CHAPTER 1

EXPERTS, ACTIVISTS, AND SELF-EDUCATING ELECTORATES

Leadership is a necessary phenomenon in every form of social life. Consequently it is not the task of science to inquire whether this phenomenon is good or evil, or predominantly one or the other. But there is great scientific value in the demonstration that every system of leadership is incompatible with the most essential postulates of democracy.


Even in the most egalitarian political systems, some citizens are more equal than others. This book addresses the role of opinion leaders as primary movers within the democratic political process – as individuals who are relatively more influential within the networks of communication connecting citizens to one another. These opinion leaders are influential – their opinions matter more – not because they hold elective office, bankroll political campaigns, or serve as advisors to those in power, but rather because their opinions are weighted more heavily in the collective deliberations of democratic electorates. This weighting system is informal rather than formal, and it results from the continuing stream of social interactions that occur among citizens. The opinion leaders have no official standing – their influence emerges instead through the countless social exchanges among citizens that carry political meaning and consequence for individuals as they make up their minds and reach political judgments.

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The most effective opinion leaders are both experts and activists. They are politically expert, not necessarily in the sense of an encyclopedic knowledge regarding the technical details of complex policy issues, but rather in their ability to address the contemporaneous political agenda in ways that are helpful and meaningful to others (Ahn et al., 2010). This is not to say that the information they provide is neutral, and indeed one might well question whether political information is ever value free. Indeed, to adopt an intermediary position between two partisan camps is often acceptable to neither extreme, and often seen as unsatisfactory by both. Moreover, very few individuals become politically expert out of a politically neutral fascination with politics. More typically, they are motivated to become informed due to their own involvement in the issues of the day.

Indeed, activists become opinion leaders because they care about politics and political issues. In many instances they care so deeply that they can hardly avoid becoming engaged by political issues and concerns. Many are like the moths who find the flame of politics and political controversy to be nearly irresistible. Their expertise is motivated by their own political engagement, and it provides them with the ability to arrive at political judgments based on their own subjectively identified interests and political evaluations, as well as the ability to communicate these judgments to others. Their activism is defined not necessarily in terms of any organizational or entrepreneurial engagement in politics, but rather in terms of political interests and commitments that are realized and activated through their communication with others.

These twin characteristics, expertise and activism, make opinion leaders pivotal in the communication process that generates public opinion and the aggregate reality of democratic politics. Particular opinion leaders may certainly rank higher on one dimension or the other.
Some experts are motivated by a fascination with politics that is really quite independent of any judgment regarding the virtue of various political alternatives. Others are complete activists who are quite innocent of well informed, reasoned judgment guided by expertise. The influence of both extremes is likely to be politically compromised: the neutral expert by a lack of motivation and zeal, and the poorly informed activist by a lack of credibility. Again, the most successful opinion leaders demonstrate a combination of the two – knowledge of contemporary issues coupled with well-articulated preferences and goals. This combination provides both the capacity and the motivation to influence the opinions of others.

The opinion leadership they provide is an irreducible element of democratic politics for the simple reason that interdependence is an irreducible element of social life. If citizens collected and analyzed political information as independent individuals, their decisions would reflect judgments reached through independent means. Political analysts, in turn, could focus solely and wholly on what takes place between the ears of individual citizens, and they could treat the choices of individuals as being independent from one another. Indeed, analysts do routinely adopt the implicit or explicit assumption that individual responses to politics can be treated independently, but the analyses of this book call these assumptions into question.

Not only are individuals interdependent, but they communicate political information and opinions to one another, and some individuals occupy outsized, disproportionally influential roles within the process. Political communication is not an antiseptic, politically neutral information transfer, and it is not necessarily an exercise in civic enlightenment. Rather, it is an extension of the political process in which some people are more influential than others. At some times and in some circumstances, communication among citizens leads individuals to act in ways that sustain their own beliefs and interests. Echoing Michels’ concern, however, the
potential also exists for communication that leads individuals to act in ways contrary to their beliefs and interests.

High Hopes and Realistic Concerns

Political analysts and philosophers have long been divided on the normative merits of interdependence and social influence among citizens. The quotation from Michels, with which we begin this chapter, is motivated by his underlying concern that democracy is inevitably compromised by oligarchic tendencies arising under the guise of political leadership, even within the most democratic institutions and processes. His fears reflect Rousseau’s (1762) concern that the general will can only be realized if individuals are wholly informed regarding their own interests and act accordingly, absent influence by others. Individuals who are influenced by others, Rousseau fears, might well be led to act against their own interests, thereby obstructing the realization of the general will.

Similar concerns are addressed by students of Condorcet’s (1785) jury theorem. If a group is composed of actors who vote independently from one another, the odds of a majority choosing correctly (given the existence of a correct choice) increases with the size of the group and the competence of individuals, assuming that individuals are more likely to vote correctly rather than incorrectly. There is disagreement, however, regarding the consequences of relaxing the independence assumption. One view sees interdependence as compromising the democratic optimism of the jury theorem. An alternative view suggests that deference to opinion leaders can, in some instances, improve individual and group competence (Estlund 1994).

