**Social Network Disagreement and Reasoned Candidate Preferences**

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**Abstract**

This study investigates the effects of social network disagreement on candidate preferences. Although much research has explored the effects of disagreement on political tolerance and disengagement, less work has examined the relation between disagreement and political reasoning. We predicted that because disagreement reveals conflicting points of view and motivates people to consider these views, it should promote more effortful reasoning—and thus increased reliance on policy preferences and decreased reliance on party identification when choosing between candidates. Using panel data from the 2008 and 2012 U.S. Presidential elections, we find that respondents in high-disagreement networks tend to shift their candidate preferences to align with their policy preferences regardless of their party identification. In low-disagreement networks, respondents tended to follow party over policy. In sum, the determinants of candidate preferences differ depending on individuals’ social networks. In some cases, disagreement may promote more normatively desirable political decision-making.

**Keywords:** Social networks, Disagreement, Candidate preferences, Voting behavior

**Word Count:** 5,759

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Although the act of voting is relatively solitary, the decision it represents is very much a social one, with implications for the groups and coalitions that the candidates represent and for the policies that govern society as a whole. Citizens’ votes reflect their thoughts and opinions in the context of the people who surround them. Recognizing this fact, a growing body of research has explored the role of social networks in political reasoning and behavior. Much of this research has explored the effects—some salutary, some troubling—of political disagreement within a network of close friends and family. On the one hand, disagreement has been found to predict greater tolerance for political opponents and their views (Mutz, 2002a, 2006) and to help individuals accumulate larger and more even-handed stores of political information (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004). On the other hand, disagreement has been found to predict political disengagement (Mutz, 2002b, 2006)—though some investigations have suggested that this relation depends critically on other factors (Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborne, 2004; McClurg, 2006).

In the current study, we explore another normative consequence of political disagreement—the depth and quality of individuals’ political reasoning (see Erisen & Erisen, 2012). Specifically, we examine whether the relative impact of party identification and policy preferences on candidate preferences depends on the extent to which voters experience disagreement within their social networks. When voters are surrounded by like-minded others, we expect party allegiance to dominate candidate preferences; however, we predict that those voters who experience frequent or intense political disagreement with close others will give more weight to their policy preferences and less to their party identification when choosing between candidates. We ground this prediction in existing research that suggests that policy voting is more cognitively demanding than party-line voting and that network disagreement tends to create conditions that facilitate more in-depth, elaborate cognitive processing.

**Defining Disagreement**

Researchers have examined many different forms of “disagreement.” We here focus on individuals’ *subjective experience of disagreement with close others*—how often and how intensely people debate politics with those they care about. At one extreme, individuals in *high-disagreement* networks feel that they routinely encounter challenges to their political views. At the other extreme, individuals in *low-disagreement* networks perceive no such challenges, and likely find active affirmation for their views among their discussants.

This aligns our work with existing research on “cross-cutting” or attitudinally “incongruent” networks (Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004; Mutz, 2002a, 2006). Other authors have focused on “heterogeneous” networks, whose members hold a diverse range of attitudes—essentially, a network-level measure of disagreement rather than an individual one (e.g., Eveland & Hively, 2009; Nir, 2005). Both high- and low-disagreement networks can be homogeneous. For example, a liberal whose closest friends are all conservative is in a relatively homogeneous network. Because our emphasis is on *individuals’* political decision-making, we focus on individuals’ experiences of disagreement rather than network-level diversity.

Our focus on individuals’ subjective experience of disagreement also aligns our work most closely with existing research on perceived disagreement with one’s discussants (Huckfeldt & Lake, 2000; Huckfeldt & Mendez, 2008; Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004; Mutz, 2002a, 2006)—rather than “objective” differences between individuals’ attitudes and their discussants’. The two are related (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995), but we don’t expect differences of opinion that are never voiced or recognized to affect individuals’ political reasoning. Thus, we focus on the disagreement that people *do* perceive, recall, and report.

**Party versus Policy and Cognitive Elaboration**

Partisanship has long been regarded as a simple and efficient, but sometimes flawed, heuristic that citizens can use to infer how well a candidate will represent their interests (Sniderman & Stiglitz, 2012). A candidate’s issue positions, in contrast, provide more direct and precise information about her likely behavior in office, but because issue attitudes require no small amount of cognitive effort to articulate and translate into vote choice, they also represent a much more difficult basis for candidate selection. In psychological terms, the relative influence of party versus policy on candidate evaluation can be viewed as a question of *cognitive elaboration* (i.e., effortful thought about a topic). In general, cognitive elaboration renders people more sensitive to the logical coherence of ideas and less likely to form or change their attitudes on the basis of simple heuristic decision rules (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). In the context of politics, citizens who cognitively elaborate upon political messages and ideas should be more likely to select candidates on the basis of policy preferences and less likely to choose candidates based on shared partisan identity. According to social-psychological research on attitude change and persuasion, people tend to cognitively elaborate when they have the *ability* and the *motivation* to do so (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

Voters’ knowledge of political information is probably the most important determinant of their *ability* to think about politics, and indeed, the more people know, the more likely they are to vote based on their issue positions (Goren, 1997; Kahn & Kenney, 1997). Anxiety and competing feelings about the parties and their candidates have been studied as factors that *motivate* voters to think about politics, and each of these variables have been found to push voters to follow policy over party (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Hillygus & Shields, 2008; Lavine, Johnston, & Steenbergen, 2012; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000).

