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Political discussion and the role of purposive/incidental processes in network formation: experimental evidence from Italy

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Abstract

In discussing politics, people might recur to purposive strategies— namely, selecting discussants according to specific characteristics, such as political agreement or involvement. Previous literature, however, states that people are more driven in their political discussion by incidental mechanisms— namely, they do not actively select political discussants but they pick them from their everyday networks.

This article tests the expectations of the purposive hypothesis in Italy, using a randomized survey experiment in which respondents are asked to indicate the characteristics of their political/important matters' main discussant. We aim at assessing whether the characteristics of the reported discussant change according to the 'topic' to which the respondent is exposed. Our results shows that political agreement is not relevant in distinguishing political from non-political networks, providing limited evidence for purposive mechanisms. Consistent with some form of purposive mechanism, however, we show that uninvolved citizens tend to select more the discussants who are perceived as more politically involved.

Keywords: Elections, Voting behavior, Social Networks, Selection, Italy

Introduction

According to a long-standing tradition of studies (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954; Klofstad, 2007; Carlson et al., 2020), political actions are not only a matter of individual characteristics and atomistic decision-making mechanisms, but they involve discussions among people – family, colleagues, neighbors, etc. – interacting in everyday life.

Since the early works on this topic, scholars have employed surveys in order to test hypotheses about the social determinants of individuals' political behavior. In these surveys, respondents are asked to provide the characteristics of their immediate social surroundings by means of so-called 'name generator' batteries (Huckfeldt and Mendez, 2008; Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe, 2009; Minozzi et al., 2020). Respondents are asked to report information on one or more discussants with whom they talk about 'politics' or, more generally, 'important matters'. Further, they are invited to describe these people's characteristics (such as, for instance, intimacy with the respondent, gender, perceived political interest or knowledge, perceived voting behavior and turnout, etc.). One of the methodological issues related to this data-collection procedure concerns the nature of the stimulus used in the question to identify the discussant (Huckfeldt and Mendez, 2008; Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe, 2009). Does asking for 'political' or 'important-matters' discussants produce different answers or, conversely, do the two name-generation procedures lead to discussants with similar characteristics?

In addition to the methodological relevance of this issue, which is mainly related to the consistency of survey results according to different question wordings, the topic is relevant also at the theoretical level: comparing discussants about political and important matters means also investigating the paths by which people choose to discuss with their relevant others. By using the most recent jargon that emerged in the literature, talking about politics might be driven by *purposive* or *incidental mechanisms* (Minozzi et al., 2020). In other words, when talking about politics, people might select specific discussants according to their political characteristics (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954; Downs, 1957; Walsh, 2004; Matthes et al., 2021), or, rather, it might be that people talk only incidentally about politics, namely, with those

discussants who are available to talk, without engaging in the selection of specific discussants (Klofstad, McClurg and Rolfe, 2009; Minozzi et al., 2020).

The idea of purposive mechanisms is strictly connected with the concept of political selection/homophily, which has been widely discussed in recent debates on political networks (Fowler et al., 2011; Lazer, 2011; Lomi et al., 2011; Noel and Nyhan, 2011; Rogowski and Sinclair, 2012; Bello and Rolfe, 2014; Carlson et al., 2020). According to this theoretical approach, people maintain (or discard) discussants according to some of their characteristics and are expected to take an active role in selecting them. The debate around political homophily, however, stresses that people might tend to select their political discussants mainly by evaluating their political preferences (with agreeable people being more likely to be their political discussants than disagreeable ones). The expectations arising from the purposive explanations, instead, might be broader: people may select their discussants according to more than just political preferences, by also considering, for instance, political involvement. Following the Downsian theory (Downs, 1957), we can imagine that voters, depicted as rational self-interested agents who seek to maximize their utility, realize that acquiring political information represents a cost that can be minimized by relying on more involved discussants. In addition, people's individual characteristics can affect the ways in which they select discussants in their networks. Indeed, the lower the level of their political involvement, the more they might be driven to seek more involved discussants in order to minimize the efforts in acquiring political information (Downs, 1957).

Early studies aiming to identify evidence for purposive/incidental processes in discussion networks (see Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe, 2009) limit their analyses to comparing the main characteristics (such as size, the discussants' perceived expertise, agreement, and the social circles to which discussants belong) of discussants connected with the 'politics' and the 'important-matters' name-generator procedures. These studies find no significant differences between these two stimuli. However, these works present issues regarding the generalizability of the results: first of all, the experimental evidence of the incidental mechanisms has been provided by using data collected from a rather small sample in relatively small American

counties (Klofstad et al., 2009). Second, virtually all the research on this debate has been conducted on American data (Hopmann, 2012; Minozzi et al., 2020; Mancosu and Vezzoni, 2018).

The present article aims to test the purposive/incidental hypotheses by introducing an experimental design applied to a mass survey spread across the Italian territory, a context that has been rarely taken into account in these studies (for a few exceptions, see, for instance, Campus, Pasquino, and Vaccari, 2008). A second element of novelty concerns the theoretical strategy of the paper. We will test additional hypotheses which have been taken into little consideration in the previous literature. More precisely, we will test whether the levels of respondents' political involvement moderates the likelihood of engaging in purposive strategies.

