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POLITICAL ENVIRONMENTS, POLITICAL DYNAMICS, AND THE SURVIVAL OF DISAGREEMENT *

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses a series of questions related to the survival of disagreement among interdependent citizens during an election campaign. Do campaign stimulated processes of collective deliberation result in the elimination of disagreement within networks of social communication? If not, what are the factors that sustain political heterogeneity and disagreement? And what are the consequences of political heterogeneity within these communication networks for patterns of political influence between and among citizens? Finally, in what manner is the influence of one citizen on another conditioned by the structure of communication networks and the distribution of preferences in the remainder of the these networks? We address these questions based on a study of electoral dynamics in the 1996 presidential campaign as it took place in the Indianapolis and St. Louis metropolitan areas.

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Political disagreement is a frequent occurrence in democratic politics, even within the smallest and most closely held social groups. While the political preferences of citizens tend to reflect the partisan composition of their micro-environmental surroundings, relatively few citizens reside in politically homogeneous social worlds, protected from the immediate social experience of people holding divergent political viewpoints. This simple fact, the survival of disagreement, forces a reassessment of (1) the common wisdom suggesting that political homogeneity is the inevitable outcome of conformity pressures within small groups, as well as (2) the models and mechanisms of political communication and influence among citizens.

Students of public opinion and political participation adopt very different models to explain the dynamic consequences of political communication among and between citizens. According to one model, social communication and social influence provide the underlying fabric of a resilient political order. Individual preferences are imbedded within politically homogeneous networks of social relations, and hence they are anchored in a stable collective sentiment. An alternative model suggests that individual choices and preferences are subject to the diverse and fluctuating sentiments of a heterogeneous mix of public opinion. While individuals are imbedded within networks of social relations, the preference distributions within these networks are politically heterogeneous and dynamic, and hence the socially contingent preferences of particular individuals are highly dynamic as well.

The divergence between these models is especially relevant to processes of democratic deliberation as they unfold in the context of an election campaign (Barber 1984; Fishkin 1991). In particular, the models predict dramatically different consequences for the dynamics of individual

preference formation and for the convergence of aggregate opinion in the campaign. The central issues revolve around the survival of political disagreement and the extent to which higher levels of interdependence among citizens serve to shield individuals from, or expose them to, the events of the campaign. Several questions become crucial.

Do campaign stimulated processes of collective deliberation result in the elimination of disagreement within networks of social communication? If not, what are the factors that sustain political heterogeneity and disagreement within these networks? And what are the consequences of political heterogeneity within communication networks for patterns of political influence between and among citizens? Is the influence of one citizen on another conditioned by the distribution of preferences in the remainder of the micro-environment? Finally, what are the implications of the analysis for the penetration of individual patterns of communication and deliberation by the larger dynamics of the campaign? How does this penetration affect the dynamic consequences of communication among and between citizens?

We address these questions based on a study of electoral dynamics in the 1996 presidential campaign as it took place in the Indianapolis and St. Louis metropolitan areas. Attention focuses primarily on citizens and their networks of political communication. Network data were gathered throughout much of the campaign, from early March of 1996 through early January of 1997, and hence we are able to address the dynamic relationships among citizens, within their networks of political communication.

POLITICS, INTERDEPENDENCE, AND THE SURVIVAL OF DISAGREEMENT

The classic statement of the socially and politically conservative consequences that arise due

to social communication in politics is contained in the work of Lazarsfeld and his colleagues, based on their field work in Elmira and Erie County during the 1940s (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Berelson et al. 1954). According to their argument, political preferences become individually idiosyncratic as political communication among citizens becomes less frequent during the period of time between election campaigns. In response to the stimulus of the election, the frequency of political communication increases, idiosyncratic preferences become socially visible, and hence these individuals are brought into conformity with micro-environmental surroundings. In this way, social communication creates political stability as it provides a buffer against the political volatility of the external political environment (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995).

The argument presented by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues is quite persuasive, but carried to its extreme, the logic of group conformity suggests that political disagreement should disappear within networks of social relations. Pressures toward conformity might drive out disagreement in several ways (Festinger 1957; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). First, the discomfort of disagreement might encourage people to modify their patterns of social relations so as to exclude people with whom they disagree. Second, people might avoid political discussion with those associates who hold politically divergent preferences. Third, and partially as a consequence of discussion avoidance, people might incorrectly perceive agreement among those with whom they actually disagree. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, individuals might bring their own preferences into correspondence with the preferences that they encounter within their networks of social relations.

As compelling as this theory of group conformity may be, it suffers from at least one major empirical weakness: campaigns do ***not*** extinguish disagreement within networks of social relations. At the end of the 1984 presidential election campaign, Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) interviewed

discussion partners who had been identified by a sample of respondents from South Bend, Indiana. And at the end of the 1992 election campaign, Huckfeldt et al. (1995) interviewed discussion partners who had been identified by a nationally drawn sample of respondents. In both instances, no more than two-thirds of the discussion partners held a presidential candidate preference that coincided with the main respondent who named them.

These measures understate the overall levels of disagreement that exist in the networks in which citizens are situated. Recall that these statistics are based on dyads rather than networks. If the probability of dyadic disagreement within a network is .7, and if the likelihood of disagreement is independent across the dyads within a network, then the probability of agreement across all the relationships within a three-discussant network drops to $.7^3$ or .34. In other words, ***disagreement and heterogeneous preferences are the rule rather than the exception within the micro-environments surrounding individual citizens***.

