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# Social Networks and Political Participation

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## Abstract

In recent years, the study of political participation has benefited from growing attention to the study of social networks. Historically, most explanations for political participation have focused on characteristics of individuals. Although these individual-level correlates do a “pretty good” job of predicting who participates, incorporating social networks deepens our understanding of the factors that lead people to express voice in the democratic process. Even though the participation literature has long been split between scholars who favor a focus on individuals and others who emphasize social networks, the two approaches need not be in tension. Instead, they complement one another. The individualistic factors known to correlate with participation—including education, religious attendance, political knowledge, political conviction, and civic duty—all have a social dimension.

## INTRODUCTION

A central question in the study of democratic politics is who participates. Who turns out on election day is of obvious importance to understanding what democratic governments do, since who votes determines who serves in elected office. Similarly, it is important to know who engages in other forms of political activity, such as writing letters to elected officials, giving money to political groups, and marching in rallies. Elected officials pay heed to these more intense and information-laden forms of political activity as well. Who participates largely determines the policies that are made. If elected officials hear only from an unrepresentative slice of the public, they are likely to enact policies favoring those few.

Social scientists often stumble over the “who cares?” question regarding their work, but the importance of knowing who participates should be self-evident. One justification, of course, is on purely scientific grounds. If a phenomenon is worth studying, it is worth studying well, which means keeping an open mind to all possible explanations. However, for many scholars of political participation, there is also a normative concern for getting the explanation(s) right. Any student of democracy should be concerned about the quantity, quality, and equality of participation (Macedo et al. 2005). Accordingly, the participation literature has long had a prescriptive thread, advocating public policies to affect political participation. Examples include changes in voter registration laws, voting technology, the timing of elections, and a host of other ideas. Some of these proposals have been implemented, perhaps most famously the federal Motor Voter law, which has made voter registration easier. If policy designed to affect political participation is to be implemented, a thorough understanding of who participates is necessary. Policy makers care little for the pet theories of academics. They want to know the likely effect of a given policy. To anticipate such effects requires looking at all the potential influences on participation.

The study of who participates has long been the subject of an increasingly sophisticated research literature—or rather two literatures, one centered on individuals and the other on social networks. That there are two distinct (albeit overlapping) research traditions results from a fissure that first formed in the early days of the empirical study of political participation. However, the theoretical divide between these two literatures is premised upon a false dichotomy. Virtually every factor influencing political participation, even those considered to be quintessentially individual-level characteristics, has a social component to it. To understand who participates, scholars are wise to look beyond individual-level characteristics to the social contexts and personal networks in which we are all embedded.

In a tale oft-told in graduate seminars, with the birth of the behavioral revolution a “Great Schism” developed between the Columbia school (Lazersfeld et al. 1948, Berelson et al. 1954), grounded in sociology, and the Michigan school (Campbell et al. 1954, 1960), which had its roots in psychology. The former pioneered intensive community studies and emphasized the social aspects of political behavior. The latter designed path-breaking national surveys that centered on individualistic explanations for political behavior. With a narrow geographic scope, a community study can put social networks under the proverbial microscope—who talks about what with whom? By contrast, the broad scope of a national survey makes the atomized individual the unit of analysis.

Although the Michigan school had a theoretical basis for giving primacy to the individual, its approach also meshed with the statistical methods common in social science. Statistics textbooks warn about violating the assumption that individual units of analysis are independent from one another, precisely the opposite of a social perspective on political behavior (Lazer 2011). (Nonetheless, various statistical methods enable interdependence to be modeled, what computer programmers call turning a bug into a feature.) The deck was thus stacked against the methodology

of the Columbia school, which in turn meant that the theoretical basis for the social dimension of politics also suffered. In the ensuing years, the Michigan school's individual-oriented paradigm largely won out. The study of political behavior generally, and participation specifically, has historically centered mostly on individual-oriented explanations.

In recounting this history, it is easy to exaggerate the extent of the schism, as I suspect is done in most graduate seminars. While acknowledging the different theoretical emphases of the two schools, we should also recall the common ground they share. In a thoughtful essay on the complementarity of individual- and social-oriented perspectives on political behavior, Zuckerman (2005, p. 3) notes that "returning to the foundational texts of the behavioral revolution in political science highlights the fundamental importance of the social logic of politics." The complementarity of individual and social perspectives in the early days of behavioral research can be seen in *The Civic Culture* (Almond & Verba 1965). This seminal work employed national individual-level surveys, like the Michigan school, but the analysis nonetheless had a heavy sociological tint, like the Columbia school.

