Social Networks, Political Heterogeneity, and Interpersonal Influence. Evidence from the 2006 Italian Elections.∗

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Abstract

Relying on a new set of survey questions about political attitudes in social networks that were asked in the 2006 Italian National Election Study –i.e. How many of your coworkers voted for the Casa delle Libertà (Berlusconi’s party) in the last general election? None of them (0%); Few of them (10%) etc.–, this paper looks at the relation between exposure to more or less homogeneous family, workplace, and associational contexts and individual attitudes and political behavior.

A high number of individuals report not knowing the political view of any of the people in their social networks and, differently from what usually observed in core discussion networks, the majority of people report social contexts that are evenly split between left-wing and right-wing supporters. Moreover, the relation between knowledge and social networks homogeneity is such that the more one knows about her/is contexts, the more s/he tends to report homogeneous environments.

The political orientation of the family and associational context is related to political choice, and this relationship remains substantial even controlling for political attitudes, media exposure, and socio-demographic characteristics. Similarly, individuals with more homogeneous social contexts are more likely to take ideologically extreme positions. Exploiting the panel design, I show that interpersonal influence is at work through a mechanism of reinforcement.

∗Please, do not quote without permission. I thank Guido Legnante, Paolo Segatti and the other members of the ITANES group.
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of political preferences, while there is no evidence in support of the political
disengagement hypothesis.
1 Introduction

Since becoming a Republic in 1946 and until the collapse of its political system in 1993-94, Italy has been characterized by a quite stable political system. Moreover, for almost fifty years the same party coalition, led by the Democratic Christian party, held cabinet control and could rely on a consistent congressional majority. In the years of the First Republic, election outcomes were highly predictable, and electoral campaigns were never perceived and interpreted as real competitions. Confrontation between parties was highly ideological, and the political debate rarely revolved around actual political issues and party agendas. The territorial embeddedness of political parties, and the formation of strong geo-political subcultures largely contributed to the crystallization of party allegiances. Consequently, electoral volatility was minimal. Not surprisingly, scholars interested in Italian public opinion focused mostly on the role of party identity and ideology, and gave little attention to the study of electoral campaigns, and more generally, to mechanisms of political persuasion.

The advent of the Second Republic brought about many institutional changes. The entire party system, discredited by the widespread investigation of political corruption that invested virtually the entire political class, collapsed overnight. In the same months, citizens voted in favor of a new, quasi-majoritarian electoral law that was expected to put an end to vote-exchange practices (‘voto di scambio’) and start a new era of political accountability. New (and re-branded) parties had to cope with the novel rules which forced them to form pre-electoral alliances. Suddenly, elections became real competitions capable of determining winners and losers, political campaigns acquired real meaning, and electoral volatility increased. Pundits explained electoral outcomes pointing to the role of media in shaping public opinion, an effect inevitably emphasized by Silvio Berlusconi’s anomalous status of both political leader and media tycoon. Surprising, even in a context in which political socialization and previous political allegiances were of no guidance to voters facing a largely renovated political system, the direct effect of media exposure on voter behavior has been shown to be quite modest. Following Katz’ and Lazarsfeld’s scholarship on “the part played by people in the flow of mass communications” (subtitle to their 1955 book “Personal Influence”), in this paper I explore the role of political discussion networks and interpersonal influence in defining the political preferences of Italian citizens.

Historically, explanations of public opinion and voter behavior based on individual characteristics have been largely unsuccessful in the Italian case. With the collapse of the First Republic, and the disappearance of the traditional partisan references, even the role of ‘analytical groups’, like class, area of residence, or religiosity, is in jeopardy. To explain the formation of political allegiances in a period of political transformation, it is important to move beyond the study of social groups as reference objects toward which people show psychological identification or attachment (cfr. Zuckerman
and focus on the actual groups and patterns of interpersonal relations in which individuals are embedded. Social categories serve analytical purposes and they can be on occasion good proxies for social groups, but it is from the web of local interactions that characterize people’s social groups that social cleavages and political identities are produced and reinforced (Lipset and Rokkan 1961; Gould 1993).

