

Social networks of independents and partisans: Are independents a moderating force?

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Abstract

While scholars have long recognized that social networks impact political engagement for partisans, comparatively little work has examined the role of networks for independent voters. In this article, we contribute to existing research on social networks and politics by surveying Arizona registered voters about their political persuasion, personal networks, and media consumption habits. Our findings show that independents have networks that are structurally different from partisans. Specifically, we found that both Democrat and Republican respondents were more likely to frequently talk about politics with independents than with members of the opposing party. Independents were also less likely than partisans to end a friendship over a political dispute. Taken together these findings show that independents may be frequent and reliable discussion partners for partisans and may be able to moderate political views. We find evidence for the moderating force of independents is especially apparent in the media consumption habits of Republican respondents.

KEYWORDS

Arizona, democracy and participation, independent voters, media consumption, partisanship, political behavior, political communications, political engagement, social networks, United States, voter identification

Related Articles

Cormack, Lindsey. 2019. "Leveraging Peer-to-Peer Connections to Increase Voter Participation in Local Elections." *Politics & Policy* 47(2): 248–66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12297>.



Malmberg, Fredrik G., and Henrik Serup Christensen. 2021. "Voting Women, Protesting Men: A Multilevel Analysis of Corruption, Gender, and Political Participation." *Politics & Policy* 49(1): 126–61. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12393>.

Rowe, Andrew D., and David E. Pitfield. 2019. "The Challenge of Social Media Incorporation: A Case Study of HACAN Clearskies." *Politics & Policy* 47(4): 775–806. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12319>.

Social networks impact political engagement in multiple ways. Structurally, networks provide important access to information and political elites while simultaneously creating a social context that encourages engagement through peer influence (Ayala, 2000; Leighley, 1996; McClurg, 2003; Rolfe, 2012; Siegel, 2009; Verba et al., 1995). For these reasons, being connected to others who are politically engaged makes one more likely to be politically engaged themselves (Gerber et al., 2008; Ioanides, 2013; Pacheco, 2008). Networks also facilitate interactions between people. Over time, individuals can develop a strong partisan identity in which their relationship to a political party becomes a vitally important part of their social identity that is reinforced through these interactions with others who share their views (Ellis & Stimson, 2012; Greene, 2004; Hanson et al., 2019).

Political networks, however, tend to be relatively homogenous. While this is unsurprising, given that networked individuals are often similar because of structural conditions (Burt, 2004; Fuchs, 2009), recent research on political discussions reveals that ideological homogeneity is produced and maintained through networked interactions. Partisan identity, strengthened through interactions with their co-partisans, makes individuals more reluctant to discuss politics with those who hold the opposing partisan identity (out-partisans) (Ellis & Stimson, 2012; Hanson et al., 2019; Settle & Carlson, 2019). This reduces cross-cutting discussions that increase tolerance (Pattie & Johnston, 2008) and make it easier for individuals to accurately assess the veracity of information (Garrett et al., 2016), both of which are important skills in an increasingly polarized world where "fake news" abounds. The propensity individuals have for avoiding interactions with out-partisans raises questions about the structural and interactional role of independent voters, who may serve as an important moderating force in an increasingly polarized political climate.

In this article, we draw on data from a survey of registered voters in Arizona, a state where approximately one-third of voters are registered independents (Arizona Secretary of State, 2017), to examine how independents fit into partisan networks both structurally and interactionally. National trends indicate many states' voting populations are exhibiting similar patterns, thus, examining voters in Arizona will offer insight into political networks due to their independence and demographics. We find that, while both partisans and independents generally report having close ties to others who share their political identity, as network density increases for partisans so does partisanship, while the opposite is true for independents. Likewise, a greater percentage of both Democrats and Republicans report having an independent in their social network than they do a member of the opposing party.

In terms of interactions both Democrats and Republicans are more likely to discuss politics with those who share their partisan identity, but they are also more likely to discuss politics with independents than a member of the opposing party. This is especially true for Republicans. We also find that independents, in general, are less likely than partisans to end a friendship over

a political dispute. We believe that a moderating effect by independents can be seen in media consumption patterns. Our analysis generally shows that differences exist between independent, Republican, and Democratic networks, though more research should be done to confirm the patterns found in this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social networks and political engagement

Historically, scholars have focused on the role that individual characteristics play in political engagement and voting behavior (Greene, 2004; McClurg, 2003). However, over the last two decades, social scientists have increasingly noted the importance of networks for understanding overall political engagement (Gimpel et al., 2003; La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; McClurg, 2003; Scheufele et al., 2004). Some research in this vein focuses on the affordances of network structures, including how networks provide people with necessary practical information about registering to vote and where to cast ballots, providing access to political elites, and stimulating an overall collective interest in politics (Ayala, 2000; Leighley, 1996; Rolfe, 2012; Siegel, 2009; Verba et al., 1995).

These affordances mean that individuals with ties to politically engaged networks are more likely to be politically engaged themselves, but social interactions between people within networks also impacts political engagement (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Gimpel et al., 2003; Lupton et al., 2015; McClurg, 2003; Pacheco, 2008). In fact, the specific dynamics of social interactions within networks play a key role in socializing people into a partisan identity (Pacheco, 2008). Socialization occurs mainly through both formal and informal conversations about politics with individuals in one's social network that led to an increase in political efficacy, which, in turn, leads to higher levels of political engagement (Gerber et al., 2008; Gimpel et al., 2003; Ioanides, 2013; Pacheco, 2008).