Modern concerns regarding the effects of political communication and interdependence among political actors are reflected in the influential political economy literatures regarding “cheap talk” (Johnson 1993). The basic problem posed is related to the potential veracity of the
information conveyed by self-interested individuals. That is, if someone is provided with political information and counsel, how do they know whether it speaks to their own interests and concerns or to those of the sender? To the extent that it is the latter, the value of communication in enhancing the capacity of the recipients to realize their own political aspirations is undermined. Correspondingly, to the extent that the recipients believe this to be the case, the value of the communication is generally diminished, as well as the recipients’ confidence in it. In short, the advice is simply cheap talk that will be disregarded by sophisticated recipients, creating a “babbling equilibrium” absent any political value (Lewis 1969).

All these concerns – the compromising effects of political leadership in democratic processes and institutions, the problematic consequences of interdependence, and the dangers of cheap talk – can be seen in terms of the role played by opinion leaders in democratic politics. Politically activated opinion leaders are not typically motivated by some objective vision of truth, but rather by their own vision. That is, opinion leaders are typically motivated to gather information and become politically expert by their own concerns, and the information they obtain often reflects their own preferences. How can it be otherwise? Hence, expertise and activism are often positively correlated – activists tend to be expert.

Moreover, the relationship between expertise and activism is likely to be mutually reinforcing. People who know more are more likely to become opinionated, and the more they know, the more opinionated they are likely to become. They are likely to ignore information that contradicts their own purposes and to embrace information that sustains their own viewpoints. Rather than a search for objectivity, the search for political information is often motivated by existing political beliefs and preferences (Lodge and Taber 2013).
While these concerns regarding the problematic effects of interdependence are legitimate, they sometimes ignore the potentially beneficial aspects of an electorate composed of interdependent individuals. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, many theorists began to adopt a more benign view of social influence and majority opinion. Durkheim’s work (1984, 1951) conceives a social aggregate that takes on meaning quite apart from the individuals who compose the group, and one of his primary concerns was the disintegrating effects of modern societies on the social fabric that sustains these groups. Even though Durkheim’s concerns were not explicitly political, he establishes a framework for a view emphasizing the community quite apart from individualist conceptions of interests and utilities.

These early concerns persist in contemporary arguments and debates, as well as in the continuing tug of war between individualistic and corporate conceptions of politics and public opinion. As we will see, one body of literature focuses on the potential for social influence to be politically misleading. Echoing Rousseau and Michels, individuals might indeed be led astray from acting in their own interests by an informant or an advisor whose interests are actually divergent from their own (Crawford 1998). At the same time, other efforts reveal the educative potential of social influence and opinion leaders (Berelson et al. 1954; Katz 1957). In an environment where individual citizens are often woefully uninformed, a reliance on relatively well informed opinion leaders might, under certain circumstances, lead to a better informed electorate. And in this way, the quality of the interdependent whole might surpass the quality arising from the sum of the independent parts.

Our own argument is that opinion leadership is neither the salvation nor the ruination of democratic politics. Some patterns of interdependence produce political bandwagons and stock market bubbles (Bikhchandani et al. 1992). Others serve to enhance the level of expertise within
electorates, as well as to diffuse shared interests within the boundaries of relevant political
groups (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Important contingencies operate on the form and function
of communication networks, and qualities of the informant relative to the person being informed
constitute a crucial element in the analysis of information that is conveyed. Are the informant
and the recipient in fundamental agreement or disagreement regarding underlying preferences
and goals? Is the informant politically expert? Assuming that individuals have multiple
informants, do a single informant’s views coincide or diverge from the views communicated by
other informants? Is the recipient of incoming information capable of making discriminating
judgments regarding the quality of the message?

Downs (1957) argues that citizens are well advised to seek out information from
individuals who are both well informed and share their political preferences. While this
prescription provides a useful baseline, it is often violated in practice, primarily because the
menu of potential informants is constrained both temporally and spatially. Hence, the costs of
locating the ideal political informant are not insignificant, and other priorities may compete. You
might prefer an articulate Republican as an associate, but your other preference – for an associate
who is keen on hiking in the Sierra – may trump that political preference, even if your hiking
buddy turns out to a liberal environmentalist.

Moreover, when we move from considerations of the individual to considerations of the
whole, Downs’ ideal may not only be empirically inadequate, but prescriptively inadequate as
well. By limiting social communication regarding politics to associates with shared political
preferences, individuals limit their opportunities to reconsider and readdress their own
fundamental assumptions and preferences. None of these complications negate the fundamental
importance of political expertise. In an interdependent world where citizens obtain political
information and guidance from others, a range of contingencies operate on the successful translation of individually held interests and preferences into appropriately informed political choices. And one of the most important revolves around the capacities of groups and individuals both to provide and receive expert political counsel.

**Political Expertise in the Corridors of Everyday Life**

The concept of political expertise is typically restricted to considerations of political elites and elite decision making – to the politicians, consultants, bureaucrats, and handlers who populate the corridors of power. While important efforts have certainly been made at introducing the role of expertise into discussions of grass roots politics among the citizens populating the corridors of everyday life, these efforts have been notable for their failure to penetrate the dominant, enduring vision of democratic politics held among political scientists (Ahn et al. 2010).

