

WORK IN PROGRESS SECTION

THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL NETWORK STRUCTURE IN DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION: DOES IT INFLUENCE INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL BEHAVIOR?¹

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Introduction

To date, many political science scholars have agreed that besides political institutions at least a minimum level of politically knowledgeable and active citizenry – or at least those behaving as knowledgeable - is needed for any democracy to work. However, more than five decades of empirical research have confirmed the picture of the average citizen as poorly informed and barely interested in politics, even in the Western established democracies. In the post-communist societies of Central and East Europe, the delayed occurrence of an interested and participative citizenry has been seen as a major obstacle to their democratic transition. A glance at these countries indicates that despite the fact that now all of them have democratic constitutions and institutions, some have fared better than others in making democracy work.

What is it that makes citizens more participative in some countries while more apathetic in others? Is democracy sustainable in the absence of a politically knowledgeable and participative citizenry? To date, the answer to these issues has been mainly sought at the formal level, including issues such as political institutions, party systems, or civic and political associations. Few authors have considered a bottom-up approach to be worthy of attention.

However, political behavior might be influenced by attitudes, opinions, and values crafted through everyday social interactions. For instance, the extent to which political discussion is a regular part of everyday interpersonal communication might play a considerable role in shaping individuals' political behavior.

The investigation of this hypothesized influence would prove particularly interesting in the case of the Central and East European societies, given the peculiarity of the network structures existing there as an effect of their communist history. As scholars have documented, these societies were characterized by a

generalized level of fear and distrust prior to the 1990s. The widespread control of the state apparatus over all aspects of life led to the existence of what Gaus called societies of 'niches' (Gaus, in Flap and Wolker, 2003) and the confinement of political discussion within the borders of closed, kin-centered, privatized networks. Has this pattern of political communication changed since the 1990s? Has political discussion been freed-up from the closed circles of contacts, and what have been the consequences of such a switch from the 'kitchen level' to the public sphere on political behavior?

The aim of this research is to investigate the impact that the transformation of social network structures has on individual political behavior, in the context of the newly democratized societies of the Central and Eastern Europe. Since the influence of networks is expected to be important both at the individual and societal levels, my study considers the micro (individual) and meso (community) levels, as well as potential interactions between the two. At the micro (individual) level, I focus on the way in which the structure and composition of the various social networks influence individual political preferences and the level of political participation, and how the impact of social networks varies across groups. In addition, the study will explore the potential of social networks to provide informational cues that would help people to overcome their low level of political knowledge and information. At the meso (community) level, the research will investigate how the prevalent patterns of network structure influence the type and extent of political participation in a particular setting. Lastly, the investigation will look for evidence of differentiated impact of networks, depending on the context. This expectation is based on the assumption that at the community level political mobilization is based on citizens' perceived common interest and propensity to engage in common activity.

The present proposal will proceed through the following steps. First, it will introduce three bodies of literature constituting the theoretical background of the research. Acknowledging their respective limitations when it comes to approaching the issues raised by this paper, I conclude on the benefit of combining the three. Second, the paper will present the model, describing the variables, their conceptualization, and the relations supposed to link them. At this stage the paper will formulate hypotheses and state the expectations toward them. Third, the paper will describe the criteria of case selection, the procedures of data collection, and the methods of analyzing them. This section will also address the limitations of the project. Finally, the paper will draw the payoff of this research, both at the theoretical and practical level.

¹ Research proposal defended in June, 2005

2. The state of the field

This section introduces three theoretical approaches, evaluates them, and concludes that none of them individually is satisfactory for investigating the issue of the impact of social networks on individual political behavior. I point out the gain of combining them in order to offer a more complex perspective that will broaden and deepen the investigation of a field that to date has remained rather under-researched: the impact of the interpersonal communication on individual political behavior.

2.1. The sociological model of voting

First and foremost in the investigation of the role played by social context in shaping individuals' political behavior is what voting behavior literature calls the sociological model of voting. This model challenges the opinion formulated by the economic and psychological models of voting that see a voter as an autonomous actor independent of the social context, forming and expressing political preferences in isolation. The sociological model of voting sees voter choice as a function of individuals' social membership. Starting with the studies of the so-called Columbia school (Lazarsfeld et al 1948; Berelson et al 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Katz 1957) the model was mostly neglected for several decades afterwards. It has been recently resurrected through some studies, the most important being by Huckfeldt et al. (1987, 1991, and 1995). Despite this late resurgence in the interest of the model, research on the role played by social interaction on individuals' political behavior remains rather underdeveloped.

Besides the scarcity of investigation based on the social context model, I will point out two limitations of the previous research. First, the research of social context effect on individual political behavior does not address the issue of the potential of social interactions to act as informational shortcuts that under certain conditions might be beneficial. Inferring the result of approaching this issue within the framework of previous research I assume that the conclusions regarding the beneficial character of the informational cues provided by social networks of political discussion would be rather pessimistic. The generalized pattern of political agreement within primary groups found by the research of Columbia sociologists might be interpreted as proof that, at this level, interpersonal communication elicits conformity to predominant opinion rather than enlightenment. Despite the fact that scholars who investigated the role of social context on political behavior did not directly address the issue of the potential of social networks to improve political knowledge, their collateral observations raise doubts about the enlightening potential of interpersonal communication (Rose, 1974; Franklin, Mackie, Valen et al, 1992).