It is important to note that, while interactions can serve to moderate political views, they do not necessarily do so. Interactions within politically engaged networks are a critical mechanism for establishing and maintaining partisan identities (Baker, 2016; Hasell & Weeks, 2016; Klar, 2014b; Settle & Carlson, 2019). Previous research indicates that strength of partisanship is the primary factor in the relationship between party identification and engagement: the more a person identifies with their choice, the more engaged they are in civil society overall (Beck et al., 2002; Greene, 2004; Heatherly et al., 2017). Thus, partisanship is not merely a set of attitudes toward a political party; it is an important part of one's identity and sense of belonging (Greene, 2004; Hanson et al., 2019; Settle & Carlson, 2019). Social psychologists argue that the importance of partisan identity to individuals may be partially responsible for increasing polarization. As the strength of partisan identity increases, individuals become less willing to engage with those who have different partisan identities (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2016).

Networks, partisanship, and digital sources

A working democracy is essentially a public good. Sociologists have long acknowledged that the critical mass necessary for achieving public goods depends on several network dynamics, of which an important resource is the variety of network members themselves (Marwell & Oliver, 1993). Coleman's (1994) conceptualization of rational action as a social theory posited the importance of group membership as providing sufficient benefits to group members as to allow for members to rationally work against selfish interests to produce what he termed



“effective norms.” The social capital in which Coleman detailed in his work was a network-based mechanism of high inter-connectedness (density) which allowed for sufficient monitoring and sanctioning (to use his parlance) of members. Groups with low levels of density did not have the necessary structure to monitor and sanction, which did not allow for enforcement of norms and, thus, disparate groups could not achieve larger goals. Putnam's (2000) “Bowling Alone” work detailed the structural activities which declined in the United States and removed natural mechanisms of interconnectedness. Regardless of one's status of belief, attending regular community religious gatherings allowed for a natural mixing of community members to interact and trade ideas. These are smaller versions of larger examples of how cities become major world powers if they fall on major trade routes and become centers of cultural exchange.

The onslaught of social media has engaged with these network dynamics in our society to produce two effects. First, from the point of view of the larger society, the exchange of ideas among those who disagree has dropped. Second, from the point of view of smaller groups, within-group solidarity of those which agree has increased. Together these forces produce a self-reinforcing dynamic of increasingly smaller, strongly tied, and more homogenous groups which, in the aggregate, lower the broader exchange of ideas. To operationalize these forces, we examine interpersonal networks.

Interpersonal networks matter, even in the twenty-first century when political news and information about voting are readily available online (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018). Existing research on political persuasion and the Internet shows that targeted political news can have a positive effect on overall political engagement and offline mobilization (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018; Vaccari, 2013). However, targeted news is effective largely because it is designed to confirm and reinforce people's existing political views, making it ill-suited to the task of introducing new political ideas. Unlike targeted news, personal communication from those in an individual's online network can increase receptiveness to new political ideas, demonstrating how networks may be an important moderating force in an era of automated, targeted digital media (Vaccari, 2013).

The relationship between digital media and political participation is clearly known, although the debate between whether the former *mobilizes* or *reinforces* the latter is still ongoing (Oser & Boulianne, 2020). The mobilization effect implies that digital media motivates political participation, whereas reinforcement states the opposite, that political participation prompts the use of digital media. Contrary to prior literature, which has favored the mobilization effect as the primary catalyst, reinforcement has been reexamined and determined to have a more “positive and enduring” relationship over longer periods of time (Oser & Boulianne, 2020). In fact, studies have shown that “active” users of social media, for political purposes, have a “greater sense of well-being” than those who are more passive in their consumption and activism (Gainous et al., 2021, p. 467). The evidence in support for this finding also suggests a “potential for increased inequality” in political participation over time, highlighting a need for further research into the relationships (Oser & Boulianne, 2020).

Political use of digital media and social networks, for youth especially, has been found to be a strong predictor for engaging in traditional political participation (Bode et al., 2014). The authors found that Internet and blog use and not television or print-news use positively affirmed the political use of social network systems. Despite previous concerns that social networking sites might hinder broader political participation, the authors found that digital media provided the impetus for broader and more robust participation.

Partisanship and cross-cutting discussion networks

Increasing polarization and decreased contact between people with different partisan identities result in more ideologically homogenous networks, in part because negative affective appraisals

of out-group partisans increase as partisan identity strengthens (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2016; Robison & Moskowitz, 2019). In short, people who belong to homogenous networks are less likely to engage in cross-cutting discussions in which individuals who hold opposing viewpoints discuss important political issues (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Lupton et al., 2015; Lupton & Thornton, 2017; Mutz, 2002). This presents a potential problem because cross-cutting discussions are important. While there is little evidence to show that cross-cutting discussions lead to increased political participation (Matthes et al., 2019), discussions across partisan lines are beneficial in other ways. They increase tolerance and open-mindedness (Pattie & Johnston, 2008) and increase people's ability to accurately assess the veracity of information about political issues and candidates (Garrett et al., 2016). Likewise, diverse discussions, in which discussants agree and disagree in roughly equal proportions, may increase both political knowledge and enable greater complexity of thought relative to political issues, although there is little evidence that it may lead to differences in voting preferences (Eveland & Hively, 2009).