The pervasiveness of disagreement within networks of social relations forces a reassessment of social conformity as a mechanism of social influence, as well as a reconsideration of the aggregate implications of political interdependence among citizens. Indeed, the theory of the consequences of social communication for the dynamics of an election campaign might be transformed fundamentally. Rather than serving as a source of insulation from the external political environment, social communication might even serve to magnify the consequences of the external environment by exposing individuals to non-redundant, politically disparate information.

DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

We address these issues on the basis of a unique election study, conducted by the Center for

Survey Research at Indiana University during the 1996 presidential election campaign. The study was expressly designed to examine the dynamic consequences of the campaign. The primary focus of the study is on political communication and preference formation over the course of the campaign, and thus campaign interviews began early in March of 1996 and ended in early January of 1997. The campaign study includes a sample of main respondents (N=2,174) drawn from the lists of registered voters, combined with a one-stage snowball sample of these main respondents' discussion partners (N=1,475).

Main respondent samples are drawn from the voter registration lists of two study sites: (1) the Indianapolis metropolitan area defined as Marion County, Indiana; and (2) the St. Louis metropolitan area defined as the independent city of St. Louis combined with the surrounding (and mostly suburban) St. Louis County, Missouri. The pre-election main respondent sampling plan was to complete interviews with approximately 40 main respondents each week before the election, equally divided between the two study sites. After the election, an additional 830 respondents were interviewed, once again divided between the St. Louis and Indianapolis metropolitan areas. Interviews with discussion partners were completed at a rate of approximately 30 interviews each week in the pre-election period, with an additional 639 interviews conducted after the election. During the pre-election period, the discussant interviews for a particular main respondent were completed within two subsequent interview weeks of the main respondent interview.

In order to collect social network information, every respondent to the survey was asked to provide the first names of his or her discussion partners. A random half of the sample was asked to name people with whom they discuss "important matters"; the other half was asked to name people with whom they discuss "government, elections, and politics" (Burt 1986; Huckfeldt, Sprague, and

Levine 2000).[1] After compiling a list of first names for not more than five discussion partners, the interviewers asked a battery of questions about each discussion partner. At the end of the interview, main respondents were asked for identifying information that might be used to contact and interview these discussants. Based on their responses 1475 discussant interviews were completed for the campaign sample, employing a survey instrument very similar to the one used in the main respondent interview.

CAMPAIGN EFFECTS ON POLITICAL HOMOGENEITY WITHIN NETWORKS

We begin by addressing campaign effects on levels of political homogeneity within our respondents' communication networks. Does the campaign serve to reduce political disagreement among individuals who are connected within networks of social communication? We are particularly interested in the survival or elimination of disagreement among citizens during the course of the campaign. And hence, our analytic strategy is to examine variation in the strength of the relationship between (1) the main respondent's perceptions regarding the partisan composition of her networks and (2) the main respondent's partisan orientation. We are making no argument regarding the direction of causation, and indeed the direction of causation undoubtedly runs both ways. People select associates on the basis of partisan orientations, and these orientations are simultaneously affected by associates (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Our only purpose is to see whether the campaign increases political homogeneity within networks of communication. If the campaign has the effect of eliminating disagreement, then the level of correspondence between individual preferences and surrounding preferences should be enhanced over the course of the campaign.

In Part A of Table 1, the partisan composition of the network is regressed on the

respondent's party identification. The first model uses the perceived network proportion supporting Clinton as a criterion variable, and the second model uses the perceived network proportion supporting Dole. In both instances, strong relationships appear between the political composition of the network and the respondent's party identification. The change in the homogeneity of the networks across the campaign is measured by the coefficient estimates for the time of interview (or wave) variables in interaction with the main respondent's party identification. For purposes of this analysis, main respondent interviews conducted before the end of primary season (prior to July 1, 1996) are first wave cases. Subsequent main respondent interviews taken before the election are second wave cases. And main respondent interviews conducted after the election are third wave cases. Statistically discernible coefficients fail to appear, thereby indicating that levels of homogeneity within the networks do not depend on the dynamics of the campaign.[2]

A parallel analysis is conducted in Part B of Table 1, but the respondent's party identification is replaced by the respondent's evaluation of the major party candidates – Clinton in the first model and Dole in the second. In both instances, the candidate evaluations are based on a five-point scale, where a score of 5 is most favorable and a score of 1 is most unfavorable. The relationships between the respondent's political preference and the partisan composition of the network are once again pronounced, but in this instance we see a slight campaign effect for the post-election period. The relationship between the respondent's candidate evaluation and network partisanship is ***reduced*** by about 20 percent in the post-election wave. At the end of the marathon campaign, respondents are actually ***less*** likely to report a candidate preference that is in correspondence with their own perception regarding the partisan composition of the network. Hence, there is little evidence here to suggest that a process of motivated conformity enhances political homogeneity within networks over

the course of the campaign.[3]

An alternative interpretation of these data is that pressures toward conformity reach their peak during the election campaign (waves 1 and 2) and relax thereafter (during wave 3). The problem with this interpretation is that it is not supported by an alternative analysis that focuses on objectively defined agreement based on self-reported opinions within discussion dyads. For the 1,475 dyads in which discussion partners were interviewed, we are able to determine whether main respondents and discussants report the same vote preference, and the levels of agreement across the three waves are: 63 percent, 52 percent, and 60 percent. Hence, agreement ***increases*** between the general election and the post-election waves, the highest level of agreement occurs during the primary wave, and the lowest level occurs during the general election campaign. In short, we see no compelling evidence to suggest that political disagreement is substantially reduced within communication networks as a consequence of the campaign.[4]

In summary, the simplest, most direct tests for the homogenizing impact of political interaction do not bear fruit. A more subtle, contingent model of communication and persuasion must be pursued in order to understand the impact of individual level communication processes on patterns of opinion formation (Axelrod 1997). In the next section, we investigate the possibility that disagreement survives as a systematic consequence of the particular network configurations within which citizens are located.