Rather than two camps diametrically opposed to one another, the Columbia and Michigan schools are better described as having different theoretical assumptions that put these two research traditions on different tracks. Those tracks initially ran close to one another but over time they grew farther apart, especially as the individual-focused paradigm became dominant.

The emergence of the rational choice school only reinforced that the individual is the critical unit of analysis for an understanding of who participates. Rather than sociology or psychology, rational choice is grounded in economics and seeks to explain the behavior of *Homo economicus*. This creature maximizes utility by calculating personalized costs and benefits. Consequently, the rational choice school places significant theoretical weight on individuals as decision makers. Although behavioralists and rational choice scholars may not agree on much, both share an individualistic focus.

A quick tour through the prominent works in the field of political participation demonstrates the common thread of centering on individual-oriented factors to explain who participates. Verba & Nie (1972) detailed the pervasive influence of socioeconomic status (SES) on political activity. Wolfinger & Rosenstone (1980) concentrated on education as the critical aspect of SES, while also highlighting how barriers to voter registration dampen voter turnout. Rosenstone & Hansen (1993) chronicled the drop in political participation through the 1970s and 1980s, which they attributed primarily to a decline in top-down political mobilization. Verba et al. (1995) explained who participates with the "civic voluntarism" model, a three-part recipe of mobilization, psychological engagement, and civic skills. In each of these seminal works, the question of who participates is seen through an individualistic lens; the answer is individuals who have high SES, who register to vote, who receive and respond to mobilization, and who have acquired civic skills. Even Putnam's (2000) work on social capital—a theoretical concept with social networks at its core—has largely relied on the same sort of individual-level measures as the earlier participation literature.

And yet, to foreshadow the discussion below, these works all hint—some more strongly than others—at the importance of socially oriented explanations for political participation. The social dimension is clearest in Putnam's case but applies to them all. SES is inherently defined in comparison to others; voter registration rules are a feature of one's political context; mobilization often occurs through social networks; and civic skills are acquired through participation in groups such as churches and unions.

We need not rely only on "reading between the lines" of individual-centered work to see that the glowing embers of the Columbia school were never completely extinguished. Other scholars, most prominently Huckfeldt & Sprague (1995), have long put social networks at

the center of their research. This relatively small band of scholars working in the Columbia tradition have convincingly demonstrated the importance of communities, contexts, and social networks for understanding many facets of political behavior, including but not limited to political participation. The work of Huckfeldt & Sprague and their students has been influential within political science—circumstantial evidence that individual and social explanations for who participates are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive. Meanwhile, within sociology, social networks were, and are, a prominent factor explaining who participates in social movements, another important manifestation of political participation (McAdam & Paulsen 1993).

In summary, understanding the causal mechanisms underpinning individual-level factors often, perhaps always, requires attention to the ways in which individuals are connected to others.

## THE USUAL SUSPECTS

To someone unfamiliar with this intellectual history, it might seem strange that social explanations, and social networks in particular, have not been more central to the study of political participation. After all, social networks are all the rage, especially online. Increasingly, web services such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Foursquare, and Groupon connect people online in order to share random musings, resumé, restaurant reviews, local bargains, and so on. Facebook has 900 million users and is valued at tens of billions of dollars, in the same neighborhood as McDonald's. If people devote so much time and attention to online social networks, scholars are compelled to better understand the consequences for political participation. But the action is not entirely online. Offline social networks—old-fashioned face-to-face personal relationships—have also risen to the fore, although not without controversy, as an explanation for happiness, smoking, and even obesity (Christakis & Fowler 2007, 2008a,b; Lyons 2011; Noel & Nyhan 2011; Shalizi & Thomas 2011).

Scholars of political participation have not ignored the increasing attention to social networks, both on- and offline. As I detail below, political scientists have increasingly looked to networks to explain who participates. In summarizing this rapidly expanding literature, my objective is to demonstrate that individual-level and social explanations complement one another. Instead of schism, there ought to be synthesis.

Imagine that you were to consult the political science literature in order to round up the “usual suspects” known to be reliable, robust correlates of political activity in the contemporary United States (although they would certainly have the same status in other advanced, industrialized democracies as well). In statistical terms, you would be identifying a set of independent variables to include in a model to predict whether someone engages in political participation. The goal would be to maximize the amount of variance explained by the model. That is, this hypothetical model is meant to explain who participates in politics. More accurately, you want to know what characteristics differentiate those who participate from those who do not.