Second, the previous research of the effect of social environment on individual political behavior rarely offers a discriminate and extensive account of the structure and composition of different networks in which individuals are embedded. In addition to that, few investigations provide information about the structure and composition of networks of political communication in particular. To conclude, previous research neither differentiated among patterns of social networks of communication in general and political discussion in particular, nor investigated the role that such networks would play on shaping political behavior, both at the individual and community levels.

Below, the theoretical approaches that will fill these gaps are presented. I consider that the investigation of the impact of interpersonal communication on individual political behavior will benefit from the insights furnished by these models.

2.2 The literature of informational cues and the concept of 'correct voting'

The theoretical approach that will furnish the appropriate theoretical framework for addressing the issue of social networks as potential providers of politically relevant cues comes from the literature on informational shortcuts. This body of literature has emerged as a combination of elements taken from models of communication and decision making under limited information in cognitive science, economics, and psychology. In the field of political science it has emerged as a reaction to the pessimistic conclusion regarding voters' low level of political knowledge measured as the degree of factual information people possess in the political sphere. Acknowledging the political ignorance of the average voter, several scholars claim that, in fact, the limited information people possess in the political sphere does not incapacitate them in making reasonable decisions (Bartels 1996; Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1991; Cutler 2002; Kahneman and Tversky 1982; Lau and Redlawsk 1997; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Popkin 1991). To prove this they have changed the focus of the research from the level of the factual information people possess in political sphere to the actual process of informing (Bartels, 1996). The central hypothesis is that people may not need complete information to make reasonable decisions. The use of informational cues helps voters to overcome their low level of information and thus reduces the gap between the decisions made by the poorly- and highly-informed voters.

The literature of informational cues has developed the concept of 'correct voting' and the theoretical model behind this concept has been tested using both experimental and real conditions (Lupia 1994; Lau and Redlawsk 1997). The authors have explored whether voters as limited-information processors can make

‘correct decisions’, meaning the ones that they would make if they were fully informed. They have reached some optimistic conclusions, as they have demonstrated that some poorly informed voters may emulate fully-informed behavior because they use the ‘right’ shortcuts. Emphasizing that not all the informational cues are beneficial, they offer an account of the conditions under which the use of informational shortcuts increases voters’ potential of making reasonable decisions.

Even if social networks were seen as potential providers of such informational cues, there has been a lack of singling out and analyzing this potential cue among others. The literature emphasizing the impact of social networks on individuals’ political behavior and the one assessing the beneficial character of different informational shortcuts barely overlap. Overall, there is a lack of investigation regarding the possibility that certain patterns of network structure and composition can provide informational cues.

2.3 Network models of analysis: their methodological utility

I argue that the second perceived limitation of the social context research would be overcome using the theoretical framework provided by the literature investigating the role of networks in the diffusion and spread of opinions, ideas, and innovations. This body of research provides both an account of typologies and characteristics of networks and an extensive methodology for collecting and analyzing network data. The extensive methodology built within this research field was quickly implemented in different research areas. The methods used to gather and analyze network data have developed both within and outside social science investigation.

To date, the methodology for collecting data about social networks has been refined and detailed criteria for defining network typologies has emerged (Burt 1980; Marsden and Laumann 1984; Freeman et al 1989). Moreover, the measurement and analysis of such data has developed and computer software supporting network analysis is now available (UCINET²). This development has facilitated the application of network analysis for studying the influence transmitted along social networks within different spheres, such as medicine, business, or politics (for an extensive list of the applications of social network models see Valente 1999).

Regarding the investigation of the role played by social networks on political behavior, the most noteworthy contribution is Burt’s (1987) distinction between the social cohesion and structural equivalence models of social network influence and the way

Huckfeldt (1987, 1991, and 1995) applies it to the study of political behavior. The core element of the social cohesion model consists of the ‘social contagion effect’ operating at the level of look-alike peers as a result of physical proximity. This model accounts for relationships characterized by intimacy, trust, respect, and mutual regard. Political influence in these settings operates by contagion given the frequency and intimacy of discussion with trusted people. The original idea of the structural equivalence model is that people base their behavior on models provided by people similarly located within the social structure.

So far, the studies that approached the issue of the impact of social networks on individual political behavior and benefited from the methodology provided by the field of network analysis have not addressed the issue of the potential of interpersonal communication to act as an efficient informational cue. If one wanted to go beyond the claims of these models she would consider that the mimicking adoption of others’ opinion and behavior as stated by the social cohesion model might be interpreted as proof of people’s lack of rationality. The structural equivalence model might fare better from this perspective despite the fact that it also contains the germs of a type of influence that might go beyond any rational criteria.

2.4 Bringing the models together: why is it worthy?

What is the benefit that these various approaches will bring to the investigation of the impact that the transformation of the structure and composition of social networks has on political behavior in the post communist societies of Central and East Europe? I will briefly list the relevance of these models for the researched issues as well as their limitations, which create the necessity of combining them.

