

*Unanimity, Discord, and the Diffusion of Public Opinion:
How Opinion Variance Affects Political Communication among Citizens*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the political communication of opinion through social networks. Attention focuses on opinion variance within populations and networks, and how this variance affects communication among individuals. Particularly in the context of ambiguous patterns of communication between individuals, people may experience difficulty in forming judgments regarding the opinions of others. In these situations, environmental priors become useful devices for forming judgments regarding the opinions of other individuals. The problem that arises is related to the utility of these environmental priors when discord rather than unanimity characterizes the contextual distribution of opinion. The paper's argument is that discussions among citizens are most enlightening when surrounding opinion is marked by higher levels of disagreement. The paper's analyses are based on data taken from the 1996 Indianapolis-St. Louis study.

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The communication and diffusion of public opinion ultimately depends on individual assessments regarding the opinions of other individuals. At the same time that these judgments are based on direct responses to the opinions of particular individuals, they also depend on opinion distributions in larger social and political aggregates (Mutz 1998). Public opinion on some issues – both in the aggregate and among individuals – can seemingly be taken for granted. Large majorities with relatively few dissenters support the general principle of equal rights for women, and hence it is a good statistical bet that any particular individual will report an opinion supporting women’s rights. Other opinions on other issues are problematic. Many people disagree with respect to the right of a woman to have an abortion, and predicting any particular individual’s opinion thereby becomes a more formidable task.

The problem thus becomes, how do people discern the opinions of others, and how do their methods of detection differ in the context of controversial and non-controversial issues – in circumstances characterized by more-or-less heterogeneous and homogeneous opinion distributions? When opinions are diverse, people have less generalized contextual information to use in reaching a judgment regarding the opinions of other individuals. In situations such as these, if individuals are to form judgments regarding the opinions of others, their judgments necessarily become more reliant on information taken within the immediate dyad – from the particular holders of the opinions through discussion and communication. The problem is that diverse opinions arise in controversial areas, and a long and continuing line of research in political psychology asserts that people tend to avoid discussion in controversial areas (Mutz 2002; MacKuen 1990). Hence, in circumstances where discussion might be most valuable in illuminating the opinions of others, individuals would seemingly become less willing to run the risk of contentious disagreement. The implication is that individuals are less likely to obtain information from others regarding the very issues where they need such information most – controversial issues with divergent distributions of opinion.

This paper addresses the consequences of opinion distributions in surrounding populations for the communication of opinions between and among the individual members of these populations. Does the variance of an opinion in a population stimulate: (1) higher or lower levels of political discussion regarding the opinion, (2) more or less accessible perceptions of the opinions held by others, (3) more or less accuracy in these perceptions, and (4) the use of alternative heuristic devices in the formation of judgments regarding the opinions of others?

This study is based on an experimental design in which respondents to the 1996 Indianapolis-St. Louis study were asked to make judgments regarding an opinion held by each of the discussants in their self-identified communication networks. While the issue object for the opinion was randomly varied across the respondents, each respondent was asked about the same randomly selected opinion for each of his or her own discussants. The distribution of these randomly selected opinions differ quite dramatically both within the entire sample of respondents, and within the communication networks of these respondents. In addition to the experimental design, two additional measurement procedures make the study possible. First, we have collected response latencies – speed of response data – for the respondents' perceptions of their discussants' opinions. Second, members of the respondents' networks were also interviewed, and hence we are able to assess the accuracy of their perceptions.

Contingent Ambiguity in Political Communication

Political communication among and between citizens is a highly efficient means whereby individuals become politically informed (Downs 1957); it plays an influential role in the formation and diffusion of political preferences (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Druckman and Nelson 2003; Levine 2004); and it is central to patterns of political engagement and mobilization (Rosenstone and Hanson 1993; Huckfeldt and Sprague 2004). Notwithstanding these important functions, political communication often occurs in a context marked by high levels of ambiguity. The source of this ambiguity is an important issue in the analysis of political communication because it speaks directly to

the potential of collective decision making in democratic politics, as well as to patterns of unanimity and discord (Huckfeldt et al. 1998a).

First, and perhaps most important, communication is typically informal and offhand, and politics seldom serves as the centerpiece for relationships and social encounters. This is not to say that politics is unimportant or insignificant, but only that it competes with other subjects and purposes for air time in the conversational life of most citizens (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004). The same factors that enhance and diminish higher levels of political participation and engagement on the part of individual citizens also serve to enhance and diminish thoroughgoing discussions of politics among and between these citizens. The importance of these factors is likely to be more pronounced in the context of public opinion than it is, for example, in the context of the vote for president. While many individuals are able to make accurate judgments regarding the presidential candidate preferences of their associates, it may be more difficult to make evidence-based judgments regarding their opinions on a wide array of issues that are rarely discussed and infrequently communicated.

Second, the ambiguity of political communication may be individually motivated, either by conscious strategy, or by social discomfort, or by both (MacKuen 1990; Mutz 2002). When people encounter associates with divergent political viewpoints, they may purposefully change the subject, unwittingly misperceive the message, or consciously censor their own response to avoid an uncomfortable social exchange. Indeed, a rich and enduring tradition in the analysis of political communication calls into question the capacity and willingness of individuals to perceive political messages accurately when they are contrary to their own preferences (Festinger 1957; Klapper 1968).

Given the ambiguity of social communication and the uncertainty that it produces, the context of the communication becomes particularly important for understanding the judgments that individuals reach regarding the opinions of individual associates. Communication occurs within social contexts that are specific to a series of nested environments: political messages are conveyed within the context of particular dyads, located within larger networks, imbedded within larger environments of opinion. Each of these environments, in turn, has the potential to influence the inferential judgments that citizens make

about the opinions of other individuals. Without actually hearing a friend's opinion on organized prayer in public schools, one might infer – correctly or incorrectly – that she holds the same opinion held by others. In short, ambiguous political messages and the uncertainty they produce create a setting in which prior information, taken from larger surrounding environments, becomes particularly influential in forming judgments regarding the preferences held by other individuals.

The use of prior information may not come easily for many individuals in many settings, and a rich tradition of experimental research indicates that people often rely more heavily on their own vivid experience in reaching decisions and forming impressions about others (Kahneman and Tversky 1973; Tversky and Kahneman 1973, 1974). This raises an important question: how important is prior information taken from the environment to political communication among citizens. Tversky and Kahneman (1982) argue that the effect of a base rate (or prior information) depends on the particular inferential context. Prior information is more likely to be employed in situations where individuals interpret the information as revealing something quite important regarding the likelihood of an event due to "external-situational factors" independently of the immediate circumstances ("internal-dispositional factors") affecting the inference (1982: 159). Our argument is that environmentally supplied priors become particularly important in the context of political communication among citizens.

Such a view of political communication carries with it a number of implications. First, the environmental information is most informative when the opinion distribution is most consensual. To the extent that your own opinion, the opinions of your associates, and the opinions of the public at large tend to be in agreement, there is less need to collect information from individual associates regarding their opinions. You might more-or-less reliably assume that, since everyone holds the same opinion, communication with any particular individual proves to be less necessary to the formation of a judgment regarding that individual's opinion. Indeed, to the extent that one expects everyone to hold a particular opinion or belief, it might be difficult to believe that anyone would hold an opinion to the contrary!