COMMUNICATION AND THE SURVIVAL OF DISAGREEMENT

The lack of a homogenizing effect in the campaign might lead some to argue either that communication is not taking place, or that nobody ever changes their mind. Neither of these

suspicions is correct, however, and other analyses of these data (Huckfeldt, Sprague, and Levine 2000) demonstrate that the election campaign stimulates meaningful political communication among citizens. Indeed, the campaign generates substantial enhancements in the ***effectiveness*** of communication, where effectiveness is defined in terms of the clarity and accuracy with which political messages are conveyed among citizens. As a consequence of the campaign, citizens are more likely to perceive their associates' preferences accurately. They are more confident in their assessments of associates' preferences. And their judgments regarding the preferences of others are more accessible – they come to mind more readily.

Our argument is that the ***influence*** of political communication depends in very important ways on the ***effectiveness*** of the communication, as well as on the configuration of the larger networks within which the communication occurs. Hence, we are deliberately separating the effectiveness of communication from the influence of communication. Unless people communicate effectively, they cannot hope to exercise influence within their networks of communication (Latane 1981; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Election campaigns activate networks of political communication, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of communication among citizens. The potential is thus created for influential communication, but the realization of this potential is problematic due to contingencies operating on political influence within communication networks.

In order to evaluate our argument, we introduce a series of models that investigate whether a person's evaluation of a presidential candidate is influenced by the political outlook of an associate. In each model of Table 2, the main respondent's evaluation of Bill Clinton is regressed on a range of individually based factors related to the main respondent – partisanship, ideology, income, education, race and ethnicity, religion, and church attendance. In addition, the partisanship of the discussion

partner is also included as a regressor, along with various contingencies.

In the first model, we consider the simple, non-conditional effect of discussant partisanship. The partisanship variable is coded on the familiar seven-point scale, where 0 signifies a strong Democrat and 6 signifies a strong Republican. As one would expect, the coefficient for the main respondent's partisanship is negative and statistically discernible (-.34). In comparison, the coefficient for the discussant's partisanship is also negative and discernible (-.03), but it is quite small in magnitude. While we would certainly expect the effect of the respondent's own partisan identification to be more influential than the discussant's partisanship in affecting the evaluation, the more important issue revolves around the factors that inhibit or enhance the influence of the discussion partner.[5]

In the second and third models of Table 2, the effect of the discussion partner is contingent on two different indicators of effective communication, each of which is related to the nature of the main respondent's judgment regarding the discussion partner's presidential vote. In the second model, the effect of the discussant's partisanship is contingent on the accuracy of the main respondent's judgment regarding the discussant's voting behavior. As the model shows, the effect of discussant partisanship is only modestly enhanced by accuracy, and the enhancement effect produces a relatively small t-value.

In the third model, the effect of discussant partisanship is contingent on the ease with which the main respondent is able to judge the discussion partner's vote preference. This ease of judgement measure is based on the respondent's response to a question regarding "how difficult or easy it was" to make a judgment regarding the particular discussion partner's vote choice. Once again, this measure provides an indicator of effective communication, where communication that is

more effective makes it easier for the respondent to render a judgment regarding the discussion partner's preference. As the third model estimates indicate, the effect of discussant partisanship is substantially enhanced (-.08) in circumstances where the main respondent is able to render a judgment easily. And the main effect, which measures the discussant effect in circumstances where it was difficult to render the judgment, is statistically indiscernible. In short, the discussant effect is conditional on the ease with which the main respondent is able to render a judgment regarding the politics of the discussion partner.

Thus, taken together, the second and third models suggest that influence is enhanced to the extent that communication occurs effectively. Why does judgmental ease serve to produce a larger enhancement effect? Recall that our criterion variable is the main respondent Clinton evaluation, the explanatory variable is discussant partisanship, and the contingency is the effectiveness of communication regarding ***vote choice***. It is entirely possible that a main respondent might correctly recognize that a normally Democratic discussion partner plans to vote for Bob Dole, but we would not necessarily expect the effect of discussant partisanship to be enhanced in such a situation. Indeed, the main respondent has been able to make an accurate judgment regarding the discussion partner's vote regardless of the disagreement between partisanship and vote choice. In contrast, it is generally easier for respondents to make judgments regarding the voting preferences of strong partisans who vote in line with their partisan loyalties, and these are also the circumstances that enhance influence.

POLITICAL INFLUENCE AND HETEROGENEITY WITHIN NETWORKS

The impact of dyadic communication depends on factors that exist beyond the narrow

confines of the dyad itself (Huckfeldt et al. 1998; Huckfeldt, Sprague, and Levine 2000). For example, respondents are much more likely to recognize the preference of a particular discussion partner accurately when they perceive the preference to be more widespread among other discussion partners. In this way the majority within a particular network realizes an advantage in effectively communicating its preference, and the obvious question becomes whether the majority ***also*** realizes an advantage in terms of influence. Are discussion partners more influential if their political preferences enjoy higher levels of support within respondents' networks of communication?

