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Social Networks and American Politics

Introduction to the Special Issue

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This article overviews the special issue on "Social Networks and American Politics." The authors explain that social network analysis is a multimethod set of approaches to examining the pattern of connections that are created among individuals and institutions when they engage in their daily activities. It is especially valuable when research problems are about (a) the flow of information; (b) coordination, cooperation, or trust; (c) informal organization; or (d) multiple levels of organization. In addressing these problems, network analysis has expanded during the last decade within the study of American politics, contributing to knowledge about political institutions, behavior, and network theory. Promising directions for future research include the study of power, preference aggregation, information flow and transaction costs, and network dynamics.

Keywords: social networks; political behavior; political institutions; methodology

The idea for this special issue arose in conjunction with the first conference on "Networks in Political Science," held at Harvard University, June 13-14, 2008. The conference was cochaired by David Lazer of Harvard University and James Fowler of the University of California, San Diego, and supported with a grant from the National Science Foundation, with John Scholz of Florida State University as the principal investigator. More than 200 scholars participated in the conference, which addressed a wide range of network topics in political science, from international conflict to online blogs to civic participation in the United States. The conference recognized the emerging critical mass of scholars who investigate social networks in politics and sought to bring them together to promote greater intellectual exchange and institutionalization of the field. This special

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issue publishes eight of the best articles from the conference that focused on American politics.

Some readers may sense an irony that scholars who study social networks—which exert influence largely because of their informality and transcendence of traditional institutional boundaries—should make a headlong push toward institutionalization through formal conferences, journals, and a new section of the American Political Science Association. Why is it not sufficient for social network scholars to work informally across journals and fields without any concrete institutions? The potency of informal organization through networks does not come from eliminating or bypassing formal institutions entirely but by working in tension with them. Social networks exist within the structures of institutions, in the holes between institutions, and in the spaces where institutions have not yet formed. The study of social networks transcends disciplinary boundaries and will never be sensibly contained within one discipline or association. Yet projects such as this issue can help promote the diffusion of network analysis within specialized fields.

This essay situates the contemporary research on display in this special issue within the larger traditions of network analysis and American politics research. We begin by discussing what network analysis is and why it is valuable. Second, we review the major developments in the literature on social networks in American politics. Third, we consider how the authors in this issue contribute to this literature. We conclude by suggesting new directions for network research within American politics.

Social Networks and Network Analysis

Social networks are the connections that exist among individuals and institutions as they engage in their everyday activities. Connections may comprise friendship ties, financial exchanges, authoritative chains of command, conversation, familial relations, comembership in associations, joint presence at events, the exchange of goods, or any number of relationships specified by the researcher. Network analysis examines the implications of these patterns for social and political processes.

A common misperception about network analysis is that this is a purely "method-driven" approach to research. However, network analysis may contribute to the theoretical, substantive, or methodological dimensions of research. Theoretically, network analysis posits that social relations are fundamental building blocks of social processes (Emirbayer, 1997). This

proposition is appealing in understanding politics, where constituent relations, patronage, gossip, and alliances are commonplace. In network theory, the relations among organizations, institutions, and actors are the focus of consideration rather than the attributes of those bodies themselves. In some contexts, network theory suggests that individual units cannot be understood in isolation from their socially embedded relationships (Granovetter, 1985). For example, rather than looking at the influence of interest groups through the lens of individual groups and their decisions, a network approach considers the position of groups to determine whether they are core influential actors or if they are more peripheral and, consequently, less influential (Laumann & Knoke, 1987).

Substantively, networks are social objects of which people are increasingly aware, especially with the rise of online social networking tools, such as Facebook and Twitter. Individuals and institutions self-consciously engage in "networking" in an effort to expand their access to information, expertise, and status. Along these lines, social networks can be examined as readily as political attitudes, trust, or partisanship.

Methodologically, network analysis is a way of analyzing data by treating the dyad, rather than the individual, as the basic unit of analysis.[1] A multitude of techniques exist, and are being developed, to measure network ties, structure, and dynamics. Nonetheless, "social networks" need not be studied using formal network analysis. Indeed, social networks may be investigated with a panoply of methods, including surveys, interviews, ethnography, field experiments, laboratory experiments, computer simulations, and content analysis.

The key task for scholars is to identify when networks are an essential part of the problem under consideration. There are four instances when network analysis may prove to be especially valuable. First, when the *flow of information* is at the heart of a problem, a network may be useful in pinpointing a solution. A network is a parsimonious way of modeling the flow of information from person to person or from organization to organization (Coleman, Katz, & Menzel, 1957; Granovetter, 1973). Such models may be especially valuable in understanding information-dependent phenomena, such as citizen learning about politics, voting behavior, the diffusion of policy innovations, and conspiracies.