This failure is especially striking in view of early efforts in political science and sociology that focused attention on differentiated levels of political capacity among citizens via "opinion leaders" and a "two step flow" of communication. The earliest two step model was a simplified rendering in which some people (the opinion leaders) paid attention to politics and the media, while other individuals (virtually everyone else) took their information and guidance from these opinion leaders (Lazarsfeld et al. 1968). This early model was vulnerable to criticisms of political elitism – that it underestimated the capacity of individual citizens consigned to the role of followers. It was also vulnerable to criticisms that it oversimplified communication processes in which leaders and followers were tied together in complex horizontal as well as vertical networks of relationships where, for example, leaders and followers change roles depending on the particular subject matter. These problems were addressed in later, more
sophisticated treatments of opinion leaders and the two step flow (Berelson et al 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Katz 1957; Weimann 1982, 1991). Nevertheless, expertise and the role of expert individuals have been slow to penetrate research on voting, public opinion, political communication, and political participation.

This lack of penetration is primarily the consequence of a historical reluctance to consider citizens as interdependent actors in politics. The primary model of a voter in the empirical literature has been a socially disembodied individual whose decisions, judgments, and voting choices are based on individually held preferences, opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and identifications. This atomistic model is probably best seen as an unintentional byproduct of particular observational strategies that have been dominant in political research – most notably randomized sample surveys of large populations that divorce individuals from their social and political environments (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993, 1995). While relatively few students of politics would advocate an atomistic model on its intellectual merits, traditional methods of data collection have resulted in a \textit{de facto} adherence to a model that separates and isolates one citizen from another in a way that is both theoretically unsatisfying and empirically inadequate.

The welcome news is that rapidly accelerating progress has taken place in alternative modes of data collection and analysis regarding communication among interdependent individuals. These alternatives include contextual studies, network studies, and experimental studies that intentionally locate one citizen relative to other citizens in both time and space, thereby generating new opportunities to revisit opinion leaders and political expertise in the context of horizontal and vertical networks creating multiple-step flows of communication and persuasion (for discussions see: Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993; Huckfeldt 2007a; Ahn et al. 2010).
The moment has thus arrived to reconsider and extend the earliest conceptions of opinion leaders, communication, and interdependence within democratic electorates.

**The Civic Capacity of Voters and Electorates**

The inability of political expertise to gain traction as a useful concept in the study of politics and social communication is even more ironic in view of the historic intellectual investment that has been made in the study of political knowledge, awareness, and belief systems among citizens (Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993, 1996; Gilens 2001; Kuklinski et al. 2000; Zaller 1992). This body of work, which is typically based on large scale national surveys and normally focused on individual determinants and consequences of knowledge and beliefs, has demonstrated levels of political competence that are often disappointing. As Sniderman suggests (1993), shocked disbelief and opposition to the earliest work ultimately gave way to a new stream of research that takes low levels of civic capacity as a given, turning instead to several important and derivative questions. If voters are so naïve, how are they able to make decisions that often seem well informed (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Lodge and Steenbergen with Brau 1995)? And, given the incapacities of individual voters, how do aggregate electorates manage to perform in a manner that appears to respond to the political environment in meaningful ways (Page and Shapiro 1992; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Sniderman 2000)?

This renewed and sharpened focus on the locus of expertise in democratic politics produced a burst of optimism regarding the capacity of citizens and electorates. Even though voters were poorly informed and lacking in encyclopedic knowledge regarding issues and candidates, many hoped they might make sound decisions and choices based on a variety of informational cues and shortcuts. More recent work calls this optimism into question. Kuklinski
and Quirk (2000) and Sniderman (2000) draw attention to the failures of cognitive shortcuts in improving the quality of citizen decision-making. Taber and Lodge (2006) and Lodge and Taber (2000) consider the limitations of human reasoning that arise when individuals must reconcile new and divergent information with their preexistent beliefs and attitudes. Kuklinski et al. (2000) address the potential for misinformation and its implications for the capacity of electorates.

Within this context, a renewed emphasis on communication networks is potentially relevant to the distribution and diffusion of political expertise among interdependent citizens, as well as to individual and aggregate decision making. The selection of informants, and hence the construction of networks, not only responds to the preferences of potential discussants, but also to their potential for being informative (Downs 1957). The presence or absence of bias on the part of potential informants does not necessarily reduce their information potential (Calvert 1985a), and empirical studies show that the construction of communication networks responds directly to the expertise of potential discussants. Discussion occurs more frequently with individuals who possess higher levels of interest and knowledge about politics, and it is only modestly depressed by disagreement (see chapters 3 and 4).

As a consequence, frequently low levels of individually held knowledge are not entirely surprising, and they may be less troublesome. This is particularly the case if the political capacities of individuals are understood in a somewhat larger context. First, citizenship involves more than political knowledge, expertise, and voting. The fabric of a democratic society depends on a range of talents and contributions, supplied both through markets as well as through voluntary communal efforts, and thus productive citizenship is not simply the residue of individuals who are able and willing to read the New York Times. If time spent consuming and analyzing information on current affairs comes at the expense of these other commitments –
coaching little league baseball, organizing the girl scout troop, or volunteering at the local library – it may very well be a bad bargain for the more complex and variegated fabric of not only democratic politics but also democratic societies (Berelson et al. 1954: chapter 14).