Existing research on network disagreement has shown that disagreement can furnish voters with both political information and the motivation to use that information. We review this literature below.

**Network Disagreement Enables and Motivates Political Reasoning**

**Network disagreement and “ability”: Political Information.** By exposing people to perspectives that differ from their own, disagreement introduces people to political information to which they are less likely to willingly expose themselves (Stroud, 2011). Previous research has found that network disagreement predicts various forms of political knowledge (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Scheufele et al., 2004), increased consumption of “hard” news (Scheufele et al., 2004), and the ability to offer reasons why someone would support or oppose a given political candidate (Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004). All of this evidence is consistent with the idea that disagreement gives citizens information that makes relatively elaborate political reasoning possible.

**Network disagreement and “motivation”: Social Pressure.** Disagreement also exposes individuals to social pressure to re-evaluate their political attitudes by making it clear that cherished others do not share their views (Sinclair, 2012). This puts people in an uncomfortable position, to the extent that they feel positively about both their attitudes and their friends or family who oppose them. This discomfort—according to classic social-psychological theories of Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1962) and Balance (Heider, 1958)—is an aversive state that people are motivated to reduce. Reflecting more carefully on one’s existing attitudes is one way to reduce this discomfort.

Imagine learning, to your surprise, that a close friend disagrees with your evaluation of a presidential candidate. Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Balance Theory both suggest that you can mitigate the discomfort of this realization through cognitive differentiation. You might, for example, focus on the fact that your friend agrees with you regarding the candidate’s stances on social issues, and set aside your disagreement about his economic policies. Cognitive differentiation—a form of elaboration—is not the only way to reduce dissonance or achieve balance, but many would prefer it to changing their attitudes, dismissing the presidency as unimportant, or dissolving their friendship.

This idea is consistent with evidence that disagreement can soften people’s reactions to views that oppose their own. Visser and Mirabile (2004) report that individuals’ attitudes are less resistant to change when they reside in attitudinally diverse networks. People in high-disagreement networks are similarly more likely to concede the legitimacy of others’ opinions (Mutz, 2002a, 2006), more tolerant of people who hold those opposing viewpoints (Mutz, 2002a, 2006), and more likely to hold both positive and negative views about their preferred candidate and his or her opponent (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). Part of these effects may be attributable to greater cognitive elaboration. Green, Visser, and Tetlock (2000) find that when people believe that they will need to justify their opinions to others who do not share their views, they tend to devote more thought to those opinions than when they anticipate a more congenial audience. Disagreement can push people to consider views that differ from their own and provide an impetus for cognitive elaboration.

**Overview and Hypotheses**

Introducing people to new information does not compel them to use it, and making people uncomfortable does not imbue them with policy expertise. But in political disagreements between real people, both information *and* social pressure are communicated together, given that when people express their opinions, they also reveal whether they disagree with others around them. We expect disagreement to condition the effects of party identification and policy preferences on candidate evaluations because it provides voters with information that goes beyond which candidate belongs to which party *and* it presses them to use that additional information to refine and articulate their preferences.

In the present study, we hypothesize that individuals who perceive higher levels of disagreement in their social networks will rely more on policy preferences (**H1**) and less on party identification (**H2**) in their evaluations of political candidates. Operationally, we therefore predict that disagreement will interact with party identification and policy preferences in models predicting candidate evaluations, such that the coefficient for policy preferences will be strongest when disagreement is high and that the coefficient for party identification will be weakest under the same circumstances. We test these hypotheses in two-wave panel models, which allow for stronger (albeit imperfect) causal inferences.

**Method**

**Data**

We employ data from two nationwide panels: the Minnesota Multi-Investigator 2012 Presidential Election Panel Study (MN panel; Chen et al., 2014), and the 2008-2009 ANES panel study. Conducted during the last month of the 2012 presidential election, the MN panel surveyed 1,800 American residents age 18 or older using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) over three waves. Descriptive statistics are available in Appendix B, Table B1. This sample overrepresented Democrats (59%; 14% Independent and 28% Republican), Whites (84%), and the well-educated (59% had a college degree), similar to other MTurk samples (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012). We include all of these variables as controls in our model, but the high levels of education in this sample remain a concern. More educated people may be especially able or willing to respond to disagreement with greater cognitive elaboration. Of course, this line of speculation may give too little credit to those without a college education (and too much credit to those who have one), but it is a possibility that may limit the generalizability of our findings in this analysis.

With the ANES, however, we can overcome this limitation. The ANES recruited 4,240 respondents in two cohorts of US citizens age 18 or older as of Election Day 2008 using standard random-digit-dialing (RDD) methods, first in late 2007, then again in the summer of 2008. DeBell, Krosnick and Lupia (2010) calculate the response rate at 43% using the CASRO method.[[5]](#endnote-2) Descriptive statistics are available in Appendix B, Table B2. The ANES sample is as nearly representative of the American population as contemporary sampling methodologies allow.

Due to attrition across waves and missing data in individual items, we include only a subset of respondents in our main analyses (MN Panel *N* = 927; ANES Panel *N =* 1,013 in models predicting candidate evaluations; ANES Panel *N* = 900 in models predicting vote choice). Further information concerning balance tests between the (complete) cases included in our analyses and the (incomplete) cases excluded is provided in Appendix B, Table B1.