In this study I look at the composition of individuals’ social networks and focus on the relation between alters’ political views and ego’s attitudes and behavior (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Berelson, Bernard, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Zuckerman 2005). Scholars working in this vein, have been mainly investigating (a) the composition and impact of ego’s core discussants network, by collecting relational data through surveys where respondents were asked about the small group of persons with whom they discuss important/political matters; and (b) the impact of contextual aspects, such as the class, ethnic or political composition of the local environment, thus interpolating individual survey data with ecological information collected at the county, provincial or other territorial level.

By relying on a new set of survey questions, I capture individuals’ social contexts at large, while retaining the specificity of actual, tangible interpersonal relations. More specifically, the research presented here focuses on the level of political homogeneity of people’s social contexts, and moves from the study of ‘strong tie’ relationships to map the broad set of relations individuals ordinarily experience in their family, work and associational contexts. The goal is to study the relation between exposure to more or less homogeneous social contexts and the strength of individual attitudes and political behavior.

2 Methodology and Data.

Empirical research has greatly contributed to our understanding of interpersonal influence (Lazarsfeld et al. 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 et al. 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 et al. 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 Dasovic 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 focus on the few persons (often up to five) with whom the respondent discusses politics or important matters, while scholars that focused on the impact of the social context at large usually rely on ecological information. Differently, through a new set of survey questions, I gathered information about the political view of the broader social groups respondents belong to, retaining the specificity of actual interpersonal relations.

Of course, this raised several problems of response accuracy, the most noteworthy being that people are not usually aware of the political opinions of all the people to which they are related, but only of some of them, and such knowledge varies according to the respondent’s overall interest in politics as well as to the salience of politics in certain social settings. 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 here) in the perceived level of political heterogeneity as experienced by the respondent. Moreover, given a substantive focus on interpersonal influence mechanisms, it is important to distinguish between conditions of potential influence—the fact of being potentially exposed, sharing time with people of a certain kind—and the factual exposure to others’ opinions and arguments. It is the latter aspect that is object of this research, since to the extent that people do not talk about politics in certain contexts, the potential influence of these contexts remains potential—or limited to subliminal influence, an aspect I do not consider any further in this paper.

A first empirical attempt at measuring this aspect was carried out in the 2006 Italian National Election Study, a two waves panel study with pre- and post-electoral face to face interviews, with a final sample size of 1377 cases (for details and descriptive findings, see ITANES 2006).1 I introduced in the post-electoral survey

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1Interviews lasted, in average, 57 and 47 minutes respectively. The pre-electoral interviews took place from the February 17 and March 21, 2006, leading to a sample of 2005 cases. The post-electoral interviews were carried out from May 1 to July 5, 2006. National elections were held on April 9-10, 2006.
a set of 9 questions oriented at capturing (a) respondents’ overall knowledge of the political views in their social contexts, and (b) the political composition of respondents’ social contexts. Questions were asked with respect to three different social contexts: family; workplace or school; and groups or associations. Respondents were presented with the following questions:

1.a 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%)

1.b How many among the members of your family voted for the House of Freedoms\(^2\) in the last general election?
   - None of them (0%)
   - A few of them [. . .]

1.c And how many of them voted for the Union\(^3\)?
   - None of them (0%)
   - A few of them [. . .]

2.a 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 [. . .]

2.b How many of your coworkers (classmates) voted for the House of Freedoms in the last general election?
   - None of them (0%)
   - A few of them [. . .]

\(^2\)The House of Freedoms (Casa delle Libertá) is the center-right party alliance, which was leaded by incumbent candidate Silvio Berlusconi.

\(^3\)The Union (l’Unione) is the center-left party alliance, leaded by front-running candidate Romano Prodi.
2.c And how many of them voted for the Union?

None of them (0%)
A few of them […]

3.a 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 […]

3.b How many of your associates voted for the House of Freedoms in the last general elections?

None of them (0%)
A few of them […]

3.c And how many of them voted for the Union?