Moreover, if many individuals do not obtain immediate benefits from consuming information on politics – if they do not place intrinsic value on political information or realize some instrumental advantage – why would we be surprised that the level of political expertise within populations is heterogeneous? At the same time, even when viewed from the vantage point of the most myopic form of individual rationality, the consumption of political information is not irrational for everyone (Fiorina 1990; Downs 1957). Some people enjoy politics more than others, and it is entirely reasonable that these people spend more time on political matters, while others are located in occupations that depend on up-to-date political knowledge. Fortunately, the consumption of political information makes perfectly good sense both among those who enjoy politics and public affairs and among those who value it instrumentally.

What is the solution to the problem of heterogeneous levels of political expertise within populations? Is this heterogeneity a problem? Heterogeneous information levels are potentially mitigated through patterns of interdependence – through complex networks of political communication. The implication is that, by ignoring the relationship between interdependent citizens and varying levels of political expertise, we obscure the capacity of citizens in the aggregate, as well as incorrectly specifying models of political judgment and decision.

None of this means that interdependent citizens necessarily produce beneficial outcomes. Indeed, a politically realistic view of interdependence and social communication acknowledges the potential and reality of individuals who are misinformed by their fellow citizens – in particular, the potential that individuals are persuaded to act against their own interests. Indeed,
experts are often activists – they not only invest in information related to their values and preferences, but they also hold deeply felt political beliefs which provide the motivation to employ that information in an effort at convincing others. Correspondingly, the very real potential exists for people to be misled by the expert activists in their midst.

Hence we are not arguing that interdependence among citizens ameliorates all the problems of a poorly informed electorate. Rather, our argument is that an ignorance of individual interdependence within electorates runs the risk of fundamentally misunderstanding not only the nature of citizenship, but also the central abiding strengths and weaknesses of democratic politics. In some instances, social communication allows politically naive individuals to act as if they were experts without incurring prohibitive information costs. At other moments, social communication encourages individuals to embrace candidates and causes they would be unlikely to support if they were better informed. Hence social communication among interdependent individuals does not always or necessarily produce an electorate of well informed individuals capable of acting on the basis of their own objectively and individually defined interests. Rather, it creates an electorate in which the preferences of some individuals – the activists and experts who function as opinion leaders – play outsized roles in the collective discussions of democratic politics. In short, we will argue that political communication among citizens is best understood as an extension of the democratic political process rather than a value-free exercise in civic education.

**Expertise, Knowledge, and Self-Educating Electorates**

What is the difference between knowledge and expertise? Knowledge involves an individual's ability to access relevant political information from long term memory (Lodge and Taber 2000). In contrast, we define expertise in terms of political choices informed by
subjectively defined interests, and hence the ability of an individual to act in accord with her own view of the world. Some citizens are politically knowledgeable and hence likely to be expert, and many of these individuals further enhance their levels of expertise based on communication with others. Some citizens possess modest or negligible amounts of political knowledge, but their judgments are informed through various mechanisms, including political discussion (Sniderman et al. 1991; Lodge et al. 1995; Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2000; MacKuen and Marcus 2001; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Still other citizens base their choices directly on the knowledge and expertise held by others. They act as though they are knowledgeable by imitating the choices of others in their environments, and hence their expertise is socially derived (Fowler and Smirnov 2005; Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004; Boyd and Richerson 1985). While such imitation may not necessarily produce optimal choices, it is a particularly effective strategy for individuals who are unwilling or unable to invest in the individually based acquisition of information, but are able to imitate the choices of others who provide appropriate guidance.

These distinctions are important because political communication need not enhance knowledge in order to enhance expertise within the electorate. Indeed, we will argue that individuals do not necessarily become more knowledgeable simply by discussing politics with knowledgeable discussion partners, and there is little evidence to suggest that people automatically weigh the advice of politically knowledgeable informants more heavily when arriving at their own political judgments and choices (chapter 3). Moreover, an interesting set of studies on "correct" voting (see Lau and Redlawsk’s 1997 definition) produces mixed consequences for the effects that arise due to communication with experts (Sokhey and McClurg 2012; Richey 2008; Jackman and Sniderman 2006).
These observations raise a series of questions related to the selection criteria that individuals employ to construct political communication networks, the contextually based supply of experts as a constraint on these selection mechanisms, and the capacity of expert citizens to influence the communication process. Is the expertise of a potential informant relevant to the construction of communication networks? Under what circumstances is expert advice influential, credible, or worthwhile? What are the circumstances and consequences of political communication beyond the boundaries of proximate groups – the conditions giving rise to networks that bridge the divides between groups? What are the implications of these various mechanisms of communication and interdependence for politics in the aggregate?