Second, network analysis may be revealing when *coordination*, *cooperation*, or *trust* is fragile. Networks reflect the histories of interaction among actors, thus suggesting their degree of familiarity with one another's habits and preferences, reliability, and character. Thus, the strength or weakness of ties in networks, as well as the patterns in which they are

arranged, may make all the difference in overcoming collective action problems, reaching agreement on difficult matters, and participating confidently in politics (Gould, 1993).

Third, network analysis may be essential to understand political processes when *informal organization* runs strongly counter to formal institutions. Network analysis may reveal whether those who are formally in control of an institution actually control the balance of power (Krackhardt, 1992). In searching for these power dynamics, networks may be beneficial in the study of legislatures, bureaucracies, and political parties.

Fourth, networks may be the best way to make sense of behavior when *multiple levels of organization* are involved. Under these conditions, even formal lines of authority are overlapping or blurred, making a network model a good way to make sense of the organizational structure (Lazer, 2005). Federalism, bureaucracy, and grassroots politics are settings in which network analysis is likely to provide this kind of insight.

Although social networks are relevant in a wide number of cases within American politics, the number of scholars conducting network analyses in the field has grown substantially only within the past decade. In the next section, we consider the origins of social network studies of American politics and how they have contributed to ongoing debates in the field.

Network Analyses of American Politics

Scholars have recognized the important role of social networks in American politics for more than half a century. The first major study in this tradition was Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet's (1944) investigation of voting in Erie County, Ohio. Although they did not use the formal methods of network analysis, the authors found that personal contacts played a more important role in an individual's vote choice than did the mass media. This study, along with a later volume by Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954), formed the core work of the "Columbia School" approach to electoral behavior. The Columbia School research helped propel the study of social networks generally but did not do much to spur its adoption within political science specifically (Freeman, 2004). To the extent that American politics scholars drew on network concepts through the 1970s, they did so largely in a metaphorical or descriptive sense, as in Heclo's (1978) classic discussion of "issue networks" in the public policy process.

Two important breakthroughs occurred in the late 1980s. First, within the study of political institutions, Laumann and Knoke (1987) conducted a

comparative analysis of organizational networks in the health and energy policy domains to establish that the interest group universe consists of a "hollow core" rather than an elite core. This study, along with the follow-up project by Heinz, Laumann, Salisbury, and Nelson (1990) on lobbyists in four policy domains—which noted the absence of unique, system-level brokers among Washington representatives—earned network analysis a place among the mainstream approaches to interest group politics. Second, within political behavior research, Huckfeldt and Sprague (1987) employed network analysis to distinguish differences between how members of a political majority and minority ascertain the political preferences of their discussion partners. This study of the social flow of information among voters in South Bend, Indiana, was the first in a new wave of behavioral studies in the Columbia tradition. Importantly, their adaptation of socio-logical name generators—questions used to identify discussion partners in a social network—to political science made network research amenable in the context of surveys, by far the most common approach to studying political behavior.

The work by Laumann and his colleagues led American politics scholars to begin asking new questions about political institutions. Schwartz (1990) turned to networks as a way of understanding the power shared by political parties and interest groups as a kind of extended "party network" (see also Heaney & Rojas, 2007; Koger, Masket, & Noel, in press). Heaney (2006) demonstrated how access to networks that cross party boundaries enhances the ability of interest groups to influence health policy. Carpenter, Esterling, and Lazer (2004) modeled information sharing as supported by transitive network structures among lobbyists. Fowler (2006a, 2006b) harnessed data from cosponsorship of bills in Congress to establish that the U.S. Senate is more closely connected than the U.S. House of Representatives and to examine the determinants of connectedness among legislative colleagues (including institutional ties, constituency services, issue collaboration, and friendship). Scholz, Berado, and Kile (2008) revealed how the structure of networks—as small and dense or, alternatively, as boundary-spanning—affect collaboration and agreement among policy actors (see also Scholz & Wang, 2006; Schneider, Scholz, Lubell, Mindruta, & Edwardson, 2003).

The research of Huckfeldt and Sprague (1987) opened new avenues of inquiry into American political behavior. Huckfeldt and his colleagues pro-duced a wide range of studies that offer network-based explanations for social capital, disagreement, and the distribution of political knowledge (e.g., Huckfeldt, 2001, 2007; Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998). McClurg (2006) showed how the level of political expertise in a person's social network

matters for how they think about, and participate in, politics (see also McClurg, 2003). Mutz (2002a) examined cross-cutting social networks as a way to understand tolerance and found that individuals who have close ties to those with different political views are more likely to have greater tolerance than those who do not, although that disagreement can suppress participation in politics (Mutz 2002b). Mutz and Mondak (2006) demonstrated that the workplace is the most important context for these cross-cutting discourses.