I am confident that anyone acquainted with the literature on political participation would agree that the list of usual suspects should include the following: education, religious attendance, political knowledge, political “conviction” (also known as “strength of preferences”), and a sense of civic duty. Note that each of these is typically measured as an individual-level characteristic. Each in itself is a highly statistically significant predictor of who participates. When put together, they provide a lot of leverage in explaining political participation. In statistical parlance, a regression model with these usual suspects produces a pretty good  $R^2$  (explained variance). Furthermore, each of these individual-level factors has an extensive theoretical literature explaining *why* it leads people to participate in politics.

If one lived in a world where social scientists only employed individual-level characteristics to explain who participates, these usual suspects would probably appear to be a complete set of

predictors. But we do not live in a world of atomized individuals. Humans are social beings, enmeshed in complex webs of social interactions and interpersonal relationships. For political participation, as for many types of human behavior, social networks matter too. In fact, we do not even have to go beyond the usual suspects to see the impact of social networks. The remainder of this article demonstrates that each one of these well-established individual-level factors known to predict political participation has a social dimension. In statistical lingo, the question is whether incorporating social networks into our “pretty good” model would increase its  $R^2$ . In qualitative terms, what, if anything, can the study of social networks add to this robust array of factors long known to have an impact on political participation?

## EDUCATION

I begin with education, widely recognized as the single most powerful factor influencing whether someone participates in politics (Converse 1972). Education is often interpreted as a measure of SES, which is a powerful correlate of political participation everywhere, but particularly in the United States. Simply put, those nearer to the top of the SES ladder are far more likely to participate in politics than those closer to the bottom. Of the various ways to measure SES—income, occupation, class—educational attainment is typically the most predictive and robust. Accordingly, virtually every statistical model of political participation includes a control for the respondent’s education level. Phrased another way, any other factor that might influence one’s propensity for participation must “survive” being in the statistical ring with the 800-pound gorilla of education.

It might seem that educational attainment is a purely individual-level characteristic. After all, individuals attend school and earn diplomas. Education is thus a hard case for what social networks can add to our understanding of political participation. Yet careful reasoning about why educational attainment has such predictive potency suggests that at least some of its impact results from how education matters within social networks.

More education means more social status. More status means a greater stake in the outcomes of the political system, a greater incentive to participate, and a louder voice in elected officials’ ears. This is where social networks come in. As argued by Nie et al. (1996), the status conferred by one’s level of education depends on the “educational environment”—education level measured at the aggregate, not individual, level. Specifically, social status is a matter of comparing your educational attainment to those around you, specifically those in your generational cohort.

[F]ormal education influences political engagement by allocating scarce social and political ranks that place citizens either closer to or further from the center of critical social and political networks that, in turn, affect levels of political engagement. The rank to which individuals are assigned is the result of the impact of education on a long train of life circumstances, including occupational prominence, voluntary associational membership, and family wealth. For political engagement, formal education works as a sorting mechanism, assigning ranks on the basis of the citizen’s *relative* educational attainment. Relative education is not the absolute number of years attained but the amount of education attained compared to those against whom the citizen competes. (Nie et al. 1996, p. 6)

Nie et al.’s book, *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America*, contains an underappreciated analysis of what they call “social network centrality” to explain the link between education and political participation. They measure centrality as familiarity with community leaders of different types. Unfortunately, the concept of social network centrality has not caught on in subsequent research, even though it is a fruitful subject for further exploration.

The “sorting” model of education explains a paradox in the study of participation: if education is the dominant factor driving political activity, then why has there not been an increase in political participation as the overall educational level in the population has risen? Sorting, essentially a theory of relative status, provides an answer. Just as price inflation means that, over time, the same income does not buy the same amount of stuff, education inflation means that, over time, the same level of education does not confer the same status. In the 1950s, a forty-year-old with a bachelor’s degree stood out from the crowd and consequently enjoyed high status. By the 2010s, a bachelor’s degree had become far more common, and so that particular credential does little to move a forty-year-old up the status ladder. However, a graduate degree still provides a status boost, comparable to the effect of a four-year degree in an earlier generation. The solution to the education paradox, then, is that although the absolute level of educational attainment has risen for society as a whole, it is the individual’s *relative* level of education that actually determines his social status and thus affects his propensity to participate in politics. A rising tide may lift all boats, but it does not change their positions relative to one another.

Perhaps the most provocative implication of Nie et al.’s argument is that education drives political participation solely through its role in determining SES, regardless of the knowledge, norms, and experience acquired in school. If their account is correct, efforts at civic education are futile.

