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978-1-107-06887-2 - Experts, Activists, and Democratic Politics: Are Electorates Self-Educating?

T. K. Ahn, Robert Huckfeldt and John Barry Ryan

Excerpt

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## I

**Experts, activists, and self-educating electorates**

T. K. Ahn, Robert Huckfeldt, and John Barry Ryan

Leadership is a necessary phenomenon in every form of social life. Consequently it is not the task of science to inquire whether this phenomenon is good or evil, or predominantly one or the other. But there is great scientific value in the demonstration that every system of leadership is incompatible with the most essential postulates of democracy.

Robert Michels (1962:364)

Even in the most egalitarian political systems, some citizens are more equal than others. This book addresses the role of opinion leaders as primary movers within the democratic political process – as individuals who are relatively more influential within the networks of communication connecting citizens to one another. These opinion leaders are influential – their opinions matter more – not because they hold elective office, bankroll political campaigns, or serve as advisors to those in power, but rather because their opinions are weighted more heavily in the collective deliberations of democratic electorates. This weighting system is informal rather than formal, and it results from the continuing stream of social interactions that occur among citizens. These opinion leaders have no official standing – their influence emerges instead through the countless social exchanges among citizens that carry political meaning and consequence for individuals as they make up their minds and reach political judgments.

The most effective opinion leaders are both experts and activists. They are politically expert, not necessarily in the sense of an encyclopedic knowledge regarding the technical details of complex policy issues, but rather in their ability to address the contemporaneous political agenda in ways that are helpful and meaningful to others (Ahn et al. 2010). This is not to say that the information they provide is neutral, and indeed one might well question whether political information is ever value-free. Indeed, to adopt an intermediary position between two partisan camps is often acceptable to neither extreme, and is often seen as unsatisfactory by both. Moreover, very few individuals become politically expert

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out of a politically neutral fascination with politics. More typically, they are motivated to become informed due to their own involvement in the issues of the day.

Indeed, activists become opinion leaders *because* they care about politics and political issues. In many instances they care so deeply that they can hardly avoid becoming engaged with political issues and concerns. Many are like the moths who find the flame of politics and political controversy to be nearly irresistible. Their expertise is motivated by their own political engagement, and it provides them with the ability to arrive at political judgments based on their own subjectively identified interests and political evaluations, as well as the ability to communicate these judgments to others. Their activism is defined not necessarily in terms of any organizational or entrepreneurial engagement in politics, but rather in terms of political interests and commitments that are realized and activated through their communication with others.

These twin characteristics – expertise and activism – make opinion leaders pivotal in the communication process that generates public opinion and in the aggregate reality of democratic politics. Particular opinion leaders may certainly rank higher on one dimension or the other. Some experts are motivated by a fascination with politics that is really quite independent of any judgment regarding the virtue of various political alternatives. Others are complete activists who are quite innocent of well-informed, reasoned judgment guided by expertise. The influence of both extremes is likely to be politically compromised: the neutral expert by a lack of motivation and zeal, and the poorly informed activist by a lack of credibility. Again, the most successful opinion leaders demonstrate a combination of the two – knowledge of contemporary issues coupled with well-articulated preferences and goals. This combination provides both the capacity and the motivation to influence the opinions of others.

The opinion leadership they provide is an irreducible element of democratic politics for the simple reason that interdependence is an irreducible element of social life. If citizens collected and analyzed political information as independent individuals, their decisions would reflect judgments reached through independent means. Political analysts, in turn, could focus solely and wholly on what takes place between the ears of individual citizens, and they could treat the choices of individuals as being independent from one another. Indeed, analysts *do* routinely adopt the implicit or explicit assumption that individual responses to politics *can* be treated independently, but the analyses of this book call these assumptions into question.

Not only are individuals interdependent, but they communicate political information and opinions to one another, and some individuals occupy outsized, disproportionally influential roles within the process. Political communication is not an antiseptic, politically neutral information transfer, and it is not necessarily an exercise in civic enlightenment. Rather, it is an extension of the political process in which some people are more influential than others. At some times and in some circumstances, communication among citizens leads individuals

to act in ways that sustain their own beliefs and interests. Echoing Michels’ concern, however, the potential also exists for communication that leads individuals to act in ways contrary to their beliefs and interests.