By using a survey experiment, we ask information about respondents' main discussant (namely, the individual with which they discuss more). More specifically, we ask to report information about the political/important matters discussant – with this characteristic experimentally manipulated, similarly to the design developed by Klofstad and colleagues (2009).

Consistent with previous literature, we report limited evidence of the purposive hypothesis, showing that, overall, people tend to talk about politics with their main discussant by means of incidental processes. However, we find that people who are less involved in politics are more likely to indicate discussants who are perceived as more involved (although the effects are quite small). This might suggest that, in specific situations, people might limitedly engage in purposive processes.

Purposive processes in political discussion networks

As Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe (2009) point out, studies that underline the importance of the so-called “social logic of politics” (Shapiro et al., 2020) outline two different mechanisms of discussion networks' formation. The first relies on “incidental” processes, a theoretical argument stating that most people do not perceive politics as a “special” topic, needing precise skills to be discussed. For this reason, people might form their political networks “naturally”, by sampling

discussants from the available pool of potential discussants with whom they interact in everyday life. As an empirical result, the political discussants are also those with which one talks about relevant matters in their everyday life – such as where to go on vacation, which car to buy, or the right primary school for the children. Various studies carried out on American public opinion have shown that apparently people do not specialize their political discussion networks, maintaining their political discussions inside the social groups that they encounter in their everyday lives (Huckfeldt et al. 1998; Huckfeldt and Mendez, 2008; Lee and Bearman, 2020). Another theoretical approach postulates that, for a given number of social circles in which one is embedded, discussions and interactions with these subsets of one's ego-networks are more or less strictly related to the topic of discussion (Mutz, 2002; Klofstad, McClurg and Rolfe, 2009; Matthes et al., 2020).

It is important to stress that these particular sections of the networks are spontaneously formed in many fields of people's everyday lives (Wellman and Wortley, 1990; Minozzi et al., 2020). According to a classic argument, which is compatible with the purposive interpretation of political discussion (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954; Downs, 1957), people tend to talk about specific topics with discussants who are (or are perceived to be) experts on those topics. For example, if one is sick and has the possibility of asking the opinion of a friend who is an accountant and another friend who is a doctor, they will tend to ask the latter. In our case, we can expect that specialists in politics are politically involved/sophisticated people, i.e. people possessing a larger amount of political information, and able to structure it in an ordered fashion (Zaller, 1992).

Moreover, according to this same theoretical approach, people would be more likely to interact with discussants with whom they share common attributes and attitudes (Minozzi et al., 2020). People might purposively discuss with a special sub-section of their network because of their tendency to avoid disagreement (e.g. Festinger 1962, Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague, 2004). Therefore, there may be more prone to discard disagreeable discussants and maintain a relationship with like-minded ones (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954; Noel and Nyhan, 2011; Hutchens et al., 2019). It makes sense to expect that

disagreement can lead to uncomfortable situations in which people are forced to defend themselves against political ‘attacks’ by others, a situation that could lead the former to stop interacting with the latter (Noel and Nyhan, 2011; Bello and Rolfe, 2014). This mechanism does not undermine the relations among people in every dimension of their social lives. “Selection of political discussants does not necessarily mean ending pre-existing relationships or befriending all Liberal Democrats that one meets; it can be as simple as choosing to sit at the opposite end of the table from politically conservative Aunt Edna at family gatherings” (Bello and Rolfe, 2014, 135). People, thus, might stop perceiving certain disagreeable others as political discussants or, more rarely, as discussants *tout court*.

Another element that has been debated in the literature is represented by the relationship between the cohesiveness of interpersonal relationships and politics intended as a “special topic”. We know from the literature that discussants can play different roles in respondents’ everyday lives. Indeed, someone can be perceived as a ‘strong tie’, a member of a cohesive social group – usually partners/spouses or relatives (Granovetter, 1973, Huckfeldt et al., 1995; Mollenhorst, Volker and Flap, 2008; Carlson et al., 2020; Matthes et al., 2021; Ladini et al., 2020). Other discussants, on the contrary, belong to networks that lie outside this cohesive social sphere: friends, neighbors or colleagues are more likely to be ‘less intimate’ discussants with respect to family members or partners. The literature shows that the former type of discussants (composed of strong ties) constitutes a network of trusted intimates that are usually the first to be taken into consideration when something important happens in one’s life (Burt, 1987; Huckfeldt et al., 1995; Brewer, 2000; Lee and Bearman, 2020; Cowan and Baldassarri, 2018). If politics represents a “special” topic, however, an individual will be motivated to seek people who have specific characteristics (involvement, like-mindedness) that might be probabilistically less diffused in their circles of intimate discussants. As a result, we might argue that, if purposive mechanisms of political discussion are really in action, the discussants in this specialized network will share *lower* levels of intimacy with the respondent (Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe, 2009).

The role of political involvement

We have stressed that, according to the purposive framework, people will be more likely to seek involved, agreeable, and, as a result, non-intimate discussants to talk about politics. The literature on political discussion (Downs, 1957; Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe, 2009), however, presents additional hypotheses. In particular, the theory postulates that one's level of *political sophistication* – namely, one's degree of involvement in political matters – may be an important intervening variable in the process of selecting one's political network.