In the wake of Nie et al., others have refined the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of relative education as a factor driving political participation, even extending the analysis to the relatively homogeneous nation of Sweden (Tenn 2005; Persson 2011). Furthermore, Campbell (2009) and Helliwell & Putnam (2007) have argued that properly accounting for relative education requires attention to the education level of the community, since education levels vary dramatically across the United States. Campbell also examines how educational sorting applies to different types of participation, since the model assumes that participation is inherently competitive. Some forms of participation do involve competition—political campaigns, for example—but others, such as membership in voluntary groups, do not. Campbell finds that when a respondent’s educational environment is defined by both age cohort and geography (e.g., the average education of 18- to 29-year-olds within a given zip code), sorting-by-education only applies to participation in election-related activities. By limiting the scope of the sorting model, Campbell’s analysis leaves open the possibility that education affects participation as more than a marker for social status. Below we will see evidence that young people learn civic norms in school, suggesting that schools can have a positive civic effect after all.

Even with these revisions to the sorting model, the fact remains that the impact of education—the most usual and individual of all the usual individual-level suspects—has a social dimension. Education acts as a status-sorting mechanism within social networks, at least for some types of participation. If social networks can illuminate the effect of educational attainment, seemingly the quintessential individual-level attribute, then perhaps they are relevant to the other usual suspects as well.

## RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE

In terms of predictive power, frequency of attending religious services is also a potent addition to any model of who participates. *Ceteris paribus*, frequent churchgoers<sup>1</sup> are more likely to engage in virtually every form of civic and political participation than nonattenders. The question, though,

<sup>1</sup>For economy of prose, “church” is used to refer to all forms of religious congregations, temples, synagogues, mosques, and so on.

is whether church attendance proxies other individual-level characteristics or instead reflects the social aspect of religiosity. Among the many possible individual-level explanations, it could be that church attenders are habitual joiners—for whatever reason, environmental or genetic, they are prone to engage in both religious and political activity. Or it could be that individual church attenders have internalized religious beliefs that encourage civic involvement. A third possibility is that church attendance, an intrinsically social activity, reflects the social networks formed among churchgoers that encourage civic involvement.

Putnam & Campbell (2010) have examined why, in the United States, churchgoers are “good citizens.” The more Americans attend religious services, the more likely they are to participate in politics and engage in other forms of collective action, such as volunteering in their community and making financial contributions to charity. Churchgoers not only participate in religious causes but also on average are more involved in secular causes than nonattenders. Drawing on a detailed panel survey, Putnam & Campbell find that social networks are the secret ingredient to explain churchgoers’ civic involvement in both religious and secular activities. More precisely, churchgoers are good citizens because of their “church friends,” social networks formed through their religious congregations. Importantly, churchgoers’ good citizen-ness cannot be explained by their general sociability. It is not the total number of their friends that matters; rather, church friends are the key. Nor can their participation be explained by their religious beliefs. Putnam & Campbell tested the impact of 25 different religious beliefs as predictors of civic involvement. None of them explains who participates. In fact, nonbelievers with many church friends (typically, spouses of believers) are more likely to be civically engaged than socially isolated believers. Furthermore, the impact of church friends does not differ across religious traditions. Although some religious traditions foster tighter social networks within their congregations than others, after accounting for those differences there are no residual differences among adherents of different religions. Synagogue friends or mosque friends appear to provide the same civic boost as friendship networks in Catholic parishes or Protestant congregations. Also, the civic significance of social networks formed through a religious community implies that the same effect could be observed in secular organizations that resemble places of worship, although whether such nonreligious organizations exist remains a matter of debate. If they do exist, they are rare. These findings only raise the further question of why church friends have the effect they do. It could be that church friends are simply more likely to extend invitations to get involved, since religious organizations are often involved in mobilizing for civic and political causes. It could also be that such invitations carry more “moral weight” when they come from a church friend than, say, a bowling teammate. The precise mechanism remains a mystery but ought to be the subject of further research. After having been largely ignored for many years, research on religion generally is currently a growth stock; the study of religiously based social networks is likely to be especially rewarding (see Djupe & Gilbert 2009 for an example).

## MOBILIZATION

Next on our list of usual suspects is mobilization. Although the term mobilization may imply a systematic, well-planned effort to recruit activists, in this context it refers to receiving a request to participate in a political activity from either an organization or an individual. Such individual-to-individual requests may or may not be part of a larger, coordinated effort.

Presumably it is noncontroversial to note that people are more likely to become involved in politics when they are asked to do so, especially if the request comes face-to-face from someone they know. However, the likelihood of being mobilized in this sense is closely related to the nature of one’s social network. The importance of church friends, to take one example, likely represents one type of mobilization.