Cross-cutting discussions may also ameliorate polarization stemming directly from strong partisan identification. Lupton and others (2015, p. 401) found that regularly engaging in discussions with high levels of disagreements reduces the likelihood that individuals will rely on their partisan identity when forming attitudes on political issues in the future. The degree of disagreement among discussants does not necessarily impact overall political engagement or the likelihood that an individual will vote, but can change the way people vote (Ekstrom et al., 2020; Sumaktoyo, 2021). Those who engage in high-disagreement discussions tend to vote based on policy positions, while those who engage mainly in low-disagreement discussions tend to vote along partisan lines, regardless of how well partisan candidates represent a voter's views on political issues (Ekstrom et al., 2020).

Despite these benefits, individuals are becoming less willing to engage with those who have opposing political views (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Heatherly et al., 2017). The technological affordances of online communication platforms make it easier than ever for individuals to "unfriend" those who disagree with their views or opinions, thereby creating an echo-chamber effect that limits exposure to diverse opinions (Giovanniello, 2017). On its own, Twitter has altered the understanding of political communication, resulting in higher levels of partisanship (largely tied to the connective power of hashtags) and less communication about nuanced policy, combined with higher levels of controversial grandstanding (Russel, 2014; Smith, 2015; Trubowitz, 2015; Vaccari, 2013).

However, whether offline or online, holding divergent views is not necessarily the most important factor in determining people's willingness to engage in a discussion (Hanson et al., 2019). The importance of partisan identities for individuals is not just about defining who they are, but who they are not (Ellis & Stimson, 2012). As such, people are often more willing to engage in discussions with others who share their partisan identities or with a mixed group of partisans than with those who explicitly identify with the opposing party (Settle & Carlson, 2019). This raises questions about the potential of independent voters in moderating polarization. If people benefit from cross-cutting discussions and avoiding out-partisans is a bigger concern than avoiding high-disagreement discussions, then independent voters may disrupt ideological homogeneity in networks by introducing new perspectives and political positions without threatening the in-group/out-group divide between Democrats and Republicans.

The role of independent voters in partisan networks

Literature exploring the benefits of cross-cutting discussions often focuses on partisans, sometimes discounting or ignoring the role of independents altogether (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Hanson et al., 2019; Settle & Carlson, 2019; Sumaktoyo, 2021). This is unsurprising because, despite the historical increase in independent voter identification, political strategists still

view independents as partisans (Klar, 2014b). The origin of this idea comes from seminal research popularized in *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Keith et al., 1986, 1992), which claimed that the ANES' "seven-point scale" only includes three actual categories (Democrat, Republican, and independent). After a period of review, the ANES three-point scale emerged in 2008 (ANES, 2015a). The authors argued, successfully, to reclassify independent-leaning Democrats, or independent-leaning Republicans, as partisans. A voting behavior analysis, where independent leaners consistently voted as partisans, drove this reclassification (Keith et al., 1992).

Much of the research on voting behavior leaves out the "true independent" voter, as a group, including social network and media research. Keith and others (1992) and Campbell and others (1960) agree that true independents are disengaged and less likely to vote. However, Keith and others argue that the number of "true independent" voters is small enough that it will not result in a significant problem for established parties. ANES data shows 14% fit this category in 2016, a percentage only matched in 1984 and only surpassed in the 1970s. Klar (2014a, p. 588), focused on this marginal group in her study, and later book (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016), finding that "independent identifiers who feel strongly about the importance of their independent identity—regardless of whether they consider themselves to be strongly ideological or moderate—exhibit levels of political engagement that are just as high as their engaged partisan counterparts."

In 2010, the Pew Research Center classified independents, regardless of lean, into five groups based on their previous partisanship, or stated lean, as shown in Table 1. Pew ("Independents Oppose Party in Power ... Again," 2010, p. 35) describes the disengaged independent as, "disproportionately comprised of women, young people and minorities ... essentially political bystanders—just 21% say they definitely will vote." However, their group of engaged independents (83%), is larger than the group Campbell and others (1960) and Keith and others (1992) agree are disengaged and not likely to vote. If nearly 40% of registered voters are independent and, as Pew ("Independents Oppose Party in Power ... Again," 2010) found, 83% of them are engaged, then a larger proportion of the 14% of registered independent voters, who are true independents not leaners, are engaged than allowed for in previous research. In short, independent voters are generally politically engaged and likely to vote. Nevertheless, it is difficult to conceptualize how independents might fit structurally into partisan networks, especially since much of the time during the lead-up to any election is spent pointing out the futility of voting for any choice other than a major party candidate, and after the election those who voted for alternative candidates are invariably blamed by supporters of the losing candidate (Easley, 2016).

One answer to this issue may lie in broader research on the role of outsiders in homogenous networks. Burt (2004) argues that individuals are inclined to seek out and build ties with others who share similar views and values. Over time, groups become increasingly homogenous and ties to external groups weaken, eventually becoming nonexistent. The result is a collection of groups that are relatively isolated. Despite the boundaries between groups, there are individuals in each group who remain closer to the periphery. These individuals are more likely to have

TABLE 1 Pew's partisan groupings

Independent "partisanship"	Percentage
Shadow Democrats	21
Doubting Democrats	20
Shadow Republicans	26
Disaffected Republicans	16
Disengaged independents	17

Source: "Independents Oppose Party in Power ... Again" (2010)



ties with members of other groups and, as such, are more likely to be open-minded and open to new and innovative ideas than individuals who are located at the center of a group (Burt, 2004; Fuchs, 2009). Those on the periphery can play an important role in conveying new insights and challenging established ideas within a group (Burt, 2004; Fuchs, 2009). Applying Burt (2004) and Fuchs (2009) theories to political networks, independent voters who are ideologically situated in the space between Democrats and Republicans may play an important role in moderating political views of partisans. This is especially true if independents have a lower level of polarization and a more expansive social network (Foos & de Rooij, 2017) and is consistent with Meraz's (2013) research showing that political moderates have less group cohesion and fewer linkages to partisan networks.