As stressed above, people are in general not particularly interested in politics: obtaining political information is an expensive operation that requires additional efforts, especially when people are unaware of political issues (Downs, 1957; Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe, 2009). Therefore, it is fully rational for politically unsophisticated individuals to reduce these costs by obtaining information from personal relations with more sophisticated people (Downs, 1957; Hopmann et al., 2020).

The purposive approach states that seeking a political discussant with specific characteristics (such as political sophistication) could lead people outside the boundaries of cohesive circles. For a politically uninvolved person, thus, the process of finding sophisticated discussants is expected to depend even less on the intimacy structure of their network. Seeking an involved/agreeable discussant can make an uninvolved person look outside their sub-network of intimate discussants more stubbornly with respect to a politically sophisticated individual for whom social contacts with involved people are less important to gather the requested information.

Experimental design

Our experimental design is aimed at providing evidence for purposive/incidental processes in the selection of the main discussant. As stressed above, the most straightforward way to provide this evidence is to design an experiment aimed at 'forcing' the respondent to

think of a ‘strictly political’ or a ‘relevant matters’ discussant (Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe, 2009). The design is based on a set of questions asking information about people’s so-called main discussant. The main discussant usually has characteristics that differ from the remaining discussants. First, it is more likely that the main discussant belongs to an intimate social circle, such as the circle of relatives (Huckfeldt et al., 1995; Mancosu, 2019; Mancosu and Vezzoni, 2017). Second, they usually present higher levels of agreement with the respondent. It is important to underline that the main discussant concept does not necessarily overlap with an intimate relationship. The main discussant can be picked from non-cohesive social groups (Huckfeldt et al., 1995; Mutz and Mondak, 2006; Nieuwbeerta and Flap, 2000) and, at the same time, the respondent may not consider intimate discussants as political discussants.

Our experimental design compares the ‘politics’ and ‘important matters’ name generators, by manipulating randomly the two stimuli to the respondents. Given the theoretical arguments explained above, it seems reasonable to define the ‘politics’ wording as the ‘treatment’ in our experiment and the ‘important-matters’ wording as a ‘control’.

The experiment, which is based on the ITANES 2013 CAWI study (see below), is designed as follows. A randomized half of the sample (1409 valid cases) is asked to report the social circle to which the person who they talked the most *about politics* belongs. The other randomized half of the sample is asked to specify the social circle of the discussants about *important matters* (1471 valid cases, see Appendix 1 for the complete wording of the questions). The social circles to which the main discussant might belong are 1) ‘Partner/spouse’ 2) ‘Another relative’ 3) ‘Friend’ 4) ‘Colleague’ 5) ‘Neighbour’ or 6) ‘Another person.’ The respondents are then asked to report their perceptions of this person’s interest in politics – a measure of perceived political involvement – on a 4-point scale (from ‘Not at all interested’ to ‘Very interested’). In this case, interest is intended as a measure of the discussant’s perceived political sophistication (Zaller, 1992). Finally, respondents are asked about the discussant’s turnout and/or the party he voted for in the 2013 election.

The experimental stimulus is exclusively contained in the question about intimacy between the respondent and her discussant. The other questions concerning the main

discussant's vote choice and perceived knowledge explicitly refer to the same individual that has been cited by the respondent in the answer to the first question.

Hypotheses

As stressed above, the literature states that the presence of purposive strategies can be found by comparing 'important-matters' discussant with a proper 'political discussant'. Finding meaningful differences between the two name generators means that, when exposed to the political name generator, people think of different discussants, an indirect proof of the fact that they are driven toward discussants with specific characteristics, rather than picking randomly discussants from the available network. Consistent with the literature provided above, thus, we might hypothesize that, if the purposive mechanisms hold, *political matters discussants will be more involved in politics with respect to important-matters ones (Hp1)*. Further, we might hypothesize that *respondents will be more in political agreement with political discussants with respect to important-matters ones (Hp2)*. Finally, we expect that *political discussants will be less intimate than important-matters ones (Hp3)*, given the process of active selection of the discussants operated by individuals and postulated by the purposive processes.

A possible role of political sophistication as an individual moderator of the purposive approach has been also argued. With this respect, we have imagined that the process to seek for more politically sophisticated individuals (also outside the usual cohesive social circles) would be more urgent for uninvolved individuals. In this way, uninvolved people would drastically reduce the costs of being up-to-date with political facts. We will thus argue that *political matters discussants will be more involved in politics with respect to important matters' ones, especially when the respondents are uninvolved in politics (Hp4)* in order to minimize the costs of obtaining political information autonomously. Also, *political discussants will be less intimate than important-matters ones, especially when the respondents are uninvolved in politics (Hp5)*.

It must be stressed that our hypothesis will be tested in Italy, while almost all datasets

available to test these assumptions were collected in the American context, with few exceptions (Huckfeldt, Ikeda, Pappi, 2005; Faas and Schmitt-Beck, 2010; Eveland et al., 2015; Mancosu, 2016). As Hopmann (2012, p. 266) states, “most studies on the effects of political heterogeneity in personal communication networks are of American origin”. Italy has a completely different institutional setting compared to the United States, sharing nearly nothing in terms of historical backgrounds, party systems, political participation, or mechanisms of democratic accountability. If the empirical evidence is similar to the US, then, results should be consistent in different political and geographical contexts.