Second, and conversely, the environment is least informative when opinion is most divided. To the extent that a higher level of variance exists among and between your own opinion, the opinions of

your own associates, and opinions in the larger community, prior information taken from the environment will be less helpful in forming judgments regarding the opinions of particular individuals. In these circumstances, a deeply divided distribution of opinion is likely to provide little guidance, and hence the process of communicating with a given associate becomes particularly important in forming a judgment about that individual's opinion. This creates a problem, of course, if controversial opinions are believed to be inappropriate subject matter for political communication. In other words, if people are hesitant to discuss controversial subjects, then political communication fails just when it would be most valuable!

The Indianapolis-St. Louis Study

The analysis for this paper is based on the 1996 Indianapolis-St. Louis study, conducted by the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University, with interviews that began early in March of 1996 and ended in early January of 1997. The study includes two samples: a sample of main respondents (N=2,174) drawn from the lists of registered voters, combined with a one-stage snowball sample of these respondents' discussants (N=1,475). Main respondent samples are drawn from the voter registration lists of two study sites: (1) the Indianapolis metropolitan area defined as Marion County, Indiana; and (2) the St. Louis metropolitan area defined as the independent city of St. Louis combined with the surrounding (and mostly suburban) St. Louis County, Missouri. The pre-election main respondent sampling plan was to complete interviews with approximately 40 main respondents each week before the election, equally divided between the two study sites. After the election, an additional 830 respondents were interviewed, once again divided between the St. Louis and Indianapolis metropolitan areas. Discussant interviews were completed at a rate of approximately 30 interviews each week during the pre-election period, with an additional 639 interviews conducted after the election. In the pre-election period, the discussant interviews for a particular main respondent were completed within two subsequent interview weeks of the main respondent interview.¹

Early in the main respondent survey, the interviewers asked each survey respondent to provide the first names of their discussion partners. A random half sample was asked to name people with whom

they discuss “important matters”; the other random half was asked to name people with whom they discuss “government, elections, and politics” (Burt 1986; Huckfeldt et al. 1998b). The interviewers took up to five names before asking a battery of questions about each discussant in the sequential order in which the discussant was named. After asking the battery of questions for the last-named discussant, the interviewer asked the respondent to identify the presidential candidate supported by each of the discussants. The order in which respondents were asked this final question about particular discussants was varied across main respondents, and the interviewer used the computer clock to time the respondent’s response.

Near the end of the survey, after the respondent had answered extensive batteries of questions regarding other issues unrelated to the network battery, the interviewer asked a final battery of questions regarding the previously identified discussants. The purpose of this battery was to obtain the respondent’s perception regarding each of her discussants’ opinions on a particular political issue. For each respondent, this issue was randomly chosen from a list of four possibilities: a woman’s right to an abortion, government aid for blacks and other minorities, equal rights for women, and organized prayer in public schools. The text of the question was,

We are about finished, and now I would like to ask you a few more questions about the (people/person) you named earlier. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is strongly oppose and 5 is strongly favor, what do you think (discussant name’s) opinion is regarding (the randomly assigned opinion)?

The interviewers asked about each of the respondent’s discussants in the same order as the questions regarding the discussants’ voting preferences.²

At the end of the question about each particular discussant, the interviewer used a key stroke to start a computer clock. As soon as the respondent answered the question, the interviewer used a second key stroke to stop the clock before recording the respondent’s answer. The CATI system then asked the *interviewer* whether the timing was successful, and the interviewer asked the respondent a follow-up question: “When you talk with (name of discussant), do you discuss these sorts of issues often, sometimes, rarely, or never?”

At the end of the interview, the interviewer asked the respondents for identifying information to use in contacting and interviewing their discussants. Based on their responses we interviewed 1,475 discussants, employing a survey instrument that was very similar to the instrument used in the main respondent interview. The analyses of this paper draw on information taken from both the respondents and their discussants, where each observation in the resulting data set is a dyadic relationship between a main respondent and a discussant.³ We refer to the main respondent as the “respondent” and the discussant as the “discussant” even though, for each dyad, both the main respondent and the discussant were interviewed. These procedures yield the following measures for the resulting matrix of 1475 dyads.

1. Each dyadic observation includes the respondent’s perception regarding the opinion of the interviewed discussant on a randomly selected political issue.
2. The dyadic observation also includes the self-reported opinion of the discussant and the respondent on the randomly selected issue.
3. The observation includes the respondent’s judgment regarding the frequency with which “these sorts of issues” are discussed with each discussant.
4. A latency measure is included for the speed with which each respondent reports a perception of each discussant’s opinion, as well as the interviewer’s assessment of whether the timing procedure was carried out successfully.
5. In addition to information on the particular discussant within the dyad, each observation also includes perceptual information regarding the respondent’s other discussants, including the respondent’s perception of each discussant’s position on the same randomly selected political issue.

Discussion and Diversity within the Networks

Individuals are located within communities, counties and other macro-environments that are characterized by particular distributions of public opinion with respect to important political issues. They do not encounter these opinion distributions directly, but rather through networks of political communication that are drawn from these larger populations (Cho 2003). Several questions thus arise:

How are opinion distributions within communication networks related to the population distributions within surrounding populations? How are opinion distributions at both levels related to the frequency of communication? In short, our initial focus is on the macro-environmental factors that underly levels of opinion diversity within communication networks, the factors that enhance the frequency of political communication within these networks, and the relationship between communication frequency and opinion diversity.

The relationship between opinion diversity within communication networks and opinion diversity within the larger population is a particularly important issue for this analysis. To the extent that individuals exercise control over the political composition of their communication networks, we might expect to see little relationship between levels of diversity in the larger population and levels of diversity in the networks. If individuals seek out politically sympathetic discussants, or if they avoid political controversy and disagreement, we would expect communication networks to be politically homogeneous and agreeable, regardless of opinion distributions in the surrounding population. Alternatively, to the extent such control is incomplete, or to the extent that people are less motivated to exercise such control, we would expect the dispersion of opinion within networks to reflect the dispersion of opinion within the larger population.

This problem is addressed in the two models of Table 1A, where the standard deviations of network opinion distributions are regressed on several explanatory variables. Both models show that larger networks tend to be more politically diverse – that is, people with more extensive networks of communication are more likely to encounter divergent political viewpoints (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004). In the first model of Table 1(A) we see that the most diverse issue within the networks is abortion, and the least diverse issue is the excluded baseline excluded issue – equal rights for women, with the minority aid issue and prayer in schools issue lying between. The abortion issue is also the most diverse issue in the sample as a whole, and equal rights for women is the most consensual.⁴ Hence, in the second model, when the dummy variables for the issues are replaced by the mean and standard deviations

of the issue opinions in the sample, higher levels of diversity within the sample predict higher levels of diversity within the networks.