Although much of this research is based on analysis of surveys, several novel experiments have attempted to isolate the effects of networks on participation. Klofstad's (2007) quasi-experimental study of college roommates suggested that political discussions in social networks increase the likelihood of political participation. Nickerson's (2008) ingenious field experiments demonstrated that voter mobilization campaigns achieve a substantial portion of their goal not only through directly contacting people but also through the indirect effect of the contacts that echo through social networks.

The nascent literature on social networks in American politics is pushing the field in important new directions. Network studies of political tolerance, for example, offer a new angle on a long-standing question. Network investigations of parties and interest groups propose a unifying perspective on subjects that have too long been viewed separately (Heaney, in press). In just a few short years, the study of social networks has shifted from a relatively obscure topic pursued by only a handful of scholars to a mainstream subject regularly covered in the discipline's leading journals. Networks are now assumed to be a central part of the explanation of political dynamics in a wide range of phenomena.

The Current Issue

The articles appearing in the current issue do much to advance the understanding of how social networks are relevant to American politics. They contribute to the study of political institutions and behavior, as well as to network theory. The authors make use of a variety of methods, including analysis of archival data, local and national surveys, quasi-experiments, and laboratory experiments. They show how network concepts and theory can be used to pose novel questions that push the understanding of politics forward.

Three articles in the issue focus on political institutions and rely on archival data. First, Jennifer Victor and Nils Ringe's article, "The Social Utility of Informal Institutions: Caucuses as Networks in the 110th U.S. House of Representatives," examines the hypothesis that informal networks established through the caucus system in the U.S. Congress sets up an alternative power system that competes effectively with formal institutions, especially committees and the parties. They consider whether caucuses provide outlets for weaker players—rank-and-file legislators, women, minorities—to leverage their influence against the establishment—committee chairs, party leaders, and veteran lawmakers. Their evidence does not support this hypothesis, leading them to conclude that "the caucus system replicates and reinforces, rather than supplements and challenges, the formal distribution of power in the legislature" (762). This work takes an important step in the direction of understanding how networks interrelate with formal institutions as well as reminding us that not all networks exist as alternatives to institutionalized patterns of authority. Future studies in this direction might consider whether networks play a role in which formal institutions have the upper hand in cases of jurisdictional overlap. For example, does the House Ways and Means Committee or the House Energy and Commerce Committee have the upper hand on Medicare issues?

Second, Matt Grossman and Casey Dominguez help integrate theories of political parties and interest group politics in their article, "Party Coalitions and Interest Group Networks." There is a wide recognition both among interest group scholars and party scholars that networks matter to each of these institutions, yet scholarship that probes how these networks fit together is in its infancy. Grossman and Dominguez combine party and group data more extensively than has been done by previous scholars, using data on campaign endorsements, legislative ties, and financial contributions. Their "multiplex" analysis suggests the absence of a hollow core in these networks (see Heaney, 2006, for a similar finding). Furthermore, they show how context matters in the structuring of party networks—though the parties may appear polarized during legislative votes, they are less polarized in how interest group coalitions approach debates. These findings raise a new set of puzzles for students of American politics. How can political polarization between the parties be maintained as interest groups continue to connect legislators in ways that cross partisan lines? How does the power of interest groups vary as a function of the party network? Are interest groups more powerful when the parties are isolated from each other? In addition to raising these substantive questions, their analysis underscores how different kinds of networks suggest alternative visions of the informal

structure. Future research could benefit from following Grossman and Dominguez's lead is assessing the interplay of several kinds of networks within a single setting.

Third, Richard Feiock and Manoj Shrestha consider the functioning of networks within local governmental institutions in their article, "Governing U.S. Metropolitan Areas: Multiplex Policy Environment and Self-Organizing Network Regionalism." Like Grossman and Dominguez, Feiock and Shrestha are concerned with the implications of multiplexity for governance. They show that local government can use transactions across multiple, overlapping policy areas to link jurisdictions in a way that ameliorates credibility of commitment problems. In doing so, they offer a model that shows the macro-political consequences of bottom-up organizing. Given that Feiock and Shresta's analysis focused on only one local region (Pinella County, Florida), future research could benefit by examining how other jurisdictions use similar structures to address a wider variety of policy problems. Of particular interest would be to examine how these types of transactions create economies of scale and efficiencies that might be exploited elsewhere in the American federal structure.