Data, variables, and method

The data come from the 2013 Italian National Election Study (ITANES) CAWI post-election survey and allow us to directly compare the two name-generator procedures. The interviews for this survey were conducted as computer-assisted web interviews between 27 March and 8 April, i.e. about a month after the 2013 election ($n = 3,007$).

In the survey, respondents were asked about the level of their political interest (a measure of their political involvement, from ‘Not interested at all’ to ‘Very interested’), whether they had voted or not in the 2013 national election, and if so for which party. Our analyses, therefore, involve the following variables: in addition to the level of respondents' political interest, from the experiment, we obtain the treatment variable (if the respondent was asked about a politics or important-matters discussant); the discussant's perceived level of political interest; the degree of respondent-discussant intimacy; and the main discussant's (perceived) vote choice. From the combination of the respondent's and the discussant's (perceived) vote choice, we derive a dichotomous measure of perceived political agreement or disagreement, with the same vote choice coded as agreement and different vote choices coded as disagreement. There are a few missing data on perceived interest and intimacy, with 2,854 and 2,880 cases respectively for the bivariate analyses and 2,830 and 2,848 cases for the multivariate analyses. Given the higher number of missing cases for these two variables, the sample sizes in the agreement-related

analyses dropped to 2,090 and 2,085 valid cases (in order to maximize the number of cases, we also include people and discussants who declared they had not voted in the election; additional analyses, only respondents/discussants who voted, lead to substantially identical results). Dealing with a survey experimental design allows us to easily test our hypotheses without having to control for confounders. In this respect, the main way of testing our hypotheses will be based on two- and three-way tables - an additional analysis, based on log-linear models, analyzes the individual partial association in which the experimental effect is located (see Appendix 2), the results that follow employ also these pieces of information. The testing strategy is designed as follows. In the first place, a chi-squared test is used to explore the associations between the experimental treatment (the 'political' or 'important matters' discussant dichotomous variable) and the perceived interest, agreement, and intimacy variables. This is to test the first three hypotheses presented above. Second, the association between the treatment and the variables is stratified by the respondent's perceived level of political interest. We assess whether non-interested people present more pronounced differences with respect to interested ones when they indicate they have more politically involved political discussants. Finally, we test whether non-interested people are more willing to choose political discussants outside their intimate circle with respect to non-interested ones.

Results

The experimental effect of the name generator on interest, agreement, and intimacy

Table 1 shows the results of the experiment for the first three theoretical expectations made above.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Perceived interest. The modal category of the discussant's perceived level of political interest variable is the 'Somewhat' interested one; very few respondents report that they have a discussant who is not interested in politics at all. In the whole sample, about a quarter of the political discussants are perceived to be very interested in politics (although for parsimony reasons the univariate distribution of our dependent variables does not appear directly in Table 1, it is possible to infer it given that the experimental randomization divides the distribution into two halves; thus, a simple unweighted average of the two conditional distributions leads to a good approximation of the univariate distribution of the variable). Table 1 (top panel) reports the distribution of the main discussant's level of political interest by the experimental treatment. People who are asked to report an important-matters discussant tend to over-report individuals who are not interested in political topics. On the contrary, people exposed to the political discussant treatment seem to avoid uninvolved discussants. Indeed, it seems that there is a very weak treatment effect in the 'Not at all interested' category. The chi-squared for the table is significant at the 10% level (p-value 0.07). Our first hypothesis is thus not fully corroborated by the data, pointing thus at incidental mechanisms of main discussant's selection.

Voting agreement. Table 1 (middle panel) shows the percentage of respondent-discussant dyads who made the same vote choice in the 2013 Italian national election by type of treatment. The level of perceived agreement between these respondents and discussants is quite high. More than 60% of the respondents think that their main discussant voted for the same party that they voted for. The experimental design does not affect this result. In other words, the level of agreement is the same in both the experimental conditions (the chi-squared test for the table is not significant). Therefore, it seems that Hypothesis 2 is not corroborated.

Intimacy. About 60% of the sample have a relative or spouse as their main discussant. Friends and acquaintances (i.e. colleagues, neighbors, and other discussants) are cited by around 20% of the respondents. Table 1 (bottom panel) reports the distribution of the circles to which the main discussants belong, stratified by treatment. The table shows that partners are slightly

under-represented and colleagues are over-represented in the ‘political’ treatment condition. The chi-squared test for the table shows a significant association (chi-squared with 5 d.f. equal to 14.04 and p-value equal to 0.02). If we consider colleagues as arguably part of a non-intimate circle, the result is consistent with Hypothesis 3: people who seek political discussants are more likely to find them in non-intimate social circles. However, we have to stress that the differences are quite small in terms of magnitude (the experimental differences can be estimated at around 5 percentage points).