Our response to these questions is framed around three propositions. First, communication networks are constructed by individual choices and opportunities for interaction that accumulate to form and re-shape patterns of communication, but these choices respond to the availability of potential discussants and their levels of expertise. Second, the messages conveyed through political communication networks are thus neither persistently nor inevitably homogeneous, and the extent of diversity varies systematically as a consequence of both individual and contextual factors. Third, varying levels of diversity, combined with the importance of expertise, carry complex dynamical implications for the diffusion of information, the self-educating properties of electorates, and self-limiting patterns of influence within aggregate populations (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004).

**Contextual constraints on network construction.** Individuals exercise choice in the construction of communication networks, but choice is constrained by supply, and the supply of discussion partners looms particularly large with respect to network composition. The supply of potential discussants is, in turn, a stochastic function of proximate populations – families, work
places, places of worship, sports clubs. Moreover, individuals have multiple preferences in the construction of communication networks, and politics is only one among a long list of preferential criteria – sparkling personalities, trustworthiness, a hatred for the Yankees, and so on. Finally, extended information searches are personally and socially expensive, and hence individuals will typically build networks of association that reflect the contexts within which they reside, regardless of their own political preferences (Greer 1961; Brown 1981).

In short, the distribution of political preferences within networks – either homogeneous or heterogeneous – might arise as a consequence of environmentally imposed supply, quite independently of individual control over associational patterns (Huckfeldt 1983b; Buttice, Huckfeldt and Ryan 2008). None of this means that individuals are powerless to exercise control over the form and content of their communication networks (Finifter 1974; MacKuen 1990). To the contrary, potential methods of control over network construction are crucial to the communication process, and they constitute a primary focus of our effort.

**Consequences of Network Diversity.** A renewed focus on political diversity within communication networks is inspired by the mismatch between long-standing theory and observation. In their classic study of the 1948 election, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954: chapter 7) argue that social interaction produces agreement and homogeneity within small groups. In his analysis of diversity, Abelson (1964, 1979) identifies a seemingly inexorable tendency toward homogeneity within formal models of communication. This same tendency is found in agent-based simulations of communication and diffusion (Axelrod 1997a), where heterogeneity is inevitably extinguished as a consequence of interaction.

More than 25 years of research demonstrate the importance of clustered political preferences within political communication networks. The vast majority of citizens live their
lives in settings where most of the people they know hold political preferences and beliefs that reinforce their own inclinations (Mutz 2006). At the same time, the accumulated evidence also points toward persistent levels of residual disagreement, even within the smallest and most closely held social groups (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt, Beck, et al. 1998; Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004). Respondents in the 2000 National Election Study were asked to provide the first names of people with whom they were most likely to discuss "government, elections, and politics." Approximately 40 percent of those supporting a major party candidate (Bush or Gore) named at least one discussant who supported the opposite party's candidate, and less than half perceived that all the discussants they had named supported their own preferred candidate (Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn 2004). Similar patterns of preference heterogeneity within networks are demonstrated across time and space within the United States (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt, Beck, et al. 1998; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague 2004), as well as in cross national comparisons (Huckfeldt, Ikeda, and Pappi 2005).

Why is preference heterogeneity important to expertise among citizens? If citizens avoid divergent preferences, the potential for persuasive communication is reduced. This was demonstrated early and convincingly in the work of William McPhee's (1963) vote simulator: disagreement gives rise to continued information search and hence the potential for "influence" in the broadest sense of the term (see also, Taber and Lodge 2006). That is, influence occurs not only when individuals are persuaded to change their preferences in response to divergent information, but also when individuals must "counter-argue" – either socially or internally. Contrary messages are influential if they force individuals to rethink their own preferences, even if their initial commitments to those preferences are sustained.
Limitations on influence. Why does disagreement fail to be resolved by persuasion – why do we not see the creation of uniformity within these networks of communication? This is a particularly important question because a range of sophisticated modeling efforts appear to suggest that such a persuasion dynamic is nearly irresistible within large populations (Abelson 1964, 1979; Axelrod 1997a, 1997b; Johnson and Huckfeldt 2005; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague 2004, 2005). The perhaps counterintuitive answer to this question is that complex patterns of communication and influence are, in fact, self limiting within the context of diverse preferences, and hence interdependence can be seen to sustain heterogeneity!

If disagreement within a dyad leads to a process of counterargument in which the views of other discussants are taken into account, then the influence of communication within any particular dyad is conditioned on communication within all other dyads. In other words, not only is the formation of an individual's preference autoregressive with respect to the distribution of preferences in an individual's communication network (Marsden and Friedkin 1994), but the influence within a particular dyad is autoregressive with respect to the flow of information within the participants' other dyads (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004). As a consequence, the influence of a contrary message is attenuated by the dominant messages within networks, and heterogeneity is thus sustained.

An example occurs in the work of Mutz and Mondak (2006), who provide a compelling account of the fact that individuals are more likely to encounter political disagreement in the workplace (also see Baybeck and Huckfeldt 2002). Within that context, suppose that Sidney and Lisa are coworkers, and that Sidney is imbedded in a family full of Republicans, while Lisa is imbedded in a family full of Democrats. For a variety of reasons – workplace proximity, shared interests, and so on – Lisa and Sidney regularly communicate about a range of topics, including
politics. Neither of them is likely to be convinced by the other to change her political stripes for the simple reason that both still reside within an informational environment dominated by their respective families. And hence one might argue that agreement as well as disagreement are both socially sustained through complex patterns of social interaction and communication (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004).