Three articles address the relevance of networks for political behavior. First, Tetsuya Matsubayashi and Jan Leighley publish the results of a ground-breaking multicity survey on "The Implications of Class, Race, and Ethnicity for Political Networks." Given the class, racial, and ethnic differences identified in so many areas of political behavior, it is somewhat surprising that these disparities have not received more attention with respect to political networks. Matsubayashi and Leighley find that Whites are more likely than non-Whites to have larger networks and to receive more information from their social networks. Church participation reduces the likelihood that Latinos have White discussants, thus further cutting their access to network expertise. This study is preliminary in the sense that some questions of causality remain unresolved, leaving future scholars the challenge of distilling the recursive relationship between political perspectives and the choice of discussion partners. More inquiry into how people choose their discussion partners would do much to expand our comprehension of how political information is disseminated among minorities. Studies of prejudice, tolerance, and race would also benefit by considering the contextual and individual conditions that lead to ties that cross ethnic and racial boundaries, the nature of those ties, and the conditions under which they suppress conflict between groups.

Second, Casey Klofstad addresses the network endogeneity problem with quasi-experimental data from University of Wisconsin students in his

"Civic Talk and Civic Participation: The Moderating Effect of Individual Predisposition." Drawing from surveys of randomly assigned college roommates, he shows how exposure to civic talk within a social network (i.e., with a roommate) increases civic participation, though prior participatory experience moderates this effect. By focusing on discussion dyads, he illustrates the flexibility of network analysis for research at multiple levels of analysis, from individuals to connections to networks to aggregates. This study hints at the benefits of searching out quasi-experiments as a way to tackle estimation problems network analysis. For example, other instances of random assignment within political institutions could offer some leverage in distinguishing genuine network effects from those of unobserved political preferences.

Third, Seung-Jin Jang considers the participatory implications of network heterogeneity in "Are Diverse Political Networks Always Bad for Participatory Democracy? Indifference, Alienation, and Political Disagreements." Following up on research showing that heterogeneous networks discourage political participation, Jang probes the conditions under which that may not necessarily be the case. Jang finds that when people are indifferent between political candidates, for example, the demobilizing effect of disagreement is reduced. This result reveals the need for more exploration of how the use of information in networks depends on preexisting political attitudes.

The last two articles in this issue make their contribution primarily to network theory. First, Nicholas Weller, Mathew McCubbins, and Ramamohan Paturi bridge the fields of game theory and networks with their "Connected Coordination: Network Structure and Group Coordination." Game theory and network theory have much in common because of their mutual reliance on dyadic interaction as a basis for theorizing, yet there is relatively little research that crosses over between these domains. Weller et al.'s analysis shows how games and networks combine to yield insight on the resolution of coordination problems. As such, this research gives us better insight into the relationship between individual behavior and aggregate outcomes. Using a laboratory experiment, they show that networks allow coordination problems to be solved faster. When actors face asymmetric incentives, they coordinate better when they are more connected within a network than when they are less connected. Further experimentation along these lines could do much to show how different kinds of network structures influence outcomes such as coordination and accurate information dissemination.

Robert Huckfeldt concludes the issue by reflecting on how networks are shaped by the environments within which they operate in "Interdependence, Density Dependence, and Networks in Politics." He stresses that interdependence among actors—one of the essential facts that makes networks relevant to politics—is highly "density dependent" on opportunities in the environment. For example, the ability of an individual to compose a friendship network made up largely of Libertarians depends heavily on the supply of Libertarians nearby. If Libertarians are densely concentrated in the respondent's social world, then such a social network may be readily constructed. Otherwise, the individual may rely more on Republicans, Democrats, and others to form friendship networks. The theoretical and empirical consequences of this observation are profound, because it requires that the analyst consider both the structure of networks and the distribution of political preferences to anticipate likely outcomes. When the endogeneity of political networks are considered—that is, that people choose their own discussion partners—Huckfeldt's theoretical analysis implies the need for much more sophisticated empirical analyses to capture simultaneously the consequences of interdependence and density dependence on political dynamics. To incorporate these ideas, researchers should more consciously account for variations in local contexts and collect data over time when designing network studies.

Directions for Future Research

American politics researchers undertook investigations of social networks more aggressively in the 2000s than they had in previous decades. Almost every subarea within the field has seen at least one network-oriented piece appear in recent years. These developments have transpired for a variety of reasons, at least, in part, because network analysis is currently a fad. Whether or not this trend is sustained depends on whether network studies continue to produce compelling explanations for important political phenomena. In this concluding section, we suggest a number of promising avenues for research that could help to accomplish this end.

