***A Report on the Social Network Battery in the
1998 American National Election Study Pilot Study***

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January 2000

The 1998 Pilot Study of the American National Election Study included a very brief and economical social network battery which solicited information regarding the respondents' self identified networks of political discussion. In this report, and in the accompanying appendix, we explore the battery's analytic potential for understanding the influence of socially communicated political expertise. The ANES battery is based entirely on the perceptions of survey respondents regarding the characteristics of their identified discussants, without any validating information taken from the discussants themselves. We explore the utility of such a battery by comparing the ANES results to other studies that *do* include this validating information. The underlying question is whether it is analytically valuable to implement a social network battery based entirely on the respondent's perceptions.

The ANES name generator was designed to provide information regarding the nature of the respondents' informally constructed networks at an affordable price measured in the currency of interviewing time. In an effort to characterize the breadth and depth of communication networks, respondents were asked only to provide the first names of discussants beyond the household. Closely held relationships are typically among those offered first by respondents to network batteries (Burt 1986), and hence the three-person network battery extends its reach by eliminating household discussants.

In addition to data regarding the size of the social network outside the household, the battery provides information on respondent perceptions regarding discussant voting preferences, as well as the respondent's ease in reporting these preferences. Of particular importance to this report, the battery also provides information regarding the respondents' perceptions regarding the frequency of political discussion with their first-named discussants, as well as respondents' assessments regarding the first discussants' knowledge of politics.

Political Expertise and Networks of Communication

Downs (1957) argued that the discussion of politics is an efficient way to minimize the information costs of meaningful political engagement. Sensible people search out *well-informed* associates with *politically compatible* viewpoints from whom to obtain information on the cheap (p. 219). The ANES social network battery allows an evaluation of Downs' argument. In addition to a political name generator that supplied up to three discussants outside the respondent's immediate household (see Part A of Table 1), the battery included two questions regarding the political expertise and frequency of political discussion with the first discussant named:[1]

> *When you talk with [discussant #1] do you discuss political matters:*
> - *never*
> - *rarely*
> - *sometimes*
> - *often*
>
> *Generally speaking, how much do you think [discussant #1] knows about politics?*
> - *not much at all*
> - *an average amount*
> - *a great deal*

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[1] The name generator used in the 1998 NES Pilot was, "*From time to time, people discuss government, elections, and politics with other people. I'd like to know the people you talk with about these matters. Apart from the people in your immediate household, can you think of anyone?*" If the response was yes, the interviewer solicited the first name of the discussant, and followed up with, *"Is there anyone else you can think of?"* for up to three discussants for each respondent outside the household.

Table 1B cross-tabulates the responses to these questions, showing that respondents are more likely to discuss politics frequently with discussants whom they judge to be politically expert. As it stands, this relationship is subject to a range of problems and questions.

First, how do we know that the *perceived* expertise of the discussant has anything to do with *objectively defined* expertise? This question cannot be addressed directly based on ANES data because the pilot study does not include data taken from the discussants themselves. Rather, we employ a recent study that does include such information to examine the veracity of respondent perceptions regarding discussant expertise. This analysis, which is shown in the appendix, provides strong validation for the respondent perceptions (see appendix Table 4). The most important factors driving *perceptions* of discussant expertise are related to the *actual* levels of discussant expertise.

Second, how important is the impact of perceived expertise on discussion frequency relative to a range of alternative factors that might predict political discussion? Most importantly, if politically knowledgeable citizens are more likely to discuss politics with others who are also knowledgeable, the effect of perceived expertise may be a spurious consequence of the main respondent's own knowledge and expertise. That is, those who are politically knowledgeable may be more likely to discuss politics with everyone, regardless of perceptions regarding expertise.

We employ an ordered logit model in Table 2 to evaluate several competing explanations for the frequency of political discussion with the first-named discussant. In addition to the perceived expertise of the discussant and the actual expertise of the respondent, the model includes measures for the respondent's partisan extremity, education, age, and employment status. Finally, the model also includes a measure regarding the respondent's perceived

agreement with the discussant regarding the 1998 gubernatorial vote. Do people simply talk

more to those with whom they agree, perhaps in an effort to avoid social discomfort? And are

these perceptions of discussant expertise conditioned on agreement?

The results show that it is the perceived level of political knowledge of the first

discussant, along with the main respondent's objective level of political knowledge, that are

statistically discernible in predicting the frequency of political discussion.[2] None of the other

explanatory variables produce statistically discernible effects.