In summary, even when we take into account the particular features of the networks and the respondents, we see a strong and direct tie between the diversity of aggregate opinion distributions in the larger community and the diversity of opinion distributions within the communication networks of the respondents. Little evidence exists to suggest that individuals are able to escape controversy by sequestering themselves in agreeable networks of homogeneous opinion. Controversial issues in the larger political environment penetrate even closely held networks of political communication.

A related issue revolves around the consequences of opinion diversity regarding a particular issue for the frequency with which that issue is discussed. Even if individuals are unable or disinclined to exercise lock grip control over the political composition of their communication networks, they may still censor their conversations, thereby reducing the frequency with which they discuss controversial issues. Hence, in response to divergent opinion regarding one issue, individuals may simply to move on to conversations regarding consensual topics that are better suited for polite conversation.

This problem is evaluated in Part B of Table 1 where the mean frequency of discussing the particular issue with discussants in the network is regressed on the same factors, with the standard deviation of network opinion regarding the issue as an additional regressor. In the first model, political interest on the part of the respondent and network size are both positive predictors of discussion frequency. Perhaps more surprising, opinion distributions within the networks have no effect. Moreover, the opinion with the highest standard deviation both in the sample and in the networks (abortion) is the most likely to be discussed, and the opinion with the smallest standard deviation (equal rights for women) is the least likely to be discussed. In the second model, when the dummy variables for the issues are replaced by the mean and standard deviation of the issues in the sample, we see that opinion diversity in the larger environment appears to stimulate higher frequencies of communication.

Rather than sequestering individuals from political disagreement and controversy, networks of political communication expose individuals to the politically compelling and controversial issues of the

day (Anderson and Paskeviciute 2004; Gimpel and Lay 2004). This exposure is realized in two separate ways. First, opinions that produce disagreement in the larger political environment also produce disagreement within communication networks. Second, rather than avoiding these contentious issues, individuals are more likely to discuss them within their networks of communication. In short, the political conversations that occur within these networks serve as an extension of the political process that is occurring in the larger political environment. Politically controversial issues do not inhibit political communication among citizens, but rather stimulate it, and the discussion of controversial issues produces important consequences for the strength of attitudes and opinions (Visser and Mirabile 2004).

Accessibility of Perceived Opinions

The evidence presented here does not suggest that political communication networks inhibit the communication of opinion diversity in the larger environment. Hence, it becomes important to assess the implications of opinion diversity for the respondents' perceptions of the opinions held by their associates. Rather than focusing on the perceived opinion itself, the analysis begins by focusing on the accessibility of the perception (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004). In the present context, factors affecting the accessibility of the perception might be conceived in two different ways. First, in keeping with previous work (Huckfeldt et al. 1998b), it might be seen as a consequence of the association in the respondent's memory between a particular discussant and a particular opinion. Alternatively, the accessibility of the perception might be seen wholly in relationship to the underlying attitude regarding the issue. If an opinion is seen as being consensual, people might respond to the opinion alone, automatically assuming that everyone they know supports or opposes the particular issue. Indeed, for some issues, it might be difficult for individuals to imagine their associates holding any *other* opinion. These alternatives are considered below, but in any event, the measurement device for accessibility is the time latency for the respondent's response – the time that is required for the respondent to offer her perception regarding a single discussant's opinion on the randomly selected issue (Fazio 1990, 1995).

The response latency for the respondent's perception of the discussant's preference is regressed on a series of explanatory variables in the first model of Table 2. The first three explanatory variables are related to measurement procedures, sociometric order, and question order: (1) A dummy variable indexes the first named discussant; (2) a variable is included for the order in which each of the discussants was originally named by the respondent; and (3) another variable is included for the order in which the perceived opinion question is asked regarding each discussant.

These order measures become important for several interrelated reasons. First, the speed of response to survey questions accelerates as respondents become familiar with the question format. The effect of such a learning curve is a potential problem in the present analysis because the sociometric order in which discussants are named may carry substantive meaning (Burt 1986; Huckfeldt et al. 1998b). That is, the effects of the learning curve are negatively confounded with the effects of any intimacy or strength of relationship bias that is related to sociometric order. In anticipation of this problem, we modified the order in which respondents were asked for their perceptions regarding the politics of the discussants. The perceptual battery always begins with a question about the first discussant's issue opinion, and hence, if the respondent named two discussants, this meant that we asked about the first and then the second. If the respondent named three discussants, we asked about the first, third, and second. For respondents who named four, we asked about the first, fourth, third and second. Finally, respondents with five discussants were asked about the first, fifth, second, fourth and third. While this produces a perfect correlation between the first discussant named and the first discussant about whose preference the respondent is asked, the correlation between question order and discussant order drops to $-.14$ for the remaining discussants, and hence the learning curve is independent of factors related to the sociometric order of identification.

Two of the three measures produce statistically discernible effects on the response latencies. The response latency for the first discussant (and first question) adds nearly 1.5 seconds to the time required for an answer, and this response latency is shortened by .66 seconds for each succeeding question. The

order in which discussants are named also produces a negative coefficient, but the relatively small coefficient and t-value suggest a relatively minor and statistically indiscernible effect.

Two more explanatory variables are also related to measurement issues. First, the baseline speed of response indicates that some respondents answer questions more quickly than others, and this baseline speed helps to explain the speed with which respondents offer perceptions regarding their discussants' opinions.⁵ Second, two separate name generator questions were used to ask respondents for the names of their discussants. One random half-sample was asked for the people with whom they discuss "important matters" (Burt 1986), and the other random half was asked to name the people with whom they discuss "government, elections, and politics" (Huckfeldt et al. 1998). While the respondents answer more rapidly when asked about the politically defined discussants, the difference is not statistically discernible.

Several explanatory variables are related to the particular opinions held by the respondents and their discussants. First and most important, the extremity of the perceived opinion for the discussant is negatively related to the response latency. That is, the respondents provide their opinions more quickly when they perceive a more opinionated discussant. Second, the extremity of the respondent's own opinion is also negatively related to the response latency. Opinionated individuals respond more rapidly in providing their perceptions regarding the discussants' opinions. Third, the extremity of the discussant's opinion, based on the self-reported opinion, produces no discernible effect, and this lack of effect persists even if we drop the variable measuring the respondent's perception of the discussant's opinion extremity. Fourth, the absolute value of the difference between the opinion reported by the respondent and the discussant also produce an important effect – greater levels of dyadic disagreement produce longer, slower response times. Fifth, the subjective opinion stability ("how likely is your opinion to change?") reported by the discussant produces no discernible effect.

The frequency with which the respondent reports discussing "these sorts of issues" with the particular discussant produces a substantial effect in which higher scores (less extensive discussion) produces faster response times. The direction of this effect may be surprising – more information in the form of more communication produces less accessible perceptions regarding the discussant's opinion.

This effect can usefully be seen in the context of Table 1, where higher levels of opinion variance were seen to produce higher frequencies of discussion. Thus it would appear that controversy stimulates conversation, but in such a context, communication produces perceptions that are anchored in a reasoned rather than an automatic response. In short, people talk more frequently about controversial issues that cannot be taken for granted, and hence a respondent is more likely to stop and think when asked to make a judgment regarding the opinion of a discussant.