Just as there is little empirical work on how independents fit structurally into partisan networks, the way independents navigate political discussions is generally not well theorized compared to their partisan counterparts. Lee and Bearman (2017, p. 23) argue that the echo-chamber effect that results from political discussions in a highly-polarized context may mean that independents “have fewer discussion partners when they think that the important matters of the day are political matters.” Further complicating this matter is the fact that the motivations of independents in political discussions are not readily intuitive, especially in the context of a two-party system. While partisans either aim to convince others to support their candidate or dissuade others from supporting the opposition candidate (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987, 1991), independents are typically seen as the target of that influence rather than as influencers in their own right (Curini & Hino, 2012). Studying the influence that independents have on their partisan counterparts may prove difficult due to a combination of selection bias, the echo-chamber effect, and hyper-targeted marketing by political campaigns that focuses specifically on partisans and the politically naïve (Feezell, 2016; Heidhues & Kószegi, 2017; Hoffmann et al., 2013; Vega, 2020). Nevertheless, independents may serve an important role if they have different opinions than partisans and if they are able to share these diverse perspectives with partisans who otherwise filter out dissenting opinions.

OUR EXPECTATIONS: INDEPENDENT VOTERS ARE MORE LIKELY TO CLAIM INDEPENDENT SOCIAL NETWORKS

Structurally, social networks shape political engagement. Interactions within politically engaged networks can strengthen partisan identity, particularly when strong partisans avoid engaging with out-partisans, which decreases the likelihood that partisans engage in beneficial cross-cutting conversations. It is, however, possible that partisans may be more likely to engage with independent voters than with out-partisans, in which independents may play an important role in transmitting new ideas into dense partisan networks and moderating polarization. Independents' networks are not well understood since most existing research views independents as either weak partisans or disengaged voters.

Our study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on independents and partisan networks by illuminating how the networks of independents differ structurally from partisans and whether independents can serve as a moderating force within partisan networks. Based on previous work on homogeneity in networks (Burt, 2004; Fuchs, 2009) and empirical work on political moderates (Meraz, 2013), we expect that structurally independents will have less dense networks than partisans. Based on previous work on cross-cutting discussions and partisan identities (Ekstrom et al., 2020; Ellis & Stimson, 2012; Hanson et al., 2019; Settle & Carlson, 2019), we expect that both Democrats and Republicans will more frequently discuss politics with independents as opposed to members of the opposing party.



Survey and independent classification

To answer these questions, we collected data from a lengthy survey of registered voters in the state of Arizona. While the use of Arizona data was influenced by the broader project for which these data were collected, we assert that Arizona provides a unique mezz-level population to explore these issues for two broad reasons. First, Arizona has been an emerging battle ground state for several of the past elections. Earlier analyses by Hart and Hedberg () suggested that the aging-in of young Latino citizens as registered voters alone, holding constant 2012 preferences, would render Arizona a solid blue state by 2030, and the fact that Arizona was called for the Democratic Presidential candidate in 2020 after decades of Republican wins is an indication of this predicted change (but not necessarily for the reasons they note). Thus, Arizona is a state undergoing political change. Second, the contested nature of the 2020 race, with various audits and office holders from both parties engaged in heated debate fueled by social media exchanges presents this work as especially salient (see e.g., Richer, 2021, p. 12).

The survey instrument asked respondents about their political persuasion, sources of news, and interactions with their own personal networks. Respondents were asked to self-identify on the ANES (2015a) seven-point political spectrum:

1. Strong Democrat
2. Democrat
3. Independent, leans Democrat
4. Independent
5. Independent, leans Republican
6. Republican
7. Strong Republican

However, unlike the recommendation in Keith and others (1992), we collapsed three groups—respondents who selected option 3, 4, or 5—as independent, thus treating leaners as independents instead of partisans. In light of the more recent work of Klar and Krupnikov (2016) and Zschirnt (2011), which showed the importance of the independent identity, classifying them as partisans seems counterproductive in examining their influence on partisans, especially when respondents elected to self-identify as leaners. In all the analyses we present here, the spectrum variable was dummy coded for all but the most conservative category, meaning that we did not treat these values as a linear scale but as unordered nominal categories.

The survey, using established methodology for measuring networks (Burt, 1984), asked respondents to name up to five friends with whom they discuss personal issues, whether those individuals know each other, and the political persuasion of their network members. Respondents were also asked whether each named friend knew other named friends and, if so, how close each friend was to the other friends the respondent named. The survey included established measures of political persuasion and of opinions on a variety of issues and assessed where each broadly classified political group (Democrat, Republicans, and independents) seeks out information and news in Arizona, replicating Pew's research and previous academic work (Prior, 2005; Rainie et al., 2012).