In short, political heterogeneity within networks is a necessary but insufficient condition for political change due to persuasive communication driven by expert opinion. Disagreement provides the occasion for influence, but if expert opinion is not weighted more heavily within the communication process, expert communications would not necessarily translate into the diffusion of expertise. Such weighting might occur if individuals genuflect with respect to citizens with higher levels of expertise – a prospect that we will argue is unlikely – or if the weighting process occurs because the views of expert citizens are disproportionately represented within the process of political communication. Hence, the intentional or unintentional weighting of expert opinion becomes a crucial issue in the analysis of opinion leadership.

*Individual, Aggregate, and Dynamic Implications*

Traditional models suggest that social communication insulates individuals from events in the external political environment. Individual citizens are imbedded within homogeneous groupings of like-minded individuals, and politics is reinterpreted relative to dominant views in the group. Hence, political information is filtered, conformity encouraged, and group boundaries reinforced. (Berelson, et al. 1954; Huckfeldt 1983a). The problem is that the persistence of diversity, coupled with the centrality of political experts within communication networks, calls into question this sort of determinate outcome (McPhee 1963).
A number of efforts have pursued the proximate, individual level implications of homogeneous versus heterogeneous communication networks. While a consensus has not been reached, a diverse set of findings is generating progress in the identification of important underlying issues. Mutz's results (2002a, 2006) suggest that individuals residing in politically heterogeneous networks are less likely to participate and more likely to make decisions closer to the election. Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn (2004) show modestly negative effects of heterogeneity on political interest but no effects on turnout. They also demonstrate higher levels of ambivalence and lower levels of partisanship among those located in heterogeneous networks. Fowler (2005) shows that one individual in a homogeneous network deciding to vote could lead to a turnout cascade, while McClurg (2006) finds that the most important social determinant of turnout is not heterogeneity but rather expertise – people in expert networks are more likely to turn out. Based on his empirical analysis, Kotler-Berkowitz (2005:167) argues that "networks made up of a diverse set of friends expose people to various non-redundant opportunities and requests for political participation …" Both Gibson (1992; also 2001) and Mutz (2002b) show that individuals in heterogeneous networks are more likely to be politically tolerant.²

While these various results are sometimes difficult to reconcile, they point toward aggregate and dynamic implications of heterogeneous networks for democratic politics that are quite profound. The survival of disagreement within networks of political communication, in combination with the important effects on communication that arise due to the distribution of expertise, lead to a reconsideration of the mechanisms of political interdependence among citizens, the diffusion of expertise within networks, and the aggregate implications of political interdependence among citizens. Indeed, the theory of the consequences of social

² For an interesting effort to reconcile findings see Gimpel, Lay and Schuknecht 2003.
communication for the dynamics of an election campaign might be transformed fundamentally. Rather than serving as a source of insulation from the external political environment, social communication might even serve to magnify the consequences of the external environment by connecting individuals to extensive and far reaching networks of political information (Barabási 2002; Watts 1999).

The intersection of these phenomena – the survival of disagreement, the self-educating capacities of electorates, and the resulting dynamic consequences of interdependent individuals – forces a reassessment of the models and mechanisms of communication among citizens (Mendelberg 2002; Barber 1984; Fishkin 1991). It also points toward particular observational strategies for collecting relevant information on these problems. In particular, it is not enough to collect information on individuals, although information on individuals is of course central to progress in understanding political communication patterns. Rather, individuals are understood within the context of communication and interaction – within the groups where they are located. Hence, observational strategies are needed which provide the opportunity to move back and forth seamlessly between individuals and groups, both theoretically and observationally.

**Expertise, Motivation, and Communication**

One of the enduring innovations of the political economy literature on citizenship is to take information costs seriously in the analysis of political communication and expertise. Within this context, Downs (1957: 229) argues, political discussion minimizes the information costs of political engagement. Those who are astute, he argues, search out *well informed* associates who possess *compatible* political orientations, and hence citizens become efficiently informed – both individually and collectively.
At the same time, opinion leadership is not simply a consequence of political expertise, but motivation as well. Not only political knowledge, but also self-reported political interest, correlate highly with discussion frequency and opinion strength in survey analyses of political communication networks. This means that people who are politically expert, opinionated, and engaged are disproportionately represented among the population that dominates the conversational airways of American politics. The fact that people report more frequent conversations with politically expert associates (Chapter 3) may simply reflect the fact that these experts are talking about politics at higher frequencies, and hence more frequent discussion with experts is virtually unavoidable! Hence we have two different expectations with reinforcing consequences: (1) individuals are likely to seek out experts as political informants, and (2) politically expert, opinionated, and engaged individuals are more likely to broadcast their political opinions and concerns through social communication. It may be either the sender or the recipient of information who initiates political exchanges that accentuate the role of expertise within communication networks.

