks—that bridging associations that bring people together from various walks of life and different backgrounds are better in socializing these values than bonding or homogenous associations that bring people together who are much alike (Putnam 2000).

There have been several theoretical and empirical difficulties in testing these assumptions, however. The question has always remained as to how the cooperation and trust one likely learns within these groups travel to the world outside of the group setting. Furthermore, the claims were also difficult to test because classic

survey research was unable to collect enough information about what is happening in voluntary associations in which respondents were members. Such information seems essential as not all "bowling leagues" are alike (Stolle and Rochon 1998). Indeed, careful causal analysis on how voluntary associations nurture these civic
p. 705 values and norms using designs with multiple groups across countries and dynamic ↳ variables such as the length of associational membership, panel studies, or distinctions between bridging and less bridging associations revealed that voluntary associations are not so much the *producers* of these values but rather contribute to maintaining them through group life (Stolle 1998; Van Ingen and Van der Meer 2016). People who join voluntary associations, especially those who join diverse groups have been found to already possess these values. There are other understudied factors such as personality traits or other psychological resources that contribute to both membership in voluntary associations and to generalized trust, cooperation, and ultimately mobilization.

A second mobilizational process focuses on recruitment, which relies on mobilization theory (Rogers, Bultena, and Barb 1975; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). The general idea here is that membership in voluntary associations opens access to other networks and weak ties and thus to more possibilities of direct recruitment (Granovetter 1973). Scholars believe that membership in voluntary associations provides non-redundant information and related calls to participate in public life. But how do non-political organizations politicize some of its members? We know that organization members report higher political participation when they belong to organizations with more political discussion (Rogers, Bultena, and Barb 1975). Some of the most insightful strategies here relate to studying groups in depth. For example, Erickson and Nosanchuk (1990) showed that being a member of a Bridge club can bring participants into contact with politically active friends with whom players discuss political issues, which is related to discussing politics outside the Bridge Club. Teorell (2003) goes a step further and argues that members of voluntary associations gain more weak ties, especially when joining multiple associations. These ties lead to a wider scope of solicitations for political action just for the sheer size of the network and for the broader diversity within (Teorell 2003: 52; see also Liu et al. 1998). Teorell's study shows that people in multiple associations were asked more to participate in politics.

Yet Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) have pointed out that associations allow not only for the spread of information and diversity in recruitment channels but also for the direct influence of political activists who nudge association members into political mobilization. Indeed, canvassing studies support the idea that being asked to do something politically can have powerful effects, at least on voter turnout (Green, Gerber, and Nickerson 2003) McAdam and Paulsen (1993) also discuss how civil rights movements and specifically the Freedom Summer Mississippi project were nurtured through recruitment by volunteers in voluntary associations, mostly from groups that share common interests. An important part in the recruitment for visible forms of participation such as protests seems to be based on interactions in groups that likely reinforce commitment to a cause, or even a personal identity (Campbell 2009). This mechanism also seems to be reflected in digital networks (see section entitled "Digital Networks").

In this context, Guigni and Grasso talk about the separate process of the building of group consciousness that helps to mobilize members into participation (2020). This mechanism seems particularly useful for minorities or marginalized groups, where awareness of discrimination, for example, exerts empowering resources to organize and raise voices. Recruitment that uses group consciousness-building is also important for theories of social movements and protest behavior, which show that being asked and reminded of one's social identity allows people to be included and nudged into social movements and protest activities (Walgrave and Wouters 2014; Giugni and Grasso 2020). The idea is confirmed, for example, in a study by Lim (2008) who compared the
p. 706 effectiveness of various social influences ↳ on the recruitment to protest. In this study, associational ties were twice as likely to succeed in recruiting a protest participant compared to a mere acquaintance trying to recruit. Thus, these weak tie relations originating in the context of voluntary associations seem to be an important part of the puzzle.