RESULTS

Our sample was not designed to be representative but instead was designed to reflect the population of Arizona voters. In Arizona, roughly one-third of voters are registered

Democrats, one-third are registered Republicans, and one-third are independents (Arizona Secretary of State, 2017).¹ As such, roughly equal numbers of registered Republicans, Democrats, and independents were called for the survey from Maricopa (Phoenix), Pima (Tucson), and the rural counties in Arizona. Of the 5639 individuals we called, 1880 agreed to take our survey, resulting in a response rate of 33.34%. However, some respondents who completed the survey declined or were unable to answer specific questions about their networks (i.e., unable to name five contacts, unsure of the political affiliation of named contacts, etc.). For this study, we removed data for respondents who had missing responses for relevant questions about their networks. While methods exist for up-weighting the respondents with networks, or imputing network characteristics of respondents who declined network questions, we chose to avoid inferring data in this case since it is impossible to tell who truly had no network members. We feel this limitation in data selection and whatever bias it may create is the lesser problem compared to creating data for individuals for which missing may simply be a true zero value.

This resulted in a usable sample of approximately 1300 individuals, 38% independents (10% lean Republican, 10% lean Democrat, 18% true independent), 30% Republicans (19% identify as Strong Republicans), and 32% Democrats (22% identify as Strong Democrats).

The sample was about evenly split between men (52%) and women (48%), but overrepresented whites and older individuals. Approximately 75% of respondents were white, with about 13% Latino and 12% African American. About 64% of respondents were over the age of 50, 19% were between the ages of 18 and 35, and 17% were between the ages of 36 and 50.

Social networks

The social networks of the respondents were classified as predominantly Democrat, Republican, or independent based on the political affiliations of the five friends provided by each respondent. This illustrates the degree to which a respondent's network is homogenous. Figure 1 presents the distribution of the social network sample, showing that 65% of all respondents reported having a social network that was predominantly made up of individuals with the same party preference as the respondent. However, there was a non-trivial percent of respondents who reported independents in their networks. About 7% of the respondents were Democrats with an independent in their network, and about 8% of the respondents were Republicans with an independent in their network. Approximately 9% of the respondents were an independent with a Republican in their network, and approximately 6% of respondents were an independent with a Democrat in their networks, showing a slightly larger overlap between independents and Republicans than between independents and Democrats.

We also analyzed the network density of both independents and partisans. Network density is a measure of closeness within groups, with values ranging from 0 (low density) to 1 (high density). As previously noted, during the survey respondents were asked how close each named contact was to the other contacts that they named. Dense networks are networks in which the people respondents named were close with each other. Median network density was not significantly different across variations of network types. All network types had a median density of around .7. However, as shown in Figure 2, the relationship between density and having friends with the same political identification is different for independents and partisans. As density increases for independents, the likelihood of having other independent friends decreases. As

¹In Arizona, those not registered as either Democrats or Republicans can register as either “no party preference” or as “other party.” In this study, we consider voters who elected to register as either “no party” or “other party” as independents.

