

## POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND SOCIAL GROUPS

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We propose questions about political attitudes in social networks—for example, “*How many of your coworkers (classmates) voted for the Republican Party in the last general election?*”—to study the political polarization associated with people’s social groups. By social groups we mean the circles of people with whom a person (in this case, a survey respondent) ordinarily interacts. Following the current literature in sociology, we distinguish three social settings: family; workplace or school; and groups or associations. By measuring the political heterogeneity of respondent’s social networks—that is, the share of people whose hold different political opinions or behaviors—we intend to contribute to two, apparently disconnected, research areas: (a) the study of social networks and interpersonal influence, and (b) the debate on the level of polarization of U.S. public opinion. We devote the next two sections to discuss these aspects. Subsequently, we introduce the questions and present our working hypothesis and data analysis strategy.

The same questions were asked in the Italian National Elections Studies 2006 Panel study, and data will be available very soon. The Italian survey provides a good test for questions wording and functioning and, moreover, it is an interesting case for comparative analysis.

### SOCIAL GROUPS AND POLITICAL HOMOGENEITY

Empirical research has greatly contributed to our understanding of interpersonal influence (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1948; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Studies of political networks have revealed the micro-dynamics of interaction between citizens, confirming lay observers’ perception that interpersonal networks tend to be homogeneous—people tend to talk to people like them (Berelson, Bernard, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954)—but also showing the persistence of disagreement in people’s networks of communication (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague, 2004). We also know that political discussions typically reinforce rather than transform actors’ preferences (Berelson, 1954; Knoke, 1991); that people that are less exposed to political confront are more susceptible to political persuasion (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948); and that political

volatility is magnified by an interpersonal network dominated by a majority that holds contrasting opinions (McPhee, 1963; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995).

Homophily in people's attitudes is induced both by social selection and interpersonal influence. Thus, social proximity and frequency of interaction usually lead to conformity; from this follows the importance of primary and secondary groups in shaping and reinforcing individuals' attitudes. In this regard, partners (spouses) show a convergence in their opinion over time (Stoker and Jennings, 2005) especially if they are interested in politics and share other relevant identities, such as class or religion (Zuckerman, Fitzgerald, and Dasović, 2005); moreover, children's political engagement resembles their parents' (Verba, Schlozman, and Burns, 2005). Of course, social influence is not limited to intimates. Individuals' opinions are also shaped by casual acquaintances and seemingly minor interactions with persons arising from diverse social contexts (Levine, 2005; Kotler-Berkowitz, 2005).

Typically, relational data collected through survey techniques focuses on 'strong ties': in this setting, the small group of persons (often one or two persons, and usually not more than five) with whom the respondent discusses important matters. Our proposal aims at gathering information about the political view of the larger social groups respondents belong to. Of course, this raises several problems of response accuracy, the most noteworthy being that people are not usually aware of the political opinions of all the people they are in touch with, but only of some of them, and such knowledge varies according to the salience of politics in certain social settings as well as to respondent's overall interest in politics. While this would be a fatal problem if we were in the business of *objectively* mapping the political view of respondents' social groups, it does not represent a real problem if one is interested (as we are) in the *perceived* level of political heterogeneity as experienced by the respondents. (Thus, for example, a person in the social network is perceived to have a particular political attitude to the extent that his or her family, friends, and acquaintances actually know about it.) Respondents' lack of knowledge with respect to the political view of others can be captured by asking "*Think of the people you work with (study with). Would you say that you know the political view of: none of them (0%), a few of them (around 10%), some of them (around 25%), . . . all of them (100%)*" and interpreted as a measure of the salience of politics for each respondent in a given social setting.

In general, our goal is to distinguish between the social categories—class, education, income, ethnicity, sex, and so forth—and social groups in which people are actually embedded.

Social categories do not measure genuine groups, but merely statistical aggregates. All Blacks share a racial identity and some common socio-economic experiences. All accountants enjoy a middle-class occupational prestige. But at the microlevel of personal interactions, individual blacks and accountants are typically embedded in quite diverse social networks. These small-scale interactions can be expected to produce different political consequences. (Knoke, 1991, p. 42)

Usually, public opinion research employs a conception of social groups as reference objects toward which people show psychological identification or attachment. This conception stands in contrast to relating individuals to groups through patterns of interdependence or interaction (Zuckerman, 2005). We think our proposal represents a parsimonious way to map some distinctive features of social groups and thus to properly

study the interplay between social groups and social categories. In the next section we discuss an instance where the analytical distinction between social categories and social groups turns out to be relevant.

#### POLITICAL POLARIZATION: PERCEPTION OR REALITY?

There has been a growing literature on the theme of social and political polarization of U.S. public over the last decade and its relation to income, religion, and other factors (DiMaggio, Evans, Bryson, 1996; Evans, 2003; Fiorina, Abrams and Pope, 2006; Baker 2005; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006). Empirical evidence seems to suggest that the polarization of public opinion did not increase in the general public, but only among certain subpopulations (see Evans' proposal for a summary). On the basis of such empirical evidence, several scholars concluded that polarization was more a perception than a reality and that such mistaken perception was due mainly to the fact that media and pundits attend to the wrong population, disproportionately focusing on political elites and party activists.