None of them (0%)
A few of them […]

While the first question provides a measure of the salience of politics for each respondent in a given social setting, questions of the second type provide a measure of the political heterogeneity of respondent’s social networks. These questions provide measures for three variables of interest: political knowledge, political orientation, and political homogeneity. Political knowledge is used in its original form, as a 7 points scale ranging from no knowledge to complete knowledge. Political orientation captures the directionality of political discussion networks and is computed as the difference between the proportion of left-wing and the proportion of right-wing voters in the respondent’s social context. This is measured on a scale from -6 to 6, where -6 indicates a context composed exclusively by left-wing voters, 0 an evenly split context and 6 a totally right-wing context. Finally, the level of homogeneity of people’s social contexts is computed as the absolute value of context orientation. The index goes from 0, indicating a context with an even proportion of left-wing and right-wing supporters – thus maximum heterogeneity –, to 6, indicating a context entirely composed by either left-wing or right-wing voters – thus maximum homogeneity.

In my description I will often use the terms left-wing and right-wing to identify pro-Prodi and pro-Berlusconi contexts. This might sound inaccurate, but the reader

If I were to consider only cases with answers on all three contexts about half of the sample would have been dropped from the analysis, since some respondents live alone, or do not have an occupation, or do not report associative life. Differently, I assigned to these respondents a neutral value of 0. There are no substantial differences between the results here presented and those obtained for the subgroup of people that actually give an answer for all three contexts, but, of course, estimates are more stable.
Figure 1: Knowledge of alters’ political views in the A) family, B) workplace, and C) associational context.

should know that ideology and voting behavior are de facto interdependent aspects in the Italian context, and there is virtually exact correspondence between the two. This is also the reason why I would not use indicators of ideology, like, for example, the self-placement on the left-right dimension, as predictors of political behavior through the analysis.

3 Descriptive Results

1. A large number of people report not knowing the political view of any of the people in their social networks.

Histograms in Figure 1 show levels of political awareness for each social social context. Respondents show a greater awareness of alters’ political views in their family environment compared to the working and associational contexts. For instance, more than a quarter of the respondents know the political opinion of all or almost all (90%) the people in their family, while this proportion is 14% in the work context and 9% in the associational context. More striking, 18% of the respondents know the political view of none of the members of their family; 30% have no clue of their coworkers or schoolmates’ attitudes; and 40% ignore the political orientation of the people they associate with in voluntary
groups and/or leisure activities. This figure is nonetheless consistent with the 30% of people saying that they have absolutely no interest in politics and never or almost never discuss political matters. Similarly, 28% of the respondents do not know or remember which party their spouse or partner voted for.

2. Respondents’ knowledge of other people’s political views is related to their interest in politics, education and, moreover, frequency of political discussion.

This result is hardly surprising, but it is relevant for assessing the quality of these new survey questions. Linear regressions of contexts’ awareness on education, interest, and frequency of political discussion show that all three elements are related to ego’s level of knowledge of the family context, while interest in politics is not statistically significant in the work context, and education is not statistically significant in the associative context. In all contexts, the most predictive factor is the frequency of political discussion.

3. Many people report contexts that are evenly partitioned between left-wing and right-wing supporters. Nonetheless, respondents with greater awareness of alters’ political view report having more homogeneous social contexts.

A large number of people report contexts in which left-wing and right-wing voters are equally represented: 30% of respondents have a completely heteroge-
neous family context, while half or more than a half of the sample report evenly split work and associational contexts, respectively. Moreover, there is a relation between context knowledge and context homogeneity: the more one knows alters’ political views, the more s/he is likely to report (perceive/experience) politically homogeneous contexts. In all contexts, correlation coefficients between context knowledge and homogeneity are higher that .3.\(^5\) Plots in Figure 2 show the data as jittered dots along with the regression line of the level of polarization on knowledge respectively for the family, work and associational contexts. The relation holds even controlling for political interest, education and frequency of political discussion.

4. *Political views are consistent across contexts.*

Individuals that are exposed to a left-wing family environment are likely to have also left wing workmates and other acquaintances and vice versa. Correlation coefficients between different contexts are .35 for family and work, .41 for family and association and .32 for work and association.