Finally, there is a belief that members of voluntary associations learn civic skills and political efficacy (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Putnam 2000; Teorell 2003; Walker 2008). Such skills might entail the learning of giving speeches, writing letters to officials, organizational skills, developing an interest in the organization, establishing relations with the government on behalf of the group, etc. These processes teach the members of groups skills that are transportable to the outside world and that political action pays off. Churches and unions, across a variety of contexts, have repeatedly been shown to teach civic skills and political efficacy (Cnaan and Curtis 2013; Turner, Ryan, and O'Sullivan 2020).

The argument for political efficacy is built on the democratic spillover thesis about the role of workplace democracy. According to this view, learning democracy at the workplace increases workers' sense of political efficacy which is transferable to experiences outside the workplace (Pateman 1970). While this work is mostly focused on unions, the ideas apply to associations more generally as well. In essence, even workers at the shop-floor level learn about democratic participation in unions and that their say influences firm-level outcomes. Particularly the experience of contestation and political negotiation as it is experienced in union-level bargaining gives a good sense of one's own voice and abilities to influence firm-level decisions—this sense of efficacy travels to outside union experiences (Turner, Ryan, and O'Sullivan 2020). The results of a cross-national study on the mobilizational effect of union membership shows that union members are indeed more participatory and efficacious, and this is true particularly in institutional contexts of low union density (D'Art and Turner 2007). Countries with high union density are thought to have experienced a successful spillover effect from union membership to the entire population (ibid). However, the relationship declines across young generations, suggesting that the socializational power of unions was stronger at times when they were seen as equal bargaining partners (Turner, Ryan, and O'Sullivan 2020).

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady show that civic skills are learned in various arenas, particularly at the workplace, but also outside of unions, in associational life, and in church (1995), at least in the US context. They examine their data in a way to get more at the causal role of churches particularly for Afro-Americans. Usually, they find a discrepancy in civic skills between people in low- and high-status jobs, with the latter having many more opportunities to learn civic skills than the former. However, when looking at church involvement they see that Afro-Americans in low status jobs do not learn many civic skills at their jobs, instead they learn them in churches. Thus, low-status Afro-Americans, who join churches, have nearly as many civic skills as Afro-Americans in high-status jobs, thus deepening our understanding that there is a causal role for churches, particularly regarding racial minorities. The institutions that enable the learning of civic skills, such as the churches of Afro-Americans, are often horizontally structured. That point is important and confirmed by a three-denominational study in Indonesia, where mosques, particularly those with a hierarchical structure, offered fewer opportunities to practice civic skills than some of the churches (Lussier 2019). Again, as Kim, Nie, and Verba (1978) have already shown, horizontal organizations such as some churches or other religious groups seem to work as equalizers in our societies.

p. 707 In sum, the theoretical link between voluntary associations and political action is extremely strong. Important theorists and thinkers have spent time and resources to develop ideas about why voluntary associations matter so much for the political and civic spirit (Rosenblum 1998). Yet empirical research still struggles to confirm the *causal* role of associations in all regards. For example, it seems that generalized trust might not be created in those groups. But there are indications that civic skills and efficacy can be boosted by voluntary group membership. The verdict is still uncertain about how voluntary associations expand weak ties and whether these weak ties shape politics or the ability to cooperate. The problem with the research is that it is often correlational—the overall results clearly show that association members are more politicized, but we do not know whether people learned politicization in their groups or whether they were already more politicized when they entered voluntary associations. This issue of endogeneity and spuriousness has been addressed in some studies and the actual findings are more modest than the theoretical ideas about voluntary associations lead us to believe. Thus, we agree with Van Ingen and Van der Meer (2016) that the evidence does not allow us to

conclude that associations are *creators* of engagement and civic spirit per se, but that they are pools of democracy where the participatory spirit is nourished and potentially maintained.

We add two more caveats to our discussion. First, the benefits of associations might be collective in nature. That is, people who live, for example, in areas with dense associational networks might benefit from a higher connectedness without being members themselves. The processes of transmission to political action would be more indirect through learning or pressures from connected neighbors, for example. This collective benefit of associational life has been discussed with regard to generalized trust, where non-members particularly benefit locally from associations (Born and Fatke 2019). In that sense social capital has become a resource that can be tapped by others beyond those who are part of the generation process.