Although this holds true, there is a different way to understand the apparent conflict between perceived and real levels of polarization. In a simulation model of interpersonal influence, Baldassarri and Bearman (2006) show that "while individuals experience attitude homogeneity, the larger group in which they are embedded retains attitude heterogeneity." In fact, it might be the case that people experience social groups in which people seem to disproportionately share their same views, and thus think of the social world as polarized, while from the standpoint of an external observer, such polarization does not occur. This asymmetry is a consequence of the fact that people interact with a limited number of others and talk to far fewer about political issues important to them. This relates to the possibility, as raised by Fiorina et al. (2006), that individuals could have stable issue attitudes over time, but these views could become more correlated with partisan identification because the political parties themselves have become more polarized.

Since there is some relationship between attitudes and social background, scholars have been searching for instances of polarization between social categories, looking for differences between subgroups distinguishing people along socio-demographic lines. In this regard, evidence of polarization is scarce: with respect to age, gender, education, region, and religious affiliation we observe stability or even instances of depolarization in inter-group differences. Polarization is observed only between self-identified liberals and conservatives and party affiliated (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003; Fiorina et al., 2006).

Our working hypothesis is that political polarization might take place at the level of social groups, even though it is not evident at the level of social categories. To test this hypothesis we need to collect data on the political views of the actual circles of persons respondents interact with.

## PROPOSED SURVEY QUESTIONS

### *Family*

Think of the members of your family. Would you say that you know the political view of:

- None of them (0%)
- A few of them (around 10%)
- Some of them (around 25%)
- About half of them (around 50%)
- Many of them (around 75%)
- Most of them (around 90%)
- All of them (100%)

How many among the members of your family voted for the Republican Party in the last general election?

- None of them (0%)
- A few of them (around 10%)
- Some of them (around 25%)
- About half of them (around 50%)
- Many of them (around 75%)
- Most of them (around 90%)
- All of them (100%)

And how many of them voted for the Democratic Party?

- None of them (0%)
- A few of them (around 10%)
- Some of them (around 25%)
- About half of them (around 50%)
- Many of them (around 75%)
- Most of them (around 90%)
- All of them (100%)

How many among the members of your family did not vote in the last general election?

- None of them (0%)
- A few of them (around 10%)
- Some of them (around 25%)
- About half of them (around 50%)
- Many of them (around 75%)
- Most of them (around 90%)
- All of them (100%)

### *Work/School*

Think of the people you work with (study with). Would you say that you know the political view of:

None of them (0%)  
A few of them (around 10%)  
Some of them (around 25%)  
About half of them (around 50%)  
Many of them (around 75%)  
Most of them (around 90%)  
All of them (100%)

How many of your coworkers (classmates) voted for the Republican Party in the last general election?

None of them (0%)  
A few of them (around 10%)  
Some of them (around 25%)  
About half of them (around 50%)  
Many of them (around 75%)  
Most of them (around 90%)  
All of them (100%)

And how many of them voted for the Democratic Party?

None of them (0%)  
A few of them (around 10%)  
Some of them (around 25%)  
About half of them (around 50%)  
Many of them (around 75%)  
Most of them (around 90%)  
All of them (100%)

How many among the people you work with (study with) did not vote in the last general election?

None of them (0%)  
A few of them (around 10%)  
Some of them (around 25%)  
About half of them (around 50%)  
Many of them (around 75%)  
Most of them (around 90%)  
All of them (100%)

### *Groups and Associations*

Think of the people you see (associate with) in groups, associations, or leisure activities. Would you say that you know the political view of:

None of them (0%)  
A few of them (around 10%)  
Some of them (around 25%)  
About half of them (around 50%)  
Many of them (around 75%)  
Most of them (around 90%)  
All of them (100%)

How many of your associates voted for the Republican Party in the last general elections?

- None of them (0%)
- A few of them (around 10%)
- Some of them (around 25%)
- About half of them (around 50%)
- Many of them (around 75%)
- Most of them (around 90%)
- All of them (100%)

And how many of them voted for the Democratic Party?

- None of them (0%)
- A few of them (around 10%)
- Some of them (around 25%)
- About half of them (around 50%)
- Many of them (around 75%)
- Most of them (around 90%)
- All of them (100%)

How many among the people you associate with did not vote in the last general election?

- None of them (0%)
- A few of them (around 10%)
- Some of them (around 25%)
- About half of them (around 50%)
- Many of them (around 75%)
- Most of them (around 90%)
- All of them (100%)

#### ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

Data of this sort can be deployed for different purposes:

- 1) To describe the level of heterogeneity of respondents' social groups, differentiating between different social settings. For example, one might discover that the most homogenous setting is the family, and one can propose an account in which mechanisms of social influence prevail over processes of social selection (according to the assumption that the family is a setting in which associates can hardly be chosen). Or it might be that it is in the sphere of friendship and associational patterns that political conformity is maximized, and thus a theory should emphasize the importance of social selection mechanisms.
- 2) To build an heterogeneity index based on the level of exposure to alternative political views and relate it to respondents' attitudes and behaviors, such as their level of interest in politics, political cognition, ideological consistency, and extremism. One can then test which categories are more exposed to interpersonal influence. Are those with low interest, less informed or that hold moderate

political views more likely to conform to the political views of the social groups they belong to?

- 3) To evaluate the importance of group pressure on turnout. While we know much about individual characteristics that favor abstention, we do not know yet to what extent social groups contribute to reduce or enhance voter turnout.

In general, these data can serve descriptive purposes, as well as be modeled through more sophisticated techniques in a theory-testing vein. In particular, following Zheng, Salganik, and Gelman (2006), we would like to fit multilevel models in order to separate individual and subpopulation effects, as well as to distinguish across different social settings.

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