How large are the effects due to the perceived knowledge of the discussant and the actual

knowledge of the respondent? The magnitudes of both factors' effects on the predicted

probability of frequent discussion are shown in Table 3. Both factors produce substantial effects,

but the perceived expertise of the discussant is more influential in affecting discussion frequency.

(These results mirror the parallel analysis undertaken in the appendix.) Before concluding, we

turn briefly to a discussion of the lack of an effect due to perceived disagreement.

Political Discussion Networks and Perceived Disagreement

The respondents' perceptions of political agreement with their discussants do *not* produce

a discernible effect in Table 2. This is perhaps surprising on both theoretical and substantive

grounds. Both economic theory (Downs 1957) and cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957)

can be employed to produce an expectation that people would seek out agreeable associates with

whom to discuss politics. Several explanations might account for the lack of such an effect.

First, disagreement may be a rare and idiosyncratic event within these networks. Second,

Calvert (1986) has argued that political information may be more valuable if it comes from

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[2] Ideally, we would conduct these analyses with the frequency of discussion about politics and the levels of political knowledge for *all* the discussants named by the respondent. In the 1998 NES Pilot Study, we are limited to data about the first respondent named.

someone with whom the receiver disagrees. Finally, we may be underestimating the incidence of political disagreement at the same time that we are overestimating its importance as a source of cognitive dissonance (Ross et al. 1973; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1999). This is not the place for a full examination of these issues, but it is important to address the frequency of perceived political disagreement within these networks before concluding the analysis.

Disagreement regarding the gubernatorial candidates is not a rare event among the ANES respondents. Table 4A displays summary data regarding the correspondence between the respondents' reported preferences and their perceptions regarding the discussants' preferences. Levels of perceived disagreement range from 36 percent to 51 percent across the three discussants. These levels are, of course, even higher if we consider the level of political disagreement with at least one discussant. Indeed, disagreement with at least one discussant is the modal condition among the respondents.

These levels of disagreement are somewhat higher than the levels of perceived disagreement taken from a post-election national survey of respondent-discussant dyads in the 1992 presidential election. In that study (Huckfeldt et al., 1995), 70 percent of the main respondents perceived agreement within a particular dyad. If we assume the likelihood of disagreement is independent across discussants, the probability of perceived political homogeneity in a three person network drops to .34.

Several factors might account for the higher levels of disagreement in the ANES data. First, the disagreement measure is based on a gubernatorial election rather than a presidential election. Second, the ANES data does not include social relationships within the household that are likely to involve agreement. Third, the ANES data were taken before the election while the 1992 data are from a post-election study. Regardless of these relatively minor differences in

levels of disagreement, it is important to emphasize that neither the ANES pilot study nor any other study produces a picture of political homogeneity and agreement within social networks during an election campaign (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1999).

Can we trust the respondent perceptions regarding agreement and disagreement with their discussants? Several analyses have shown systematic biases in the perception of other people's political preferences, created both by: (1) the political preferences of the perceiver and (2) the social setting of the perception (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, 1999; Huckfeldt et al. 1998). The impact of these biases should not be overestimated, however. Based on the 1992 national study, Part B of Table 4 shows that 91 percent of those who actually agree with their discussants correctly recognize the discussant's preference, and 63 percent of those who actually disagree with their discussants correctly recognize the discussant's preference.

Several lessons can be taken from Table 4. First, perceived disagreement is widespread among the respondents' networks of political communication, and these levels of perceived disagreement modestly underestimate actual levels of disagreement. Second, while perceptions of disagreement are biased by the actual presence of agreement and disagreement, information regarding the size and nature of the bias is readily obtained from multiple sources. This information can be used in analyses where such information is not directly available – where we do not have interview information with the discussants. Finally, the respondent's perception regarding a discussant is, for many purposes, more important than reality. For example, if we wish to assess the impact of disagreement on the frequency of discussion, it is arguably more important to know whether the respondent *perceives* disagreement with the discussant.

Conclusion

The reality of citizenship is that individuals seldom go it alone when they engage in political activities. Preferences, choices, and levels of engagement are contingent on the location of individuals within particular social settings. The 1998 ANES Pilot Study pursued one strategy for the measurement of these settings – the incorporation of a social network battery. Our own judgment is that such a strategy yields progress even when the network battery is not supplemented with survey data taken directly from the respondents.