The second caveat has to do with adolescence and youth, which represent important socialization phases of the so-called "impressionable years." Whereas adult socialization in voluntary associations can only be a modest influence in one's life, the role of youth associations is much more plausible (Hanks 1981). Indeed, longitudinal research designs show that being a member of a youth association in school or beyond generates more political participation later in life (McFarland and Thomas 2006). There is a particular promise that associations make a difference here.

In sum, voluntary associations have received much attention as important arenas for political mobilization. While research on trust, recruitment, and civic skills seems theoretically and correlationally powerful, the challenge is to tease out the causal pathways and arrows in more detail.

Informal Social Ties

Social informal networks are at the heart of political mobilization (Diani 2004). There are two strains of literature and two methodological approaches of how to study informal social networks that come together here as in some of the other mobilization spheres discussed in this chapter. On the one hand, the political behavior literature has talked about the importance of everyday life networks outside of voluntary associations
p. 708 and it includes ties such as ↳ friendships, neighbors, or colleagues from work, and even fleeting encounters at bus stops or doctors' offices (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1999). On the other hand, social movement scholars, have also highlighted the importance of personal networks for bringing people into movements or protests (McAdam 1986; Giugni and Grasso 2020). The empirical research on these two approaches can be undertaken in two different ways: on the one hand, individual-level survey research or interview research documents the level, or which characteristics of these social networks matter for political mobilization. On the other hand, a thorough network analysis of geographically or institutionally finite social ties can reveal how mobilization moves through an existing social network, for example select locations, dormitories, or online groups (see next section).

Many of the mechanisms identified in the study of voluntary associations as a mobilizational sphere come into play here as well. Particularly, informal ties can provide a community of like-minded folks, create political consciousness, and collective identity, and results in efficacy that brings people closer to their political goals (Passy 2003). In addition, informal social networks can lead to incidental political exposure and transmission of political information, which propels people into action (ibid). At the same time, some types of social networks have also been found to demobilize people away from political participation.

Studying the power of social networks for political mobilization is no easy undertaking, particularly because social networks are so vast and there are no real network boundaries. This problem is also critical in the study of digital networks (see next section). The problem regarding the causal role of networks is also difficult to pin down. As informal social interactions are mostly (though not always) selective, particular attention must be paid to the causal flow of network effects.

Many of the important studies about the role of informal social ties were conducted by using semi-experimental methods, for example with the random assignment of college roommates. For example, Klofstad (2011) finds that college students, who reported more political discussion with their roommates, were also more likely to participate in civic clubs and to vote; however, these outcomes were based on self-reports (see critique in Campbell 2009). Nickerson (2009) was able to push this research further to pin down the causal story. He finds that living with someone who frequently discusses politics leads college students to engage in more political talk. In this way, having a college roommate worked very much like talking to a Bridge club member—that is, in settings of formal organizations and informal ties, people get to talk about politics, because their fellow group or network members have these interests. Mobilization occurs here through incidental exposure in our social surroundings. And incidental exposure has been an important tool for showing that network exposure matters.

Much of the research on the mobilizational role of social ties relies on distinguishing their different characteristics, such as strong from weak (Granovetter 1973), as well as homogeneous from heterogeneous ties (denoted as bonding and bridging ties in Putnam 2000). While there has been a lot of hope that weak bridging ties might be most beneficial for trust, the reduction of prejudice and the learning of collective values, it is really the research on informal strong friendship and bridging ties as mobilizational arenas that has received most attention. Particularly the composition of friendship networks regarding *political disagreement* have played an important role in the discussion of political demobilization.

