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.

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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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Cambridge Studies in Public Opinion and Political Psychology is dedicated to furthering theoretical and empirical research on the relationship between the political system and the attitudes and actions of citizens.

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Experts, Activists, and Democratic Politics

Are Electorates Self-Educating?

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Dedicated to
John Sprague
and
the memory of
Elinor Ostrom
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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, 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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