Finally, dummy variables are included for three of the issues – a woman's right to an abortion, aid for blacks and minorities, and organized prayer in schools – with equal rights for women being the excluded baseline category. These dummy variables suggest important differences across the issues, with perceptions regarding abortion opinions being the least accessible, and perceptions regarding women's rights being the most accessible. The abortion issue adds .8 seconds to the response latency, and the school prayer issue adds .6 seconds. What might account for these differences?

Differential Accessibility of Communicated Opinions

One explanation for the differential accessibility of perceived opinions focuses on cues taken from the larger environment, and another focuses on cues taken from the micro-environment. In terms of the former, some issues have achieved wide support in the larger environment, producing cultural unanimity among the larger population, while others remain contested. For example, in the larger American political culture, it is widely believed that women should have equal rights, at least so long as the meaning attached to equal rights remains unclear. In the case of these culturally uncontested issues, individuals may automatically assume that individuals hold an opinion that coincides with the culturally dominant opinion. Hence, cultural unanimity regarding an issue may drive the accessibility of people's perceptions regarding the opinions of others.

A second explanation focuses on information transmitted through the more immediate micro-environments within which individuals are imbedded. According to this second explanation, individuals learn about culturally dominant opinions through specific patterns of social interaction and political

communication. To the extent that individuals are imbedded among individuals who communicate particular opinions regarding particular issues, these individuals are more likely to believe that any one of their associates holds similar opinions. Hence, unanimity within networks of social interaction may also be responsible for the accessibility of people's perceptions regarding the opinions of others.

The first explanation is considered graphically in Figure 1(A), where the first model's dummy variables for the various issues in the first model of Table 2(A) are plotted on the standard deviations of these opinions in the entire sample.⁶ Each of the dummies is plotted as an incremental change in the response latency, and hence the baseline – equal rights for women – is plotted as zero. Part A of the figure produces a set of points that lies along a remarkably straight line in which higher levels of opinion diversity produce longer latencies. The plot in Figure 1(B) also produces a substantial relationship between the response latencies and the diversity of opinions within the remainder of the respondents' networks, but the predictability of the pattern is less pronounced.

Part C of Figure 1 demonstrates the strong association between patterns of diversity in the larger sample and patterns of diversity within respondents' networks of communication. This relationship may by now seem obvious, but it is worthwhile to linger for a moment on its importance. Regardless of the fact that the construction of communication networks depends on a continuing series of volitional decisions, the opinion diversity within communication networks reflects the opinion diversity within the larger population. At the same time, notice that the diversity is muted within communication networks – the range of diversity is lower within networks than it is in the population as a whole. But this does not change the fact that opinion networks fail to qualify as oases of political calm and unanimity within a culture of contentiousness. Indeed, the same disagreements that occur in the larger political environment are reflected in the patterns of diversity that persist within even these closely held, personally idiosyncratic communication networks.

Finally, the second model in Table 2 replaces the dummy variables for the issues with the mean and standard deviations for the opinions, both within the sample and within the respondents' networks. Both standard deviation measures produce nearly discernible effects on the response latencies in which

higher levels of diversity yield slower response times.⁷ What does this mean? Figuring out associates' positions on issues becomes less straightforward – perceptions of their opinions are less accessible – when diverse opinions are present within the dyad, within the larger community, and within the more immediate communication network. In short, the accessibility of judgments regarding the opinions of others is driven by the reality of opinion distributions, both within the immediate micro-environment and within the aggregate opinion of the larger community. This does not mean that the accessibility of perceptions is unrelated to associations in memory between particular individuals and particular opinions, but the net effect is really due to two effects – a particularistic effect due to the particular individual and a more universal effect due to the wider dispersion of the opinion.

The Factors that Drive Perception

We have seen that perceptions are more accessible to the extent that issues are distributed more homogeneously, both within the larger environment and within the individual's own network of communication. In this section the focus shifts to the factors that affect the perception itself – what are the factors that drive the perceptions? Previous research shows that individuals reach judgments regarding the opinions of their associates based on several primary sources – their own opinions, the opinions of other individuals in their communication networks, and the actual opinion of the associate in question (Huckfeldt, Sprague and Levine 2001; Huckfeldt et al. 1998). From one perspective, the first two factors – an individual's own opinion and the opinions of other associates – provide short cuts for the individual to use in assessing a particular individual's opinion. As long as the distribution of an opinion is characterized by unanimity, such shortcuts are likely to be highly reliable. In contrast, when the distribution of opinions on a particular issue is widely dispersed, we would expect the short cuts to become less reliable. The question thus arises, do individual inferences rely more heavily on the actual opinions of others when an issue is marked by discord rather than unanimity?

In the first model of Table 3, the perceived opinions are regressed on the respondent's self-reported opinion, the discussant's self-reported opinion, and the mean of the respondent's perceptions

regarding the opinions of her remaining discussants. Dummy variables are included for three of the issues – the deleted baseline issue is women’s rights. Finally, these dummy variables are used to create interaction variables with the self-reported opinions of the discussant and the main respondent, as well as with the mean of the main respondent’s perceptions of the opinions held by the remaining discussants.

The model produces discernible effects for the main respondent opinion, the discussant’s opinion, and the mean opinion in the residual network (Huckfeldt, Sprague, and Levine 2001). The directions of these effects suggest that main respondents are more likely to perceive that their discussants hold an opinion to the extent that (1) they hold the opinion themselves, (2) they perceive that their other discussants hold the opinion, and (3) discussant actually reports holding the opinion. The dummy variables for abortion and school prayer also produce discernible effects, as well as several of the interaction variables.

We are particularly interested in the variable impact of the discussant’s self-reported opinion on the main respondent’s perception, and the pattern of interaction effects for the discussant opinion produce a pattern of effects in which larger coefficients are correlated with the standard deviation for the opinions in the sample. In Part A of Figure 2, the estimates in the first model of Table 3 are used to consider the magnitude of the effect due to the discussant’s opinion on the probability that the main respondent perceives the discussant to hold either a four or a five on the relevant opinion scale. The figure shows that the discussant’s self-reported opinion is most influential with respect to abortion – the opinion with the highest standard deviation in the sample – and least influential with respect to equal rights for women – the opinion with the lowest standard deviation in the sample.

We build on these results in the second model of Table 3 by estimating an ordered logit model in which each of the three effects – the effects due to self-reported respondent opinion, the self-reported discussant opinion, and mean perceived opinion in the residual network – is contingent on the standard deviation of the opinion in the sample. As these results show, the contingent effect – measured as the interaction with the standard deviation of the opinion in the sample – is only discernible for the discussant’s self-reported opinion.

Part B of Figure 2 once again displays the probability that the respondent perceives the discussant to hold either a four or a five on the relevant opinion scale. In this graph, the effect of the discussant's self-reported opinion is contingent on the standard deviation of the opinion in the sample. As we see, the results closely mirror the previous results. The standard deviation of the opinions in the figure, from low to high, are held constant at the standard deviations for the opinions in the samples – women's rights, minority aid, school prayer, and abortion. Once again, the discussant's opinion is particularly important for the communication of the most variable opinion – abortion.