The moderating effect of individual involvement

We have previously argued that individuals’ level of political involvement may moderate their capacity to select political discussants. Less involved individuals should seek (perceived) more sophisticated people (even among less cohesive social groups) to balance their lack of political information. Among the variables that could measure this individual characteristic, the political interest variable is selected as it is an adequately valid measure of political involvement (Zaller, 1992, Meyer and Shultze, 2019). This section expands the bivariate tables presented above by adding the respondent's political interest variable. To allow readability of the tables and avoid sparseness (i.e. almost empty cells), it has been decided to recode the variable into two categories: respondents who answered ‘Very much’ and ‘Somewhat interested’ have been recoded as ‘Interested’ while ‘Not so much’ and ‘Not at all interested’ have been recoded as ‘Not interested.’

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Perceived interest. Politically interested respondents tend to report that their discussants are much more involved in politics. More than 90% of these respondents indicate a ‘Very much’ or a ‘Somewhat’ interested discussant. The percentage drops to around 50% when non-politically-interested respondents are considered. Table 2 (top panel) shows the multivariate

association between the treatment and the discussants' and respondents' levels of interest. The bivariate association between treatment and perceived interest is only significant among the non-interested respondents. In particular, somewhat interested political respondents are 8 percentage points over-represented with respect to 'important-matters' ones (49% vs. 41%, the association is significant also when applying log-linear models– see Appendix 2). Although not a particularly huge effect, this is consistent with hypothesis 4.

Voting agreement. We do not have theory-driven expectations for what concerns the moderation effect of involvement in the relationship between our experimental treatment and perceived voting agreement. In any case, agreement proves to be non-significant across the treatments and for the respondent political interest variable. Table 2 (middle panel) shows the multivariate situation. The associations among non-interested and interested respondents are both non-significant (chi-squared p-values of .91 and .40 respectively). We can therefore state that the treatment does not lead to significant differences in discussants' political attitudes, irrespective of their political involvement.

Intimacy. Table 2 (bottom panel), shows the association between treatment and intimacy stratified by the respondents' levels of interest. The first interesting result concerns the discriminating power of the third variable. The treatment effect for interested respondents does not produce differences. The chi-squared for the subgroup is non-significant (p-value equal to .17). In contrast, the non-involved respondents' partners are over-represented in the 'important-matters' treatment (about 6.5 percentage points) and colleagues are much more (about 8.5 percentage points) cited as political discussants, consistently with Hypothesis 5. Indeed, the chi-squared for the bivariate association is strongly significant (chi-squared equal to about 14 with 5 degrees of freedom; p-value equal to 0.02– the highlighted partial associations are significant also when tested with log-linear models – see Appendix 2).

Discussion

When dealing with their political discussion networks, people might rely on purposive processes rather than on incidental ones. In the former situation, voters might be able to select their discussant according to some of their characteristics— political agreement and involvement. To assess whether purposive or incidental processes are in action, previous works (Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe, 2009; but see also Sokhey and Djupe, 2014) have compared two survey instruments, the first one asking people to report the characteristics of their political discussants and the second of their important-matters discussants. The idea behind the experimental design is that if the two wordings produce different characteristics of the discussants, then people actively seek specific characteristics of their discussants to talk about politics. These studies conclude that the two wordings do not seem to lead to different information about discussants, i.e. political discussants are roughly the same type of people with whom respondents discuss important matters. Previous works, however, present at least two major drawbacks: first, they are plagued by several generalizability issues (both in terms of the contexts treated and of data-related issues). Second, they limit their expectations to a subset of the possible number of hypotheses that the theoretical framework suggests – for instance, by not taking into account the moderation effect that salient individual characteristics might lead to.

By means of a survey experiment that systematically compares politics and important-matters discussants, we have been able to add evidence on Italy (a country rarely analyzed in this debate) and to assess whether the evidence brought is consistent with American results. In addition, we investigated a less analyzed aspect of the issue, namely, the moderation effect that individual involvement in politics might produce on the experimental effects.

Overall, and consistently with American literature, we find limited evidence of the purposive framework. Consistently with previous literature, citizens tend to select politically involved discussants without paying particular attention to political homophily. Also, we find no relevant evidence supporting a form of selection by political agreement or social circle to which a discussant belongs.

However, we have provided evidence that less politically involved citizens engage in some form of selection of their discussants based on what is arguably consistent with rational choice mechanisms, i.e. by selecting perceivedly more involved discussants, who can benefit them in some way (by providing them ‘cheap’ political information that they do not already possess). As a consequence of this process, we have shown that unsophisticated people are slightly more inclined to choose their political discussants from non-intimate circles of acquaintances, especially co-workers, leading to an under-representation of partners among political discussants. Our results show that these two processes (the selection of both politically involved and non-intimate political discussants) produce quite relevant effects among politically uninvolved citizens. This result is consistent with some form of purposive process: those who need more political information, namely politically unsophisticated people, are more likely to select their political network accordingly.