The fourth model of Table 2 addresses this question by making the effect of discussant partisanship contingent on the perceived distribution of preferences among the main respondent's other discussion partners. In particular, we are concerned with the proportion of the remaining network discussion partners who hold preferences that, according to the respondent's judgment, correspond with the self-reported preference of the discussion partner being considered within the dyad.[6] This measure of network correspondence produces a substantial enhancement in the effect of discussant partisanship. The effect of a politically isolated discussant is reversed in sign (.03), thus suggesting that a socially unsupported preference actually encourages a reactive response on the part of main respondents. In other words, the presence of a lone Democratic discussion partner within a network otherwise composed of Republicans may actually discourage Clinton support. At the same time, this effect is more than nullified by the negative enhancement effect (-.12) for discussion partners whose preference is perceived to be held by all the other discussants – the Clinton discussion partner in the context of other discussants who are also perceived to support Clinton. The important point is that discussion partners who hold minority preferences have, at best, no influence on main respondents, while the expected effect of discussion partners who hold the

majority preference is substantially enhanced.

The final model of Table 2 gives joint attention to ***both*** judgmental ease ***and*** the configuration of preferences in the remaining network as factors conditioning discussant effects, and the results parallel those found earlier. Substantial enhancement effects on discussion partner influence are produced by both factors. Discussion partners are more likely to be influential if they hold preferences that are perceived to be dominant within the network ***and*** if it is easier for the respondents to render judgments regarding their political preferences, and the cumulative enhancement effect is particularly substantial. Indeed, the net effect for easily perceived discussants holding a preference that reflects a network consensus is -.11 (.07-.08-.10), a nearly fourfold increase in the discussant effect of the baseline model (-.03).[7]

MAJORITARIAN BIASES AND THE SURVIVAL OF DISAGREEMENT

These results add to a significant body of evidence suggesting that political minorities operate under pronounced disadvantages in democratic politics (Miller 1956). Several efforts show that minority preferences are less likely to be communicated effectively, and hence they are less likely to be recognized, even by fellow members of the minority (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt et al. 1998; Huckfeldt, Sprague, and Levine 2000). This paper adds to these efforts, showing that the individuals who hold minority preferences are less likely to be politically influential within networks of social communication. In other words, the influence of the discussion partner's preference is weighted by majority-minority standing within networks of social communication. Hence, the preferences of those in the political majority count more heavily in the deliberative process than the preferences of those in the minority.

Regardless of this cumulatively bleak picture for the communication and influence of minority preferences, there is no evidence here to suggest that minorities tend to be eliminated as part of the deliberative process (see Moscovici, Mucchi-Faina, and Maass 1994). This is especially striking because we are defining minority and majority preferences relative to closely held social environments created through the communication networks of individual citizens. Within this context, only 36 percent of the main respondents who support Dole or Clinton perceive that all their discussion partners hold the same candidate preference. In other words, a lack of political agreement is the modal condition among our respondents, even within enduring networks of communication and association.

This raises an important question – how is the minority opinion able to survive? Like the gene pool, the opinion pool is subject to a number of different forces which act to both eradicate and sustain diversity. At an aggregate level, perhaps the minority is sustained by something as simple as the Markov principle. A small defection rate operating on a large (majority) population will at some point be at equilibrium with a large defection rate operating on a small (minority) population.

We suspect other processes are at work, however, which serve both to maintain individual-level disagreement and to sustain minority opinion in the aggregate. A discussion partner who holds a minority opinion in one of our main respondent's networks may, indeed, be part of a majority in her ***own*** network and thus sustained in her opinion. Although such a person encounters disagreement, she receives sufficient support for her opinion to withstand the drift toward conformity. Correspondingly, while people who hold opinions that receive minority support in the aggregate are more likely to experience disagreement within networks of political communication (Huckfeldt et al. 1998; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995), they are often located within political micro-environments that

tend to support their views.

Hence, in order for disagreement to survive within political communication networks, it is vital that the micro-environments created through networks of communication are not closed systems that are identically experienced by all participants. In particular, even if two discussion partners, say Joe and Bill, are reciprocally related to one another as regular discussants and close friends, their micro-environments may be almost completely independent. Hence, Joe and Bill may hold different political preferences, and yet both may be part of a political majority within their own respectively defined networks.

Several simple network structures, as well as their implications for the survival of disagreement, are considered in Figure 1. Individuals are represented as ovals, discussant relationships as connecting lines, and the presence of a particular political preference as the presence or absence of shading in the oval. In Part A of the figure, each individual is connected to each of three other individuals in a self-contained network of relations. In such a situation, the logic of Table 2 suggests that disagreement is quite likely to disappear, and only the heroic individual is likely to sustain an unpopular belief. In contrast, Part B of Figure 1 shows two sub-networks of four individuals each, where every individual is connected to every other individual within the sub-network. In addition, one individual within each sub-network is connected to one individual in the other sub-network, thereby providing a bridge that spans a structural hole between sub-networks (Burt 1992). In this setting, the logic of Table 2 suggests that agreement will be socially sustained ***within*** each of the sub-networks, but ***dis***agreement will be socially sustained ***between*** the individuals who bridge this particular type of structural hole.

SOCIALLY SUSTAINED DISAGREEMENT

How important are such networks to the survival of disagreement? One way to address this question is by examining the networks of ***both*** main respondents ***and*** their discussion partners. The interview with the discussion partners included the same network name generator that was employed in the interview with the main respondents. Thus we are able to compare (1) the main respondent's perception regarding the political composition of the main respondent's network with (2) the discussion partner's perception regarding the political composition of the discussion partner's network. Guided by Part B of Figure 1, we are particularly interested in the composition of the residual networks – the networks that remain when the two members of the dyad are removed.[8] Two questions arise. First, how closely related is the political composition of the discussion partner's residual network to the political composition of the main respondent's residual network? Second, does this relationship depend on the existence of political agreement or disagreement between the main respondent and the interviewed discussion partner?