Political experts are more likely to be emotionally engaged by politics and political issues for several reasons. Affect and emotion vary in systematic and consequential ways across individuals, and they carry important implications for the process of political communication. One reason that disagreement and dialogue occur among citizens is that some individuals cannot resist expressing their opinions, even when it means that a social dispute is the inevitable outcome. That is, when they receive provocative and disagreeable messages through political exchanges, they react on the basis of an automatic and pre-conscious response, prior to any deliberative calculation regarding the unpleasant disagreement that is likely to follow (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000). While these people do not necessarily enjoy communication
induced disagreement, their high levels of engagement in politics and investment in political information serves to make communication inevitable, even when disagreement is the inevitable outcome. This is particularly important because, as McPhee (1963) demonstrates, influence depends on disagreement—you may reinforce your friend's preference if you agree with her, but you will never change her mind unless you disagree.

In short, those who are most engaged by politics and political affairs are most likely to initiate political conversations with the individuals who populate the microenvironments where they are located. This higher frequency of political communication makes them more likely to encounter disagreement—more discussion with more people yields more opportunities for disagreement (Huckfeldt, Ikeda, and Pappi 2005). While one obvious way out of the dilemma is to censor conversations in order to avoid political discussion, the politically engaged citizens who are most emotionally invested will find this to be particularly difficult to accomplish (Chapter 4). Some actors are unaware of events in the external political environment, and hence are immune to the process we are describing. Other actors are so conflict-averse that they steer their ways clear of political communication entirely. Still others are engaged and emotionally committed, and these individuals are more likely to seize opportunities to exercise opinion leadership. Indeed, for such individuals, these opportunities may be very nearly irresistible.

Sources and Consequences of Motivation

Fiorina (1990) argues that staying politically informed is at its essence a response to consumer preference—some people value information on its own terms as an end in itself. Why would they value information? One explanation is simply related to an innate interest regarding politics and public affairs—some people simply enjoy politics. Hence, understanding levels of
participation and political engagement simply in terms of the exogenously imposed information costs can be misleading.

Indeed, as we will see in Chapter 7, the logic of our experimental subjects’ behavior cannot be understood wholly as a consequence of information costs. Even among individuals for whom information acquisition is costless, we will see heterogeneous levels of information acquisition. Just as important, we will also see heterogeneity in the communication of information that cannot be understood apart from the idiosyncratic characteristics of the messengers. Some individuals act strategically in their communications while others do not. Some send misleading messages, while others send messages that are straightforward reflections of their own underlying beliefs.

Alternative explanations point toward other factors that lead to political attentiveness and engagement. Some personality types are more likely to be drawn to political discussion and to tolerate, and even welcome, exposure to disagreement (Mondak 2010; Mondak et al. 2010). Analyses using data on the Big Five personality traits find, for example, that extraverted individuals tend to have large discussion networks and to engage in political discussion with heightened frequency, as well as to exhibit higher levels of exposure to disagreement. More broadly, these same works reveal numerous relationships between personality and various aspects of political engagement.

Moreover, politics elicits strong emotions among some individuals, primarily due to particular patterns of association in memory among objects that are powerfully charged with negative and positive affect. According to Fazio (1990, 1995), attitude strength is defined in terms of the strength of association between an object in long-term memory and the evaluation of that object. In this way, attitude strength can be a provocative factor in the stimulation of
political discussion and disagreement, as well as a source of hot cognitions generating an instantaneous emotional response (Kunda 1999; Lodge and Taber 2000).

For example, the mere mention of a "liberal Democrat" or "Rush Limbaugh" or "John Boehner" or "Barack Obama" is likely to stimulate pre-conscious emotional responses for many people. To the extent that emotional responses to political objects are intense, we would expect political communication to be nearly inevitable. You may be able to resist the urge to join a conversation, but you are probably less likely to hide the nature of your emotional response. Hence, just as we would expect some personality types to be active within communication networks, so also we would expect people with strong emotional responses to politics to become more active as well.

These strong emotional responses to political objects often lead individuals to become more actively engaged in a range of political behaviors. In particular, such responses stimulate attentiveness and hence encourage the development of knowledge and expertise (Simon 1983). Expertise is likely to be partisan in nature for the simple reason that emotional responses are unlikely to generate balanced and objective information gathering and analysis. In short, emotion stimulates engagement, engagement leads to information gathering, and the resulting expertise is likely to be decidedly partisan. As Lodge and Taber (2000) argue, the collection of new information is likely to reinforce previously held attitudes and opinions. This is particularly important because partisan individuals with more extreme attitudes are the people who are most likely to communicate effectively and unambiguously (Huckfeldt, Sprague, and Levine 2000).

As a consequence, the logic of "affective intelligence" (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000) extends beyond considerations of individual opinion and behavior to an analysis of the communication process among citizens, and it suggests that personality and emotion lie very
close to political attentiveness, expertise, and influential communication. Those people who feel most deeply and emotionally regarding political topics are likely to possess more political information, even if they are less likely to be objective and value free. Indeed, as Lodge and Taber suggest (2000), those who know more are more likely to be more strongly partisan in support of their preferences. Hence the experts within communication networks possess more information, and they are also more likely to be automatic responders to political stimuli—they are willing to wade into the political thicket of controversy and disagreement.