The research on political disagreement starts from the principle of homophily, or the tendency of people to
p. 709 surround themselves with people like them (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, ↳ and Cook 2001). However, we do not really choose or do not always have the luxury to choose our social networks based on political agreement (although see Fowler, Baker, and Dawes 2008 on assortative mating in politics). Thus, political disagreement in friendships, family ties, or in other social ties is generally a common feature of social networks that has been studied well in the literature on political mobilization and demobilization. There is consistent evidence that people perceive some political disagreement within their social networks, and that such perceived diversity is more likely among weaker ties, for example at work where individuals have even less choice in selecting their associates (Huckfeldt et al. 2004; Mutz and Mondak 2006), or in strong ties where there is little choice (such as family ties).

There are contradictory expectations and findings as to the political consequences of political disagreement in social networks. Based on theories of deliberative democracy and social capital, the assumption is that political diversity might have positive effects on the creation of civic values and behavior (Fishkin 1995; Putnam 2000). The point is that politically diverse networks are more likely to expose people to new information (Granovetter 1973; Coleman 1988), and create greater awareness of rationales for opposing views (Huckfeldt et al. 2004; McClurg 2006a; Mutz 2002a). In other words, these diverse social networks may provide citizens with valuable resources—political information and understanding of the opposing political side—and are similarly believed to have mobilizing effects on their political participation (Knoke 1990; Leighley 1990; Pattie and Johnston 2009).

In contrast, other research has shown that political disagreement in social networks may inhibit political participation, especially mainstream, electoral participation (Mutz 2002a; Mutz and Mondak 2006; Jang 2009). This phenomenon has been referred to as a democratic dilemma (Mutz 2002b; Pattie and Johnston 2009). Several causal mechanisms have been discussed in this context. One is social accountability, that is people's desire to avoid interpersonal conflict tends to have a direct, negative impact on participation (Ulbig and Funk 1999). A second possibility is that exposure to political disagreement, by increasing the ability to see things from other people's perspectives, also arguably creates less intense, more ambivalent attitudes. It is this kind of political ambivalence that has been found to inhibit political engagement. In other words, political disagreement in certain social settings creates ambivalence and social pressures of accountability that might hurt, limit, or silence certain forms of political participation.

This important debate has been reviewed and tested in many contexts, and several qualifications must be added. Most importantly, demobilization does not occur among the highly knowledgeable (McClurg 2006b), and when the network contains both political heterogeneity and homogeneity (Nir 2011; Bello 2012), or depends on the level of intimacy or network strength, with demobilization occurring mostly in diverse ties that are very strong or intimate (Ladini, Mancosu, and Vezzoni 2020). Finally, Harell, Stolle, and Quintelier (2019) show that politically diverse ties mobilize instead of demobilize for individualized forms of political action of young people.

A second important debate here concerns the importance of homogeneous or bonding ties which are questioned in their ability to stir political interest beyond the group (Uslaner and Conley 2003). However, in certain contexts, similarity can breed political action. For example, religious attendance means forming informal social networks with similarly minded church friends, who can recruit others to be active in politics. Campbell attributes this power to recruitments from religious groups to the "moral weight" resulting from
p. 710 friendships in ↳ religious communities (Campbell 2013). Similarly, ethnic social networks can mobilize political participation (Miller et al. 1981). Members of minority groups turn out at higher rates when experiencing a higher level of group consciousness which can be formed in informal networks with similar others. Research on migration and settlement has typically focused on strong bonding ties and specifically the role of co-ethnic communities in helping newcomers to find not only employment, a place to live, and even emotional support (Portes 1998); however, when it comes to political incorporation of newcomers in the host society, co-ethnic ties have their limits (Kim 2017). Diverse social networks that link immigrant communities to native-born nationals seem to be most beneficial for civic participation in host country politics (ibid).

In sum, the mobilizational power of informal social networks such as friendships, colleagues, neighbors etc. has also been captured by some of the same mechanisms as for voluntary associations: information transmission, incidental political exposure, and creation of collective identity. However, much of the discussion here has focused on the composition and the intensity of the ties. While social networks with political disagreement might politically mobilize, some researchers have shown that they can inhibit political participation because of cross-pressures. Such mixed effects have also been found for strong bonding ties.