HIGH HOPES AND REALISTIC CONCERNS

Political analysts and philosophers have long been divided on the normative merits of interdependence and social influence among citizens. The quotation from Michels with which we begin this chapter is motivated by his underlying concern that democracy is inevitably compromised by oligarchic tendencies arising under the guise of political leadership, even within the most democratic institutions and processes. His fears reflect Rousseau’s (1762 [see Rousseau 1994]) concern that the general will can only be realized if individuals are wholly informed regarding their own interests and act accordingly, without any influence by others. Individuals who are influenced by others, Rousseau fears, might well be led to act against their own interests, thereby obstructing the realization of the general will.

Similar concerns are addressed by students of Condorcet’s 1785 jury theorem (see Condorcet 1976). If a group is composed of actors who vote independently from one another, the odds of a majority choosing correctly (given the existence of a correct choice) increases with the size of the group and the competence of the individuals, assuming that individuals are more likely to vote correctly rather than incorrectly. There is disagreement, however, regarding the consequences of relaxing the independence assumption. One view sees interdependence as compromising the democratic optimism of the jury theorem. An alternative view suggests that deference to opinion leaders can, in some instances, improve individual and group competence (Estlund 1994).

Modern concerns regarding the effects of political communication and interdependence among political actors are reflected in the influential political economy literatures regarding “cheap talk” (Johnson 1993). The basic problem posed relates to the potential veracity of the information conveyed by self-interested individuals – that is, if someone is provided with political information and counsel, how do they know whether it speaks to their own interests and concerns or to those of the sender? To the extent that it is the latter, the value of communication in enhancing the capacity of the recipients to realize their own political aspirations is undermined. Correspondingly, to the extent that the recipients *believe* this to be the case, the value of the communication is generally diminished, as well as the recipients’ confidence in it. In short, the advice is simply cheap talk that will be disregarded by sophisticated recipients, creating a “babbling equilibrium” without any political value (Lewis 1969).

All of these concerns – the compromising effects of political leadership in democratic processes and institutions, the problematic consequences of interdependence, and the dangers of cheap talk – can be seen in terms of the role played by opinion leaders in democratic politics. Politically activated opinion leaders

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are not typically motivated by some objective vision of truth, but rather by their *own* vision – that is, opinion leaders are typically motivated to gather information and become politically expert by their own concerns, and the information they obtain often reflects their own preferences. How can it be otherwise? Hence, expertise and activism are often positively correlated – activists tend to be expert.

Moreover, the relationship between expertise and activism is likely to be mutually reinforcing. People who know more are more likely to become opinionated, and the more they know, the more opinionated they are likely to become. They are likely to ignore information that contradicts their own purposes and to embrace information that sustains their own viewpoints. Rather than a search for objectivity, the search for political information is often motivated by existing political beliefs and preferences (Lodge and Taber 2013).

While these concerns regarding the problematic effects of interdependence are legitimate, they sometimes ignore the potentially beneficial aspects of an electorate composed of interdependent individuals. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, many theorists began to adopt a more benign view of social influence and majority opinion. Durkheim's work (1984, 1951) conceives a social aggregate that takes on meaning quite apart from the individuals who compose the group, and one of his primary concerns was the disintegrating effects of modern societies on the social fabric that sustains these groups. Even though Durkheim's concerns were not explicitly political, he establishes a framework for a view which emphasizes the community as being quite separate from individualist conceptions of interests and utilities.

These early concerns persist in contemporary arguments and debates, as well as in the continuing tug of war between individualistic and corporate conceptions of politics and public opinion. As we will see, one body of literature focuses on the potential for social influence to be politically misleading. Echoing Rousseau and Michels, individuals might indeed be led astray from acting in their own interests by an informant or an advisor whose interests are actually divergent from their own (Crawford 1998). At the same time, other efforts reveal the educative potential of social influence and opinion leaders (Berelson et al. 1954; Katz 1957). In an environment where individual citizens are often woefully uninformed, a reliance on relatively well-informed opinion leaders might, under certain circumstances, lead to a better-informed electorate – and in this way, the quality of the interdependent whole might surpass the quality arising from the sum of the independent parts.

Our own argument is that opinion leadership is neither the salvation nor the ruination of democratic politics. Some patterns of interdependence produce political bandwagons and stock market bubbles (Bikhchandani et al. 1992). Others serve to enhance the level of expertise within electorates, as well as to diffuse shared interests within the boundaries of relevant political groups (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Important contingencies operate on the form and function of communication networks, and qualities of the informant relative to the person being informed constitute a crucial element in the analysis of the

information that is conveyed. Are the informant and the recipient in fundamental agreement or disagreement regarding underlying preferences and goals? Is the informant politically expert? Assuming that individuals have multiple informants, do a single informant’s views coincide with or diverge from the views communicated by other informants? Is the recipient of incoming information capable of making discriminating judgments regarding the quality of the message?

