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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

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Experts, Activists, and Democratic Politics: Are Electorates Self-Educating?

This book addresses opinion leadership in democratic politics as a process whereby individuals send and receive information through their informally based networks of political communication. The analyses are based on a series of small group experiments, conducted by the authors, which build on accumulated evidence from more than seventy years of survey data regarding political communication among interdependent actors. The various experimental designs provide an opportunity to assess the nature of the communication process, both in terms of increasing citizen expertise as well as in terms of communicating political biases.

T.K. Ahn is a professor of political science at Seoul National University. His work has been published in a number of journals, including the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, *Political Psychology*, the *Journal of Public Economics*, the *Journal of Public Economic Theory*, and the *Journal of Economy Psychology*. He has received the Paul Lazarsfeld Award from the American Political Science Association for the best paper on political communication. He received his PhD from Indiana University, Bloomington.

Robert Huckfeldt is Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Davis. He is the author or coauthor of *Politics in Context*; *Race and the Decline of Class in American Politics*; *Citizens, Politics, and Social Communication* (Cambridge); *Political Disagreement* (Cambridge); and a number of articles. He received the 1979 E.E. Schattschneider Award for the outstanding dissertation in American politics from the American Political Science Association; the 2012 Doris Graber Outstanding Book Award from the Political Communication Section of the American Political Science Association; and outstanding conference-paper awards from the Political Communication Section and the Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Section of the American Political Science Association. He received his PhD from Washington University in St. Louis.

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John Barry Ryan is an assistant professor of political science at Stony Brook University. His work has appeared in journals such as the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Political Behavior*, and *Political Communication*. He has received the Paul Lazarsfeld Award from the American Political Science Association for the best paper on political communication. He received his PhD from the University of California, Davis.

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“Against the onslaught of declarations that modern political life is isolated and anomic, this sparkling analysis of networks and experiments shows how networks of ideas and individuals connect our political activities. Ahn, Huckfeldt, and Ryan weave together network surveys and small group experiments to show how political ideas may spread in daily life as well as what structures enhance or restrict that spread. In the end, they present a very compelling vision of modern political life that encompasses politics in the current century, as well as the last half of the twentieth.”

– Michael Ward, Duke University

“This book reveals the ways in which pundits, partisans, and political activists are central to forming public opinion and to the resilience of democracy. These biased opinion leaders garner expertise in issues that interest them, and their views are channeled to citizens with little incentive to gather their own information. Anyone seeking to explain public opinion, opinion leaders, partisan bias, political activism, or political communication is going to have to tackle this book. Disputing its findings will be a herculean task. The authors marshal observational data, laboratory experiments, agent-based models, network analysis, and statistical simulations to support their central theoretical claims. The book is an excellent model of social science, using diverse methods to answer well-defined questions.”

– Rick K. Wilson, Rice University

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T. K. AHN

Seoul National University

ROBERT HUCKFELDT

University of California, Davis

JOHN BARRY RYAN

Stony Brook University



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Origins and acknowledgments

The origin and path of this project reveal the magic of serendipity. Huckfeldt taught a seminar at Indiana University in the mid-1990s on interdependence and communication among citizens – a seminar in which Ahn happened to be enrolled. In spite of Huckfeldt's best efforts at convincing him to undertake a dissertation in the area, Ahn decided instead to work with their friend and colleague, Elinor Ostrom. As a consequence, Ahn also had the opportunity to work with Jimmy Walker and Roy Gardner on the experimental analysis of strategic behavior. Ten years later, Huckfeldt happened to be giving a talk at Florida State, where Ahn was a faculty member. They began a series of discussions on translating the study of network effects on political behavior into an experimental research program. Crucially, this was during the same period that John Ryan happened to arrive as a graduate student at the University of California in Davis, where he subsequently received a doctoral dissertation improvement grant from the National Science Foundation to run a series of experiments on networks and political communication. Finally, during this same period, the project also happened to benefit from a series of related discussions and collaborations with Mayer, Mendez, Osborn, Pietryka, and Reilly – all of whom we gratefully acknowledge as the coauthors of various chapters. Viewed in the rear view mirror, this all seems like a perfectly orderly process, but retrospective judgments obscure the inherently stochastic element within all our journeys – intellectual and otherwise!

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We owe a particularly large debt of gratitude to two individuals who have been with us over the long haul as sources of motivation, inspiration, and intellectual insight. Hence, the book is dedicated to John Sprague and the memory of Elinor Ostrom.

Finally, each of us is grateful to those individuals who play crucial roles in our own lives: T.K. to Mi-young; Bob to Sharon and the other members of their family; and John to Yanna and his parents John and Jeanette Ryan.