Digital Networks

While in-person voluntary associations, and social ties continue to be relevant mobilization spheres for people's engagement in politics, the past two decades have seen a dramatic shift towards digital politics (Chadwick 2020; Persily and Tucker 2020). For millions of individuals, particularly young people, the primary way to connect with others and share or discuss information is now on social media.

How their buzz of activity matters for politics and particularly for broader patterns of mobilization is an active and thriving area of inquiry. However, a persistent challenge in studying the political consequences of digital networks is that they are—much like voluntary associations or other physical social networks—often not exclusively or even primarily based upon political discussions. Joining digital networks is mostly motivated by existing social ties or entertainment and recreation interests. A brief tour of some of the largest digital networks is instructive. Facebook emerged as a method for college students to socialize online. Twitter began as a text-based status sharing service. YouTube as a video uploading site. Pinterest and Instagram emerged as creative platforms for sharing images. LinkedIn as a resume and job search site. Tik Tok, its precursors Vine and Music.ly, and Snapchat were/are creative platforms focused on short videos. WhatsApp and WeChat began as simple messaging apps. Reddit as a science, programming, and adult content website. None of these communities began with the explicit intention to create a space for people to share political news, discuss/debate politics, and/or potentially become politically mobilized. Indeed, even today, the majority of users on these platforms do not engage in politics (Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019). Nevertheless, there is

extensive documentation of individuals in these networks becoming implicated in politics, and, moreover, social media platforms themselves are now central to contemporary politics.

p. 711 Early writings on digital networks expressed a profound hope that online networks would lead to broader and more inclusive forms of political participation (Ward, Gibson, and Lusoli 2003). The question we address here is whether this anticipated mobilization effect has actually occurred in digital networks. By singling out digital from other types of social networks, we continue the tradition of conceptualizing online and offline as distinct spheres of political mobilization (Lilleker and Koc-Michalska 2017). The most frequently studied outcomes of digitally networked participation include protests (Macafee and De Simone 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Breuer, Landman, and Farquhar 2015; Tufekci 2017) and voting (Biswas, Ingle, and Roy 2014).

However, prior to delving into the research, a cautionary methodological note. Understanding the mobilizing effects of digital networks demands causal evidence, but the vast bulk of research employs surveys that use self-reported behaviors (see Boulianne 2020 for a meta-analysis of over 300 such survey-based studies). These responses tend to be somewhat incongruous with actual political behaviors (Dahlgaard et al. 2019). Moreover, while there are strong correlations between aggregate self-reported and behavioral measures of social media use, there are substantial and hard-to-predict discrepancies at the individual level (Guess et al. 2019; Barthel et al. 2020). The wealth of survey research thus provides insights into the relationship between digital networks and political participation, but cannot clearly identify causal processes at play.

However, some work on digital networks attempts to untangle causal effects more closely. More specifically, we identify five ways in which researchers have tried to better understand overall how digital networks mobilize: 1) through tracking the same users over time through repeated surveying or longitudinal examinations of digital trace data (the panel approach, for example Vissers and Stolle 2014); 2) linking self-reported and actual behavior through collecting both survey responses and digital trace data (see Vaccari et al. 2015 for an early innovation); 3) ethnographic and interview methods that allow researchers to understand journeys to political mobilization through digital networks (e.g. Bonilla and Rosa 2015); 4) survey or lab-based experiments that search for psychological processes underpinning mobilization effects (e.g. Vissers et al. 2012); and 5) through experimental manipulations on social media platforms (the field experiment approach, for example Bond et al. 2012; Coppock, Guess, and Ternovski 2016; Bail et al. 2018). Despite these innovations, work in this area faces persistent limitations around selection bias, construct validity, and measurement error, especially regarding the full range of digital network engagement, both internal and external validity depending on the research design, and a broad range of unobservable confounders such as digital network usage patterns, membership in other networks, and strength of ties to other individuals in digital networks. The major barrier to decisive identification of causal effects continues to be data access: researchers can only compile patchwork and incomplete individual—and aggregate-level data from even the large public digital networks. An individual simply cannot be effectively traced in their digital habits across networks (but see Barthel et al. 2020 for a well-resourced attempt) which limits the ability to really understand the collective causal impact of digitally networked participation.