In summary, *the actual opinions of the discussants become more important when the distribution of opinion is more divided regarding an issue.* (For a complementary result, see Segal and Meyer 1974). What does this imply? As we have already seen, perceived opinions regarding conflictive issues are less accessible. In the absence of unanimity, perceptions regarding the opinions of others are not automatic – individuals must stop and think before making a judgment. The same factors would appear to trigger a shift in the importance of the discussant's true opinion. In the absence of unanimity, respondents are less able to rely on a surrounding consensus in making inferences regarding the opinions of others. Hence, they rely more heavily on evidence regarding the opinion that is idiosyncratic to a particular individual.

Communication Accuracy

In this final section of the analysis, we consider the consequences of dispersed opinions for communication misfires – instances in which individuals misperceive the opinions of others. Previous analyses have shown that opinion diversity affects the accessibility of perceptions regarding the opinions of others, as well as the means that are used to reach judgments about these opinions. Does opinion diversity also affect the accuracy with which individuals perceive the opinions?

The goal is to identify the factors that enhance and attenuate effective communication within communication networks, and thus Table 4 employs an ordered logit model to address the accuracy with which respondents perceive the opinions of discussants. For purposes of this analysis, communication errors are defined as the absolute (positively signed) distances between the discussant's self-reported

opinion and the respondent's perception of the discussant's opinion. The model includes several explanatory variables – the self-reported opinion of the discussant, the self-reported opinion of the main respondent, the perceived opinion in the remaining network, and the interactions among these three variables. Dummy variables are also included for three of the opinion issues, with women's rights as the excluded baseline. Finally, control variables are included for the discussants' judgments regarding the stability of their own opinions, the respondents' judgments of the frequency with which the respondent and the discussant discuss "these sorts" of issues, and the self-reported ideological and partisan extremity of the discussant.

The model produces discernible effects due to the respondent's opinion, the discussant's opinion, and the respondent's perception of opinion in the remainder of the network, as well as the interactions among these variables. None of the other variables produce discernible effects. The accuracy of the opinion perceptions are not differentiated across the issues. The more generalized partisan and ideological extremity of the discussants' opinions does not affect the accuracy with which they are perceived, and neither does the frequency of discussion or the discussant's subjective assessment of their own opinion's stability.

In short, all can be explained in terms of the distribution of the opinions within the dyad and the remainder of the network. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the distribution of the opinions within the dyad and within the network vary across the opinions. In particular, the standard deviation of the opinion in the sample affects the extent of disagreement between the respondent and the discussant, as well as between the discussant and the remainder of the network. And as we have seen, the standard deviation of the opinion in the network is driven by the standard deviation of the opinion in the sample. (In results not shown here, the standard deviation of the opinion in the sample produces a substantial and statistically discernible effect on the level of disagreement within the dyad and within the network, as well as a substantial and discernible effect on the accuracy of the respondent's perception of the discussant.) Thus, it is not that the distribution of the opinion in the larger population does not matter,

but rather that its effect is captured in the distribution of the opinion within the micro-environments where communication occurs.

The magnitudes of the discernible effects are shown in Figure 4. In each plot, the probability of misperception is graphed on the y-axis, and the discussant's self-reported opinion is graphed on the x-axis. The three different parts of the plot correspond to mean opinions in the residual networks that are opposed, intermediate, and favorable. And each plotted line corresponds to a different main respondent opinion – oppose, intermediate, and favor. This means that, to the extent that a plotted line is horizontal, there is no effect on perceptual accuracy due to variation in the discussant's true opinion when the main respondent and the residual network opinions are held constant at those particular values. In contrast, as the plotted line becomes steeper in either a positive or negative direction, the discussant's opinion becomes increasingly important in whether or not the respondent perceives the discussant correctly.

What does the figure show? First, the discussant opinion has the least effect for mid-point respondent opinions in mid-point residual networks. The discussant opinion also has minimal effects on accuracy among opinionated respondents located in maximally divergent networks. Thus, we see only a minor effect due to discussant opinion for respondents who oppose an issue in residual networks that favor it, and for respondents who favor an issue in networks that oppose it. In all these instances, it would appear that respondents are accustomed to encountering preferences that are different from their own, and hence they are better equipped to identify discussant opinion, regardless of what that opinion might be.

Second, the discussant opinion produces a maximal effect when opinionated respondents are located in residual networks that share their opinions. Thus, we see an enormous effect due to the discussant's opinion among respondents who favor an issue located within a residual network that also favors the issue; and we see a similarly dramatic effect among respondents who oppose an issue located within a residual network that also opposes it. Indeed, the likelihood of an inaccurate perception is about .1 if the respondent, the discussant, and the main respondent either favor or oppose the issue. And the probability is about .9 if the respondent and the residual network either favor or oppose the issue, and the discussant holds the opposite opinion.

In short, respondents are more likely to recognize divergent preferences accurately if they are located in heterogeneous micro-environments. If people seldom encounter opinions that are different from their own, they are unlikely to recognize divergent preferences when they do encounter them. Thus individuals are more likely to misperceive disagreement as agreement in relationship to environments and issues characterized by unanimity rather than discord. Indeed, conditions approximating unanimity can be seen as the enemy of accurate communication, and the catalyst for misperception.

Conclusion

The analysis of this paper supports the importance of opinion diversity as a factor that conditions political communication, as well as leading to less than obvious conclusions regarding the role of disagreement in the diffusion of public opinion. First, and perhaps most important, the political communication networks and micro-environments where individuals transmit, receive, and process information about politics do not provide safe havens from the controversies that buffet the larger political environment. Issues that provoke controversies in the larger environment also provoke controversy closer to home.

Moreover, politically contentious issues are more likely to stimulate political communication. People are most likely to discuss those issues that provoke the most disagreement. In one context, this is perhaps wholly unsurprising. If an issue is settled – if unanimity has been achieved and uncertainty resolved – why would individuals spend time talking about it (Downs 1957)? Politics is driven by conflict and disagreement, not only at the level of elites and formal institutions, but also at the level of citizens and the informal institutions of political communication that lie at the heart of democratic politics.

Second, perceptions of the opinions held by others are less accessible with respect to controversial issues. An individual's judgments regarding the opinions of her associates are more likely to be automatic when a consensus has been reached in the larger environment with respect to the issue in question. Hence, people assume that their associates hold socially dominant opinions, and they respond

less readily when they are asked to provide the opinions of their associates regarding controversial issues. This suggests that opinion perceptions regarding controversial issues must be informed by discussion and communication, and as the analysis has shown, discussion is more frequent regarding controversial issues. At the same time, this produces a conclusion that perhaps runs counter to intuitions formed on the basis of the conflict avoidance literature: *discussion is most frequent for the controversial issues that are associated with the least accessible perceptions regarding the opinions of others.*

Third, dyadic communication regarding politics – the communication that occurs between two citizens – is most effective and important in the context of controversial issues. One person's perception of another individual's opinion is most affected by the reality of that individual's opinion in the context of controversial rather than consensual issues. When disagreement is a rare event, judgments regarding the opinions of individuals are frequently driven by aggregate opinion distributions and individual assessments of a perceived consensus. In contrast, little can be taken for granted when disagreement is widespread, and individuals pay greater attention to the particular messages that individuals communicate.