As pointed out throughout the article, the results presented in this study might be open to several elements of criticism, starting from the operationalization of the ‘network’ concept. In our article, only the main discussant’s characteristics are taken into consideration (Huckfeldt et al., 1995; McCarthy et al., 2019). Although this has not allowed us to test for differences in terms of several crucial characteristics of the network (such as, for instance, its size and composition), we do not think that measuring only the main discussant should affect the general validity of our results, especially because they have been obtained by means of a randomized procedure that makes the units equal except for the experimental treatments. We can imagine a further element of criticism, given by the measurement of the variables: indeed, we measure political sophistication as individual and perceived political interest, although, as previous research states (see, for instance, Zaller, 1992), political sophistication is a much more complex concept (which contains not only interest but also knowledge). This is a data limitation that we cannot solve (mainly because with the data at our disposal there is no way of obtaining perceived political knowledge of the discussant, or actual political knowledge of the respondent). We think that this would hardly impinge our results, but with more refined data our results might be more robust also in this respect. Finally, previous research on purposive/incidental

processes in political discussions has shown that long-term longitudinal design can be as well employed to keep track of the ego-networks of citizens (see Minozzi et al., 2020). This latter approach has been demonstrated to provide strong evidence against the purposive processes. Future research might be devoted to integrating a larger number of discussants in experimental/longitudinal designs in order to make our argument more robust and extend the hypotheses to the collective characteristics of networks.

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Tables

Table 1. Bivariate cross-tabulations to study the effect of 'political'/'important matters' discussants on intimacy, perceived interest, and agreement

<i>Perceived interest</i>	Politics	Imp. matters
Very much	23.6	24.1
Somewhat	58.6	57.3
Not much	16.1	15.4
Not at all	1.7	3.2
N: 2854 – Chi-2: 6.95 – p-value: 0.07		
<i>Voting agreement</i>	Politics	Imp. matters
Disagreement	38.3	36.9
Agreement	61.7	63.1
N: 2090 – Chi-2: 0.42 – p-value: 0.51		
<i>Intimacy</i>	Politics	Imp. matters
Partner	37.1	42.7
Relative	19.0	17.9
Friend	22.4	21.5
Colleague	16.7	12.8
Neighbour	1.1	1.4
Other	3.7	3.7
N: 2880 – Chi-2: 14.04 – p-value: 0.02		

Table 2. Multivariate cross-tabulations to study the effect of 'political'/'important matters' discussants on intimacy, perceived interest, and agreement, stratified by the respondent's level of interest

	Non-interested respondents		Interested respondents	
	Politics	Imp. matters	Politics	Imp. Matters
<i>Perceived interest</i>				
Very much	9.4	10.2	29.3	29.3
Somewhat	49.2	41.0	62.6	64.0
Not much	36.7	38.5	7.9	6.3
Not at all	4.7	10.2	0.3	0.4
	N: 792- Chi2: 11.29- p-value:0.01		N: 2,038- Chi2: 2.05- p-value:0.56	
<i>Voting agreement</i>				
Disagreement	35.9	36.5	39.0	37.0
Agreement	64.1	63.5	61.0	63.0
	N: 431- Chi2: 0.01- p-value:0.91		N: 1,654- Chi2: 0.7- p-value:0.40	
<i>Intimacy</i>				
Partner	34.3	40.7	38.4	43.8
Relative	17.3	20.2	19.4	16.6
Friend	20.9	18.1	23.0	22.9
Colleague	22.2	13.7	14.7	12.5
Neighbour	1.3	2.7	1.1	0.9
Other	4.1	4.6	3.5	3.4
	N: 803- Chi2: 13.93- p-value:0.02		N: 2,045- Chi2: 7.84- p-value:0.17	

Appendix 1. Relevant questions in the ITANES 2013 dataset

Intimacy with the discussant

Who is the person with whom you talk most frequently about [things that are important to you/politics]?

- 1) Partner/spouse
- 2) Another relative
- 3) A friend
- 4) A colleague
- 5) A neighbor
- 6) Another person

Discussant's perceived interest in politics

How much would you say that this person is interested in politics?

- 1) A lot
- 2) Somewhat
- 3) Not so much
- 4) Not at all

Discussant's vote choice

Do you know whether, and for which party, this person voted in the last national election for the Chamber of Deputies on February 24 and 25?

- 1) Yes
- 2) No

Could you indicate which party?

(The list of parties follows)

Appendix 2 - A deeper look - Testing the hypotheses with log-linear models

Log-linear models

The chi-squared test only represents an overall measure of the association between two variables. As a result, we only have indirect evidence of which partial association makes the chi-squared significant. In order to overcome this drawback, we can further develop our analysis by means of log-linear Poisson models. Log-linear models are widely used in sociological research (but not much for testing experimental effects) and they have been developed to provide measures of the relationships among categorical variables (Agresti, 2018). Instead of being a variable as in standard regression models, the dependent ‘objects’ in a log-linear model are the cells of the multivariate table itself. In the process of estimating a set of log-linear models, conditional odds ratios are employed to select the model that is both the most theoretically valid and the most parsimonious (i.e. the model that fits the real-data table better and has the lowest number of parameters) from a set of models ordered hierarchically. Log-linear models present another interesting feature since they make it possible to identify the effect and test the significance of a single partial association (or a subset of partial associations). When using a dummy coding (Powers and Xie, 2008; Wong, 2010; Agresti, 2018), these subsets of partial associations can be designed as dummy variables that are equal to 1 in certain specific (and theoretically relevant) conditions and 0 otherwise. In the next sections, this feature of log-linear models will be exploited in order to specifically test some of the expectations hypothesized in the article.