Downs (1957) argues that citizens are well advised to seek out information from individuals who are both well-informed and share their political preferences. While this prescription provides a useful baseline, it is often violated in practice, primarily because the menu of potential informants is constrained both temporally and spatially. Hence, the costs of locating the ideal political informant are not insignificant, and other priorities may compete. You might prefer an articulate Republican as an associate, but your other preference – for an associate who is keen on hiking in the Sierra – may trump that political preference, even if your hiking buddy turns out to be a liberal environmentalist.

Moreover, when we move from considerations of the individual to considerations of the whole, Downs’ ideal may not only be empirically inadequate, but prescriptively inadequate as well. By limiting social communication regarding politics to associates with shared political preferences, individuals limit their opportunities to reconsider and readdress their own fundamental assumptions and preferences. None of these complications negate the fundamental importance of political expertise. In an interdependent world where citizens obtain political information and guidance from others, a range of contingencies operate on the successful translation of individually held interests and preferences into appropriately informed political choices – and one of the most important revolves around the capacities of groups and individuals both to provide and to receive expert political counsel.

POLITICAL EXPERTISE IN THE CORRIDORS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

The concept of political expertise is typically restricted to considerations of political elites and elite decision-making – to the politicians, consultants, bureaucrats, and handlers who populate the corridors of power. While important efforts have certainly been made to introduce the role of expertise into discussions of grass-roots politics among the citizens populating the corridors of everyday life, these efforts have been notable for their failure to penetrate the dominant, enduring vision of democratic politics held among political scientists (Ahn et al. 2010).

This failure is especially striking in view of early efforts in political science and sociology that focused attention on differentiated levels of political capacity among citizens via “opinion leaders” and a “two-step flow” of communication. The earliest two-step model was a simplified rendering in which some people (the opinion leaders) paid attention to politics and the media, while other individuals (virtually everyone else) took their information and guidance from these opinion

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leaders (Lazarsfeld et al. 1968). This early model was vulnerable to criticisms of political elitism – namely, that it underestimated the capacity of individual citizens consigned to the role of followers. It was also vulnerable to criticisms that it oversimplified the communication processes in which leaders and followers were tied together in complex horizontal as well as vertical networks of relationships where, for example, leaders and followers change roles depending on the particular subject matter. These problems were addressed in later, more sophisticated treatments of opinion leaders and the two-step flow (Berelson et al. 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Katz 1957; Weimann 1982, 1991). Nevertheless, expertise and the role of expert individuals have been slow to penetrate research on voting, public opinion, political communication, and political participation.

This lack of penetration is primarily the consequence of a historical reluctance to consider citizens as interdependent actors in politics. The primary model of a voter in the empirical literature has been a socially disembodied individual whose decisions, judgments, and voting choices are based on individually held preferences, opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and identifications. This atomistic model is probably best seen as an unintentional byproduct of particular observational strategies that have been dominant in political research – most notably randomized sample surveys of large populations that divorce individuals from their social and political environments (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993, 1995). While relatively few students of politics would advocate an atomistic model on its intellectual merits, traditional methods of data collection have resulted in a *de facto* adherence to a model that separates and isolates one citizen from another in a way that is both theoretically unsatisfying and empirically inadequate.

The welcome news is that rapidly accelerating progress has taken place in alternative modes of data collection and analysis regarding communication among interdependent individuals. These alternatives include contextual studies, network studies, and experimental studies that intentionally locate one citizen relative to other citizens in both time and space, thereby generating new opportunities to revisit opinion leaders and political expertise in the context of horizontal and vertical networks that create multiple-step flows of communication and persuasion (for discussions, see Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993; Huckfeldt 2007a; Ahn et al. 2010). The moment has thus arrived to reconsider and extend the earliest conceptions of opinion leaders, communication, and interdependence within democratic electorates.

#### THE CIVIC CAPACITY OF VOTERS AND ELECTORATES

The inability of political expertise to gain traction as a useful concept in the study of politics and social communication is even more ironic in view of the historic intellectual investment that has been made in the study of political knowledge, awareness, and belief systems among citizens (Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993, 1996; Gilens 2001; Kuklinski et al. 2000; Zaller 1992). This body of work, which is typically based on large-scale national surveys and is normally

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focused on individual determinants and consequences of knowledge and beliefs, has demonstrated levels of political competence that are often disappointing. As Sniderman (1993) suggests, shocked disbelief and opposition to the earliest work ultimately gave way to a new stream of research that takes low levels of civic capacity as a given, turning instead to several important and derivative questions. If voters are so naïve, how are they able to make decisions that often seem well informed (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Lodge and Steenbergen with Brau 1995)? And, given the incapacities of individual voters, how do aggregate electorates manage to perform in a manner that appears to respond to the political environment in meaningful ways (Page and Shapiro 1992; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Sniderman 2000)?