The MN panel was conducted in three waves. The first wave took place between October 16th and October 22nd 2012. The second wave ran from October 31st to November 5th, and the third (post-election) wave from November 14th to November 24th. Details of participant attrition may be found in Chen et al. (2014). Because we are primarily interested in candidate preferences that *preceded* the election, our models only analyze responses across the first two waves.

Respondents in the ANES panel were asked to complete monthly surveys for a period of 20 months in 2008-2009, but here we focus only on those waves that preceded the 2008 presidential election (i.e., Waves 1-10), and the measure of vote choice in November 2008 (Wave 11).

**Design**

We employ a two-wave panel design in both datasets. Using the MN panel, we examine whether network disagreement moderates the relationship between candidate evaluations on the one hand and party identification and policy preferences on the other. Using the ANES panel, we extend this analysis to a larger, more representative sample and use both candidate evaluations and vote choice in the 2008 presidential election as the outcomes of interest.

Our two-wave panel design allows us to determine whether our predictors are associated with *change* in candidate evaluations and vote intention over time. Controlling for initial candidate preferences in our models rules out the possibility that the observed associations are attributable to a “reverse causal” effect of candidate preferences on respondents’ social networks, party identification, or policy attitudes. Our models also allow us to control for the effects of any omitted variables whose effects are “baked in” to the dependent variable prior to our initial observation. However, our analysis does *not* rule out the possibility that the people who choose to remain in high-disagreement social networks are, because of some third variable, more likely to form candidate preferences on the basis of effortful considerations. Because the ANES and MN panels only assessed network composition in a single wave, we cannot use lagged models to formally test whether strong policy preferences, education, or political engagement influenced the composition of respondents’ networks. We can, however, control for some potential confounds and use cross-sectional data to determine the plausibility of alternative explanations.

**Measures**

We describe our key variables below. For consistency and ease of interpretation, all continuous predictors were rescaled to run from 0 to 1, except age (coded in years).

***Predictors.*** Recall that our focus is on respondents’ *subjective experience of political disagreement with close others*. We regard this construct as a combination of disagreement frequency and intensity—the extent to which individuals feel their views are challenged by their friends and family. The MN panel’s measure of disagreement, assessed in Wave 1, maps closely onto this construct. Three unipolar items asked respondents to report how frequently they experienced disagreement with “those people [they] feel very close to, such as [their] family and close friends.” Respondents reported how many of these close others had different political views, how often close others expressed these different views, and how often they themselves disagreed with their close others. We took the average of these items to form a composite scale of disagreement, with the highest values indicating the most frequent and intense disagreement (α= 0.76).[[6]](#endnote-3) The ANES panel’s measure less directly taps respondents’ personal experiences with political disagreement, but should still covary with that construct. ANES respondents were asked to name up to 8 people with whom they frequently discussed politics in the September 2008 wave. Respondents then indicated, for the first three people they named, “In general, how different are [Name’s] opinions about government and elections from your own views.” We calculated the average disagreement reported by the respondent across up to three discussants; 2,117 respondents named at least one discussant, and are included in this measure.[[7]](#endnote-4) Both disagreement scales recorded substantial variance, though the ANES scale showed more positive skew than the MN panel measure (*MMN* = 0.54, *SDMN* = 0.21; *MANES* = 0.31, *SDANES* = 0.20). See Appendix A for verbatim wording of both the MN and ANES items.

Our measures of *policy preferences* are meant to capture participants’ attitudes about key issues that distinguished the candidates in each election. According to Gallup (Saad, 2012), the economy, unemployment, and the federal deficit evoked the most public concern in the 2012 election.[[8]](#endnote-5) Wave 1 of the MN panel included four policy items, measuring attitudes about government spending on services, national defense, guaranteeing jobs, and the environment. We included them all, and averaged them to form a composite scale of respondents’ policy attitudes. Higher scores indicate more conservative policy preferences (α = 0.78).[[9]](#endnote-6) In 2008, the economy, terrorism, healthcare, and taxes were perceived as the most important issues (Saad, 2008). The first (January 2008) wave of the ANES panel measured 9 policy issues, listed in Appendix A. We limited our measure of policy preferences to 5 items relating to terrorism, healthcare, and taxes.[[10]](#endnote-7) Again, these items were averaged to form a composite scale of policy attitudes, with higher values corresponding to more conservative preferences (α = 0.59).

Both the ANES and MN panels measured *party identification*using the standard ANES branching scale. The MN panel assessed party identification in Wave 1. In ANES analyses, we use party identification as measured in January 2008. In all analyses, this variable is a 7-point scale running from 0 (strong Democrat) to 1 (strong Republican).

***Outcomes***. We use two measures of participants’ candidate preferences. In both pre-election waves of the MN Panel, respondents reported their *global evaluations* of the candidates using 100-point feeling thermometers (FT). Our outcome variable is the difference between the two candidate feeling thermometers (Obama FT - Romney FT). Higher values thus indicate greater favorability toward Obama compared to Romney. As with the other continuous variables, the resulting FT difference scores were rescaled to run from 0 (greatest Romney preference) to 1 (greatest Obama preference). In the ANES, participants were asked branched questions about how much they liked or disliked a given candidate in Wave 1 (January) and again in Wave 10 (October). Our outcome variable is again the difference between evaluations of the eventual major party candidates—in this case Obama and McCain. We rescaled these difference scores to run from 0 (greatest McCain preference) to 1 (greatest Obama preference).