In Part A of Table 3, the percentage of the discussion partner's residual network supporting Clinton is regressed on the percentage of the main respondent's residual network supporting Clinton. The regression is estimated twice – once for all dyads in which interviewed discussion partners and main respondents each name at least two discussants, and a second time for all dyads in which the main respondent and the discussion partner each identify more than two discussion partners. In both instances we see a positive slope with a large t-value and a small R^2. In short, the political composition of the main respondent's residual network generally resembles the political composition of the discussion partner's residual network.

These simple regressions are repeated in Parts B and C of Table 3, first for main

respondents and interviewed discussion partners reporting the same candidate preferences, and then for main respondents and interviewed discussion partners reporting different candidate preferences. For the agreeing dyads, we see an enhanced relationship in the form of a larger regression slope, as well as a larger coefficient t-value and an enhanced R^2. In contrast, for the disagreeing dyads, we see a reversed slope of smaller absolute value with a nearly non-existent R^2, but with a coefficient t-value that supports the presence of a discernible negative relationship.

What do these results suggest? Agreement within dyads is typically sustained by larger networks of communication that simultaneously support the preferences of ***both*** individuals within the dyad. In contrast, we see at least some evidence to suggest that disagreement is also socially sustained, but by politically ***divergent*** networks that serve to pull the two members of the dyad in politically ***opposite*** directions. At the very least, disagreement within dyads is characterized by political independence between the two participants' larger networks of association and communication.

In summary, the survival of disagreement within dyads is profitably seen within larger patterns of association and communication. The logic of social influence creates a bias in favor of majority sentiment, thereby making it difficult for disagreement to be sustained. Indeed, to the extent that networks of communication and influence constitute closed social cells, characterized by high rates of interaction within the network but very little interaction beyond the network, we would expect to see an absence of disagreement among and between associates. Hence, the survival of disagreement depends on the permeability of networks created by "weak" social ties (Granovetter 1973) and the bridging of structural holes (Burt 1992). At the same time that these ties lead to the dissemination of new information (Huckfeldt et al. 1995), they also bring together individuals who hold politically

divergent preferences, thereby sustaining patterns of interaction that produce political disagreement.

IMPLICATIONS

What are the implications of this analysis for processes of social communication and democratic deliberation during election campaigns? Simply put, observed patterns in public opinion depend not only on individual predispositions and interpersonal communication, but also on the particular locations and configurations of individuals within networks of political communication. At one extreme, it is entirely possible to construct a hypothetical network in which majority opinion is, in the long run, held by all citizens. At the same time, it is also possible to construct a network in which minorities are not only able to survive, but are even able to overtake the majority.

The group conformity model, in which individuals are inevitably located within politically homogeneous networks, fails to accommodate ***either*** political disagreement ***or*** the ebb and flow of majorities and minorities that characterize the empirical reality of democratic politics. History shows that Democratic majorities replace Republican majorities, which in turn replace Democratic majorities. Does this happen outside the collective process of social communication and democratic deliberation? We think not, and our analysis points to the important dynamic implications of low density communication networks – networks characterized by individuals who serve as bridges of communication between and among otherwise independent networks (Granovetter 1973; Burt 1992). In networks such as these, individuals encounter disagreement at the same time that they find support for the opinions that they ultimately adopt, and therein lies the key to the survival of minority opinion.

Our analysis does not support or suggest a determinate outcome to the process of social

communication and influence. Citizens not only respond to one another – they also respond to the real-life events in the external political environment. Indeed, individuals are continually being bombarded by the exogenous events of politics, and these events frequently lead to opinion changes that produce ripple effects within communication networks (McPhee 1963). At the beginning of an election campaign, many individuals are uncertain regarding their preferred candidates. And as they formulate preferences in response to the campaign, their newly constructed opinions produce implications for other citizens. Part C of Figure 1 introduces this sort of individual uncertainty into the structural setting portrayed in Part B. And by introducing uncertainty, the outcome of the political dynamic within the network is rendered unpredictable and indeterminate.

Recall the traditional model of social influence in politics, whereby social communication and influence provide the underlying fabric of a durable political order, shielding individuals from the events and dramas in the external political environment. Consider such an explanation in the context of a political independent with three discussion partners—a strong Democrat, a strong Republican, and a fellow independent. Assume that the strong Democrat admires Bill Clinton, the strong Republican loathes Bill Clinton, and both independents are undecided at the beginning of the campaign. The role of the independent discussion partner is clearly crucial – she occupies a pivotal role in the formulation of the first independent's preference. If the independent discussion partner becomes a Clinton supporter, the persuasiveness of the strong Democrat is enhanced while the influence of the strong Republican is attenuated. Alternatively, if the independent discussion partner develops an animus toward Clinton, the entire pattern of influence is transformed.

Such an analysis suggests that the conversion of any single individual to a particular candidate's cause is not only important in terms of a single vote or a single unit of social influence. It

is also important in terms of the enhancement and attenuation effects that it creates ***throughout*** the networks of relationships within which the individual is imbedded, quite literally transforming entire patterns of social influence. In this way, political interdependence among citizens might actually ***magnify*** the importance of events in the external political environment.