Brady et al. (1999) have carefully examined who is mobilized—essentially, who within a given social network is asked to engage in political activity. They find that political mobilization is self-reinforcing. The people who are the most likely to be asked to participate are those who were already the most likely to participate, a process Brady et al. refer to as “rational prospecting.” Interestingly, though, further analysis by Lim (2008) indicates that although mobilizers are more effective with people they know personally, they are not more effective among close friends (strong ties) than acquaintances (weak ties) (Granovetter 1973). Recruitment for participation in protests, including activism that entails substantial risk (e.g., the Freedom Rides of 1968), appears to work differently. These invitations typically come not from friends but from people known through shared membership in a voluntary association (McAdam & Paulsen 1993). This makes sense, as the social interaction within these organizations likely reinforces commitment to a cause, or even a personal identity (e.g., environmentalist, gun-rights supporter).

The bottom line is that although we can measure mobilization at the individual level—“Were you asked to get involved?”—the likelihood of both receiving and agreeing to that request depends on the social relationships between those who are asking and answering.

The nature of mobilization is a ripe area for further research, especially in this era of online social networks. How effective are virtual networks, such as those formed through Facebook, for political mobilization? In the wake of the effective use of web-based recruiting by the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns, political campaigns are collecting proprietary data on the effectiveness of online social networks as a channel of mobilization (Issenberg 2012). Scholars should likewise make a priority of studying the mobilization potential of social networking on the internet.

## POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

Political knowledge (also known as sophistication or expertise) has long been an important theme in the study of democracy. People generally do poorly when asked factual questions pertaining to politics, a regularity that has generated debate over the competence of the electorate as a whole (Converse 1964). Not subject to debate, however, is the strong empirical connection between political knowledge and political participation (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996). Galston summarizes the empirical literature pithily: “All other things being equal, the more knowledge citizens have, the more likely they are to participate in public matters” (2001, p. 224).

Political knowledge is conceptualized as an individual-level characteristic, typically measured by giving respondents a series of factual questions to answer. Social networks become relevant when we ask where people acquire their political knowledge. One source is formal education—knowledge gained in school. But another important source is the people with whom we interact. McClurg (2006) shows that people whose social networks are populated with people who have greater political expertise are more likely to participate in politics. Likewise, Klofstad (2011, 2010, 2009, 2007) demonstrates a connection between political talk and participation. Obviously, these conclusions are subject to concern about selection bias. It could be that people who are intrinsically interested in politics seek out others who are also politically engaged, just as Harry Potter aficionados seek out fellow enthusiasts to discuss all things wizardly. McClurg (2006), relying on observational data, addresses concerns about selection bias by statistically accounting for the process by which people end up in information-rich networks, but acknowledges that “this subject requires further exploration in order to better sort out these processes” (p. 746).

Field experiments, which rely on the power of random assignment to avoid the problem of selection bias, present the most promising avenue for further exploration, but randomly assigning friends would be logistically difficult and ethically dubious. However, it is both feasible and ethical to study the effects of random assignment in institutional settings, such as college dormitories.

Klofstad (2011) conducted such a study at a university that uses a lottery to assign first-year students to their dorm roommates. He finds that, over the course of an academic year, college students who reported more political discussion with their roommates were more likely to participate in civic clubs and to vote, but not to participate in other, rarer forms of political activity.

Klofstad's research is an important step toward uncovering the causal mechanisms behind the social dimension of political participation, if only for demonstrating the opportunities available to the creative researcher. Yet this study also demonstrates the challenges inherent in such research. Ideally, Klofstad would have been able to link the data from roommates together to see whether political talk by loquacious roommate A affects the political participation of taciturn roommate B. Unfortunately, most students in his study were unwilling to disclose the address of their dorm, the critical piece of information needed to match roommates to one another. In the absence of such data, Klofstad had to rely on students' self-reports of their political talk, leaving open the question of who initiated the political conversations between roommates. Was it the respondent, which implies selection bias (the respondent was already a talker)? Or were the discussions initiated by the respondent's roommate, suggesting a true causal effect? In a similar study at a different college, Nickerson (2009) also capitalized on the random assignment of dormitory roommates and was able to match them up, presenting more convincing evidence of causation. He finds that living with someone who frequently discusses politics leads college students to engage in more political talk, even if they are otherwise politically disengaged. In contrast to Klofstad's findings, in Nickerson's study more talk did not lead to greater political interest (a precursor to political participation), perhaps indicating a limit to network effects.