### 3.1 Context Orientation and Voting Behavior

Virtually all the respondents reporting a completely or almost completely homogeneous family context vote according to the preferences of their relatives, and a similar tendency affects the associational context, and, to a lesser extent, the workplace. The picture becomes more nuanced when we turn to the large majority of respondents embedded in more heterogeneous social contexts. To study the relation between context orientation and political behavior, I computed several predictive models of voting behavior, in which vote is reduced to a binary choice between the two main party coalitions, the Union, which supported Romano Prodi’s candidacy, and the House of Freedoms, which supported Silvio Berlusconi’s candidacy. In Table 1 I report results for four logistic regression models in which the probability of voting for the House of Freedoms *versus* the Union is modeled as a function of the political orientation of the social contexts, controlling for socio-demographic characteristics, attitudinal variables, and other relevant proxies of voting behavior.

\[\text{in model 1 I regress voting behavior on our variables of interest, namely the political orientation of the family, workplace, and associational context. Results confirm the expected relationship between the political orientation of the context and voters’ choice. The family context is by far the most aligned with voting behavior, followed by the associational context, while the relation between workplace context and voting}\]

\[^5\text{Of course, respondents reporting not knowing anybody’s political view were dropped from the analysis.}\]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Intercept</strong></td>
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<td>.24 (.51)</td>
<td>***-2.11 (.61)</td>
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<td>***.70 (.06)</td>
<td>***.70 (.14)</td>
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<td>.09 (.06)</td>
<td>.10 (.06)</td>
<td>-.03 (.08)</td>
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<td>Associational ntw</td>
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<td>**.21 (.08)</td>
<td>*.19 (.08)</td>
<td>.05 (.13)</td>
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<td>.30 (.29)</td>
<td>-.18 (.52)</td>
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<td>North-East (white)</td>
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Table 1: Estimates from binary logistic regression models of vote (House of Freedoms versus Union) on social contexts’ political orientation, media, political attitudes, and socio-demographic characteristics.
behavior is quite weak. Model 2, adds controls for a series of background characteristics. Control variables include the most important socio-demographic predictors of voting behavior in Italy as well as other, classical socio-demographic indicators. I consider the geopolitical area, distinguishing between the ‘industrial’ North-West, ‘white’ North-East, South, and ‘red’ Center (reference category), religiosity, distinguishing between Catholics who go to Church at least once a month and non-churchgoers (reference category), class, distinguishing between bourgeoisie, middle-class, small proprietors, and working class (reference category), gender, age, and education.6

As expected, some of these variables are related to voting behavior: residents in the white area are more likely to vote for Berlusconi’s center-right alliance, as do Churchgoers, while middle-class respondents are more likely to support the center-left alliance when compared to working-class respondents (this is not a typo!). More interesting to us, controlling for these factors does not reduce the importance of patterns of interpersonal relationships: in particular, the political positions of relatives and friends remain predictive of ego’s voting behavior.

According to Lazarsfeld’s and colleagues’ theory of “two steps of communication”, interpersonal communication is expected to mediate the effect of the media. Italy has a level of media concentration unparalleled in any other Western country. Media competition is absent, and Silvio Berlusconi, the leader of the right-wing coalition, owns a large proportion of the media.7 Only a very few citizens get their political information from newspapers or the radio, while the vast majority get their news from television. In Italy, two TV networks have 95% of the share, Rai, the public service, and Mediaset, Berlusconi’s company. Not surprising, one of the greater predictors of voting behavior is the TV network that people watch. Following Legnante (2006; 2007), I built a measure of media orientation based on the exposure to different TV networks, going from a value of -3 for respondents who watch only Rai, to 3, for Mediaset viewers. The correlation between this indicator and ideological self-placement on the left-right continuum is .44. Its correlation with the orientation of the family context is .50, workplace .31, association .49.

In Model 3 I consider the role of media, adding the media orientation variable and the interaction between media orientation and family orientation to the regression model. As the results suggest, both social contexts and media orientations are positively related to voting behavior, and the two channels seem to be relatively independent: the interaction effect is null.