Let us shortly summarize the findings of the previous three sections. First, scholars who investigated the mechanisms of the impact of social context on political behavior, such as Columbia sociologists and later Huckfeldt, do not address the issue of social networks as potential providers of politically relevant informational cues that, under certain conditions, might be beneficial. Moreover, they neither develop a detailed account of social network typologies according to their structure and composition nor investigate the impact that various networks would have on political behavior, both at the individual and societal levels. Second, the literature on the role played by informational cues and shortcuts in overcoming the effects of individuals’ low level of political information does not single out social networks as potential providers of politically-relevant information cues. Third, social network models do not consider the role that networks might play on individuals’ level of political knowledge by providing politically relevant information resources. Overall, the scarcity of research

² Borgatti, S.P., Everett, M.G. and Freeman, L.C. 2002. Ucinet for Windows: Software for Social Network Analysis. Harvard, MA: Analytic Technologies.

linking the account of social networks as influential factors of political behavior and as informational shortcuts that under certain structural conditions might be efficient influences deserves special attention.

What is the potential payoff of investigating the structure and composition of social networks in general and of networks of political discussion in particular as an important antecedent of political behavior in the case of post communist societies? The predominance of the 'privatized' patterns of interpersonal communications based on small, kin-centered, 'private niche' networks is a well-documented feature of the societies under the totalitarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe (Dowley and Silver 2002; Flap and Wolker 1995; Iglie 2003; Opp and Gern 1993; Rose 1994). The widespread political control of most spheres of life by the state apparatus, the organized dependency on the party for all goods and opportunities, and the repressive nature of state apparatus made distrust a prevailing feature of interpersonal communication within these societies. The exclusive political control of daily life and the extensive nature of the security police presented people with 'the acute problem of whom to trust and how to decide whether intentions of others were honest' (Flap and Volker, 2003: 29). These generalized feelings of fear and distrust led to the exile of political debate to the private sphere of life, at the level of intimate relationships. Gaus' societies of 'niches' were characterized by small islands of trustful ties among family and close friends in a large sea of fear and distrust. These circumstances imposed a double standard for social relations: on one hand, impersonal interactions, where political discussions were considered taboo, and on the other, 'privatized' relations, basically comprising those closed, kin-centered, personal contacts that could be trusted and thus allowed for political discussions.

Under these circumstances, the networks of political discussions perfectly overlapped with the networks of personal, private discussions and comprised family members and close friends. The pre 1990s networks of political discussion tended to be rather homogeneous. They were characterized by high agreement and a consensual pattern of communication. Political communication within these closed networks was not a real exchange of opinions and probably did not contribute to an increase of political knowledge but rather to a reinforcement of already existing opinions and political attitudes. The ties of political communication tended to be small in number, closed, and dense. Their structure therefore did not work as a vehicle of larger social integration but one that created and maintained an atomized and fragmented society.

Has the structure of social networks changed? A series of empirical studies conducted in the beginning of the 1990s revealed a mixed picture. While the

structure of social networks in some societies becomes more similar to the pattern of Western democracies – presence of differentiated personal communities rather than kin-centered ones – some of them remain closer to the pre 1990s pattern (see Flap and Volker 2003; Iglie 2003; Mondak and Gearing 2003). Overall, the strength of 'niche' ties has dramatically declined and the structure of communication networks has become more loosely integrated at the edges – a pattern that closely follows the structure of networks in Western democracies (Iglie 2003: 21). Political discussion has left the boundaries of the kin-ties and has become the topic of discussion within the 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1973). However, compared with Western network structures, the privatized type of personal interaction still predominates in the post-communist societies, a finding that raises questions regarding the space attributed to political discussion within the networks of everyday interaction. It becomes an important topic of investigation as to whether political discussion has actually moved out of the borders of personal ties and become a topic of discussion within the edges of the social interactions.

In sum, the relevance and novelty of this investigation consists of its proposition that individuals' political preferences as well as their willingness to participate in political and civic activities may depend on the structure and composition of their everyday networks of communication. Regarding the cue-giving potential of social networks, this study does not assume that all types of social networks are equally beneficial in providing politically relevant information cues. On the contrary, looking at different patterns of networks in general, and networks of political discussion in particular, the study signals that some of these patterns would instead hamper the development of an active and participative citizenry or alternatively would not contribute to an increase in the level of political knowledge. As a preamble to the further debate, I will indicate two such examples of social network influence. First, at an individual level, kin-centered, dense, and politically homogeneous network structures are expected to impede a real exchange of political information and therefore to lead to network members' adoption of some political behavior patterns out of conformity rather than reflection. Second, at a society level, the prevalence of kin-centered, dense, and low interconnected networks is expected to act as a braking force for the development of a civic community that is generally based on citizens' perceived common interest and willingness to engage in collective actions.

3. The project description

This section develops the proposed model in a detailed manner. First, it will introduce the variables, their conceptualization, and their operationalization through a series of indicators. Second, the relations

between variables will be described and expected patterns of interrelations will be formulated in the form of preliminary hypotheses. They will be formulated both at a micro (individual) and meso (community) level. Third, the section will address the limitations of the project as well as the provisional character of some hypotheses, mainly due to the character of the research being a 'how' centered one.