Vote choice is a less sensitive variable than candidate evaluations but more directly represents the outcome of citizens’ political decision-making. Unfortunately, vote choice in the MN Panel was remarkably consistent–of those participants with complete data, only 7 switched their vote choice between Romney and Obama between Waves 1 and 3. The greater variation in the ANES allows us to examine change in vote choice from vote intention (reported in September) to vote choice (reported in November).[[11]](#endnote-8)

***Control variables.*** To control for the effects of demographics and other potentially confounding variables, our models include respondents’ *age* on election day (in years), *income* (19 ordered categories, recoded as 0-1), *gender* (0 = female, 1 = male), *education* (8 ordered categories, recoded as 0-1), and whether the respondent was *non-white* (0 = no, 1 = yes). In the MN panel, all control variables were measured in Wave 1. In the ANES, demographic variables were derived from responses to multiple waves, but are unlikely to have changed during this period.

In Appendix B, we include balance tests that assess whether each of these control variables varied as a function of network disagreement (Table B5). We also present models with controls omitted—the results are substantively identical in both cases (Tables B6-8).

**Results**

**MN Panel Results: Network Disagreement and Candidate Evaluations**

We predicted that respondents who reported more disagreement within their social networks would shift their candidate preferences to align with their policy preferences rather than with their party identification. Note that respondents’ policy preferences and partisanship were related but empirically distinct (*r* = 0.64, *p* < .001). See Appendix B, Figure B2 for details.

To test our key predictions, we regressed respondents’ Wave 2 candidate evaluations (as measured by the FT difference score) on Wave 1 evaluations, key predictor variables (i.e., policy preferences and party identification), controls, and on interactions between network disagreement and each key predictor variable. Our predictions were supported (see Table 1 for estimates).

Significant interactions emerged between disagreement and policy preferences and between disagreement and party identification (both *p*s < 0.01). These relationships are substantively large. Among respondents who reported experiencing relatively little disagreement with their friends and family (1 SD below the scale mean), Republican Party identification predicted change in candidate evaluations from Wave 1 to Wave 2 (*b* = -0.13, *p* < 0.01). The effect of policy preferences (*b* = -0.08, *p* < 0.01) was weaker than that of partisanship under these circumstances.[[12]](#endnote-9) Among respondents who tended to *disagree* with their close others (1 SD above the scale mean), the effect of partisanship was reduced to non-significance (*b = -*0.02, *p* = 0.39). Meanwhile, the effect of policy preferences (*b* = -0.21, *p* < 0.01) was far stronger. Figure 1 illustrates these results. In short, high levels of disagreement were associated with a relatively strong reliance on policy preferences and a remarkable null effect of partisanship.

**ANES Analyses: Network Disagreement, Candidate Evaluations, and Vote Choice**

In the ANES panel, we are able to test the effect of disagreement on the bases of both candidate evaluations and voting behavior. Once again, we note that there is a great deal of unshared variance between respondent partisanship and policy preference (*r* = 0.53, *p* < .001; see Appendix B, Figure B3).

Our first outcome is preference for Obama over McCain in candidate evaluations, measured in October 2008 and controlling for earlier evaluations in January. Our second outcome is self-reported vote choice for Obama over McCain in November 2008, controlling for vote intention in September. We used OLS regression to predict candidate evaluations and logistic regression to predict vote choice, adjusted using the cross-sectional weight for the wave in which the outcome variable was measured (DeBell et al., 2010). We employ this weighting procedure—rather than one using the cumulative panel weights—because many respondents who would otherwise be included in our analyses have missing data for the panel weight for any given analysis, which is only available for those respondents who completed *every* wave of the panel prior to a given point in time (e.g., every wave up to and including October). Because the cross-sectional panel weight does not account for attrition across waves, however, we repeated all focal analyses using the panel weights. Results of these analyses did not differ in direction or significance from those we report here, but are available upon request.

The model estimates depicted in Table 2 partially confirm our predictions and replicate the MN panel results. The results for candidate evaluations map closely onto those from the MN panel. When respondents reported relatively little disagreement (1 SD below the mean), they tended to follow party (*b* = -0.40, *p* < 0.01) more than policy (*b* = -0.16, *p* < 0.01). When respondents reported relatively high levels of disagreement (1 SD above the mean), they tended to follow policy (*b* = -0.34, *p* < 0.01) more than party (*b* = -0.14, *p* < 0.01). This pattern is evident in the left panels of Figure 2. The results predicting vote choice were less consistent. Disagreement and partisanship interacted as before, such that the effects of party identification were stronger for respondents who reported little disagreement (*b* = -1.09, *p* < 0.01, when disagreement is 1 SD below the mean), compared to those who reported the most disagreement (*b* = -0.62, *p* < 0.01, when disagreement is 1 SD above the mean). However, the interaction between disagreement and policy preferences was not significant. See the rightmost panels of Figure 2. In sum, three of the four interaction terms replicated the MN Panel results, providing imperfect but converging evidence from a representative sample during the 2008 election.