Given these methodological caveats, we focus here on the extent to which the scholarship has been able to identify (sometimes causal) relationships between digital networks and political participation. Two decades of research on these connections has yielded a very persistent finding: use of digital media is associated with
p. 712 greater civic and political participation ↳ (Boulianne 2020). Political learning was initially thought as the principal pathway by which those in online social networks could become politically mobilized, and is more broadly seen as a key ingredient for many forms of political participation (Verba and Nie 1972). The underlying idea has been that active digital network effects start with political information-seeking, lead to broader increase of political knowledge and internal efficacy, and result in greater political participation (Andersen et al. 2016).

However, there has been only limited empirical evidence of this process for wider political knowledge (e.g. Valenzuela et al. 2019). Increased information availability seems to have led, not to higher levels of knowledge, but instead to greater selective information seeking behavior which can widen political knowledge differences despite better access to information (Prior 2007). However, there are simultaneously repeated findings that digital networks provide political information and knowledge that facilitate large-scale offline political action (Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Reuter and Szakonyi 2015; Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020). Here, the discrepancy between specific and general political knowledge can be explained in part by the difference between the systematic/habitual political participation that is of interest to scholars and to instances of single-issue mobilization.

An alternative pathway through which political learning may occur, particularly in digital networks, is through incidental exposure. Individuals may encounter a range of political messages in their digital networks, much like in voluntary associations or social networks in the offline world. This incidental exposure might unleash increased political interest and engagement (Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil de Zúñiga 2017). This proposed mechanism operates similarly to offline networks where increased network heterogeneity and a larger number of weak ties can facilitate an incidental learning process (Lee and Kim 2017). Incidental exposure is more frequently observed in youth and those with low political interest (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018). Another possible consequence of incidental exposure work through agenda-setting effects, which arise by highlighting issue salience, particularly for those who have low political interest and little direct political news consumption (Feezell 2018).

When individuals believe that digital networking sites provide them with the political information they require (i.e., that relevant news will find them), they are less likely to seek out news and thus, have reduced general political knowledge (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017). Another observed dynamic (sometimes called *tune-in, tune-out)* is that online political information in these networks is sporadic as compared to more traditional forms of information seeking (Ekström and Shehata 2018). This inattentiveness to political information on digital networks appears to limit the true acquisition of political knowledge or mobilization effects (Dimitrova et al. 2014). On balance, research on political learning in digital networks suggests that knowledge can be enhanced but the effects are limited by the sporadic nature of information-seeking in online networks (Boukes 2019).

Given weak informational effects, the role of socialization, social identity construction, social commitments, and peer effects have been highlighted as an alternate pathway to mobilization. The less distinct boundaries between non-political and political spheres online provide ample opportunities for (nonpolitical) social interactions in digital networks to prompt political action. For example, Feezell, Wagner, and Conroy (2021) find that socially driven information consumption patterns (e.g. algorithmically determined information feeds based on social networks) are notably associated with increased online political mobilization. Consuming
p. 713 socially driven algorithmic news, they argue, produces stronger ↳ socialization effects through a distinct form of packaging where each piece of information is imbued with a "social message" (e.g., agreement/conflict in a network) in addition to the "information message." These results are intriguing but again, based on self-reports in surveys.

Social identity formation provides a powerful bridge between being active in online digital networks and offline participation. In a study of protest behavior in Venezuela during the *Toma de Caracas* ("taking of Caracas"), Eubank and Kronick (2020) find that when your networks are able to follow your actual political participation, there are social sanctioning effects that induce greater participation during key political moments. More generally, and building on the social identity model of collective action, Thomas et al. (2020) argue that identity temporally precedes collective action. This extends earlier work arguing that people will engage in collective action to advance the interests of groups they identify with (Tajfel 2010). Digital networks reinforce and produce shared identities, even where there are weak barriers to entry (Mikal et al. 2016).