Finally, Model 4 includes two attitudinal variables: respondents’ evaluation of the front-running candidates and issue preferences. Leader’s evaluation is computed

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6 This is an ordinal variable (4 categories: Elementary, Middle, High School and College or more), and is used as a continuous variable in the model.

7 Recent estimates suggest that Berlusconi himself or close members of his family have direct or indirect control over 75% of the media.
as the difference in the score received by the two candidates on a 10 points scale (Berlusconi–Prodi); to measure issue preferences I combined respondents opinion on several issues, computed as a cumulative index of preferences on 6 issues. Other variables, such as the self-placement on the left-right dimension, or party identification are, in the Italian case, too close proxies of voting behavior to be included as predictors in the model.

Not surprisingly, attitudinal variables are strongly related to vote choice: leaders’ evaluation is, in absolute, the most powerful predictor of voting behavior, followed by issue preferences. The introduction of close proxies of political behavior is expected to reduce the direct impact of other variables, like context and media orientation. Indeed, this is the case with respect to the orientation of the media and the associational context, but, quite remarkably, the family context continues to have a consistent impact on voting behavior. A possible interpretation is the following: in the case of media influence, there is a process of alignment between media orientation, political attitudes and vote choice, while, with respect to the influence of the family context, the alignment with vote choice does not necessarily imply the display of coherent political attitudes. The orientation of the family context might serve as a decisional shortcut (heuristic) that reduces the complexity of the decision making without requiring a consistent political belief system. To test this hypothesis, I considered a model that estimates the effect of the social context, distinguishing between those voters who picked the party long time before from those who were still undecided during the campaign. According to this ‘heuristic’ hypothesis, the group of undecided should be more likely to rely on their social context. This hypothesis has been disconfirmed: undecided voters are less likely to be subjected to the influence of their social context.

To have a better sense of the salience of each social context, Figure 3 shows the logit function for each social context as estimated in Model 4. I fixed the socio-demographic characteristics to values representative of a ‘regular’ voter, and plot the impact of each social context, using candidate evaluations (panel A) and issue preferences (panel B) as control variables. In each plot, I used multiple lines to display the fit for different values of the control variable. For each panel, the first plot from the left refers to the family context, the second to the workplace context, and the third to the associational context.

Consider panel A. The continuous line reports the estimated curve for a woman, age 45, with a high school degree, churchgoer, who lives in the North-East area, belongs to the middle-class, has moderate issue preferences and gives the same eval-

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8This index is strongly correlated with respondents’ self-placement on the left-right dimension (Pearson’s correlation of .5)
9This is partly due to the strong personalization of the 2006 campaign.
10Results for this model are not included, but are available from the author.
Figure 3: Fitted logistic regression of the probability to vote for the House of Freedom versus the Union. Curves for the orientation of the family, workplace, and associational context, plotted (A) as a function of different evaluations of the front-running candidates and (B) as a function of different issue preferences. For each plot, the remaining input variables (Model 4 in Table xxx) are held constant at representative values.
uation to the two front-running candidates. Comparing curves across social contexts makes it easy to appreciate the substantial relevance of the family context, the smoothed role of the associational context, and the null impact of the working environment. Consider now the variation within each context due to different evaluations of the leaders. While the continuous line shows the fit in case leaders receive the same score, the segmented line refers to a subject who likes Berlusconi better by two points, while the dotted line represents her expected vote function in case she prefers Prodi by the same amount. As the curves show, in the family context curves move laterally, but slopes do not change, suggesting a substantive effect of this context even in the case people have a structured preference in favor of the leaders. Differently, in the associational context, curves are not only transposed, their slopes are also flat and never cross the .5 probability, suggesting that the associational context might have an impact only on those people whose political attitudes are moderate.