This alternative model of political influence is particularly important because many individuals do not reside in politically homogeneous micro-environments (Lipset 1981). Hence, for most citizens, the mix of political messages to which they are exposed – even at the most closely held levels of association – is heterogeneous, unstable, and subject to the impact of events in the external political environment. Rather than serving as a buffer between the individual and the external political environment, these networks of communication serve as transmitters and intermediaries that connect individuals to the events and circumstances of democratic politics.

None of this suggests that social communication and social influence are destabilizing forces in democratic politics. Rather, we are simply making two arguments. First, the collective processes of democratic communication and deliberation are not irrelevant to the outcome of the democratic process. Second, dyadic information flows must be seen in light of preference distributions within larger networks of communication, and thus individual preference arises in part as the complex and highly non-linear product of larger patterns of association and communication (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). In summary and taken together, these results encourage a reconsideration of the role played in electoral politics by social communication and influence, as well as the manner in which events in the external political environment are socially as well as individually processed.

CONCLUSION

This paper's analysis has addressed a number of specific questions regarding political communication and persuasion within election campaigns. Some of the results are important simply because they challenge long-standing common wisdom within public opinion research. In particular, we find that political communication occurs among people who disagree with each other, and contrary to expectations, disagreement is not inevitably diminished by interaction. We also find that political influence within discussion networks depends on two broad categories of factors. One category of factors can be understood relative to the particular participants within an isolated dyad, but others can be understood only with reference to the larger network within which the individuals and dyads are located. Perhaps most importantly, the political influence of ***a particular discussion partner*** depends in a very fundamental way on this second class of network-related factors.

These results provide grist for the debate regarding deliberative democracy and the importance of political communication among citizens during election campaigns (Barber 1984; Fishkin 1991). The empirical reality is that minority opinion and political disagreement are able to survive, and hence the group conformity model appears to be a bad fit with respect to the substance of political preferences and political communication. A central characteristic of political influence arises due to the subjectivity and hence comprehensibility of many political preferences, even when they are disagreeable. You may not like your best friend's politics, but the disagreement is frequently tolerable, in large part because you are able to understand the motivation behind her opinions (Downs 1957; Calvert 1985; Sniderman 1991).

Indeed, a wide gulf separates most instances of ***political*** communication and persuasion from the communication and persuasion that are characteristic of the conformity studies conducted by Asch (1955) and others. As Ross et al. (1976) argue, it may be difficult to resist the majority

when everyone is saying that the larger line is shorter than the shorter line due to the simple fact that no obvious explanation accounts for the divergence of their (incorrect) beliefs. In contrast, when an associate embraces the cause of Newt Gingrich or Bill Clinton, a variety of plausible justifications may arise for dismissing the associate's judgment. Thus, political disagreement is (perhaps ironically) much easier to tolerate and accommodate, pressures toward conformity are thereby reduced, and disagreement and minority preferences are better able to survive. Not only is political disagreement sustained by particular structures of social interaction, but also by the inherently subjective nature of democratic politics.

NOTES

1. The experimental condition imbedded within the design of this name generator allows us to examine the extent to which political information networks are separate from social communication networks more broadly considered (Huckfeldt, Sprague, and Levine 2000).

2. For both regressions, we conducted a joint test of the null hypothesis that the coefficients for all four wave-related variables (the two dummy variables and their interactions) are equal to zero. For the Clinton results in Table 1(A), this yields an F of 1.11 (df= 4, 1686) and a p-value of .35. For the Dole results in Table 1(A), it yields an F of .72 (df= 4, 1686) and a p-value of .58.

3. A post-election consensus effect is well documented, where those who supported the loser become more favorable to the victorious candidate. This would have the net effect of reducing the relationship between an individual's own evaluation of the candidate and the perceived distribution of preferences in the surrounding network (Joslyn 1998).

4. For both regressions shown in Table 1(B), we once again conducted a joint test of the null hypothesis that the coefficients for all four wave-variables (the two dummy variables and their interactions) are equal to zero. For the Clinton results, this yields an F of 1.58 (df= 4, 1725) and a p-value of .18. For the Dole results, this yields an F of 2.15 (df= 4, 1718) and a p-value of .07.

5. This model only considers the direct effects of discussant partisanship on the main respondent's evaluation of Bill Clinton, without taking account of any indirect effects due to discussant partisanship that might be operating ***through*** main respondent partisanship. Such a modeling strategy is appropriate because we are ***only*** concerned with the short-term campaign effects that arise due to the discussion partners' political preferences, and we are treating the

partisanship of both the main respondent and the discussion partner as exogenous.

6. Network correspondence is a proportional measure defined in terms of vote preference. If the discussion partner in the dyad ***reports*** a vote preference that the respondent ***believes*** is shared by all the other discussants, network correspondence is set to 1. At the other extreme, if the discussion partner in the dyad reports a vote preference that the respondent ***believes*** is shared by none of the other discussants, network correspondence is set to 0.

7. The alternative models in Table 2 do not produce enormous differences with respect to the explained variation and standard errors of estimate. Rather, the added value lies in a better specification of the conditions that give rise to political influence.

8. Removing the interviewed discussion partner from the main respondent's network is a straightforward task. Removing the main respondent from the interviewed discussion partner's network is not straightforward because we do not have a direct measure of reciprocity – we do not know with certainty whether the discussion partner names the main respondent as one of her discussants. We adopt the procedure of assuming that the main respondent is included in the discussion partner's network if the main respondent reports a candidate preference that is perceived by the discussion partner to be present in the network.

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Table 1. Campaign effects on political homogeneity within networks.