3.1. Variables: concepts and their operationalization

3.1.1. Independent variable: Social networks

As the independent variable in the model, social networks refer to the informal groups individuals are embedded in. They comprise those 'alters' with whom the respondents report to have more or less regular contacts and discussions, such as family, friends, neighbors, work-mates, schoolmates, acquaintances etc. Adopting a functionalist approach, I describe five basic types of networks, namely 'niches' or 'core networks' (Marsden, 1987), provision networks (Flap and Volker, 2003), incidental networks, leisure networks, and networks of political discussion. Niches or core networks comprise those trusted alters with whom respondents report discussing personal matters. Flap and Volker (2003) introduce provision networks as being widespread means of obtaining scarce commodities under the command economy of the communist regime. In this study I will use them in the sense of ties providing different types of informal service. Incidental networks are defined as by-default

types of ties, occurring as a by-product of respondents' implication in other main activities or roles. Leisure networks comprise those voluntary chosen ties with whom respondents report often spending their free time. Finally, networks of political discussion comprise those ties that mostly accommodate political discussion. Data about these various social networks will be obtained using multiple- situation- name generators, a procedure that will be extensively described within the data collection section (Fischer and McAllister, 1978).

For the micro (individual) level of the analysis, the concept of social networks will be operationalized through a series of indicators intended to assess them on two dimensions, namely their structure and composition. In the first step of the research, information about the structure and composition of various networks in which individuals are embedded will be collected using several indicators. In a later step, in order to avoid multicollinearity, the indicators will be correlated and factors will be computed in the case of highly correlated variables.

The structure of networks will be assessed through the following indicators, most of them representing basic indices developed within previous network research. These are size, density, tie strength and range (Marsden, 1990). To these measures defined by the previous literature I will add the degree of overlap between networks fulfilling different functions. Following the synthetic treatment that Marsden gives to the literature that developed these indicators I will briefly introduce them.

Table 1. Indicators for network structure

Indicator	Description	Network types ¹
Network size	'the number of direct ties involving individual units' (Marsden, 1990:453)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small • Extensive
Network density	'the mean strength of connections among units in a network, or the proportion of links present relative to those possible' (Marsden, 1990: 453-54)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dense/close • Loose/open
Tie strength	The intensity and closeness characterizing a link (Marsden, 1990: 455)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong • Weak
Range	'the extent to which a unit's network links it to diverse other units' (Marsden, 1990: 455)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concentrated • Spread
Overlap degree	The percentage of ties belonging to more than one network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kin-centered • Differentiated

The composition of networks will be assessed using two sets of indicators that will be applied to data obtained via two kinds of name interpreter items. These name interpreter items will elicit information on

attributes of network members (e.g. socio-demographics) and on properties of ties with network members (e.g. frequency of contact, estimation of discussants' expertise etc.). The two sets of indicators

¹ The qualitative description of network types will be used throughout the paper in order to facilitate the formulation of hypotheses. Scores that will be included in further analysis will replace them.

are homogeneity vs. heterogeneity – applied to different socio-demographics of network members – and degree of presence (high vs. low) of elements constituting respondents’ politically relevant social

Table 2. Indicators of network composition

Indicator ¹	Network data assessed
Homogeneity vs. heterogeneity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network members’ education • Age • Gender • Occupation • Habitation • Type of relationships with respondent • Similarity of political preferences
Degree/ High vs. low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency of political discussion • Level of respondents’ awareness regarding discussants’ political views • Discussants’ level of political knowledge/information

This information will constitute the basis for describing patterns of social networks, an enterprise that represents the preamble to the investigation on the role that different patterns of network structure and composition play on shaping individual political behavior.

For the meso level of the analysis I will use the same data collected at the individual level of the analysis. The aim of this part of the research is to detect patterns of network structure and composition existing in the investigated setting, e.g. city, village, community. These typologies will constitute the basis of further investigation on the role that the prevalent form of network structures and composition play on the type and extent of political participation within a certain setting.

3.1.2. *Dependent variable: Political participation*

Political participation is one of the variables used to conceptualize political behavior. Its operationalization deserves a separate discussion. This is due to the fact that the few authors who focused their research on the assessment of political participation in the post communist societies of Central and East Europe generally used indicators that were previously developed to operationalize political participation in the Western societies. The validity of these indicators for societies that differ in terms of political culture and tradition is highly questionable. For instance, donating money to a party or working for a party are generally used for measuring political participation in Western democracies. Yet they are probably inappropriate in the context of newly democratized countries, which simply lack these traditions. The picture is even more complicated by the fact that in the newly emerging democratic societies of

capital - applied to data on frequency of political discussion, discussants’ level of political knowledge, etc.

Central and East Europe one may find quite often covert means of political participation. Abstention and protest vote represent two such means of expressive political acts people sometimes turn to for expressing their discontent. However, in-depth research should be done to distinguish them from simple non-vote or party-choice.

Acknowledging all of these difficulties, the investigation will use a mixture of Western-type indicators that could be translated to the region, and some new indicators. The provisional list of indicators measuring political participation comprises the following items:

- Voting in the most recent elections at all existing levels, namely local, national, and European Parliamentary elections in the case of EU member states
 - Intention to participate in the next elections, again at all the existing levels
 - Participation in referenda
 - Attending any meetings related to politics, i.e. election rallies or protest meetings
 - Contacting a public official
 - Circulating or signing a petition for a candidate or issue.