Social network analysis is particularly useful for reinvigorating debates about the exercise of political power. Although nearly every piece of research on American politics focuses to some degree on power, these questions have receded into the background relative to the vigorous debates of earlier decades (cf. Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). Although questions of power are often conceived in terms of institutional roles, jurisdictions,

rules, and formal authority, it remains fundamentally true that the ability to exert power in politics often depends on relations among actors that encourage cooperation or facilitate the exchange of political goods on which influence is often based.

Social networks are particularly useful for thinking about the horizontal exercise of power. A somewhat broadly conceived example of this logic can be seen in bureaucratic recalcitrance in the face of presidential pressure. Although the president formally has the power to direct bureaucrats, that authority depends on an agency's links to Congressional leadership, legislative committees, influential interest groups, and even other bureaucratic agencies that operate in the same policy domain. Beyond using social networks for reconceptualizing political influence, they can also be used to reexamine existing theories of power. Questions in this vein could be descriptive, such as comparing the networks of influential political actors with the networks of others who are less influential, or causal, such as examining how reforms aimed at reducing the power of different actors reshape their networks and relations.

A second direction for fruitful inquiry is the study of preference aggregation that is at the heart of many analyses on American democracy. Social networks particularly hold great potential for reconciling questions centering on the long-standing micro–macro problem in politics (Eulau, 1996). Along these lines, a long-standing area of inquiry focuses on the apparent disjunction between rationality in collective opinion and the seeming randomness of individual views. To some degree, this pattern arises from the so-called miracle of aggregation, where individual irrationalities cancel each other out. But it is also quite likely, as Eulau observed, that such a pattern is partly a function of contextual influence that social network analysis is well positioned to address.

Similarly, social network analysis may provide a significant alternative to the theory of social choice. One distinct characteristic of social choice analyses of political institutions and society is that they inevitably assume either independence among decision makers or a specific type of relationship characterized by strategic voting. Social network theories provide a wide variety of tools for thinking about different types of interdependence. In doing so, it can raise a host of new empirical questions about the types of networks that facilitate good and bad decision making as well as normative questions about how social structure is related to the function of American democracy.

A third area of inquiry where network analyses may prove to be particularly useful is in understanding information flows and transaction costs.

Although these are clearly not new concepts for political scientists, they can be enhanced when seen through the lens of social networks. In the case of information, a network analysis would emphasize questions of bias stemming from social location (e.g., Mutz, 2006), variations in availability because of isolation and centrality, and influence depending on patterns in the network (e.g., Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004). Similarly, in considering the costs of decisions and actions, a network approach does not see these as constants for all actors. Instead, the costs of some actions and engaging in some behaviors can vary greatly based on the attributes of your network partners (as in the case of social norms; Gerber, Green, & Larimer, 2008) and social locations.

Finally, American politics research should give more attention to the dynamics of networks and how they influence political outcomes. Network dynamics have been modeled fruitfully by scholars in other fields, offering a template to be applied within political science (cf. Powell, White, Koput, & Owen-Smith, 2005). Such analysis would allow scholars to address questions such as why relationships between parties and interest groups evolve over time. How did Congress transition from dominance by committee to dominance by parties? When a voter switches from identifying with the Democratic to the Republican Party, how does his or her access to political information change? Siegel's (2009) recent dynamic model of collective action using four network types (the small world, the village, the opinion leader, and hierarchical network) offers much promise. An extension of this model to allow for multiplexity or for institutional boundaries would deepen network theory even further.

In closing, we would be remiss if we did not point to a necessary precondition for taking advantage of social network theory. As we note earlier, the network approach to politics is defined by its emphasis on relationships rather than individuals. Because it is nearly impossible, in many situations, to neatly identify the population of relationships for the purpose of sampling, it is often necessary to impose a carefully considered boundary on the social unit being studied (Laumann, Marsden, & Prensky, 1989; McClurg, in press). Social network studies therefore often examine closed systems characterized by marital ties (Nickerson, 2008), college dorms assignments (Klofstad, 2007), specific policy domains (Heinz et al., 1990), and so forth. Critics sometimes charge that these limitations threaten the external validity of network studies. However, all research restricts the scope of its analysis in some way to gain analytical leverage, as when a random, national sample is obtained at the cost of separating individuals from their social contexts. Intellectual unity and scientific progress depends

entirely on whether this brand of research is well motivated from a theoretical standpoint, thus potentially requiring reconsideration of the criteria for evaluating its scholarly contribution.

Note

1. It is possible to take the results of a network analysis and examine their implications at the individual level of analysis. However, the network analysis itself is always performed by examining dyads.

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