A. Partisan composition of network by respondent's party identification.

	Network Clinton Proportion		Network Dole Proportion	
	coefficient	t-value	coefficient	t-value
constant	.63	27.72	.09	4.05
wave 1	.01	.38	-.01	.28
wave 3	-.03	1.13	.02	.77
party identification	-.09	14.81	.09	16.09
party id. X wave 1	-.01	1.02	.004	.48
party id. X wave 3	.01	.95	-.01	1.14
N=	1692		1692	
R2=	.28		.30	
S.E.	.32		.33	

B. Partisan composition of network by respondent candidate evaluation.

	Network Clinton Proportion		Network Dole Proportion	
	coefficient	t-value	coefficient	t-value
constant	-.07	2.24	-.07	2.10
wave 1	-.01	.29	.02	.42
wave 3	.06	1.50	.08	1.71
candidate evaluation	.15	15.94	.16	14.24
cand. eval. X wave 1	-.003	.23	-.001	.08
cand. eval. X wave 3	-.03	2.06	-.03	2.20
N=	1731		1724	
R2=	.27		.22	
S.E.	.32		.34	

network Clinton proportion: the proportion of all discussion partners perceived by the main respondent to support Clinton. (The mean is .35.)
network Dole proportion: the proportion of all discussion partners perceived by the main respondent to support Dole. (The mean is .38.)
party identification: measured on a seven point scale, where 0 is strong Democrat and 6 is strong Republican. (The mean is 3.03.)
wave 1, wave 3: 1= respondent was interviewed at the particular

wave; 0 otherwise. The distribution across the three waves was 28%, 34%, and 38%, respectively.

candidate evaluations: measured on a 5 point scale, where 1 is most unfavorable and 5 is most favorable. Clinton is evaluated in the left-side model, and Dole is evaluated in the right-side model. The mean for Clinton is 2.9, and the mean for Dole is 2.8.

Table 2. Discussant effects on Clinton evaluation, contingent on the accuracy and ease of judgments regarding discussants, as well as the correspondence between discussant and the remainder of network. (Least squares; coefficient t-values are shown in parentheses.)

		Discussant Effects Contingent on:			
	1. baseline model	2. judgment accuracy	3. judgment ease	4. network corresp.	5. ease & corresp.
constant	4.89	4.74	4.64	4.57	4.39
	(23.38)	(21.23)	(21.37)	(20.38)	(19.08)
partisanship	-0.34	-.33	-.33	-.33	-.33
	(21.01)	(20.24)	(20.54)	(19.05)	(18.81)
ideology	-0.14	-.15	-.14	-.14	-.14
	(7.56)	(7.74)	(7.47)	(7.00)	(6.93)
income	0.01	.01	.01	.02	.02
	(.45)	(.67)	(.43)	(1.00)	(.98)
education	-0.02	-.02	-.01	-.02	-.02
	(1.21)	(1.09)	(1.05)	(1.32)	(1.16)
African-American	.32	.43	.31	.40	.39
	(3.04)	(3.87)	(2.93)	(3.65)	(3.59)
other ethnic minority	1.00	.98	.99	1.02	1.02
	(6.19)	(6.16)	(6.25)	(6.26)	(6.28)
church attendance	-.06	-.06	-.06	-.05	-.05
	(3.14)	(2.95)	(2.98)	(2.62)	(2.47)
Protestant	-.13	-.12	-.13	-.12	-.12
	(1.70)	(1.54)	(1.71)	(1.50)	(1.51)
Catholic	.002	-.002	.001	.004	.002
	(.02)	(.03)	(.02)	(.04)	(.02)
Jewish	.32	.34	.30	.38	.37
	(1.86)	(1.96)	(1.78)	(2.17)	(2.12)
discussant partisanship	-0.03	.005	.02	.03	.07
	(2.42)	(.19)	(.99)	(1.66)	(3.05)
judgmental accuracy		.11			
		(.98)			
accuracy X disc. part.		-.04			
		(1.31)			

judgmental			.28		.26
ease			(2.93)		(2.60)
judg. ease X			-.08		-.08
disc. part.			(3.41)		(3.06)
network				.38	.31
correspondence				(2.93)	(2.33)
network corr. X				-.12	-.10
disc. part.				(3.70)	(3.16)
N=	1,131	1,084	1,129	1,042	1,040
R^2=	.62	.63	.63	.64	.65
S.E.=	.88	.88	.88	.87	.87

partisanship: seven-point party identification scale, where 0 is strong Democrat and 6 is strong Republican. (The mean is 3.15.)
ideology: seven-point ideological self-placement, where 0 is strongly liberal and 6 is strongly conservative. (The mean is 3.49.)
education: years of school. (The range is 7-19, and the mean is 15.1.)
income: family income on a six point scale. (The range is 1-6, and the mean is 4.2.)
African-American: 1=African-American; 0=other.(African-Americans constitute 8 percent of the sample. The baseline category is non-hispanic white.)
other ethnic minority: 1=any ethnic minority other than African-American; 0=other. (Other ethnic minorities constitute 3 percent of the sample. The baseline category is non-hispanic white.)
Protestant: 1=respondent identifies as a Protestant; 0 otherwise. (Protestants constitute 51% of the sample, and the baseline category is non-religious or other religious – not Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish.)
Catholic: 1=respondent identifies as a Catholic; 0 otherwise. (Catholics constitute 27% of the sample, and the baseline category is non-religious or other religious – not Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish.)
Jewish: 1=respondent identifies as Jewish; 0 otherwise.(Jews constitute 3% of the sample, and the baseline category is non-religious or other religious – not Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish.)
church attendance: frequency of attendance, where 5=every week, 4=almost every week, 3=once or twice a month, 2=a few times a year, 1=never. The mean is 3.4.
judgmental accuracy: 1=main respondent accurately judges the discussant's self-reported vote preference; 0=not accurate. (65% are accurate.)
judgmental ease: 1=very easy to judge discussant vote; 0=somewhat easy, somewhat difficult, or very difficult. (56% report very easy.)
network correspondence: proportion of other discussant partners perceived by the main respondent to hold the vote preference that is reported by the discussant in the dyad. (The range is 0-1, and the mean is .47.)