In panel B, I show similar curves for a subject whose candidates’ evaluations are the same, but varies in her issue preferences: the continuous line refers to a subject who has moderate issue preferences (at the center of the opinion spectrum: position 4 on a 1 to 7 scale), the segmented line represents a subject whose overall issue preference leans toward the right (position 6) while the dotted line is for a subject who leans toward the left (position 2). In general, the pattern observed is similar to panel A.

3.2 Context Orientation and Political Extremism.

The analysis, so far, has shown that people tend to vote according to the political orientation of their social contexts, and the more homogeneous these contexts are, the more individuals would follow the preferences of relatives and friends. This relationship is not only limited to voting behavior. People embedded in very homogeneous social contexts tend to have more extreme ideological positions compared to people that are exposed to more heterogeneous contexts.\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\)The interpretation of the data analysis in this section is based on the assumption that respondents do not differ with respect to the way in which they perceive the political views of the people to which they relate. That is to say that their level of political radicalism does not condition the understanding of their social relations in a way that systematically distorts their interpretation of other people’s viewpoints. (This is different from saying that individuals have an unbiased perception of their social contexts. People’s perception might be biased (and we know it is), but the cognitive bias is not conditional on respondent’s level of political commitment.)

The data at my disposal do not allow me to rule out the possibility that the perception of the external reality (i.e. the reported level of contexts’ homogeneity) is a consequence of respondent’s ideological radicalism. Even in this case subjects with more extremes ideological positions are expected to report contexts disproportionally more consistent with their own views. Nonetheless, I think there is some evidence against this alternative explanation. In fact, if context homogeneity
Table 2: Linear regression of political ideology (self-placement on the left-right 1-10 scale) on contexts orientation, media orientation, frequency of political discussion, and political attitudes.

Table 2 shows linear regressions of political ideology, as measured by the respondent’s self-placement on the left-right scale (a 10 points scale, where 1 is 'extreme left' and 10 'extreme right'), on the orientation of the family, work and associational contexts, controlling for some attitudinal variables and the frequency of political discussion.

Model 1 includes contextual variables and two controls, the frequency of political discussion and media orientation. In this simple model, all three contexts are related to ideology. In Model 2 I control for two attitudinal variables, leader evaluations and issue preferences. These two factors are strongly related to the level of ideological radicalism, but the impact of the family context is still valuable, from which I conclude that the relationship between social contexts homogeneity and political extremism is not a spurious one.

is simply a by product of individual’s political extremism, one would expect the level of contextual homogeneity to become non significant when attitudinal variables that are related both to ideology and social contexts are considered in the model. Results from Model 2 suggest that this is not the case.
3.3 Testing the Reinforcement and Disengagement Hypotheses.

After having documented the relationships between context orientation and vote, and between context orientation and strength of ideological commitment, it is now time to discuss the generative process(es) that bring about these relationships. In very general terms, the observed relationships might be due to three different mechanisms. The first, *interpersonal influence*, states that the exposure to alters’ political opinions might induce ego to modify his/her own political views, with the final outcome of making ego’s views more similar to those of his/her social context. The second, *structural homophily*, states that certain background characteristics affect both ego’s social network composition and political views. The observed relation between social context and political attitudes is therefore spurious, and due exclusively to background similarities. Finally, the third, *choice homophily*, states that individuals self-select into social networks which are consistent with their political preferences. Compared to the interpersonal influence mechanism, the causal relationship is reversed: according to the choice homophily mechanism, it is ego’s political view that influences the composition of ego’s social context.

Scholarly evidence suggests that all these mechanisms are somehow at work, although there is some discussion regarding their relative importance. In addition, it is usually hard to disentangle these three effects relying on observational data. In this paper I am not in the position of testing these three alternatives against each other, but the panel nature of the data at my disposal makes it possible to exclude the impact of structural and choice homophily and focus on the effects of interpersonal influence.

