

Social Learning in Politics

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Social scientists have long argued that political decisions are not made in isolation. People do not simply privately take in information and then decide for whom to vote. Rather, we make our decisions after interacting with other people, discussing our ideas and beliefs. Understanding how other people affect our voting decisions has significant implications for models of turnout and electoral competition.

Understanding how social networks affect political choices is of particular importance in developing countries for at least three reasons, and is deeply related to promoting equitable growth. First, many people in the developing world lack access to a wide range of media sources (e.g. a variety of newspapers or television channels) or may alternatively lack the reading skills to understand them, affecting the way information about the political process is disseminated. A person's neighbors or social network may play a substitute role for the media. Second, many political institutions in the developing world have an inherently social character. Consider, for example, a patronage network. In a patronage network, a landlord, big-man, or other local influential leader instructs other people how to vote. The initial people receiving the information from the leader often relay this information to others. What role does social influence play in allowing patronage networks to operate? Third, understanding the connection between social networks and voting may be useful for empowering the poor. In most developing countries, the poor outnumber the rich, yet governments fail to implement redistributive policies and to provide the poor with critical services. Efforts to politically empower the poor must crucially understand the way by which the poor form opinions and ultimately decide for whom to vote.

To shed light on social networks and public opinion, we turn to a randomized experiment. We interview subjects. Then we randomly inform some of a subject's friends and see if they change their political behavior to conform to that of the subjects.

Our results are relevant for the growing conversation about how networks affect many economic behaviors (including credit, risk-sharing, and technology adoption), particularly in developing countries. The effective scale-up of policies depends on whether information about their efficacy is widely distributed. What types of information are most easily communicable, and who is likely to listen to such information? What makes a person central in a social network? Our research sheds lights on a particular application of these important questions.