Assuming that interpersonal communication might play a different role in mobilizing people for different political activities, the study will investigate separately the strength of impact social networks have on different forms of political participation.

Regarding the indicators used to tap the type and extent of political participation at the society level, the paper advances a provisional list that will be further adjusted after an in-depth research of each unit of analysis included in the investigation e.g. cities, regions, countries. The indicators for political participation at the societal level will include the following items:

- Evolution of turnout at all the existing levels, namely local, national, and European Parliamentary elections in the case of EU member states
 - Participation in referenda
 - Number of political manifestations, protests, strikes
 - Number of political and civic associations
 - Number of media outlets and media consumption within a certain time period
 - Level of party membership.

To grasp the dynamic of political participation at the community level, the above listed measurements will take into account a longer period of time. Both

¹ Scores for these indicators will be constructed and included in further analysis

lists will be further adjusted depending on setting specificity revealed by in-depth research and available sources of information.

3.1.3. Dependent variable: Political preferences

Political preferences represent the second variable that conceptualizes political behavior. The operationalization of this variable is a sensitive issue given the general difficulty of capturing and measuring attitudes. One could consider at least two ways of operationalizing the concept of political preference, namely through party preferences (vote choice) or through self-expressed opinions on politically salient issues. Two reasons will be stated in favor of adopting the latter indicator.

First, as scholars investigating post-communist party systems have documented, these systems are characterized by high volatility. Therefore, the instability of parties would make the identification of the electorate's patterns of political alignment difficult in a longitudinal study. Second, post-communist parties have delayed their development as programmatic parties that send voters clear messages about their positions on issues and their general placement on the relevant axis of political competition. This makes it difficult for voters to transform their political beliefs into party preferences and eventually into vote choices. In addition to that, both party systems' instability and parties' failure to establish meaningful linkages with the electorate would make a cross-countries investigation difficult. Therefore, the present research opts for the operationalization of political preferences through individuals' self-expressed opinions on politically divisive issues.

To establish the relevant dimensions of party competition, the paper will use Kitschelt's suggestion regarding the existence of two such axis of political competition, namely an economic axis and a cultural, value-based one. The economic axis is defined by pro-market versus pro-state options while the cultural one comprises pro-liberal versus authoritarian positions (Kitschelt et. al, 1999). Using these theorized dimensions of political competition, the paper will

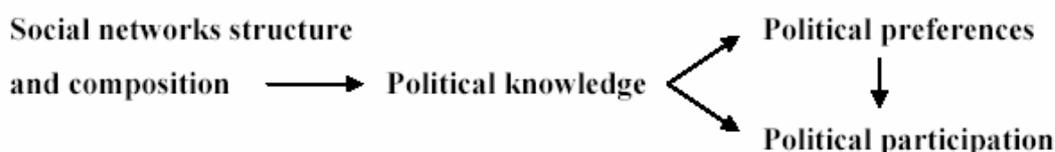
define a set of indicators for assessing individuals' preferences on politically salient issues. For the economic axis, the list of indices may comprise, for instance, attitudes toward privatization, measures for fighting unemployment, social protection, market opening, subsidies, and limits on foreign investment. For the cultural, value-based axis, the list can comprise attitudes toward the public role of the church, decommunization, minorities' protection, nationalism, liberal individualism, mass-media regulation, and so-forth. To avoid the risk of multicollinearity these indicators will be factorized and resulting factors will be included in further analysis.

3.2. The model: expected patterns of influence (provisional hypotheses)

As has been stated above, the influence of social networks is expected to matter and will consequently be assessed both at the individual and societal levels. First, the paper will present the model of influence separately for each level and afterwards will make predictions about their interactions.

3.2.1. The impact of social networks at the micro (individual) level

For the sake of simplicity and clarity, the paper starts by presenting the model in a graphic form. Both the structure and composition of networks is expected to have an impact on political behavior and consequently the paper will investigate their joint effect accounting for various combinations in which they might occur. Based on the research of the use of informational cues as means of overcoming the low level of political knowledge, I suppose that social networks will provide politically relevant informational resources. Therefore, I hypothesize that social networks do not have a direct effect on political behavior, but one that is mediated by political knowledge. In addition to that, political preferences might play an intermediate role in this chain of influence; namely, it might represent an antecedent condition for political participation.



There are three suppositions that guide my research. First, I conjecture that there are multiple paths of influence that networks exert on political behavior. They are defined by the various combinations of structure and composition in which

networks occur. This investigation seeks to detect the most influential of these patterns. Second, presumably not all the paths of influence are equally beneficial; while some of them bring enlightenment others lead to mere conformity or outright deception. I consider that the beneficial character of networks as information shortcuts is a function of both network structure and individual level of political knowledge. Third, both the extent and the character of the influence exerted by networks might vary across different measures of political preferences and participation.