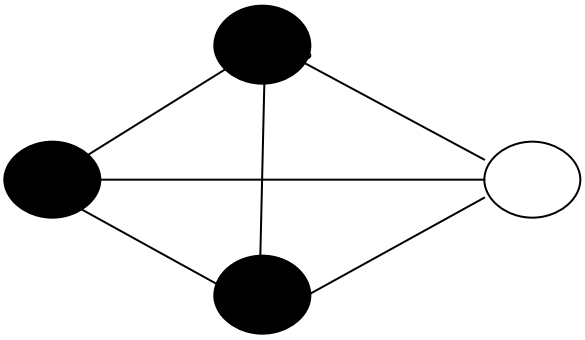
Table 3. The proportion of the respondent's network perceived (by the respondent) to support Clinton regressed on the proportion of the discussant's network perceived (by the discussant) to support Clinton, conditional on whether the main respondent perceives agreement within the respondent-discussant dyad.

	number of discussants named by both the respondent and the discussant:	
	2 or more	more than 2
A. ALL DYADS		
constant	.32	.30
	(20.15)	(15.75)
slope	.16	.22
	(5.28)	(5.53)
R2	.03	.04
s.e.	.38	.36
N	1006	640
B. AGREEING DYADS		
constant	.26	.22
	(13.46)	(9.61)
slope	.36	.47
	(9.23)	(9.78)
R2	.12	.19
s.e.	.37	.34
N	605	401
C. DISAGREEING DYADS		
constant	.39	.42
	(16.03)	(14.24)
slope	-.08	-.15
	(1.73)	(2.34)
R2	.01	.02
s.e.	.36	.34
N	378	223

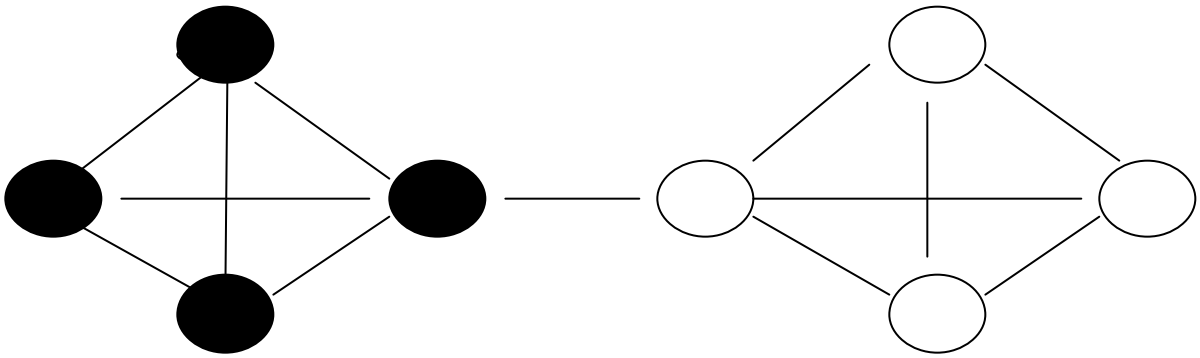
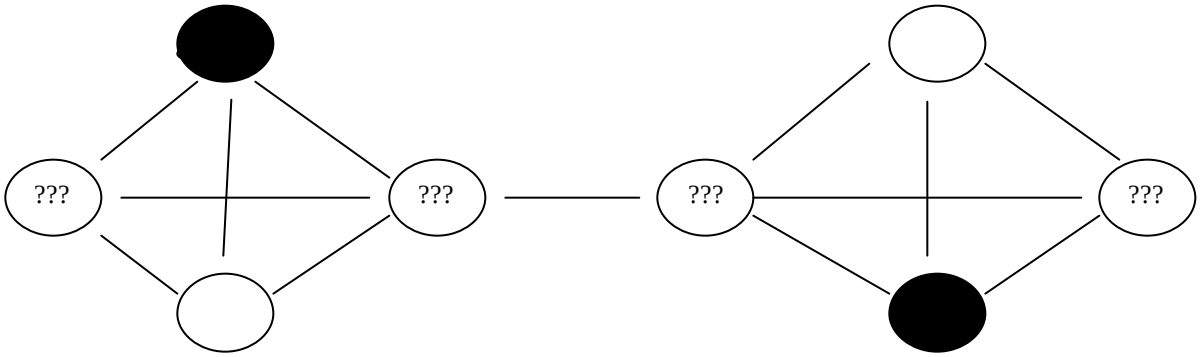
Note: In constructing perceived network support for Clinton, the main respondent in the dyad is extracted from the discussant's network, and the discussant in the dyad is extracted from the main respondent's network. Hence, we index the political composition of the remaining networks absent the preferences of the particular dyad. The measure is based on perceptions regarding whether each remaining member of the networks voted for Clinton in the 1996 presidential election. The mean level of network Clinton support is .37 for main respondents and .33 for discussants.

Figure 1. Patterns of social connection and implications for electoral change.

A. Conformity and the socially heroic holdout.



B. Socially sustained disagreement.



C. Social connections giving rise to political change.