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POLITICAL DISAGREEMENT

The Survival of Diverse Opinions within Communication Networks

Not only is political disagreement widespread within the communication networks of ordinary citizens, but political diversity within these networks is entirely consistent with a theory of democratic politics built on the importance of individual interdependence. Contrary to commonly held theoretical expectations, the persistence of political diversity and disagreement does not imply that political interdependence is absent among citizens or that political influence is lacking. This book's analysis makes a number of contributions. The authors demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of political disagreement, even within the networks and contexts that comprise the micro-environments of democratic citizens. They show that communication and influence within dyads is autoregressive – that the consequences of dyadic interactions depend on the distribution of opinions within larger networks of communication. They argue that the autoregressive nature of political influence serves to sustain disagreement within patterns of social interaction, as it restores the broader political relevance of social communication and influence.

Robert Huckfeldt is a Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of California at Davis. His interests lie in the areas of elections, public opinion, political communication, urban politics, and, more generally, in the relationships among groups and individuals in politics.

Paul E. Johnson is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Kansas. His work includes applications of game theory, social choice theory, and complexity theory. He currently has an avid interest in the development of tools for agent-based modeling and computer simulation in the social sciences, and he is an active contributor to the development of the Swarm Simulation System.

Professor John Sprague has written on voting and elections, the history of socialist voting, voting patterns in the U.S. Supreme Court, lawyers in politics, and crime, including homicide. His academic career has been wholly at Washington University in St. Louis, where he has served as the Sidney W. Souers Professor in Political Science, as well as chair of the Department of Political Science.

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For
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Turning a question on its head sometimes ends up being a productive exercise. Arthur Conan Doyle took advantage of this fact when he led Holmes to wonder why the dog had failed to bark. For us, the original motivating question was, what are the sources and consequences of agreement and homogeneity within political communication networks? We do not apologize for the question. Quite to the contrary, we think it continues to raise important issues and yield fundamental insights regarding the nature of groups and individuals in politics.

At the same time, the structure of any question is self-limiting, as it excludes important observations that do not qualify as answers. By turning the original question on its head, we thus open up a new set of possibilities, asking, if individuals are interdependent, what are the circumstances that make it possible for disagreement to survive? We kept bumping up against this question in various settings: when we encountered empirical evidence pointing to the persistence of disagreement within the context of influential communication processes; when we studied racial polarization in politics – a situation in which political heterogeneity within racial groups *has* come close to disappearing far too often; when we realized the imperfect fit between the classic literature on small group influence and the typical contexts of political persuasion.

The result of this exercise is the recognition that persistent disagreement and diversity within communication networks does not necessarily constitute evidence of individual independence. In some contexts, heterogeneity may indeed be a consequence of individual independence. At the same time, and in other contexts, agreement *and* disagreement may *both* be understood within the context of influential patterns of political communication among citizens.

This book represents a continuing preoccupation for all three of us. We have pursued these themes individually as well as collectively for some time, and none of us has any intention of stopping any time soon.

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