Signaling membership in a community, particularly through online expression, can thus lead to increased political participation and activism (Valenzuela 2013).

Another social pathway is the role that peers, and "influencers" can have in mobilizing digitally networked communities. A range of experimental interventions have shown how individuals in digital networked communities are able to prompt behavioral change (at least online) among members. Eckles, Kizilic, and Basky (2016), for example, show that peer encouragement and feedback on Facebook can lead to more expressive political speech online. These effects appear to be particularly pronounced when coming from high-status individuals (e.g., Munger 2017, 2020).

A third important argument for the mobilizational role of digital networks focuses on their ability to lower coordination costs between like-minded individuals, which can prompt collective action. Cell phone use and digital networks are now intimately linked with large-scale protest organizations as well get-out-the-vote initiatives and community organizing. Digital networks also allow the rapid dissemination of government response to political activity which can prompt greater collective action, especially in cases of violent repression (Christensen and Garfias 2018). There are numerous documented cases of digital networks being instrumental in widespread mobilization. Examples include Egypt's Tahrir Square protests in 2011 (Tufekci and Wilson 2012), the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement in 2014 (Abramson, So, and Leung 2015), and the international youth protests on climate change (Boulianne, Lalancette, and Ilkiw 2020).

Overall, there is strong evidence for complementary/reinforcing mobilization dynamics from digital networks to political participation. While there are limited causal findings demonstrating learning or information effects, socialization effects appear to be stronger.

However, some scholarship suggests that participating in digital networks may actively lead to less embodied political participation; engaging with digital networks has become the primary and sometimes exclusive realm of political activity for some populations. That is, their political action is embedded in their social network activity. This behavior (e.g., liking a political message online) appears conceptually and empirically different from more conventional, institutional, and even what has often been called non-institutionalized forms of political participation (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Hersh 2020). Engaging in politics primarily through digital networks appears to be particularly attractive for younger and less prosperous individuals who may opt out of more traditional or other participation avenues (Theocharis, Moor, and Deth 2019). This account is
p. 714 corroborated by Feezell (2016) who finds ↳ that resource-based characteristics of those who participate in offline politics do not powerfully predict engagement in digital networks.

In an innovative experimental study, Theocharis and Lowe (2016) randomly assigned Greek youth to activate a Facebook profile for six months and measured their online and offline political participation. They find small negative effects and speculate that social media platforms may distract the users' attention from politics. Another similar demobilizing mechanism is established by Schumann and Klein (2015) who find that low-threshold online action leads to decreased offline political activity due to a misplaced sense of political accomplishment. Hersh (2020) similarly argues that those who engage in political hobbyism (which includes consuming political news and engaging in low-impact online activities) are effectively substituting genuine political activity for ongoing digital network use.

Digital networks clearly have an instrumental role in mobilizing large-scale protests, but little research has been able to causally demonstrate a strong aggregate-level link between digital social networks and other forms of offline political action outside of protests. Indeed, there is some evidence, examples of which are described earlier in the chapter, that suggests digital networks reduce embodied participation. When mobilization does occur, political knowledge effects tend to be limited and instead identity formation provides the best explanatory power.

The digital network landscape is rapidly changing as are the methods used to understand how they impact political behavior. Much of this research has been conducted on Twitter and Facebook and there are indications that structural features of social networks are important for understanding the role they play in politically mobilizing individuals (e.g., the algorithm for information feeds, the extent to which the digital networks reproduce embodied ones, etc., see Feezell, Wagner and Conroy 2021). Finally, while the bulk of this research has focused on a causal pathway that flows from digital network use towards political participation; Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) argue that the process may actually be the reverse, where political participation as a result of other processes (for example, through existing offline networks) leads individuals into digital networks This theorizing supports the idea that prior political commitments continue to be the primary drivers, even as digital networks emerge as a core site of political contention.