Specifically, pre- and post-election interviews allow us to measure short term changes in political attitudes that took place during the campaign and to relate these changes to context orientation. The working hypothesis is that dynamics of interpersonal influence might have induced individuals to align their preferences with the view of their social context. Given the short-term, marginal nature of opinion changes that occur during a campaign, I exclude that either structural or choice homophily might be responsible for such change. Structural homophily is, by definition, a long-term variable, thus badly suited to the explanation of short term variations. Choice homophily is a more contingent process, but it is difficult to imagine that individuals have changed their social contexts – especially their family or friends – over a few months period as a consequence of marginal changes in their political preferences. Individuals might become more careful in the selection of discussion partners and topics of conversation, but it is hard to believe that people would change their social networks. For these reasons I can assume that, if we were to observe any relationship between opinion change and the orientation of the social context, such change should
Table 3: Estimates of linear regression models of the change in leaders evaluation on context orientation, political attitudes, and other control variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Δ Prodi</th>
<th>Δ Berlusconi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contexts</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>*.79 (.33)</td>
<td>.60 (.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family ntw</td>
<td>-.05 (.02)</td>
<td>*.06 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace ntw</td>
<td>-.04 (.03)</td>
<td>-.02 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associational ntw</td>
<td>-.01 (.04)</td>
<td>-.01 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tv orientation</td>
<td>.01 (.04)</td>
<td>.00 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political attitudes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues</td>
<td>.08 (.06)</td>
<td>*-.14 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ Berlusconi (Prodi)</td>
<td><strong>-.08 (.03)</strong></td>
<td><strong>-.09 (.03)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political sophistication</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pol. interest</td>
<td>-.16 (.08)</td>
<td>.04 (.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pol. discussion</td>
<td>-.01 (.05)</td>
<td>.04 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td>-.10 (.07)</td>
<td>.01 (.08)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results suggest that when people change their mind about the candidates, they do so in accordance with the orientation of their family context, and this relationship remains significant even controlling for media orientation and other political attitudes. It should be noticed that Tv network exposure does not have any comparable effect. This finding supports the reinforcement hypothesis and seems to suggest that short-term modifications of individuals’ preferences have to do with patterns of interpersonal relation and influence, rather than media exposure.
heterogeneous environments has the effect of reducing the level of political engagement. Unfortunately, the only indicator of change in the level of political engagement available in both the pre- and post-election interviews is the level of interest in politics. The hypothesis in this case is that exposure to heterogeneous environments is likely to trigger disengagement, here measured as a reduction of the interest in politics during the course of the campaign. Results from a linear regression model do not offer any support to the disengagement hypothesis. The weak quality of the indicator does not allow me to draw any convincing conclusion on this topic.

4 Conclusion

The role of heterogeneous discussion networks has received new attention in recent years. Robert Huckfeldt and colleagues have convincingly documented the persistence of political disagreement in discussion networks (Huckfeldt et al. 2004; Huckfeldt, Ikeda, and Pappi 2005; Huckfeldt 2007) and provided an explanation for such persistence based on the dynamic tension between individuals’ tendency to avoid disagreement and therefore withdraw from potentially conflictual discussions, and the desire of politically engaged people to talk politics in spite of disagreement (Huckfeldt and Mendez 2008). Diana Mutz has instead argued that exposure to cross-cutting social contexts might have a negative effect on political participation (2002a; 2002b; 2006).

This paper addressed similar issues, relying on a new survey instrument that captures respondents’ social networks in their entirety, while retaining the specificity of individuals’ personal relations. Moving beyond the small circle of ‘close’ political discussants has made it possible to document large differences between voters with respect to their exposure to political discussion networks, both with respect to their level of political awareness, and the level of heterogeneity of these networks.

People with modest interest in politics and relatively little knowledge of their social contexts are likely to report very heterogeneous social contexts. Simultaneously, moderate people are also more likely to behave according to the political orientation of their social context, given their weak political preferences. Taken together, this suggests that those citizens who are at a higher risk of being influenced because of their moderate views are at the same time less exposed to political discussion and are embedded in tendentially heterogeneous political networks. As others have suggested with respect to the impact of the media (Zaller 1992), there is an inverse relation between being sensitive to interpersonal influence and the actual likelihood of being exposed to such influence. If supported by more systematic evidence, this theory might help explaining why public opinion tend to remain moderate even when party elite and political activists become more extreme (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007).
References