References

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Table 1. Network Size and Frequency of Political Discussion.

A. Number of discussant partners named by respondents using the 1998 ANES Pilot Name
Generator.

*From time to time, people discuss government, elections, and politics with other people. I'd like to
know the people you talk with about these matters. Apart from the people in your immediate household,
can you think of anyone?*

   Number of Discussants

none	195	22.0%
one	138	15.6
two	165	18.6
three	<u>387</u>	43.7
N=	885	

B. Reported frequency of political discussion by perceived political expertise of discussant
(first discussant named).

When you talk with [discussant #1] do you discuss political matters:	*Generally speaking, how much do you think [discussant #1] knows about politics?*		
	<u>not much at all</u>	<u>an average amount</u>	<u>a great deal</u>
often	9.4	21.8	49.6
sometimes	64.2	54.0	39.2
rarely	24.5	23.9	10.8
never	1.9%	0.3%	0.4%
N= (679)	53	376	250

Source: American National Election Study, 1998 Pilot.

Table 2. Perceived frequency of political discussion (with the first discussant named) by perceived political knowledge of first discussant, main respondent political knowledge, partisan extremity of main respondent, perceived political agreement of main respondent with first discussant, and socioeconomic control variables. (Ordered logit model. T-values for coefficients and standard errors for cutting point thresholds are shown in parentheses.)

	coefficient	(t-value)
perceived first discussant political knowledge	.9616	(7.434)
main respondent knowledge	.207	(4.452)
main respondent partisan extremity	.0553	(.643)
perceived agreement regarding candidate preference	-.1005	(.657)
main respondent education	-.0003	(.008)
main respondent age	-.0041	(.712)
main respondent employment status	.0298	(.162)
threshold 1	-2.6983	(s.e= .8359)
threshold 2	1.3660	(s.e.=.617)
threshold 3	3.7991	(s.e.=.6343)
N=	673	
chi^2/df/p:	81.92/7/.00	
pseudo R^2	.06	

perceived frequency of political discussion: 0=never, 1=rarely, 2=sometimes, 3=often
perceived discussant political knowledge: 1=not much at all, 2=an average amount, 3= a great deal
main respondent knowledge: sum of whether or not respondent named the Republican and Democratic gubernatorial candidates (0-2) plus four item knowledge battery (0-4), range 0-6
main respondent partisan extremity: 0=independent or non-partisan, 1=independent leaning toward Democrats or Republicans, 2=weak Republican or Democrat, 3=Strong Democrat or Republican
perceived agreement of candidate preference: 1=respondent perceives that discussant gubernatorial candidate preference is the same as theirs, 0=otherwise
main respondent education: years of school based on respondent self-report
main respondent age: age in years based on respondent self-report
main respondent employment status: 1=working now, 0=laid off, unemployed, retired, disabled, homemaker, or student

Source: American National Election Study, 1998 Pilot.

Table 3. Predicted probability of frequent ("often") political discussion with discussant, across the range of respondent knowledge and perceived discussant knowledge.

	perceived discussant knowledge	
respondent knowledge	not much at all	a great deal
lowest (0)	.04	.24
highest (6)	.14	.53

Source: Table 2 estimates. Partisan extremity is held constant at independent leaner. Perceived agreement is held constant at agree. Main respondent education is held constant at high school graduate. Main respondent age is held constant at 50 years. Employment status is held constant at currently working.

Table 4. Perceptions of Agreement and Disagreement with Discussants.

A. Frequency of Perceived Disagreement with Discussant by Discussant Named.
Source: American National Election Study, 1998 Pilot.

Respondent	*Discussant #1*	*Discussant#2*	*Discussant#3*
perceived agree	64%	49%	58%
perceived disagree	36%	51%	42%
N=	542	534	378

Source: American National Election Study, 1998 Pilot.

B. Accuracy in Perception of Discussant's Votes by Agreement and Disagreement (All
Respondent-Discussant Dyads). Source: 1992 American Cross-National Election Project.

Main Respondent Perception is:	Self Reported Votes of Discussant and Main Respondent are:	
	Same	Different
Accurate	91.0%	63.5%
Inaccurate	9.0%	36.5%
N=	346	219

Source: Cross-National Election Project, 1992 American Study; Huckfeldt et al. 1995.