This renewed and sharpened focus on the locus of expertise in democratic politics produced a burst of optimism regarding the capacity of citizens and electorates. Even though voters were poorly informed and lacking in encyclopedic knowledge regarding issues and candidates, many hoped they might make sound decisions and choices based on a variety of informational cues and shortcuts. More recent work calls this optimism into question. Kuklinski and Quirk (2000) and Sniderman (2000) draw attention to the failures of cognitive shortcuts in improving the quality of citizen decision-making. Lodge and Taber (2000; see also Taber and Lodge 2006) consider the limitations of human reasoning that arise when individuals must reconcile new and divergent information with their pre-existent beliefs and attitudes. Kuklinski et al. (2000) address the potential for misinformation and its implications for the capacity of electorates.

Within this context, a renewed emphasis on communication networks is potentially relevant to the distribution and diffusion of political expertise among interdependent citizens, as well as to individual and aggregate decision-making. The selection of informants, and hence the construction of networks, not only responds to the preferences of potential discussants, but also to their potential for being informative (Downs 1957). The presence or absence of bias on the part of potential informants does not necessarily reduce their information potential (Calvert 1985a), and empirical studies show that the construction of communication networks responds directly to the expertise of potential discussants. Discussion occurs more frequently with individuals who possess higher levels of interest and knowledge about politics, and it is only modestly depressed by disagreement (see Chapters 3 and 4).

As a consequence, frequently low levels of individually held knowledge are not entirely surprising, and they may be less troublesome. This is particularly the case if the political capacities of individuals are understood in a somewhat larger context. First, citizenship involves more than political knowledge, expertise, and voting. The fabric of a democratic society depends on a range of talents and contributions, supplied both through markets as well as through voluntary communal efforts, and thus productive citizenship is not simply the residue of individuals who are able and willing to read the *New York Times*. If time spent consuming and analyzing information on current affairs comes at the expense



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of these other commitments – coaching little league baseball, organizing the girl scout troop, or volunteering at the local library – it may very well be a bad bargain for the more complex and variegated fabric of not only democratic politics, but also democratic societies (Berelson et al. 1954: chapter 14).

Moreover, if many individuals do not obtain immediate benefits from consuming information on politics – if they do not place intrinsic value on political information or realize some instrumental advantage – why would we be surprised that the level of political expertise within populations is heterogeneous? At the same time, even when viewed from the vantage point of the most myopic form of individual rationality, the consumption of political information is not irrational for everyone (Fiorina 1990; Downs 1957). Some people enjoy politics more than others, and it is entirely reasonable that these people spend more time on political matters, while others are located in occupations that depend on up-to-date political knowledge. Fortunately, the consumption of political information makes perfectly good sense among *both* those who enjoy politics and public affairs *and* those who value it instrumentally.

What is the solution to the problem of heterogeneous levels of political expertise within populations? Is this heterogeneity a problem? Heterogeneous information levels are potentially mitigated through patterns of interdependence – through complex networks of political communication. The implication is that, by ignoring the relationship between interdependent citizens and varying levels of political expertise, we obscure the capacity of citizens in the aggregate, as well as incorrectly specifying models of political judgment and decision.

None of this means that interdependent citizens necessarily produce beneficial outcomes. Indeed, a politically realistic view of interdependence and social communication acknowledges the potential and reality of individuals who are misinformed by their fellow citizens – in particular, the potential that individuals are persuaded to act against their own interests. Indeed, experts are often activists – they not only invest in information related to their values and preferences, but also hold deeply felt political beliefs which provide the motivation to employ that information in an effort at convincing others. Correspondingly, the very real potential exists for people to be misled by the expert activists in their midst.

Hence, we are not arguing that interdependence among citizens ameliorates all the problems of a poorly informed electorate. Rather, our argument is that an ignorance of individual interdependence within electorates runs the risk of fundamentally misunderstanding not only the nature of citizenship, but also the central abiding strengths and weaknesses of democratic politics. In some instances, social communication allows politically naïve individuals to act as if they were experts without incurring prohibitive information costs. At other moments, social communication encourages individuals to embrace candidates and causes they would be unlikely to support if they were better informed. Hence, social communication among interdependent individuals does not always or necessarily produce an electorate of well-informed individuals capable of acting



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on the basis of their own objectively and individually defined interests. Rather, it creates an electorate in which the preferences of some individuals – the activists and experts who function as opinion leaders – play outsized roles in the collective discussions of democratic politics. In short, we will argue that political communication among citizens is best understood as an extension of the democratic political process rather than as a value-free exercise in civic education.

