

# POLI-FLUENTIALS

## THE NEW **POLITICAL KINGMAKERS**



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF POLITICAL MANAGEMENT

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY  
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## CHAPTER 6

# New Possibilities in Mobilizing Political Influencers

BY DORIS SPIELTHENNER, NEAL GORENFLO AND HARALD KATZMAIR  
 FAS.RESEARCH

## Framing the Story (WHAT)

As we explained in the previous section, messaging must take into account not only the opinion of the target, but also the opinion of the people who surround the influencer – especially the degree of consensus or dissent over a particular issue. Why?

The answer is that disagreement in political discussion networks can be dangerous for a political campaign because it can disrupt the initial communication strategy. Developing a message or a candidate's image takes time, research and money. Eventually, the message leaves the safe harbor of the political war room. Once it enters the political market place, usually through media, advocates or the candidates themselves, people discuss the message, possibly changing the original intent and content.

At this point a political campaign manager loses a large measure of control. Voters don't just accept a message passively. Interpretations by the media, but even more so individuals, as they engage in political discussions with family, friends and co-workers, create new meanings and sometimes mutilate the hard work of the candidate.

FAS.research and other network analysts studied how to manage disagreement within political communications networks. Huckfeldt and his colleagues found that some people are located, either by intent or by accident, within closed social cells of politically like-minded

associates.<sup>16</sup> Others find themselves within politically diverse networks of communication where participants with little political interest deftly avoid political topics in an effort at keeping the peace. Still others within these politically heterogeneous networks resemble the moth and the flame – incapable of resisting the temptation to address politics, even though a cacophony of dissenting voices is the inevitable result.

Opinion formation is a group process – and the level of disagreement on political issues suggests conversion opportunities. While consensus is more easily found in homogeneous communities, the level of dissent increases at the edge of a closed-off community or within heterogeneous groups.

A vital political discussion, even if somebody makes a strong argument for a certain cause, will not be enough to expand the voter base unless the influencer can bridge his or her argument with their oppositional discussants' viewpoint. A political discussion over a controversial topic will always leave the party with the weaker argument destabilized and only in rare cases influenced.

What can be done to cross this chasm between different groups to allow for the story to be passed on? Since only stories that get passed on are good stories, the ideal

16 Huckfeldt, Robert, Paul E. Johnson and Robert Sprague, *Political Disagreement. The Survival of Diverse Opinions within Communication Networks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

place to seed the story and the person who can carry the story across the chasm has to be found. A better approach to messaging is possible by using an index that measures cleavages within and across partisan or ideological groups.

Based on the survey data and previous research, FAS research has developed an index that helps define which topics are suitable to convert potential supporters, mobilize the existing base, or demobilize supporters of the opposing party. The index can help campaigners develop the right bridging stories for each community.

The existence of strong dissent within communities of the same political preference – meaning they are polarized and unbalanced – offers a good opportunity to either expand the voter base within this community or demobilize those who can't be converted. For those who can't be converted, you can increase the cleavage in their partisan group.

We reiterate that opinion formation is not an individual decision process; it's a group process. Most decisions are formed by exchanging opinions about something within core personal networks. Since voting decisions are also formed in group processes, we asked questions about:

**1. Size and Composition of Respondents' Political Discussion Networks**

- Level of dissent in political discussions within ideological groups.
- Level of dissent in political discussion within the group of homogeneous and heterogeneous Hubs.
- Level of agreement over key political issues within and across partisan groups.
- Level of agreement over key political issues within and across ideological groups.

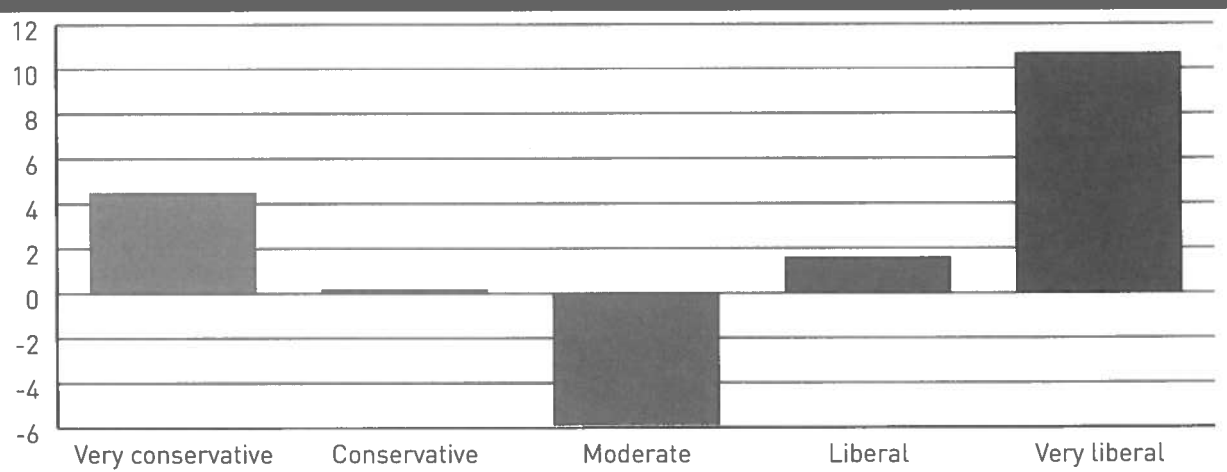
**2. Level of Dissent in Political Discussions within Ideological Groups**