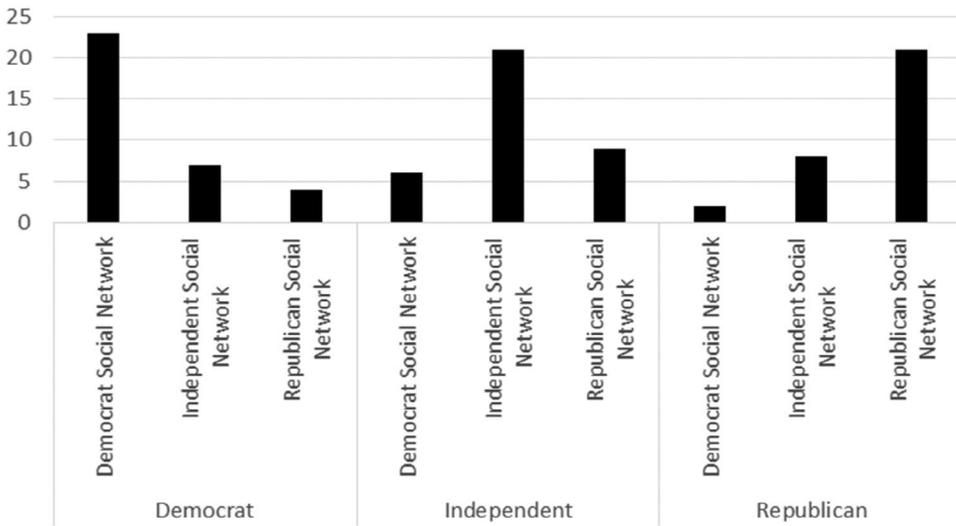


FIGURE 1 Respondent distribution by party and social network type

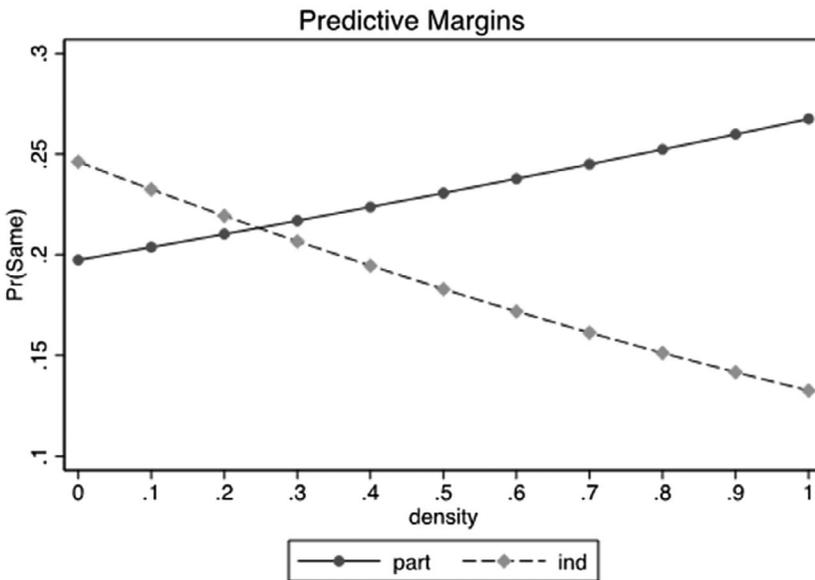


FIGURE 2 Network density for independents and partisans

density increases for partisans, the likelihood of having friends with the same partisan identities increases.

Independents as a moderating force

The first analysis in this section looked at the discussion patterns of political or government matters with friends. The key predictors were the party of the respondent and the party of each

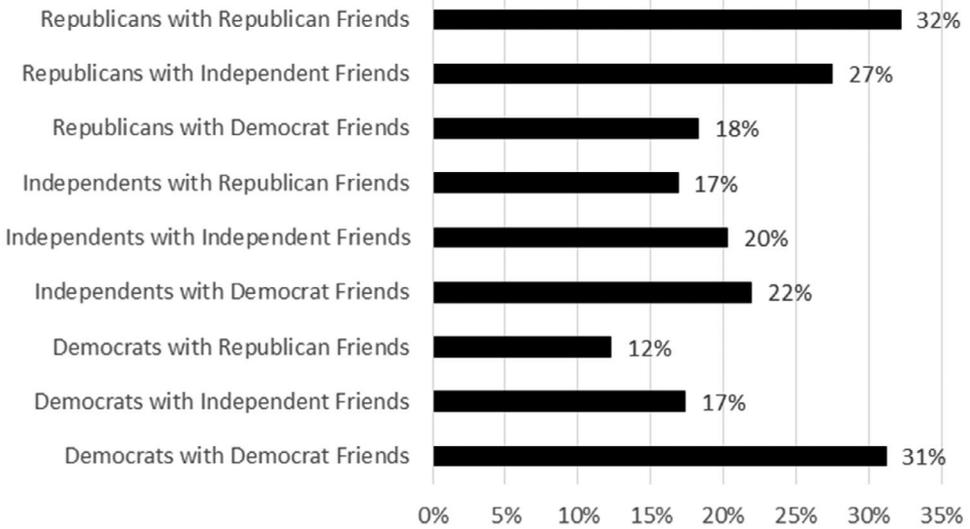


FIGURE 3 Predicted chance of talking about politics and government nearly every day

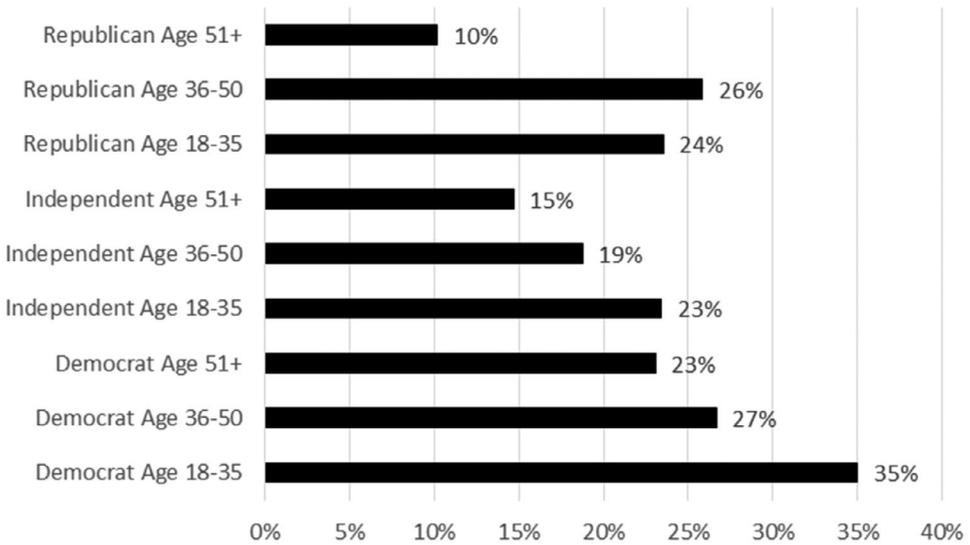


FIGURE 4 Predicted chance of ending a friendship due to political disputes by age and party

of their named friends. Figure 3 presents results based on marginal predictions from a mixed ordered probit model that controlled for respondents age, race, gender, income, network size, and network density. It shows the likelihood of discussing politics nearly every day based on the party of the respondent and the party of the named friend. Both Democrats and Republicans talk with friends of the same respective party about the same amount. However, Republicans (27%) speak with their independent friends more than Democrats (17%) speak with their independent friends.