**Exploring Network Selection Biases in the MN and ANES panels**

Our theory is that network disagreement *affects* the relative weight of party identification and policy preferences in candidate preferences. However, the evidence we present above may be biased by omitted variables. Certain types of individuals may be more or less likely to choose social networks (i.e., to establish or maintain relationships) in which political disagreement is commonplace. Perhaps people who are especially interested in politics, well-educated, or politically knowledgeable tolerate more political disagreement in their relationships. Or, perhaps people with weaker partisan attachments or stronger policy preferences are more comfortable disagreeing about politics with others. With network disagreement measured at one wave in each study, we cannot test whether these variables *affect* reported disagreement. However, we can test the plausibility of the idea that network disagreement is simply standing in for these variables by examining the correlation between network disagreement and education, political interest, political knowledge, and the extremity of respondents’ partisan identities and policy preferences. These correlations are reported in Table 3. Some are statistically significant, but all are modest in magnitude (|*r* |< 0.25). We find evidence that people in high-disagreement networks are *not*, on average, more interested in politics, better educated, or more extreme in their policy views. In fact, network disagreement was associated with *less* extreme policy views in both samples. Disagreement was slightly correlated with political knowledge (*r* = 0.06, *p* < 0.05 in both datasets), but this correlation is consistent with our theory that network disagreement promotes the dissemination of political information, and is likely not strong enough to account for the entirety of our effects. Additional models controlling for the effects of political knowledge and political interest (and their interactions with our key predictors) replicated the results reported in the main text. The significant negative correlations between partisan extremity and network disagreement (*rMN = -*.16, *r*ANES = -.22; *p*s <0.01) are more problematic; these may bias our estimates of the interaction between partisanship and network agreement, such that partisanship only appears weakly related to candidate preferences when disagreement is high because these networks house mainly weak partisans. In Appendix B, Tables B9-10, we test the extent of this bias. Our findings suggest that bias from this particular variable cannot account for our results.

**Summary and Conclusion**

In two nationwide panel surveys, we find evidence that citizens’ party identification predicts change in their candidate preferences differently depending on their immediate social context. Among citizens who rarely disagreed with their friends and family about politics, party identification predicted change in candidate preferences. However, among citizens who reported more disagreement with close others, partisanship was a much weaker predictor of candidate preferences. Conversely, we find that policy positions best predict candidate evaluations under the same conditions in which partisanship’s effect is weakest. This pattern of results supports both of our hypotheses. When compared to those in low-disagreement networks, citizens in high-disagreement networks appear to develop candidate preferences through more effortful cognitive processes, no longer choosing candidates on the basis of simple partisan cues.

Although we replicate the interaction between party identification and network disagreement across two datasets, two elections, and three outcomes, we did not observe the expected interaction between policy attitudes and network disagreement in the ANES vote-choice model. This may be due to differences between the 2008 and 2012 election, to the insensitivity of the outcome, or to differences in our measure of disagreement across datasets; future research is necessary to determine whether the interaction of policy attitudes and network disagreement is reliable across election years. The fact that party identification is reliably less predictive of candidate evaluations for those in high-disagreement networks suggests that disagreement may reduce citizens’ reliance on certain heuristics in candidate selection. The extra effort required to choose candidates based on policy preferences instead, however, might require more specific circumstances—or perhaps the actual *experience* of disagreement with one’s close others rather than the general belief that their opinions differ from one’s own.

A second important limitation of our study is the difficulty of causal inference in panel analysis. Although we can be confident that network disagreement and our other predictors at least *precede* change in candidate preferences, we cannot rule out the possibility that some third variable accounts for the associations we observe. It is possible that a particular type of person selects into relatively low-disagreement networks, and that this type of person also happens to rely more heavily on party identification than policy preferences in evaluating candidates—for example, strong partisans or individuals with weak policy preferences. We try to account for this bias in the supplemental analyses described above. Even setting those models aside, however, the complete absence of an effect of partisanship in high-disagreement networks is noteworthy. Given that self-identified independents usually vote for the party toward which they lean (Abramowitz, 2010; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960), the null effect of partisanship that we observe in high-disagreement networks would be surprising even if every respondent in a high-disagreement network was also a weak partisan.

That said, other less obviously relevant variables might account for the associations we observe. Perhaps psychological predispositions to engage in effortful reasoning (e.g., need for cognition; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) or to regulate one’s impressions across social situations (e.g., self-monitoring; Snyder, 1974) are associated with individuals’ tendencies to select into high-disagreement networks and to evaluate candidates based on policy rather than party. Experimental investigations of the effects of political disagreement will be necessary to overcome the causal ambiguity inherent in all panel designs, our study included.

These limitations notwithstanding, the present study does permit novel inferences concerning the consequences of political disagreement. First, whereas previous investigations have revealed direct effects of disagreement on attitude change, we find that disagreement may also influence how people form their attitudes. The considerations that voters weigh in an election may depend critically on the people with whom they discuss politics and how often these discussions occur. Second, our evidence contributes to extant debates surrounding the normative consequences of disagreement for democratic systems. Previous work has revealed both potential benefits, such as greater tolerance for political opponents and their views, and potential costs, such as political disengagement. Our own work suggests one additional benefit that disagreement might offer—a push to engage in more effortful political decision-making and to choose candidates based on the policies they support rather than on the letter that appears next to their name on the ballot.

However, our evidence also suggests that it takes quite a bit of disagreement for citizens’ policy preferences to take precedent over their partisanship. Such high levels of disagreement might be difficult to sustain, and might have other, underappreciated deleterious effects. For example, political disagreement is generally not enjoyable, and can damage interpersonal relationships that might be more valuable to the average citizen than a carefully reasoned vote.