Given the complex character of the influence expected to occur as an effect of network embeddedness, I consider that at this step only general and provisional hypotheses can be formulated. Disjointing the general pattern of network effect into several intermediary hypotheses and describing every single type and effect of the occurring influence would not be a fruitful approach. Nonetheless, I will formulate a set of hypotheses that should be mainly read as guidelines for my research. They define a set of expectations that are based on the existing literature and previous research that to date is rather deficient. Further investigation of network data will furnish relevant insights and lead to the refinement of the hypotheses.

H1: The influence of a small, dense/close, strong, concentrated, kin-centered network is expected to be twofold. Depending on the composition of the network, it may translate either into lower exposure to political discussions and debates, and consequently lower level of political participation or into a higher presence of the above mentioned elements.

H1.a. Respondents' observed level of political participation will presumably increase with an increase in the homogeneity of network members' political preferences, frequency of political discussions within network, respondents' awareness regarding their discussants' political preferences and respondents' perception about discussants' political expertise.

Political participation

H1.b. Under similar composition of networks except for the homogeneity of members' political

3.2.2. The influence of social networks at the meso (community) level

I suppose that the predominant pattern of social networks in a certain community will influence

preferences, the impact will be enhanced by respondents' strength of political preferences (see the scheme above). The stronger the respondents' political

preferences, the higher the impact of networks in spite of discussants' heterogeneous views and consequently the higher the respondents' observed level of political participation will be. Similarly, the weaker the respondents' political preferences, the lower the impact exerted by networks will be given the heterogeneity of discussants' views and consequently, the lower the respondents' observed level of political participation will be. (I acknowledge the fact that this argumentation might look circular, but I see it in line with my expectation regarding the fact that the impact of networks on political participation might go through political preferences).

H2: A path of influence conforming to the structural equivalence model is expected to provide more beneficial cues than a path of influence conforming more to the social cohesion model. Small, dense/close, strong, concentrated, kin-centered, and high politicized networks define a pattern of influence conforming more to a social cohesion model and thus are unlikely to act as a beneficial informational cue. In contrast, an extensive, weak/open, spread, differentiated, and highly-politicized network defines a pattern conforming more to a structural equivalence model and thus is more likely to furnish beneficial informational cues.

The beneficial character of a cue is estimated by generating fully-informed opinions by assigning the preference held by the highly-informed members of a given demographic group, for instance, to all members of that group and afterwards checking whether poorly informed people emulate fully informed behavior if they are exposed to a certain type of interpersonal influence (Althaus, 2003; Bartels, 1996).

This set of hypotheses offers a very broad view on the direction of further investigation. I have described only some of the possible pattern of interaction that might occur at networks level. The study will account the various combinations in which networks might occur and detect more influential pattern of influence on one hand, and the more beneficial of such patterns on the other.

the type and degree of political participation present there. No influence is expected at this level in terms of political preferences.

Predominant small, dense/closed, strong, Concentrated, kin-centered networks → **Lower level of political participation**

Predominant extensive, loose/open, Weak, spread, differentiated networks → **Higher level of political participation**

As in the preceding section, I state two expected models of influence, which, nonetheless, will need further refinement resulting from the theoretical and empirical dialogue. I assume that at the community level the impact of the prevalent network structure on political participation will vary across its different components. For instance, I expect a higher impact in the case of those acts of political participation that are based on citizens' perceived common interest and willingness to take part in common actions, such as participation in political manifestations, protests, strikes, and so on.

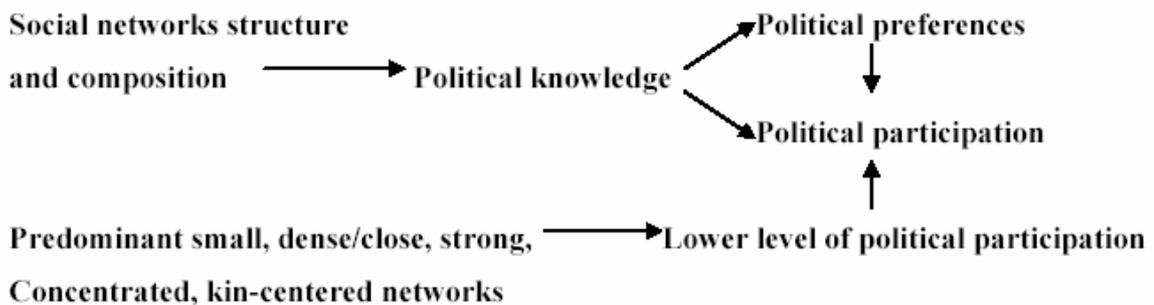
H4: A setting characterized by the predominance of small, dense/close, strong, concentrated, kin-centered networks is expected to display a lower level of political participation, especially in the case of those forms of political participation that are mainly based on willingness to participate in collective actions (e.g. political manifestations, rallies, strikes etc.).

H5: A setting characterized by the predominance of extensive, loose/open, weak, spread, differentiated networks is expected to accommodate more political participation again, with expected differences across different forms of political participation.