In other words, affect, emotion, personality, and expertise interact in important ways, producing experts who are more likely to be politically active, as well as activists who are more likely to be politically expert. The personal realization of discomfort and distaste for disagreement is likely to vary quite substantially across various personality types. Even among those who find disagreement distasteful, people who are emotionally engaged are more likely to pay the price, and hence they play central roles within political communication networks. What does this suggest regarding the profile of the influential citizen expert in democratic politics?

Citizen experts are neither emotionally detached nor are they politically neutral. This runs at least partially counter to the concept of expertise as it has typically been employed to study the corridors of power, where the professional politicians, bureaucrats, and lobbyists ply their trades. In these contexts, expertise is motivated by instrumental ends, where cool consideration and detached calculation often pay enormous dividends. Indeed, the effectiveness of the professional experts depends on the ability to comprehend the interests of all sides in an effort to realize their instrumental goals more effectively, and the impassioned plea is often just one more tool in the arsenal to achieve these goals (Wilson 1973).
In contrast, emotional engagement is central to the amateur (citizen) expert who operates in the corridors of everyday life. The amateur expert is perhaps no more likely to feel deeply regarding relevant political issues and debates, but feelings and emotions are likely to provide primary motivations for their involvement. Due to the ever present collective action problems that obstruct citizen involvement, citizens typically lack clear cut instrumental motivations that survive even the most rudimentary cost-benefit considerations. Hence emotion plays a key role in the survival of a robust democratic politics. Absent emotion, it is doubtful that cool-headed assessments of the costs and benefits associated with engagement and participation would generate widespread involvement – far fewer individuals would be willing to pay the costs of involvement. Just as altruistic punishment makes it possible for small groups to address collective action problems, so also affective intelligence sustains communication, discussion, and engagement within the electorate by offsetting participation costs (Fehr and Gächter 2002; Ostrom, Walker, and Gardner 1992).

In short, opinion leaders are likely to be both experts and activists. They do not serve as the reference librarians of democratic politics – individuals who are simply on call to respond to requests for information. Rather, they are frequently the instigators who cannot resist the temptation to become involved when confronted with disagreeable statements or wrong-headed viewpoints. None of this is meant to deny the multiple forms of opinion leaders and opinion leadership. Some tend toward the dispassionately expert, while others tend toward the passionately inept. At the same time, tendencies toward activism and expertise tend to be self-reinforcing, and therein lies an important element of the genius underlying political leadership in the corridors of everyday life.

**Implications and Conclusion**
While information costs constitute an impediment to participation for many individuals, these costs are highly variable across individuals. As Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) suggest, information costs are lower among those individuals for whom the acquisition and processing of information is easier – typically individuals with higher levels of education. And as Fiorina (1990) argues, many individuals may find information about politics to be intrinsically rewarding – they read about the Democrats and Republicans with the enthusiasm of a basketball fan reading about the Lakers and Celtics. For these people, the benefits of information far outweigh the costs, and staying informed thus becomes a self-reinforcing behavior.

Moreover, information costs become largely irrelevant for individuals who demonstrate high levels of political motivation. For many individuals, political engagement, interest, and hence discussion constitute preconscious responses to topics about which they care deeply. Political information always comes with costs – one might always prefer sailing a boat on a beautiful day to reading the opinion page of the newspaper. At the same time, and for some individuals, the acquisition of information is less an investment than an emotionally charged response to deeply held attitudes and beliefs.

Hence, we should not be surprised to see the division of labor in the communication of political information suggested by Berelson and his colleagues (1954) so long ago. Individuals with high information costs and (or) low levels of emotional involvement will intentionally or unintentionally rely on individuals with minimal information costs and (or) high levels of emotional involvement. The resulting patterns of communication may indeed produce an electorate that makes surprisingly expert choices – at least relative to the low mean levels of political awareness among individuals within the electorate (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Page and Shapiro 1992; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). In this
way, civic capacity in the aggregate benefits from the diffusion of expert opinion within and throughout networks of political communication.

At the same time, it is important to recall that political communication is not an objective exercise in civic education. It involves people with opinions and interests who are not only learning from one another but also persuading one another. The accumulated record, based on surveys and experiments, suggests that the process tends to be driven by knowledge and expertise. That is, the process is skewed in favor of politically engaged participants with more information – the very individuals identified by Lodge and Taber (2000) as being most opinionated and most likely to demonstrate motivated reasoning.

To the extent that the distribution of political expertise within the electorate is correlated with the distributions of particular interests and preferences, the process we have described carries important partisan consequences. Hence it becomes important to take interdependence seriously in the study of democratic politics. Progress in such an undertaking requires, in turn, a continuing effort to design and implement novel ways of both locating and observing individuals within the social settings where they obtain political information and make political choices – to study citizens as they occur, as parts of an interdependent social construct.

An adequate understanding of opinion leaders requires a focus on the location of experts and activists within the political communication networks that define the structure and form of interdependence among citizens. Hence, in the chapter that follows, we give deliberate attention to the implications of interdependence in politics. We make the attempt to take interdependence seriously as an integral element of political life, and hence as a necessary ingredient in political analysis.