Democrats are different from Republicans in other ways. The chart in Figure 4 is based on a probit regression model that controlled for gender, race, and income and shows the likelihood of ending a friendship over political disputes. In general, younger Democrats, Republicans,

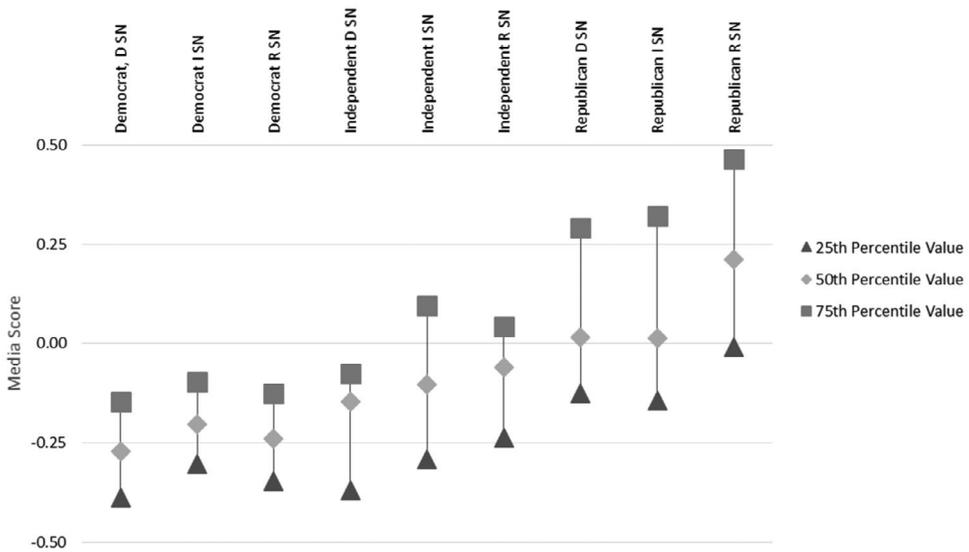


FIGURE 5 Predicted media score quantiles by party and social network type

and independents are overall more likely than their older counterparts to end a friendship over a political dispute. The only exception is that Republicans between 36 and 50 are slightly more likely to end a friendship than Republicans between 18 and 35. Democrats are most likely to end a friendship in every age group. Republicans over 50 are the least likely to end a friendship of all groups.

We also collected data on media consumption. We calculated media bias scores based on reported use by respondents. Sources used more often by liberal respondents had negative scores and sources used more often by conservative respondents had positive scores. We discuss this method for examining media bias in a forthcoming article and provide the table with all media sources, their calculated media bias score, and the percentage of each group that reported using that source in the Appendix. We used these scores (calculated for media sources) to calculate a media use score for each respondent. A respondent's media use score is an average of the scores assigned to media sources that they reported using. These calculations are also detailed in a forthcoming article. We then compared how media use scores varied across party and social network type. The results are presented in Figure 5.

Starting from the left, it is apparent that, regardless of social network, the media consumption patterns for Democrats is consistent with the median media score of about $-.25$. The 75th percentile for Democrats with independent contacts and Democrats with Republican contacts tends to be slightly higher (more conservative) than the same percentile for Democrats who reported only contacts that are also Democrats. The distribution for independents does vary somewhat. For independents, while the median (50th percentile) and 25th percentile increase as the social network becomes more conservative, the 75th percentile for independents with independent social networks is more conservative than independents with Republican social networks. The most interesting results are for Republican respondents, however. When Republican respondents have independent or Democrat social networks, the median consumption distribution shifts more liberal, indicating that social networks (at least for Republicans) moderate the consumption of biased media.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous theoretical understandings of homogeneity in networks (Burt, 2004; Fuchs, 2009), and empirical work on both moderates and independents (Foos & de Rooij, 2017; Meraz, 2013), more independents report having friends that are Democrats than Republicans and more Republican friends than Democrats. The results of the network density analysis offer some additional insight into how independents fit into partisan networks structurally and in the context of interactions. As network density increases for partisans, so too does partisanship. The inverse is true for independents: as network density increases for independents, their networks are less likely to contain other independents. As such, independents with high network density are more likely to be closely tied to those who are committed partisans and may serve as an important source of diverse opinions in a way that is theoretically consistent with previous literature on homogeneity in networks (Burt, 2004; Fuchs, 2009).

In terms of interactions, independents are equally likely to frequently discuss politics with Democrats, Republicans, and other independents. While both Democrats and Republicans are more likely to have frequent political discussions with their respective co-partisans, members of both partisan groups are more likely to engage in frequent political discussions with independents than with out-partisans. This lends support to the argument that partisans are less inclined to avoid disagreement in discussions than they are inclined to avoid engaging with those who identify with the opposing party (Settle & Carlson, 2019). Theoretically, this makes independents an important tie for partisans. Without partisans their social networks are far more ideologically homogenous. The benefits of cross-cutting conversations, including increased tolerance (Pattie & Johnston, 2008), ability to accurately assess whether information about politics is true (Garrett et al., 2016), and decreased likelihood of relying on partisanship for voting decisions (Ekstrom et al., 2020), are more likely to occur as a result of conversations between partisans and independents than as a result of conversations between Democrats and Republicans, given that the former conversations are more likely to occur frequently than the latter.

In addition to being more frequent discussion partners than out-partisans, independents are less likely to end friendships over disagreements than either Democrats or Republicans. Young Democrats are the group most likely to end a friendship over a political dispute. This is particularly interesting because Democrats as a group (17%) are much less likely than Republicans as a group (27%) to frequently talk about politics with independent friends. While this is not definitive evidence that cross-cutting conversations with independents increase tolerance for different views (Pattie & Johnston, 2008), it does offer some support for the idea that interactions with those who belong to different groups may be less invested in protecting the ideological homogeneity of their networks by terminating relationships over disagreements.