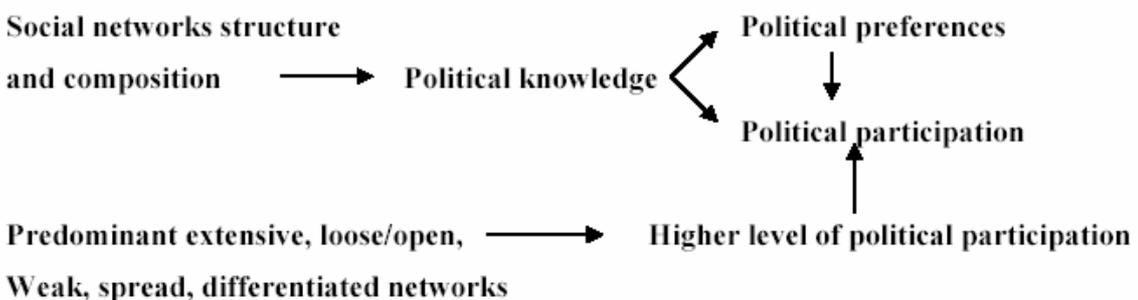
3.2.3. *Expected interactions between levels of investigation*

The interaction between the micro (individual) and meso (society) level will be relevant only for the first hypothesis. More precisely I expect that the level and predominant type of political participation in a given setting will have an additional and separate impact on individual political behavior. It might encourage or inhibit political interest and participation at the individual level.

I.



II.



In this view, the first hypothesis will be restated to accommodate for the potential influence exerts by the extent of political participation at the societal level on individual political behavior.

H1.1: The influence of a small, dense/close, strong, concentrated, kin-centered network is expected to be twofold. Depending on the composition of the network, it may translate either into lower exposure to political discussions and debates, and consequently

lower level of political participation or into a higher presence of the above-mentioned elements.

This pattern of influence is expected to hold in societies characterized by a general low level of political participation. It might decrease at the margins in the case of settings dominated by a higher level of political participation.

3.3. Limitations of the project

The limitations of this project come mainly from the very decision to select and focus on social networks as potential influences of individuals' political behavior. In doing so, the project does not claim either their primacy or that their effect is the strongest. It rather introduces in the analysis a series of variables that account for alternative explanations of political preferences and political participation.

At the individual level, the investigation will introduce and control for the effect of some socio-demographics that to date have been found to have a robust effect on the overall level of individuals' political behavior, both in terms of their preferences and their level of political involvement. These variables are age, gender, and education. Given the fact that this study aims to trace the influence of structural change in the patterns of social networks, age represents a key variable of the investigation deserving special attention. I assume that comparing the structure and composition of different age groups will furnish relevant information on the extent and nature of this transformation. The second method that will be used to tap this transformation is based on questions explicitly asking about the structure and composition of the pre- and post-1990s networks. Since none of the methods meant to gather information about the nature of the transformation in the structure and composition of networks is flawless, I anticipate that their joint use will overcome the potential shortcomings. Some other demographics that will be controlled for due to their potential effect on network structure are ethnicity, religion and housing patterns (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995).

The model will also control for the number of voluntary associations the respondents belong to, since such groups can provide incentives for political participation or can alter members' political preferences (Lake and Huckfeldt 1998, Verba et al. 1995). Partisan identity and strength of ideology will also be controlled for, assuming that strong political convictions might play an important role in political participation. Last but not least, the analysis will control for intensity and type of media consumption as well as for the period of time respondents have been living in their current area. This last factor was particularly researched by Putnam (2000), whose study proves that newcomers might be less embedded in their community and thus less likely to be involved in political and civic activities.

At the broader level, the investigation will control for particular political institutions that might inhibit or encourage political participation. They will be sought for both at the local and the national level.

The second type of limitation regards the generalizability of the findings. Given that what is at stake is a rather general concept, namely political behavior, the investigation seeks to discover general patterns of interaction. However, much depends on the particular mechanisms in place both at the individual and societal level.

4. The research design

This section presents the sets of available data and the procedures for collecting new ones. It includes a preliminary questionnaire for network data collection, which seeks to offer a clearer picture on the investigation I am planning to conduct as a first step of my study.

4.1. Data

4.1.1. Available data

The most extensive network data of which I am aware was collected in Hungary, in several rounds of surveys both before and after the 1990s, notably by Angelusz and Tardos. Their first round of network data collection was conducted in 1987. Using a wide range of techniques (Fischer - McAllister multiple situation name generator, Lin-Dumin position generator, Christmas card sending, membership in associations), they collected extensive network data in a national survey. Part of the items used in the 1987 survey were replicated in two further surveys conducted in 1997 and 2003, respectively (Angelusz and Tardos, 2001). The follow-up studies make possible a cross-national comparison and allow for observing the transformation in the structure and composition of social networks along a 16-year period. I am familiar with the 2003 dataset, which I used to investigate the impact of social networks on individual voting behavior (Lup, 2004).

Different from the data collected in national surveys, Angelusz and Tardos (2000) conducted a small-scale survey that consisted of mapping the existing social networks from four different villages and assessing their role on individuals' level of political participation. Despite their focus on political participation (operationalized as turnout rate) these studies did not approach the issue of social networks as potential providers of politically relevant cues.

4.1.2. Procedure for collecting new data

The new data will be obtained from surveys carried out in two stages. In the first stage, data will be collected at the local level, namely in a set of communities. The selection of the communities will be based on the suggestions provided by the classic studies of Berelson et al. (1954) and Huckfeldt (1995).