Finally, individuals are more likely to recognize the opinions of others accurately when they are imbedded within politically diverse micro-environments. To the extent that an individual is located within a micro-environment that is perceived to be in homogeneous agreement with the individual's own opinion, the individual is less likely to recognize disagreement when he encounters it. In this way, the reality (or the perception) of a political consensus undermines the opportunity for the consensus to be disturbed by the recognition of viewpoints to the contrary (Noelle-Neumann 1984). Indeed, perceptions of unanimity are typically sustained by misperception – misperception stimulated by false perceptions of the individuals whose opinions and beliefs lie beyond the boundaries of the perceived consensus.

Notes

1. The experimental condition imbedded within the design of this name generator thus provides the opportunity to consider whether political information networks are separate from social communication networks more broadly considered. Additional details regarding the study are available in Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague (2004).
2. The order in which the questions are asked is particularly important due to a sociometric bias in the order that respondents provide names (Burt 1986), and this bias could easily be confounded with the respondents' learning curve in the time required to answer survey questions, thereby undermining the effort to evaluate the latency measures.
3. Each discussant (n=1475) only appears once in this data set, but main respondents (872) appear multiple times: 469 appear in one dyad, 250 in two, 112 in three, 35 in four, and 6 in five. Hence we employ a standard error correction for clustering that takes account of this fact. This correction produces only minor changes (see Rogers 1993) – an unsurprising result given the very modest degree of clustering. All results are obtained with Stata, Release 8.
4. The standard deviations within the entire main respondent sample are: 1.68 for abortion, 1.50 for prayer in schools, 1.26 for minority aid, and 1.06 for equal rights for women. See appendix Table A5 for the frequency distributions within the sample.
5. The baseline speed of response is measured as the number of minutes required for the entire interview.
6. Calculating the sample statistics separately for St. Louis and Indianapolis did not create appreciable differences or consequences for the analysis, and hence we employ the entire sample.
7. The t-values and coefficients for each of the standard deviation measures become larger if one or the other is dropped from the regression.

Appendix

The distributions of main respondent opinions for the four issues are shown in Tale A5. The sample for this table consists of all main respondents, in Indianapolis and St. Louis, who were interviewed between March and December of 1996.

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Table 1. Discussion and diversity within networks.

A. Standard deviation of opinion within network.

	<i>model 1</i>		<i>model 2</i>	
	<u>coefficient (t-value)</u>		<u>coefficient (t-value)</u>	
main respondent education	.003	.33	.002	.28
main respondent partisan extremity	.01	.55	.01	.47
main respondent political interest	.02	.73	.02	.73
number of discussants	.07	4.54	.07	4.56
abortion opinion	.34	6.23		
minority aid opinion	.16	3.05		
prayer in schools opinion	.13	2.31		
mean opinion in sample			-.06	1.38
standard deviation of sample opinion			.39	4.11
constant	.17	1.18	-.01	.05
N =		1011		1011
R ² =		.06		.05
s.e. of est. =		.61		.61

B. Mean frequency of opinion discussion within network.

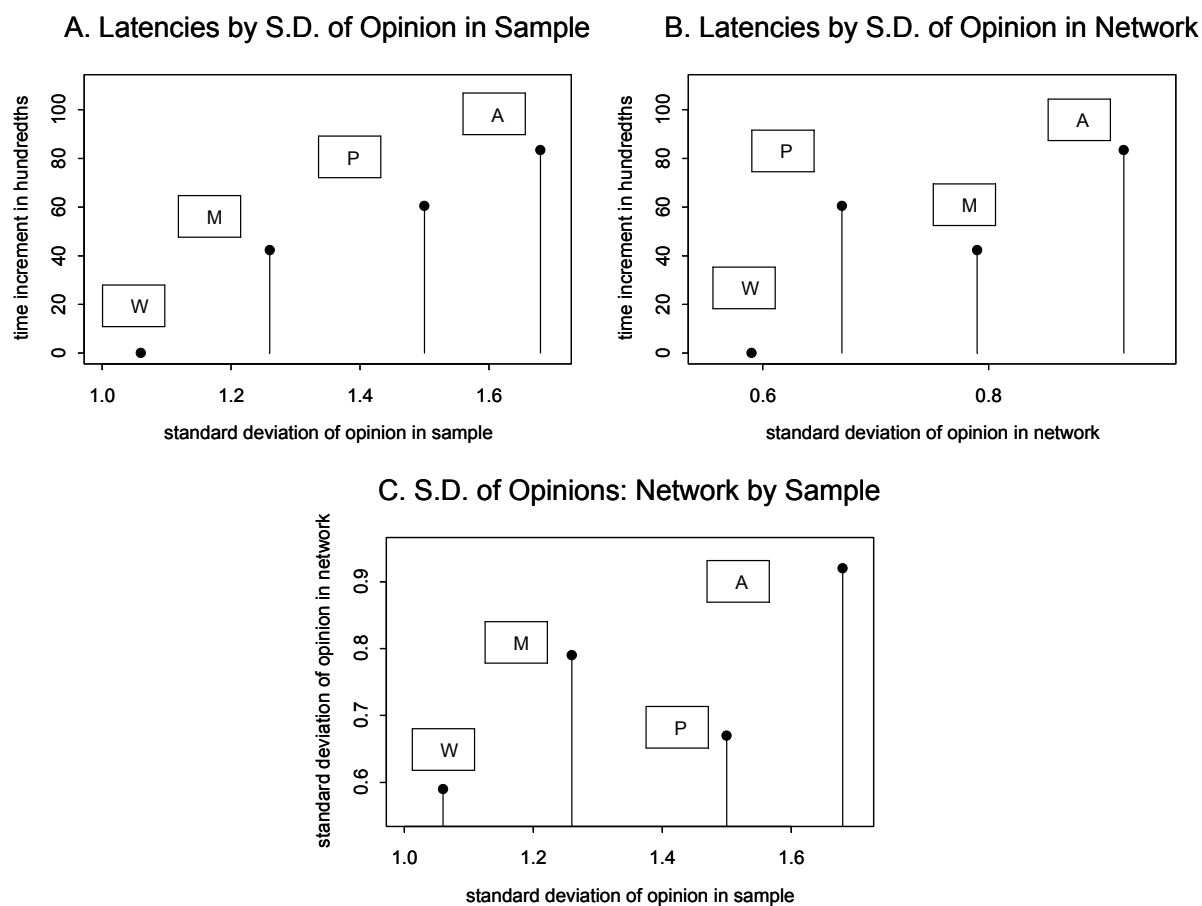
	<i>model 1</i>		<i>model 2</i>	
	<u>coefficient (t-value)</u>		<u>coefficient (t-value)</u>	
main respondent education	-.01	-1.39	-.01	1.43
main respondent partisan extremity	.02	1.13	.02	1.06
main respondent political interest	-.16	-5.23	-.16	5.22
number of discussants	.03	1.95	.03	1.95
standard deviation of network opinion	-.01	-0.45	-.01	.29
abortion opinion	.30	5.20		
minority aid opinion	.07	1.38		
prayer in schools opinion	.11	1.96		
mean opinion in sample			.01	.22
standard deviation of sample opinion			.43	4.44
constant	2.53	17.40	2.03	7.20
N =		1011		1011
R ² =		.06		.05
s.e. of est. =		.62		.62

Table 2. Accessibility of perception regarding discussant opinion. Least squares. Coefficient t-values are in parentheses.