So although our results suggest that disagreement *can* induce people to engage in more effortful political reasoning, it is unclear how pervasive these effects are and whether the benefits that accompany them outweigh the potential costs. We do not claim to have shown that political disagreement is “a good thing.” However, our finding that disagreement is associated with reliance on policy over party in presidential elections suggests a previously unexplored benefit of political disagreement for democratic systems: pushing citizens to think more carefully about the political decisions that democracy asks them to make.

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**Table 1: MN Panel Effects of Policy Preferences and Party ID on Change in Candidate Evaluations**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Obama FT –Romney FT  (Wave 2) |
| Policy Preferences | 0.02 |
| (Conservative) | (0.05) |
| Party Identification | -0.22\*\* |
| (Republican) | (0.04) |
| Network Disagreement | 0.02 |
|  | (0.04) |
| Policy Preferences X | -0.31\*\* |
| Disagreement | (0.10) |
| Party Identification X | 0.27\*\* |
| Disagreement | (0.07) |
| Non-white Indicator | -0.01 |
|  | (0.01) |
| Age | <0.01\* |
|  | (0.00) |
| Male Indicator | 0.01 |
|  | (0.01) |
| Education | -0.02 |
|  | (0.02) |
| Income | 0.03 |
|  | (0.02) |
| Lagged DV (Wave 1) | 0.80\*\* |
|  | (0.02) |
| Constant | 0.25\*\* |
|  | (0.03) |
| *R*2 | 0.88 |
| *N* | 927 |

*Note.* Entries are ordinary least squares regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses.

The outcome is the difference between respondents’ feeling thermometer ratings of the two candidates, with higher values indicating a more positive evaluation of Obama relative to Romney.

All continuous variables besides age were rescaled to run from 0 to 1, while age is naturally coded in years.

\* *p*<0.05; \*\* *p*<0.01

**Table 2: ANES Effects of Policy Preferences and Party ID on Change in Vote Choice and Candidate Evaluations**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Candidate Evaluations  (October 2008) | Vote Choice  (November 2008) |
| Policy Preferences (Conservative) | -0.11 | -3.42 |
|  | (0.07) | (2.02) |
| Party Identification (Republican) | -0.47\*\* | -4.91\*\* |
|  | (0.05) | (1.10) |
| Network Disagreement | -0.11 | -3.75 |
|  | (0.11) | (2.01) |
| Policy Preferences X Disagreement | -0.44\* | 1.29 |
|  | (0.21) | (4.22) |
| Party Identification X Disagreement | 0.64\*\* | 4.74\* |
|  | (0.13) | (2.18) |
| Non-white Indicator | 0.05 | -0.32 |
|  | (0.03) | (0.74) |
| Age | -0.00 | -0.00 |
|  | (0.00) | (0.01) |
| Male Indicator | 0.03\* | -0.15 |
|  | (0.02) | (0.41) |
| Education | 0.07 | 1.22 |
|  | (0.04) | (1.09) |
| Income | 0.04 | 0.05 |
|  | (0.05) | (1.15) |
| Vote Intention (September 2008) | --- | 4.26\*\* |
|  |  | (0.40) |
| Candidate Evaluations (January 2008) | 0.53\*\* | --- |
|  | (0.04) |  |
| Constant | 0.41\*\* | 1.43 |
|  | (0.06) | (1.12) |
| *R2* | 0.63 |  |
| *AIC* |  | 323.90 |
| *Percent Correct Predictions[[13]](#footnote-6)* |  | 94.22 |
| *N* | 1,013 | 900 |

*Note.* Model 1 entries are OLS regression coefficients and model 2 entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Model 1 outcome is the difference between Obama and McCain evaluations in October 2008, coded such that strong preference for Obama is 1 and strong preference for McCain is 0. Model 2 outcome is self-reported vote choice in November 2008, dichotomized such that a vote for Obama yields a value of 1 and a vote for McCain yields a value of 0. All continuous variables besides age were rescaled to run from 0 to 1, while age is naturally coded in years.