Their investigations on the role that social context plays in shaping political behavior were carried out at the level of two communities. The information will be obtained from the community inhabitants in detailed interviews. Moreover, the data will be obtained in repeated interviews (time-series) with the same persons (panel-study), thus allowing the detection of changes in political preferences over time.

While the main disadvantage of this selection procedure is certainly its lack of representativity at the national level, there are several benefits that it may bring to the present research. First, given the smaller scale of this investigation - in comparison with a national sample, for instance - it allows for a more extensive collection of information. Second, the conclusions of this local investigation are expected to constitute the basis for further improvements and refinements of the hypotheses. Last but not least, this method involves fewer costs as well as the possibility that the researcher will have first-hand contact with the data collection.

The same procedure will be applied in the next stage of the investigation, except for the fact that this time the surveys will be carried out at the national level. The sample will be randomly selected from the population registered in the election lists. The selection procedure will ensure the representativity of the sample.

In all other respects, except for the level of investigation – local and national - the procedure for data collection is similar. At the local level the main sample will be supplemented with another one obtained through respondents' report. The first round of interviews will be followed by a second one including a 'snowball' sample of discussants mentioned by initial respondents (Burt 1986, Huckfeldt and Sprague 1991).

Data about the structure and composition of various networks in which respondents are embedded will be obtained using an adaptation of the multiple-situation-name generator technique (Fischer and McAllister, 1978). Each of the respondents from the main sample will be asked in individual interviews to successively indicate up to five persons from their personal, provisional, incidental, leisure, and political discussion networks. The information about networks of political discussion will be the last in an attempt to tap possible overlaps between the networks serving other functions and the politically relevant ones. Each step of the name generator technique will be followed by a battery of questions meant to collect additional information about the characteristics of network members and the relationships within networks.

The list provided by respondents will be used for follow-up interviews with the indicated discussants. The resulting data set will be aggregated in dyads, which represent the base for interpreting the influential relations within each network. It is clear that this

procedure cannot be applied beyond the small-scale, community-based investigation.

Since my investigation relies exclusively on data gathered through respondents' reports, there might be some drawbacks. As literature discussing the limitations of opinion polls mentions, they mainly refer to the questionable validity and completeness of the respondents' reports. Nonetheless, since interviews are the only available method for such research, I would claim that an appropriate and innovative design of the questionnaires and the ability of the interviewer will overcome potential deficiencies. To offer a better understanding of the procedures of data collection, I have developed a provisional questionnaire comprising a set of questions that I will use to gather information about the structure and composition of networks (see Appendix 1, p. 24).

4.2. Case selection

In the first stage of the study, the influence of the interpersonal discussion networks will be analyzed at the local level. For reasons of easier access to the information, the community will be chosen from Romania. After this step of investigation I expect to improve and refine the research design and hypotheses. A comparison with the data already collected from Hungary will be carried out. This will allow for some inference regarding the generalizable character of patterns of network influence on political behavior.

The second step of the analysis will be an investigation at the national level. Considering that the research hypothesizes general patterns of social network influence and thus seeks to detect effects that might hold irrespective of the countries analyzed, there is no strict criterion informing the country selection. Therefore, a cross-country comparison could be done within the limits of available data.

An interesting stage of the study will be an interregional comparison between these post-communist democracies and Western democracies/or United States, relying at this time on the results reported by scholars who analyze this topic (the only data that might be available in the ICPSR archives are Huckfeldt et al.'s).

4.3. Methods

The investigation will use statistical methods to analyze data. In addition, inasmuch as the available data will suit, I will use network method analysis. When necessary, qualitative data will be gathered to allow for a better understanding of the specifics of different communities.

5. The pay-off of the project

The relevance of this project should be considered both at the theoretical and practical levels. Since I have extensively approached the contribution that my study

will bring to previous research in the field in the last paragraph of the second section (2.4), here I will just briefly summarize the main points. First, this study will contribute to the development of a field that to date has remained rather under-researched, namely the impact of social interaction on individual political behavior. Second, it will not only fill a theoretical gap but will also provide a different perspective on the topic, by investigating the potential of social interaction to act as politically relevant shortcuts. Last but not least, this investigation is expected to enrich the existing literature on social context role due to the fact that it focuses on an area that has not been previously approached, namely the post communist societies of Central and East Europe.

The practical relevance of the study consists of its potential to provide information about better ways to frame and channel public discourse. Discovering what cues are susceptible to use by many people and in a more beneficial way can inform the design of institutions and procedures so that they can channel information accordingly. As Popkin (1991: 218-219) emphasizes, the way people collect information is best described by the metaphor of the Drunkard's Search: if political information conveyors want to increase their audience they have to put the information where people are more likely to look for it or to tailor it according to people's expectations and tastes.

Can democracy thrive even though government is based on decisions made by poorly informed citizens with low interest in politics? If the conclusions of this study indicate that under certain conditions social interaction is both influential and beneficial in terms of political behavior this will represent a challenging answer to the question. It might redirect the method of sending political messages from the level of governmental elite to the community level. It will translate into a greater emphasis on strengthening the leadership of local communities and organizations in disseminating information and enabling public debate on politically salient issues.

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