POLI 100M: Political Psychology

Lecture 9: Social Networks, Political Discussion, and Social Media
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Announcements

• Final project is due Saturday, Sept. 9, 11:30am
  – Submit to Turn it In on TritonEd
  – Review the rubric and detailed assignment guidelines on TritonEd

• Office hours this week: Tuesday and Thursday 2:30-4:30. Email me if you want to meet, but can’t make it to office hours.

• I will get you feedback on your rough drafts as quickly as I can
Last Time

• Different types of polarization
  – Issue
  – Sorting
  – Affective

• Social identity theory and moral foundations theory as explanations for at least affective polarization

• Apolitical differences between liberals and conservatives
What questions do you have?
Today: Driving Questions

• How do individuals experience political discussions?
• Why and with whom do individuals discuss (or avoid discussing) politics?
• How do individuals engage with politics on social media?
• Explain some of the ways in which social networks impact political behavior

• Define the following key terms: political discussion network, name generator, homophily, homogeneous discussion network, heterogeneous discussion network, conflict avoidance, social anxiety, political discussant, echo chamber, opinion leader, political informant

• Explain how social media has (or has not) changed the way in which individuals learn about and discuss politics

• Propose ideas for how campaigns and elected officials can use social media to engage with citizens
Social Networks
the social network
Social Networks

• An organized set of people that consists of two kinds of elements: human beings and the connections between them (Christakis & Fowler 2010)
Social Networks

- Influential on lots of behaviors and attitudes
  - Health behaviors (exercise, weight, smoking, etc.)
  - Emotions (smiling/happiness is contagious)
  - Attitudes
  - Good Read: *Connected: How Your Friends’ Friends’ Friends Affect Everything You Feel, Think, and Do* (Christakis & Fowler)
    - As discussed on the Colbert Report
    - TED Talk

- Impact on *political* behaviors and attitudes too!
Political Networks

• Consists of the social network members with whom an individual discusses politics, elections, or government (Sinclair 2012)
How do we examine political networks?

• Please list the first and last names of the people with whom you have discussed politics, campaigns, elections, or government in the past three months.

• Next to each person’s name, please write the political party with which they identify
Political Networks

• Low Density: Rare for political discussion partners of one person to be socially connected to another

• Asymmetric: Individual identifies someone as a political discussant, but s/he may not reciprocate
  – Richard and Emily say that they discuss politics with Lorelai, but Lorelai doesn’t say that she discusses politics with Richard and Emily

• Small: Only 18% name four people with whom they discuss politics

• Strong Ties: mostly relatives, close friends
Political Networks: Homophily

• Homophily: the tendency of an individual to associate with similar others

• In what ways might political networks be homophilous?
Political Networks: Homophily

• Looking at partisanship, are networks homophilous?
• Homogeneous network: A political network in which discussants have the same political opinions, party identifications, etc.
• Heterogeneous network: A political network in which discussants have different political opinions, party identifications, etc.
Partisan Homophily in Political Networks

• Generally, political networks are homogeneous

• **But**, the degree of (dis)agreement in networks depends on what we do with Independents
  – If Independents are considered copartisans: ~84-90% of discussants in a network are copartisans → pretty homogeneous
  – If Independents are not considered copartisans: ~73-80% of discussants in a network are copartisans → still pretty homogeneous, but much less so
How much choice do we have over our discussants?

• Generally, we get to decide with whom we discuss politics, but our options can be constrained by:
  – Geography
  – Workplace
  – Psychological pressures
Psychological Factors

• Consistency theory
• Personality traits
  – Social Anxiety
  – Conflict Avoidance
• Physiological reactivity
Why do we care about homophily?

• Information Sharing

• Political Engagement
  – Mobilization Theory: Individuals in heterogeneous networks (exposed to disagreement) are more likely to seek information → other forms of participation
  – Ambivalence Theory: Individuals in heterogeneous networks (exposed to disagreement) experience “cross-pressure” and become ambivalent → do not participate
Can Personality Condition the Effects of Disagreement?