	<i>model 1</i>		<i>model 2</i>	
	<u>coefficient</u>	<u>(t-value)</u>	<u>coefficient</u>	<u>(t-value)</u>
constant	99.03	(1.00)	-51.90	(.29)
first named discussant	149.86	(3.40)	150.43	(3.43)
order in which discussants are named	-19.01	(1.55)	-16.72	(1.39)
order in which questions are asked	-66.17	(5.51)	-64.80	(5.48)
baseline speed of response	11.54	(7.19)	12.12	(7.34)
extremity of discussant opinion	-10.05	(.61)	-13.25	(.79)
extremity of respondent opinion	-31.10	(1.72)	-33.86	(1.83)
extremity of respondent's perceived discussant opinion	-75.94	(4.40)	-80.73	(4.45)
politics name generator	-24.90	(1.00)	-39.35	(1.53)
extent of disagreement in dyad	28.13	(2.37)	26.85	(2.23)
discussant's subjective issue stability	6.46	(.35)	14.85	(.78)
respondent perceived discussion frequency of issue in dyad	33.05	(2.11)	28.65	(1.85)
<u>randomly assigned opinions:</u>				
woman's right to abortion	83.48	(2.52)		
aid for blacks and minorities	42.33	(1.24)		
organized prayer in schools	60.49	(1.84)		
mean opinion in sample			-4.00	(.14)
standard deviation of opinion in sample			109.52	(1.59)
mean opinion in network			-1.36	(.13)
standard deviation of opinion in respondent's network			36.49	(1.61)
N	1021		942	
R ² =	.23		.25	
s.e. of estimate =	364.22		351.29	

Note: response times are measured in hundredths of seconds - a response time of 2.41 seconds would be measured as 241. Standard errors are corrected for clustering.

Figure 1. Response latencies for perceptions of discussant opinion by opinion variability, in the sample and in the respondents' networks.



A= a woman's right to an abortion
M= government aid for blacks and other minorities
P= organized prayer in public schools
W= equal rights for women

Note: The standard deviation of the opinion in the sample is taken from the main respondent sample. The standard deviation within the network is defined as the mean for the standard deviation of respondents' perceptions of their discussants' opinions, sorted by the particular opinion.

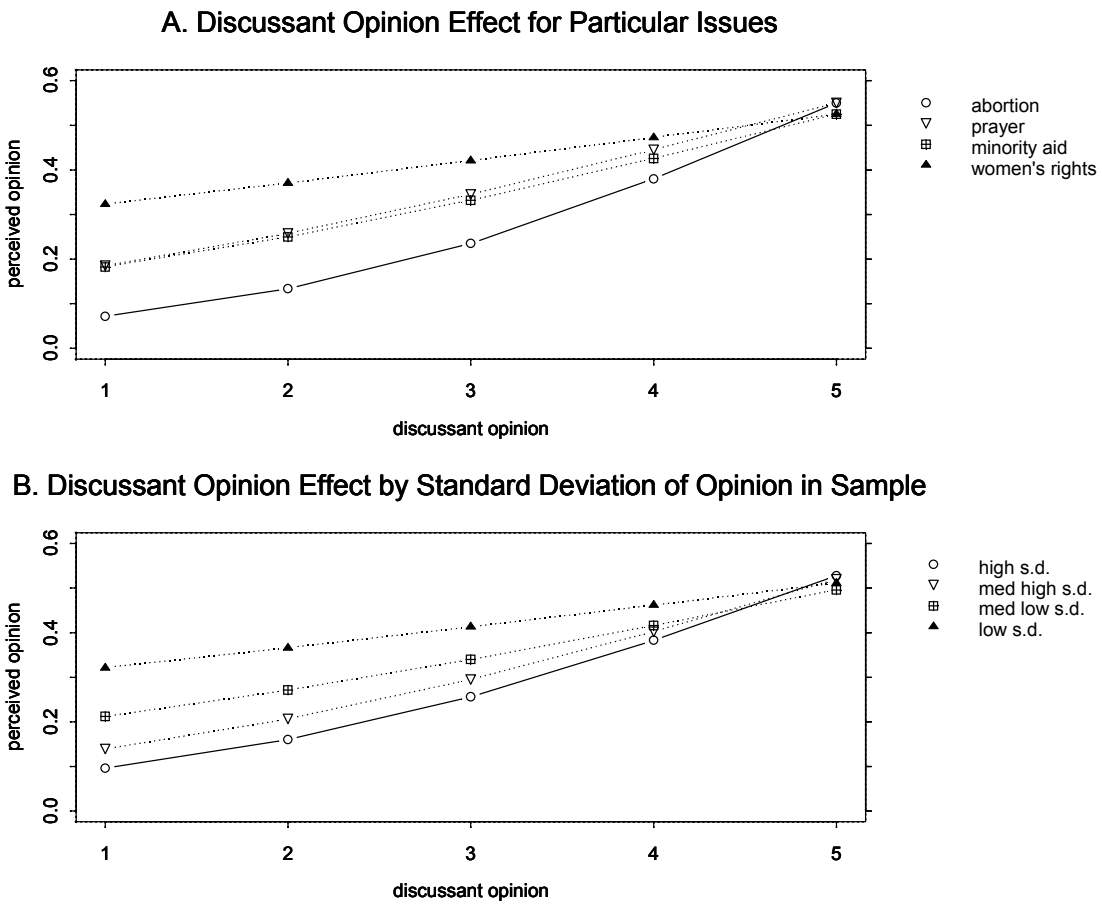
Source: The magnitude of opinion effects are taken from the Table 1 estimates in the first model.

Table 3. Main respondent's perception of discussant's opinion by the self-reported opinions of main respondent and discussant, and the mean of the perceived opinion in the remainder of the network. Contingent on the particular opinion in the first model, and on the standard deviation of the opinion for the entire sample in the second model. (Ordered logit models.)