Research that exploits random assignment for other purposes is extremely promising for the study of social networks generally, and more specifically the effect of exposure to people with greater political knowledge. These two studies demonstrate the potential for further research with college roommates—a social setting that has been the subject of surprisingly little political science research—but similar research could be conducted in other settings where people are assigned to live, work, or study alongside others, such as the military, businesses, and schools.

## CONVICTION

If a social network full of politically knowledgeable people leads to greater participation, does it matter whether those discussion partners share the same political views? Is it the politicization of the network that matters, or the content of the political opinions held by members of the network? Mutz (2002a,b; 2006) argues that the content does indeed matter, as exposure to political talk with which one disagrees leads to a weakening of political conviction. Although the term conviction is not often found in the literature, I use it as a synonym for the more common but clunky term "strength of preferences." Typically, conviction is measured as strength of identification with either the Democratic or Republican Party. Strong partisans are more likely to participate in politics than people who are politically ambivalent (Verba et al. 1995). No surprise here. People with strong feelings for their preferred sports team are also more likely to attend the games than are fair-weather fans.

Political conviction—or the lack thereof—does not exist in a vacuum; it is reinforced by a social network of like-minded politicians. Recall the finding that people who participate in political protest are often recruited by fellow members of a voluntary group (McAdam & Paulsen 1993, Lim 2008). Such groups are nodes where people with common worldviews come to know one another. Conversely, a network characterized by political disagreement feeds ambivalence, which dampens participation. Ambivalence is born of cross-pressures, a term from the early Columbia school studies (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948) that Mutz has recently resurrected. To be cross-pressured is to be

pulled in different political directions—to have prolife friends and prochoice friends, Republican friends and Democrat friends. When an object is subject to opposing forces, it stays still.

Put in more normatively provocative terms, Mutz argues that micro-level political diversity—cross-pressures by another name—dampens political participation. There may be other normatively positive consequences for a society composed of people living in a web of political diversity (notably, greater tolerance), but a high level of political activity is not among them. In Mutz's words, there is an "inherent tension between promoting a society with enthusiastically participative citizens and promoting one imbued with tolerance and respect for differences of opinion" (2006, p. 3).

Mutz generally draws on evidence that hearkens back to the early days of the Columbia school. In her studies, data are collected not only on the individual respondent but also on members of the respondent's social network. Using different types of evidence, other scholars have questioned whether politically heterogeneous social networks dampen political engagement. After all, political disagreement within a community generally sparks greater political engagement, whether that community is defined as a nation (Anderson & Paskeviciute 2005), county (Campbell 2006), or municipality (Oliver 2001). Local communities with greater political diversity can also enhance political interest and efficacy among adolescents during their critical period of political socialization (Gimpel et al. 2003). In conflictual communities, people feel that their interests are threatened and respond by tuning in and turning out, often helped along by political mobilization efforts (reminding us of another role played by social networks).

The apparent disagreement between Mutz and these contextual studies can be reconciled with a recognition that they rely on different types of data. Communities—or contexts—do not necessarily proxy personal social networks, the people with whom we actually interact on a regular basis. It is possible to live in a politically heterogeneous community and still have a politically homogeneous network of friends and acquaintances, or vice versa. In a classic study within an auto plant, Finifter (1974) found that the few Republican auto workers formed "Republican cocoons." As a small minority within the plant, the Republicans banded together. The disconnect between context and network would seem especially pronounced in an age of online networking, which facilitates personal connections that transcend geography and make such cocooning even easier. The point is that contexts should not be confused with networks.

If a diverse context can ignite political activity, are there conditions—contra Mutz—under which politically diverse social networks lead people to be more, not less, politically engaged? Thus far, the answer is that cross-pressures within a personal network may not always diminish participation but do not seem to increase it (Nir 2005). Huckfeldt et al. (2004) find that network heterogeneity has a null effect on voter turnout, and even though their conclusions seem to contradict Mutz, they emphasize a commonality that bears on the study of social networks. "Both sets of analyses point toward the ambivalence-producing consequences of political heterogeneity within patterns of political communication among citizens" (Huckfeldt et al. 2004, p. 90). In other words, diverse networks weaken political conviction even if the evidence is still mixed regarding whether they dampen turnout or other forms of participation.