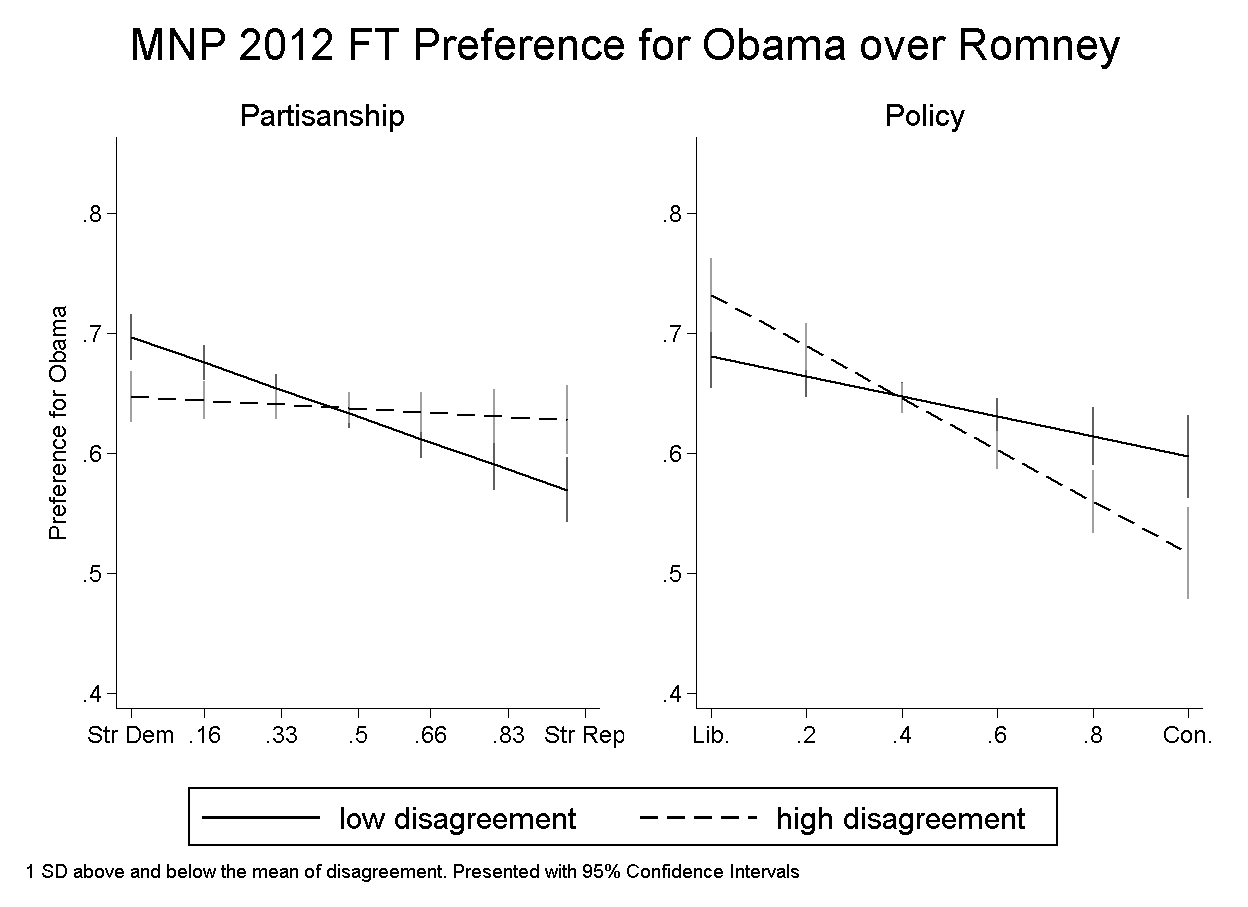
\* *p*<0.05; \*\* *p*<0.01

**Table 3: Correlations between Network Disagreement and Potential Confounds**

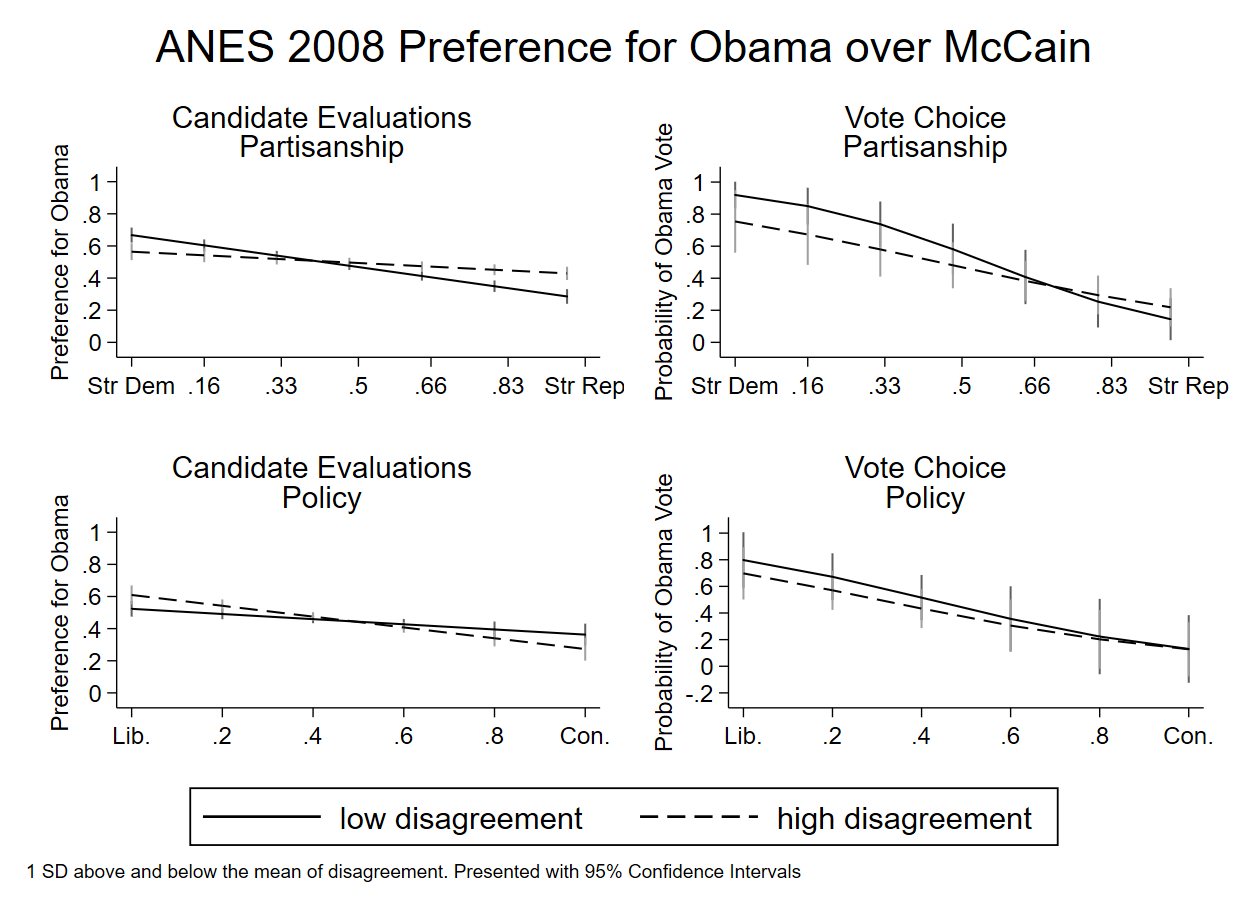
|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | MN Panel  Correlation with Network Disagreement | ANES  Correlation with Network Disagreement |
| Political Interest | 0.01 | -0.08\*\* |
| Political Knowledge | 0.06\* | 0.06\*\* |
| Partisan Extremity | -0.16\*\* | -0.22\*\* |
| Policy Extremity | -0.09\*\* | -0.10\*\* |
| Education | 0.02 | 0.01 |