Identifying experimental effects using log-linear models

TABLE A1 ABOUT HERE

The top panel in Table A1 presents an analysis of the association between the levels of

the discussants' perceived political interest, the respondents' political interest, and our experimental treatment. The table shows the deviance of the models (G^2), the degrees of freedom, the significance of the deviance, and the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) to identify the goodness-of-fit of the models. Our baseline model is the independence model (Agresti, 2018). In this model, the three variables are considered to be totally independent and only univariate marginal frequencies of each variable are taken into consideration. The fit of the model is quite poor (a G^2 equal to 564.2 with 16 degrees of freedom, significant at the 1% level).

Model 2 has the form of what is usually defined as a 'conditional independence model' (Powers and Xie, 2008; Wong, 2010). This class of models contains two two-way interactions. Using the notation IT and ID, we estimate a model in which the T (treatment) and D (discussant's perceived political interest) are independent of each other at each level of I (the respondent's interest in politics). If the fit of our model is good, it means that there is no significant association between D and T and consequently we can reject the hypothesis according to which the important-matters discussants' political interest is significantly different from that of the political discussants. Although model 2 is closer to the real data table with respect to model 1, is it still significantly different (p-value equal to 0.03). The drop in the G^2 is mainly due to the fitted association between the respondents' interest and the discussants' interest. As we have seen in the multivariate tables, people with higher levels of political interest tend to choose more politically interested discussants (or, rather, people who are *perceived* to be more involved in politics).

Model 3 includes all three possible two-way interactions without including any three-way interaction. The deviance measure is equal to 5, with 3 degrees of freedom (the model is now not significantly different from the real data matrix). By investigating the deviance residuals in Model 2 (see Table A2) and the multivariate tables (Table 2 in the article), we fit an additional model which is less constrained than Model 3 but contributes to explaining the data matrix in a similar way.

TABLE A2 ABOUT HERE

The theory exposed in the article holds that the main driver to finding a political discussant for non-involved people might be based on the minimization of the effort required to acquire political arguments and facts. As a result, more interested political discussants should be over-represented with respect to important-matters discussants among non-involved respondents. Model 4 tests this hypothesis by including a dummy, DUM_A, which takes value 1 when the discussant's political interest variable is equal to "Somewhat interested," the treatment variable is "Politics" and the respondent's political interest variable is equal to "Not interested" (see the top panel in Table A3 for the precise location of the dummy variable).

TABLE A3 ABOUT HERE

Model 4 tests whether this partial three-way interaction can explain the table in the same way as the best model (Model 3). The results confirm our hypothesis. The effect of DUM_A alone fits the model well, with a deviance of 8.2 with 5 degrees of freedom (the p-value of the deviance is 0.15). The BIC shows that Model 4 fits the data better than Model 3 (140.2 for the more constrained model as opposed to 137.9 for the less constrained). Therefore, we can say that non-interested respondents tend to choose people who have a sufficient amount of political interest as political discussants, compared to important-matters discussants. This is a far more specific and systematic test of the hypotheses than the results presented in Table 2 (Log-linear analyses are not shown for the 'voting agreement' variable. As multivariate tables can easily show, there is no two-way interaction whatsoever in the tables. Further analysis with different techniques, therefore, seemed redundant).

The bottom panel in Table A1 presents systematic tests for the joint effects of the treatment, individual political interest, and intimacy. As in the previous analysis, we start with the independence model (Model 1). The model does not fit the data well, as the G^2 is big and significant (almost 40 with 16 degrees of freedom, p-value 0.00). Model 2, as in the previous

analysis, is a conditional independence model in which the only non-fitted two-way interaction is the one between intimacy and the treatment. We already know that there is an association between the discussant's circle of friends and the treatment, even when controlling for the respondent's political interest. Model 3 formalizes this idea in the form of a 'no-three-way interaction' model (Powers and Xie, 2008) in which all the two-way interactions (IT, IN, and TN) are estimated. As can be seen from Table A1, the model fits the data well, having a lower BIC and a non-significant G^2 . By analyzing the multivariate tables presented in Table 2 in the main text (and inspecting the deviance residuals in Model 2, presented in Table A2), it is possible to realize that we do not need *every* treatment-intimacy association. On the contrary, it is possible to have a much more parsimonious model that fits the data in a similar way by using the dummy variable approach shown above. Model 4A represents the first attempt to fit the data without fitting the entire set of treatment-intimacy associations. It fits the Model 2 parameters plus a single dummy, DUM_B. The dummy takes value 1 when the intimacy variable is equal to 'Partner' and the treatment variable is 'Important matters,' independently of the level of the respondent's political interest (see the bottom panel of Table A3 for the precise position of DUM_B). The main descriptive result concerning purposive mechanisms is that closer circles are chosen more for important matters while political discussants are more likely picked from less intimate circles (because of the particular characteristics needed for being a political discussant). If DUM_B leads to a significant enhancement of the model, it means that people (independently of their levels of political interest) tend to prefer their partners as important matters discussants and to choose them less when the topic is politics. Table A1 shows a significant improvement in Model 4A compared to Model 2. The deviance passes from 21.9 to 12.4 while only one degree of freedom is lost, and the likelihood-ratio test (not shown here) signals a significant difference between the two models. Going more deeply into the investigation of the table, Model 4B adds another dummy variable to Model 4A, DUM_C, which takes value 1 when the intimacy variable is equal to 'Colleague' and the treatment variable is 'Politics,' and 0 otherwise (see the bottom panel in Table A3 for the position of the dummy in the table). In this case, we estimate an over-representation of colleagues in political

networks. Model 4B shows a significant improvement (the G^2 is reduced by 4.2 points with one degree of freedom lost, a change that is significant at the 5% level according to the likelihood-ratio test).