The debate over the consequences of network heterogeneity speaks to the normative strain that runs throughout much of the participation literature. Are the twin virtues of deliberation and participation truly in tension? What are the democratic consequences of political diversity? In looser terms, can disagreement ever be agreeable, even constructive? Because these are big normative questions, they warrant further research on the relationship between social networks and political conviction. Is the dampening effect of political diversity truly causal, or are politically apathetic people just more likely to have cross-pressured social networks—whether because of selection bias, reciprocal causation, or spurious causation (Fowler et al. 2011)? Are there conditions under which political disagreement can trigger greater political involvement, perhaps because

defending a political perspective can lead to greater conviction? Here we have another case where investing in the study of people randomly assigned to one another—whether in dorms, barracks, workplaces, classrooms, or other environments—could pay big dividends. Such studies can also illuminate the situations under which political discussion occurs. Are people more likely to discuss politics in settings that they choose than in settings to which they are assigned?

## NORMS

The normative thread that runs through the political participation literature is reflected in the fact that we can speak of a social norm encouraging political activity, including but not limited to voting. Both behavioral and rational choice scholars have noted the importance of civic duty—a cultural norm that good citizens are engaged in political life—as a factor explaining who participates. Behavioral scholars have long observed that a high percentage of people believe that citizens have a duty to vote (Campbell et al. 1960). But because nearly universal acceptance makes it a virtual constant—and a constant cannot explain a variable—empirical scholars have typically glossed over civic duty as an interesting explanation for who participates.

Similarly, rational choice scholars have conceded the relevance of civic duty to explaining who participates, because without it, participation cannot be reduced to a cost-benefit calculation. The costs are simply too great and the probability of one vote swaying an election too small for voting to be “rational.” Voter turnout, according to an oft-cited article by Riker & Ordeshook (1968), can only be explained by incorporating a sense of civic duty into *Homo economicus*’s calculus of voting. People vote because they feel they ought to. Although empirically satisfying, the so-called “D” (duty) term seemingly presents a theoretical conundrum. The explanation for voting appears tautological, as it answers the question of “who votes?” with “people who feel it is their duty to vote,” which is not far from “people who like to vote.” (The same objection holds for other forms of political activity. Who participates? People who feel it is their duty to do so.) A strong sense of duty is like a taste for political activity and, as the saying goes, there is just no accounting for taste.

For years, civic duty was such a “usual suspect” that neither rational choice nor behavioral scholars paid much attention to it, considering it more a nuisance than a concept worthy of greater study. More recently, however, research on civic duty has experienced a renaissance (Campbell 2006). The decline in social capital means that civic duty is far from a constant (if it ever was), as not everyone endorses the normative value of voting, or other forms of civic engagement, to the same extent. And if civic duty varies, it need not be dismissed. Variation raises the question of why some people have a stronger sense of duty than others. Maybe we can account for this particular taste after all.

This newfound attention to civic duty is due, at least in part, to the social capital literature. As a theoretical construct, social capital refers to social networks and norms (Putnam 1993). Social norms, including a sense of civic responsibility, are “enforced” (sometime benignly, sometimes less so) within social networks. In his early work on social capital, Coleman (1988, 1990) emphasized strong ties or what he called “network closure”—everyone in a network knows everyone else—as the means by which norms are reinforced. The decline in group memberships, bowling leagues, and informal schmoozing carefully documented by Putnam (2000) has weakened the civic norms that bind communities together.

Norms can be enforced through social sanctions, which, in the case of voting or other forms of civic participation, are relatively innocuous—for example, a neighbor’s disapproving look for not turning out (Knack 1992, Knack & Kropf 1998). However, norms can also be internalized, such that people feel guilty for not voting or for failing to engage in other forms of civic activity, even in the absence of social influence within their personal network. Blais (2000, p. 104), in fact,

concludes that “an internalized sense of duty” outweighs immediate social pressure in inducing voter turnout.

In recent years, large-scale field experiments have added much to what we know about how people respond when their internalized civic norms are primed. These experiments consist of sending out postcards informing people that whether they turn out to vote is a matter of public record (a fact that many people do not know). The specific treatments vary. Some postcards explain that turnout by household members will be monitored for an academic study; others include a report of who within the household had voted in prior elections and indicate that a future mailing will report on their turnout in the present election; still other postcards contain voter turnout information for people living on the same block (Gerber et al. 2008). The results are striking, as turnout rises 4–5 percentage points for people receiving notices that their turnout is public information (a large effect by the standards of voter mobilization studies). Further experiments reveal that it is the disclosure of monitoring that drives the effect, regardless of how the surveillance is framed (Davenport 2010, Mann 2010). It apparently does not matter if the monitoring is described as helping people find their polling place or if the mailing also includes a survey of their opinions. What does matter is eliciting a sense of shame for not voting rather than pride in having voted. Reminding people of when they did not vote (inducing shame or guilt) has a stronger effect than reporting on when they did vote (pride) (Gerber et al. 2010). Likewise, telling people that the names of nonvoters will be published in the local newspaper raises turnout more than a pledge to publish the names of those who did vote (Panagopoulos 2010).