## EXPERTISE, KNOWLEDGE, AND SELF-EDUCATING ELECTORATES

What is the difference between knowledge and expertise? Knowledge involves an individual's ability to access relevant political information from long-term memory (Lodge and Taber 2000). In contrast, we define expertise in terms of political choices informed by subjectively defined interests, and hence the ability of an individual to act in accord with her own view of the world. Some citizens are politically knowledgeable and hence likely to be expert, and many of these individuals further enhance their levels of expertise based on communication with others. Some citizens possess modest or negligible amounts of political knowledge, but their judgments are informed through various mechanisms, including political discussion (Sniderman et al. 1991; Lodge et al. 1995; Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2000; MacKuen and Marcus 2001; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Still other citizens base their choices directly on the knowledge and expertise held by others. They act as though they are knowledgeable by imitating the choices of others in their environments, and hence their expertise is socially derived (Fowler and Smirnov 2005; Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004; Boyd and Richerson 1985). While such imitation may not necessarily produce optimal choices, it is a particularly effective strategy for individuals who are unwilling or unable to invest in individually based acquisition of information, but are able to imitate the choices of others who provide appropriate guidance.

These distinctions are important because political communication need not enhance knowledge in order to enhance expertise within the electorate. Indeed, we will argue that individuals do not necessarily become more knowledgeable simply by discussing politics with knowledgeable discussion partners, and there is little evidence to suggest that people automatically weigh the advice of politically knowledgeable informants more heavily when arriving at their own political judgments and choices (Chapter 3). Moreover, an interesting set of studies on “correct” voting (see Lau and Redlawsk's 1997 definition) produces mixed consequences for the effects that arise due to communication with experts (Sokhey and McClurg 2012; Richey 2008; Jackman and Sniderman 2006).

These observations raise a series of questions related to the selection criteria that individuals employ to construct political communication networks, the contextually based supply of experts as a constraint on these selection mechanisms, and the capacity of expert citizens to influence the communication process. Is the expertise of a potential informant relevant to the construction of communication networks? Under what circumstances is expert advice influential,

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credible, or worthwhile? What are the circumstances and consequences of political communication beyond the boundaries of proximate groups – the conditions giving rise to networks that bridge the divides between groups? What are the implications of these various mechanisms of communication and interdependence for politics in the aggregate?

Our response to these questions is framed around three propositions. First, communication networks are constructed by individual choices and opportunities for interaction that accumulate to form and re-shape patterns of communication, but these choices respond to the availability of potential discussants and their levels of expertise. Second, the messages conveyed through political communication networks are thus neither persistently nor inevitably homogeneous, and the extent of diversity varies systematically as a consequence of both individual and contextual factors. Third, varying levels of diversity, combined with the importance of expertise, carry complex dynamical implications for the diffusion of information, the self-educating properties of electorates, and self-limiting patterns of influence within aggregate populations (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004).

#### CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS ON NETWORK CONSTRUCTION

Individuals exercise choice in the construction of communication networks, but choice is constrained by supply, and the supply of discussion partners looms particularly large with respect to network composition. The supply of potential discussants is, in turn, a stochastic function of proximate populations – families, work places, places of worship, sports clubs. Moreover, individuals have multiple preferences in the construction of communication networks, and politics is only one among a long list of preferential criteria – sparkling personalities, trustworthiness, a hatred for the Yankees, and so on. Finally, extended information searches are personally and socially expensive, and hence individuals will typically build networks of association that reflect the contexts within which they reside, regardless of their own political preferences (Greer 1961; Brown 1981).

In short, the distribution of political preferences within networks – either homogeneous or heterogeneous – might arise as a consequence of environmentally imposed supply, quite independently of individual control over associational patterns (Huckfeldt 1983b; Buttice, Huckfeldt and Ryan 2008). None of this means that individuals are powerless to exercise control over the form and content of their communication networks (Finifter 1974; MacKuen 1990). To the contrary, potential methods of control over network construction are crucial to the communication process, and they constitute a primary focus of our effort.

#### CONSEQUENCES OF NETWORK DIVERSITY

A renewed focus on political diversity within communication networks is inspired by the mismatch between long-standing theory and observation. In their classic