*Note.* Entries are Pearson correlation coefficients. \* *p*<0.05; \*\* *p*<0.01

**Figure 1: Obama feeling thermometer advantage as a function of party identification and policy preferences (MN Panel)**



*Note.* Data from the 2012 MN Panel, presenting predicted values as a function of 1) party identification and 2) policy preferences among respondents at 1 SD below and above the mean of network disagreement (.33 and .75). The outcome is the difference between respondents’ feeling thermometer ratings of the two major party candidates, with higher values indicating more positive evaluations of Obama relative to Romney. Presented with 95% Confidence Intervals. All controls are held at their means, except gender, race, and education, which are held at their medians.

**Figure 2: Candidate evaluations and vote choice as a function of party identification (ANES)**

*Note.* Data from the 2008 ANES presenting predicted probabilities as a function of 1) party identification and 2) policy preferences among respondents at 1 SD below and above the mean of network disagreement (.11 and .51). Outcome 1 is preference for Obama over McCain in candidate evaluations; outcome 2 the probability of voting for Obama relative to voting for McCain. Presented with 95% Confidence Intervals. All controls are held to their means, except gender, race, and education, which are held to their medians.

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5. See DeBell et al. (2010) for an explanation of why AAPOR standards are less credible for this sampling frame and a further explanation of attrition across waves. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
6. The number of discussants with whom respondents disagree and the frequency of their verbal disagreements are distinct concepts in principle, but in practice we find that they measure the same general perception of disagreement. Exploratory factor analysis shows that the three questions load onto one factor. The results shown in the main text are robust to multiple constructions of the disagreement measure, including a version using only the ‘frequency’ questions, only the ‘proportion’ question, or alternative methods of weighting the contribution of the three questions. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
7. For those who named three discussants, Cronbach’s α for the disagreement scale is 0.51. The creation of this scale is similar to that used by Parsons (2010) and Klofstad et al. (2013), among others. This measure captures the average level of disagreement within the respondent’s network. An alternative method would measure the *number* of discussants with whom the respondent reports at least moderate political disagreement. Table B3, Appendix B presents the main ANES models using this alternative measurement. The results do not substantively differ from the results reported in the main text, with the exception that the interaction between policy preferences and disagreement becomes a significant predictor of vote choice in the expected direction. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
8. In this 2012 Gallup poll, 37% of respondents rated “the economy” as the most important problem facing the nation. The runners-up were “unemployment” (26%) and the federal deficit (12%). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
9. Due to the limited number of policy items in the MN Panel, we include all four items in our policy scale. A more limited scale focusing on the most campaign-relevant items (i.e., excluding government spending on national defense and the environment) produces substantively identical results. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
10. In the 2008 Gallup poll, 55% of respondents rated “the economy” as an extremely important problem facing the nation. The runners-up were terrorism (42%), healthcare (41%), and taxes (40%). We included all attitude measures related to these issues in our composite measure. The items excluded from our composite scale were related to same-sex marriage, illegal immigration, and increasing taxes on those making less than $200,000 per year. Increasing taxes on low- and middle-income Americans is not clearly a liberal or conservative issue, and indeed was widely opposed (only 7% of respondents favored increasing taxes for this group). While same-sex marriage was a relevant issue in 2008, both McCain and Obama argued that ‘marriage’ should be limited to heterosexual couples (Ewers, 2008). Illegal immigration, meanwhile, was only viewed as an extremely important issue by 25% of voting-age Americans in October 2008 (Saad, 2008). When we estimate the models from Table 2 with a broader policy scale including same-sex marriage and illegal immigration, the key interaction between disagreement and policy preferences is not statistically significant, but the interaction between disagreement and party identification is much the same. These results are provided in Appendix B, Table B4. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
11. Out of 927 complete cases in Wave 1 and Wave 3 of the MN Panel, 7 respondents changed their preference from one candidate to the other. In the ANES, in contrast, 50 respondents (of 900 complete cases) changed their preference from one candidate to the other. We do not examine change in vote intention among undecided or third-party voters because the nature (and therefore the likely consequences) of the political disagreement that they experience may differ fundamentally from disagreements *across* the left-right divide. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
12. In Appendix B, Table B11, we analyze Obama and Romney FTs as separate outcomes. There are no substantive differences between these models, which replicate the main text. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
13. Proportion of cases where the predicted DV value with the highest probability matched the actual DV value (Harris & Zhao, 2007). A model randomly assigning vote choice would correctly predict 50% of outcomes. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)