These studies affirm the power of priming the norm that citizens ought to vote. But this still leaves the question of how people learn these norms in the first place, which again brings us to social networks. Campbell (2006) finds that adolescents develop civic responsibility by attending a high school with a strong “civic climate”—a student body with a strong sense of civic duty. It is as though these adolescents are “imprinted” with an internalized sense of civic duty, as they carry it into adulthood. Put another way, young people’s social networks have an enduring impact on their political participation even as they age out of adolescence.

Closely related to the idea of social norms is that of contagion, namely that one individual’s decision to vote can “infect” others, leading them to turn out as well. That is, perhaps norms are triggered within a household or perhaps even a neighborhood. Using a field experiment with a “get out the vote” mailing as the treatment, Nickerson (2008) finds that voting is indeed contagious within households. In another field experiment, Sinclair et al. (2012) concur that voting is contagious within a household but find that it does not diffuse to other households within the same zip code.

In related work, Fowler (2005) models the possible contagion of voting, or what he calls a turnout cascade. He hypothesizes and confirms that even a modest degree of contagion can cause a chain reaction that, in turn, substantially raises aggregate voter turnout. He estimates that one person’s decision to vote can affect up to four others. Similarly, Siegel (2009) simulates the structure of social networks to see its likely effect on civic participation. Interestingly, both Fowler and Siegel independently confirm a theoretical claim that originates in the social capital literature. Civic engagement results from a mixture of strong and weak ties within a network. Too many weak ties (bridging social capital) lead to weak and ineffective norms, but if there are too many strong ties (bonding social capital), the norms do not diffuse far enough to have much impact.

Because civic norms have been largely absent from the study of political participation, this is an area where both theoreticians and empiricists have a lot of catching up to do. Although their Orwellian tone can be controversial, further field experiments on social pressure offer an auspicious research strategy. This type of experiment could see whether mailings employing social pressure

are more effective in communities with high social capital, thus testing whether social capital actually does lead to stronger civic norms.

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to make the case that a focus on individual-level factors to explain who participates is shortsighted. Although the usual suspects are typically measured as individual-level characteristics, we gain by expanding their scope to include the social networks in which those individuals are embedded. If we were constructing a statistical model, the  $R^2$  would increase substantially if we incorporated social networks into the analysis.

However, my objective is not to pick sides in a Columbia versus Michigan debate. Over the past 60 years, most research into who participates has focused on individual-level characteristics and, in doing so, has been successful in identifying many robust correlates of participation. A substantial literature has accumulated to explain why those individualistic factors have the impact they do. With such a firm foundation, the next step is to push the theoretical boundaries with greater attention to the social dimension of political participation.

If my message to individual-oriented scholars is “think social,” my message to the growing corps of network researchers is “stay relevant.” Social network scholars should be conscious of how their work contributes to answering the fundamental questions of who participates—as well as when, how, why, and to what effect. The increasing methodological sophistication of network analysis risks producing abstruse research disconnected from the realities of political activity.

Throughout this article I have noted areas where future research can be profitably directed. Online social networking tops the list. Do online networks reinforce or supplant offline networks? Do they function like offline networks or are they *sui generis*? How does information spread through online networks? Another highly promising area of research is the further use of field experiments to study civic norms. An especially powerful research design would use field experiments to study online social networks. Can norms be primed on the internet? Do norms diffuse online and, if so, how?

Although I have focused on how social networks can explain who participates, a question fundamentally about the behavior of individuals, networks themselves can also be a unit of analysis. What predicts the size, scope, and politicization of social networks, whether on- or offline? Given the rise of “big data” (Lazer et al. 2009) (mammoth datasets), the study of networks qua networks holds much promise.

In closing, I would suggest that, going forward, the most compelling research on who participates will synthesize individual and social explanations, always with an eye to the normative questions that have long motivated the study of who participates. By concentrating primarily on political participation, this review has only touched on the mushrooming social network literature within political science. Beyond political science, network research has come into the forefront of many academic disciplines, from physics to computer science to public health—with theoretical insights, methodologies, and data that pertain to politics. Fittingly, the future of network research can itself exemplify the power of networks, as political scientists connect with and learn from like-minded scholars in other academic disciplines.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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## Errata

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