	<i>contingent on:</i> <i>particular opinion</i>		<i>contingent on:</i> <i>s.d. of particular opinion</i>	
	<u>coefficient (t-value)</u>		<u>coefficient (t-value)</u>	
main respondent opinion (MR)	.35	(2.72)	.58	(1.59)
discussant opinion (D)	.21	(2.00)	-.47	(1.55)
mean opinion in residual network (ResNet)	.81	(4.88)	.55	(1.15)
woman's right to an abortion (Abortion dummy)	-1.67	(-2.08)		
organized prayer in public schools (Prayer dummy)	-2.21	(-2.91)		
black and minority aid (Aid dummy)	-.62	(-.79)		
Abortion dummy X MR opinion	.01	(.05)		
Prayer dummy X MR opinion	.47	(2.61)		
Aid dummy X MR opinion	.31	(1.80)		
Abortion dummy X D opinion	.48	(3.34)		
Prayer dummy X D opinion	.21	(1.56)		
Aid dummy X D opinion	.19	(1.34)		
Abortion dummy X ResNet Opinion	-.22	(.97)		
Prayer dummy X ResNet Opinion	-.05	(.23)		
Minority dummy X ResNet Opinion	-.42	(-1.80)		
mean of opinion in sample			.07	(.55)
s.d. of opinion in sample			-3.08	(2.88)
main respondent opinion X s.d. of opinion in sample			-.04	(.17)
discussant opinion X s.d. of opinion in sample			.63	(2.93)
mean residual opinion X s.d. of opinion in sample			.09	(.27)
threshold 1	1.65	s=.68	-1.18	s=1.36
threshold 2	2.77	s=.67	-.10	s=1.36
threshold 3	4.43	s=.69	1.53	s=1.35
threshold 4	5.68	s=.70	2.76	s=1.36
N =	1153		1153	
χ^2 , df, p =	578/15/.00		83532/8/.00	

Note: Standard errors are corrected for clustering.

Figure 2. The effect of the discussant's self-reported opinion on the main respondent's perception of the discussant's opinion, by particular issues and by the standard deviation of the issue opinions in the entire sample.



Note: The magnitudes of communication effects in Part A are taken from the first model's coefficient estimates in Table 2. The magnitudes in Part B are taken from the second model in Table 2.

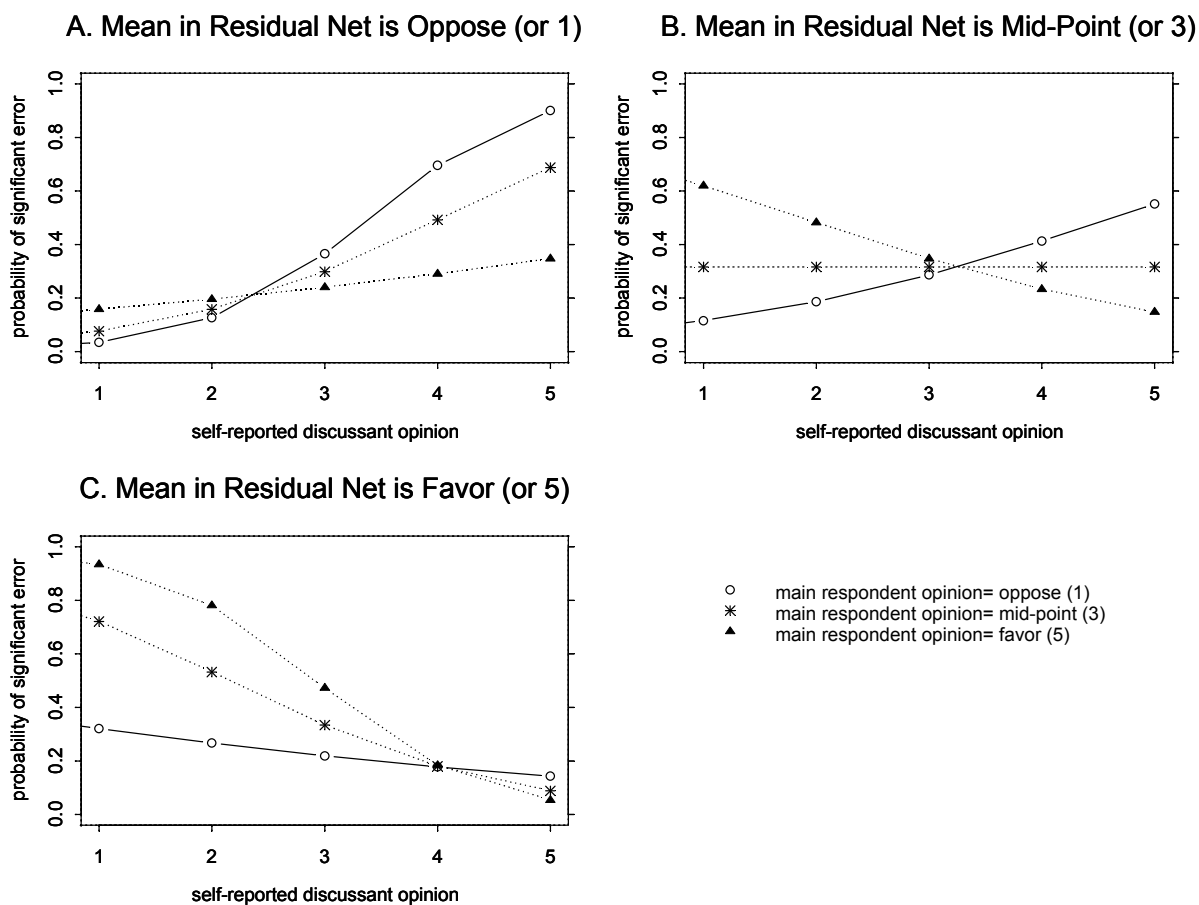
Table 4. Error in respondent judgment regarding discussant opinions: the absolute distance between the main respondent's perception of the discussant's opinion and the discussant's self reported opinion. Ordered logit model.

	<u>coefficient (t-value)</u>	
self-reported main respondent opinion (R opinion)	.58	(2.65)
self reported discussant opinion (D opinion)	2.07	(11.37)
mean perceived opinion in remaining network (N opinion)	.94	(4.54)
<u>interaction variables:</u>		
MR opinion X D opinion	-.28	(5.85)
MN opinion X D opinion	-.41	(6.55)
R opinion X MN opinion	.11	(2.42)
<u>opinion dummy variables (with women's rights baseline):</u>		
abortion opinion	.07	(.38)
minority aid opinion	-.09	(.46)
prayer in schools opinion	.18	(1.03)
discussant's subjective judgment of own opinion stability	.03	(.28)
main respondent judgment of opinion discussion frequency	.06	(.80)
discussant ideological extremity	-.03	(.49)
discussant partisan extremity	.02	(.37)
threshold 1	4.70	(s=.64)
threshold 2	6.47	(s=.66)
threshold 3	8.13	(s=.68)
threshold 4	9.55	(s=.72)

N = 1070
 $\chi^2, df, p = 345, 13, .00$

Note: Standard errors are corrected for clustering.

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of significant errors in respondent judgments regarding the opinions of discussants.



Note: For purposes of this graph, a significant error is defined as a respondent judgment that is 2 or more points removed from the discussant self report. For example, if the discussant places themselves at "5" on the abortion rights scale, an error is defined as any respondent judgment that is less than or equal to "3".

Source: Based on estimates of Table 4.

Table A5. Distribution of main respondent opinions on issues.

	a woman's right to an abortion	government aid to blacks and other minorities	organized prayer in public schools	equal rights for women
oppose				
1	27.2	17.5	18.4	3.8
2	8.1	22.8	9.7	2.7
3	12.6	33.3	21.2	14.3
4	11.7	12.6	15.2	18.9
5	40.4	13.8	35.5	60.2
favor				
N=	2083	2042	2118	2139
mean	3.30	2.82	3.40	4.29
standard deviation	1.68	1.26	1.50	1.06