• Lyons et al. (2016) argue *yes*

• When exposed to disagreement...
  – Extraversion $\rightarrow$ more information seeking
  – Openness $\rightarrow$ more information seeking*
  – Agreeableness $\rightarrow$ less information seeking
Political Networks Summary

• Political Networks: the people with whom we discuss politics
• Generally measured by asking individuals to name their discussants (some limitations with this)
• Networks are generally:
  – Homogeneous (similar)
  – Small
  – Strong ties
• Personality characteristics might impact
  – The people with whom we choose to discuss politics
  – How we are affected by disagreement in our networks
Questions?
Social Media
Social Media and Politics

• What percent of social media users report often discussing, commenting, or posting about politics or government?

• What percent of all Facebook posts are political?
Echo Chambers or Diversity? Homogeneous or Heterogeneous Online Networks?
Homogenous Online Networks?

• Individuals do appear to opt in to following information sources that are consistent with their ideological beliefs

• **But**, because we are also exposed to information that our friends post, we are exposed to a lot more diverse information than you might expect

• Our online social networks have a lot more diversity than our offline social networks
Most Facebook and Twitter users' online networks contain a mix of people with a variety of political beliefs

% of Facebook/Twitter users who say that most of the people in their networks have political beliefs that are ____ to theirs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Similar</th>
<th>Different</th>
<th>Mix of beliefs</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey conducted July 12-Aug. 08, 2016. “The Political Environment on Social Media”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER
Posting offensive content is the main reason people block or remove others from their feeds because of politics

% of social media users who have ___ because of something related to politics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changed settings to see fewer posts or blocked or unfriended someone</th>
<th>Not done these things</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>39%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of that share, percent who did so because someone ...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posted something they found offensive</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posted too much political content</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posted things they disagreed with</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was abusive or harassing</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some other reason</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey conducted July 12-Aug. 08, 2016.
“The Political Environment on Social Media”
PEW RESEARCH CENTER
Highly politically engaged social media users take more active steps to curate their feeds, respond to political disagreements

% of social media users in each group who ...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Lower political engagement</th>
<th>Higher political engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Follow candidates for office or other political figures</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually respond when someone posts something about politics that they disagree with</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have blocked or unfriended someone because of politics</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have changed settings to receive fewer posts from someone because of politics</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Users with high levels of engagement are those who are registered to vote; who say they always or almost always vote; and who have volunteered or contributed money to political parties, campaigns or groups in the past year.
Source: Survey conducted July 12-Aug. 08, 2016.
“The Political Environment on Social Media”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER
What are the key advantages and disadvantages of social media’s role in communicating political information?
Social Media and Affective Polarization

Excerpts from Jaime Settle’s forthcoming *Frenemies: How Social Media Polarizes America*
Central Argument

• The defining characteristics of political communication on Facebook are uniquely suited to facilitate the psychological processes of polarization:
  – Identity recognition and reinforcement
  – Biased information processing
  – Out-group stereotyping
How do individuals learn about the political views of their social connections online?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Learned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expression of their political viewpoints (in their own words)</td>
<td>63.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of disagreement with the political viewpoints of other people (in their own words)</td>
<td>48.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments they made in response to content someone else posted</td>
<td>40.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political meme, image, or infographic they posted, shared, or liked</td>
<td>39.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media or political source they used when they posted or shared political content</td>
<td>35.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media or political source they followed or liked</td>
<td>28.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate or political organization they follow on Facebook</td>
<td>24.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image they used for their profile picture</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Social Media Summary

• Overall, very little content is political
  – Though this may be growing and it may be more memorable

• Our online networks are more politically heterogeneous than our offline networks, but...
  – Selective exposure to news sources
  – Curate our networks to be more homogeneous

• Social media is uniquely suited to facilitate affective polarization
Questions?