Future Research

This chapter has examined the extent to which voluntary associations, informal social ties, and digital networks can politically mobilize. Our goal was to bring multiple perspectives and evidence to understanding the various spheres and processes involved in the mobilization process. Table 41.1 highlights the main processes discussed in the chapter, grouped into several sub-themes and with a checkmark for the (de)mobilizational sphere where each was applied. The checkmarks do not indicate that a causal relationship has been proven but rather that a given process has been theoretically and empirically examined in the literature.

Survey research has formed the bedrock of much of the theorizing and empirical testing around the mobilization spheres discussed here. Hundreds of surveys, including many with panel components, have been conducted that track correlations between individual-level characteristics, social networks, and various forms
p. 715 of political participation. These surveys ↳ offer only marginal utility when conducted on the same types of (overwhelmingly Western) populations. This is true for both embodied and digital networks. For networks such as voluntary associations and informal social ties we observe an enormous theoretical literature pointing to their importance for political mobilization. Yet when it comes to showing their causal role, evidence remains scarce. The same can be said for digital networks.

Table 41.1 Processes across Mobilization Spheres

Processes	Voluntary Associations	Informal Social Ties	Digital Networks
Mobilization Processes			
Attitudes and skill development			
Learning to trust, cooperate, and solve collective action problems	✓		
Learning civic skills and political efficacy	✓		
Political information effects			
Political information-seeking and learning	✓	✓	✓
Incidental exposure to political information	✓	✓	✓
Social Mechanisms			
Recruitment into politics by ties	✓	✓	✓
Identity formation	✓	✓	✓
Coordination Costs			
Lowered political coordination costs			✓
Demobilization Processes			
Distraction, hobbyism, or misplaced sense of political accomplishment			✓
Network composition (social accountability and ambiguity)		✓	

Scholars should focus on using creative quantitative or systematic qualitative or mixed approaches that seek to understand specific ways in which mobilization has occurred in particular communities, during selected events or campaigns, and at specific moments in time. The type of research preferred by political behavioralists consistently produces causally inconclusive findings, while more ethnographic, qualitative, or targeted quantitative approaches of studying one or a few networks or associations potentially over time is more promising for disentangling the true influence of social spheres. Such approaches help to observe mobilization and demobilization processes from within social networks. Researchers can benefit enormously from building ties in these communities to better understand the processes of mobilization. Of course, greater dialogue between these approaches is necessary for the field to advance.

Experimental approaches can help elucidate causal processes, showing that changes within networks can produce mobilization or demobilization. While keeping in mind ethical considerations associated with these types of interventions, there are a variety of innovative ↳ and effective approaches available and data collection at scale for digital networks have made this type of research more accessible. Here scholars have been able to use a variety of nudge experiments with the attempt to exogenously induce subsequent mobilization (examples include sending private messages requesting subjects to sign a petition or increasing exposure to cross-partisan messaging, see experiments in Bond et al. 2012; Theocharis and Lowe 2016; Coppock, Guess, and Ternovski 2016; Bail et al. 2018; Munger 2020).

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Finally, the detailed mixed findings described in this chapter hide two larger realities. First, the distinction of these three social spheres is increasingly artificial, as political identity, conversation, and action slip in and out of associations, relationships, and digital networks. Second, digital networks now play an instrumental role in nearly all political mobilization processes. As these networks continue to strengthen, this role will only grow, leading to an increasingly tautological line of inquiry around their place in mobilization processes. It will be increasingly difficult, for example, to separate social digital network engagement from political participation within these networks. The lines between social and political action are becoming increasingly blurred.

Of course, these three social spheres are only one aspect of political mobilization. Research has included group grievances, direct political mobilization by parties and media, and most recently has focused on how emotions play a role for political action. Key frontiers in research on mobilization in social spheres (re)consider the ways that identity (Jardina 2019; Thomas et al. 2020; but see Bennett 2012 for claims to the contrary) and emotion (especially anger, see for example Wollebæk et al. 2019; Banks, White, and McKenzie 2019) play a role in mobilization processes.

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Notes

1 Guigni and Grasso (2020) distinguish four theories: the social capital model, the group consciousness model, the civic voluntarism model, and the mobilization model.