While it is possible that in every generation younger individuals will moderate their views as they age, it is also possible that the rise of online communication and social media platforms have made younger adults so accustomed to “unfriending” or “blocking” people they disagree with online that they are more inclined to replicate the practice in offline networks (Giovanniello, 2017). In our sample, approximately 55% of younger respondents reported that the Internet was their primary source of information about politics, compared to only 30% of older respondents. While Kahne and Bowyer (2018) found that political discussions online did not negatively impact offline political engagement, and may even have a positive effect on engagements, they did not examine whether limiting content individuals disagree with online translates to offline networks as well. If these practices translate to offline networks, political engagement may remain steady or increase at the same time polarization increases, in part

because partisanship becomes the driving force behind voting behaviors in the absence of cross-cutting conversations (Ekstrom et al., 2020).

However, our final analysis illustrating that diverse social networks can moderate media consumption (especially for Republicans), offers some hope. While algorithms and content filters may make it less likely that people are exposed to diverse news sources online, diverse networks may be able to counteract the effects of technology. As Vaccari (2013) noted, personal communication with social contacts can increase receptiveness to new ideas. As technology becomes more ubiquitous and online news sources more popular, independents may play an increasingly important role in moderating partisan media consumption patterns that are shaped by algorithms.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to previous literature on networks and political engagement by showing that independent voters are a group distinct from partisans. The independents we surveyed have structural differences within their networks compared to partisans. They may also be better suited to moderate the views of partisans, especially Republicans, than those in opposing partisan groups. While previous research shows that individuals with highly polarized views are less likely to discuss politics with those who hold opposing views (Hanson et al., 2019; Settle & Carlson, 2019), our research shows that partisans continue to discuss politics with independents. As such, independents may very well be the key to bridging the political divide by moderating the views of committed Democrats and Republicans and, in doing so, expanding the advantages associated with cross-cutting discussions to committed partisans.

Despite these contributions, our study has several limitations. First, as with any survey, the social network details are all based on self-reports. That is, the identification of the political leanings of social network members is based on the perception (and honest reporting) of the respondents. Second, we recognize that this was a long telephone survey. This lends itself to the criticism that our respondents may not reflect the general population as they “stuck it out” with regards to the survey. Finally, while our models controlled for several demographic factors, there is always the risk of omitted variable bias, so we caution the reader not to make causal interpretations.

Future research may build on Eveland and Hively (2009), Lupton and others (2015), and Sumaktoyo (2021) by qualitatively analyzing the content of discussions between independents and partisans to better understand how they might moderate high-disagreement discussions. Likewise, given the increasing importance of [digital or online] social [spaces or networks], future research may expand on Meraz (2013) by analyzing online connections for those who identify as independents. Research in this vein could also expand on whether online practices like “unfriending” and “blocking” could impact behavior in offline networks. Last, given what we know about the importance of partisan identities, future research may build on Hanson and others (2019) by analyzing the symbolic value of independent identities. This research may contribute to a better understanding of who independent voters are and whether they develop the same sense of collective identity with other independents that both groups of partisans share with their co-partisans.

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APPENDIX A

Media scores for sources, percent use, and use rank by party

Source	Media score	Republican		Democrat		Independent	
		Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank
<i>New York Times</i>	-1.07	26	19	52	9	38	15
<i>NPR</i>	-1.06	38	11	65	7	56	6
<i>Mother Jones</i>	-1.03	6	28	28	22	17	26
<i>Huffington Post</i>	-1.01	23	22	50	10	41	12
<i>MSNBC</i>	-1.00	40	10	67	6	49	9
<i>PBS</i>	-.91	48	6	71	3	58	5
<i>CNN</i>	-.91	54	3	76	1	66	1
<i>Washington Post</i>	-.77	24	21	41	13	40	13
<i>BBC</i>	-.68	42	7	59	8	53	7
<i>The New Yorker</i>	-.67	18	25	35	17	26	22
<i>NBC News</i>	-.67	54	2	74	2	59	4
<i>ABC News</i>	-.66	53	4	69	4	61	2
<i>CBS News</i>	-.65	50	5	68	5	61	3



<i>Source</i>	Media score	Republican		Democrat		Independent	
		Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank
<i>Slate</i>	-.63	15	27	27	23	24	24
<i>Politico</i>	-.55	28	18	40	14	35	16
<i>The Guardian</i>	-.55	17	26	29	21	29	20
<i>Bloomberg</i>	-.32	25	20	33	18	31	19
<i>USA Today</i>	-.23	41	8	48	11	42	11
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	.00*	38	12	39	15	38	14
<i>Google News</i>	.00*	37	13	43	12	44	10
<i>Yahoo! News</i>	.00*	32	16	31	20	34	17
<i>BuzzFeed</i>	.00*	23	23	33	19	32	18
<i>The Economist</i>	.00*	22	24	27	24	28	21
<i>Drudge Report</i>	.90	34	15	12	25	24	25
<i>Breitbart</i>	1.08	35	14	7	26	26	23
<i>The Blaze/ Glenn Beck</i>	1.38	32	17	6	28	16	27
<i>Rush Limbaugh Show</i>	1.55	40	9	7	27	15	28
<i>Fox News Cable Channel</i>	1.62	79	1	38	16	51	8

Note: *Score set to 0 due to nonsignificant difference between Strong Republicans and Strong Democrats.