If respondents are asked to report their political discussants, they tend to cite an individual who is outside the typical range of cohesive circles. In contrast, an important-matters discussant is – not surprisingly – more likely to be chosen among closer discussants, such as the partner. This is consistent with the view that public opinion topics are more likely to be discussed with people belonging to one’s public sphere.

Another argument stressed above is that the less an individual is sophisticated in political topics, the more they will be prone to look for politically involved people in order to minimize the effort involved in inquiring about political facts and arguments, even looking for these sources of information outside the private world of intimate ties. Model 4C tests this hypothesis by adding a three-way interaction dummy, DUM_D , which takes value 1 when the intimacy variable is equal to “Colleague,” the treatment variable is “Politics” and the political interest variable is equal to “Not interested,” and 0 otherwise (as previously stated, the dummy is selected by relying on the deviance residuals in the previous models). In this way, we test whether non-interested citizens are more likely to indicate a non-cohesive tie (a colleague) as their political discussant. The results of the model partially confirm this expectation. Model 4C’s goodness of fit is better than that of the less constrained one. While losing one degree of freedom, G^2 increases by 3.2 points. However, the likelihood-ratio test shows that the improvement is significant at the 10% level (the p-value of the likelihood-ratio test is 0.08). Model 4C, therefore, tests Hypothesis 5 in a much more systematic way and corroborates it.

Table A1. Goodness-of-fit statistics for perceived interest (n=2,830) and intimacy (n=2,848), treatment, and respondent's interest – hierarchical log-linear models

Model specification	G2	DF	P-value	BIC
<i>Perceived interest (D) - Respondent's interest (I) - Treatment (T)</i>				
Model 1 (D,I,T)	564.2	10	.00	680.1
Model 2 (IT,ID)	13.6	6	.03	140.5
Model 3 (IT,ID,DT)	5.0	3	.17	140.2
Model 4 (DT,DN,DUM_A)	8.2	5	.15	137.9
<i>Intimacy (N) - Respondent's interest (I) - Treatment (T)</i>				
Model 1 (N,I,T)	39.9	16	.00	210.2
Model 2 (IT,IN)	21.9	10	.02	211.2
Model 3 (IT,IN,TN)	7.6	5	.20	212.8
Model 4A (IT,IN,DUM_B)	12.4	9	.19	204.9
Model 4B (IT,IN,DUM_B,DUM_C)	8.2	8	.41	203.8
Model 4C (IT,IN,DUM_B,DUM_C,DUM_D)	5.1	7	.65	203.9

Notes: DUM_A takes value 1 when the Perceived interest variable is equal to 'Somewhat interested,' the Treatment variable is equal to 'Politics' and the Respondent's interest variable is equal to 'Not interested.'

DUM_B takes value 1 when the Intimacy variable is equal to 'Partner' and the Treatment variable is equal to 'Important matters.'

DUM_C takes value 1 when the Intimacy variable is equal to 'Colleague' and the Treatment variable is equal to 'Politics.'

DUM_D takes value 1 when the Intimacy variable is equal to 'Colleague,' the Treatment variable is equal to 'Politics' and the Respondent's interest variable is equal to 'Not interested.'

Table A2. Deviance residuals for model 2 (upper and lower panel of Table A1)

<i>Perceived interest</i>	Non-interested respondents		Interested respondents	
	Politics	Imp. matters	Politics	Imp. matters
Very much	-0.27	0.25	-0.02	0.02
Somewhat	1.22	-1.22	-0.28	0.28
Not much	-0.31	0.30	0.93	-0.95
Not at all	-2.19	1.86	-0.25	0.24

<i>Intimacy</i>	Non-interested respondents		Interested respondents	
	Politics	Imp. matters	Politics	Imp. matters
Partner	-1.09	1.02	-1.36	1.31
Relative	-0.71	0.67	1.04	-1.06
Friend	0.64	-0.63	0.02	-0.02
Colleague	1.96	-2.05	0.94	-0.96
Neighbour	-1.05	0.90	0.35	-0.36
Other	-0.22	0.21	0.07	-0.07

Table A3. Position of dummy variables for the hierarchical log-linear models presented in Table A1

	Non-interested respondents		Interested respondents	
	Politics	Imp. matters	Politics	Imp. matters
<i>Perceived interest</i>				
Very much	.	.	.	.
Somewhat	DUM_A	.	.	.
Not much	.	.	.	.
Not at all	.	.	.	.
<i>Intimacy</i>	Politics	Imp. matters	Politics	Imp. matters
Partner	.	DUM_B	.	DUM_B
Relative	.	.	.	.
Friend	.	.	.	.
Colleague	DUM_C/ DUM_D	.	DUM_C	.
Neighbour	.	.	.	.
Other	.	.	.	.