To understand the level of agreement or disagreement in the respondents' political discussion networks, we asked, "When you discuss political topics with these people, is there often a lively discussion and disagreement over issues, or not?" and cross-tabbed it against ideological orientation.

We found that 58% of the sample agrees or agrees somewhat with people in their political networks. We also examined whether the average level of agreement was higher or lower within ideological groups compared with the overall average. Those who self-identified as very liberal stood out by reporting a very strong consensus, 11% above average, followed by those whose orientations are very conservative, 5% above average.

High levels of agreement within particular groups lead to strong reinforcement of community members' views. Those self-identifying as very conservative or very liberal experienced up to 11% higher consensus in their political networks than the overall population, which leads to strong reinforcement of their views. In comparison, moderates find themselves much more often in the line of fire of conflicting arguments. According to Huckfeldt this suggests that moderates with only little political interest are likely to change the conversation to less conflicting topics. Moderates however, who do have a strong political interest and influence, like Bridging Hubs, won't be able to resist the temptation of a passionate political discussion. However, to help a candidate to broaden the political base, the discussion not only has to be passionate but inviting and convincing. Therefore Bridging Hubs need to be empowered with stories that reveal and foster common ground and offer mutually acceptable solutions.

**FIG 6.1: LEVEL OF AGREEMENT OF IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS COMPARED TO AVERAGE**



### 3. Level of Dissent in Political Discussions Within Homogenous and Heterogeneous Hubs

Since we consider Hubs to be key targets for mobilization campaigns, we explored variances in the level of dissent between Bridging Hubs (heterogeneous) and Community Hubs (homogeneous).

We found that an astonishing 81% of all Community Hubs experience consensus in their political discussion networks. This level of agreement is 37% higher than the level of agreement among Bridging Hubs, 25% higher than the level of agreement in the overall study sample's networks, and 20% higher than the level of agreement among Hubs in general. Given the fact that the majority of Community Hubs are distributed strongly over the extremes of the ideological spectrum, these findings again underscore the echo chamber or reinforcement effect in such groups.

Looking at it from the opposite perspective, this means that 56% of all Bridging Hubs experience dissent in their networks and underscores the need for bridging stories if they are to be successful at voter conversion.

**FIG 6.2: LEVEL OF AGREEMENT/HUB TYPE**

	AGREE   AGREE SOMEWHAT	DISAGREE SOMEWHAT   DISAGREE
Community Hubs	80.9%	19.1%
Bridging Hubs	44.3%	55.7%
Total	60.5%	39.5%

### 4. Level of Agreement over Key Political Issues Within and Across Ideological and Partisan Groups

To construct a consensus/dissent index that could help guide the creation of bridging stories, we measured the level of agreement on key political issues within each ideological category (Very Conservative, Conservative, Moderate, Liberal, Very Liberal).

The index serves as a guide for targeted messaging by making clear which topics are best suited for telling bridging stories and what elements bridging stories should have. The large number of respondents in this survey provided valuable information about which issues provoked the largest dissent within each ideological and party category, and how this would differ across the spectrum for the exact same issue.

To illustrate our approach, let's examine moderates' response to the "Abortions should be restricted" claim. It's a low-consensus issue, with nearly an equal number of people who agree and disagree. For instance, if the

claim split the group 50/50, the difference would be zero, indicating maximum dissent. A score of 8% means that Moderates are split and nearly equally divided on this issue. Given this split, a bridging story might be effective in luring some of these voters to either site of the political spectrum. In contrast, the group Very Liberal has high consensus on this topic with a score of 92%. It's a high consensus issue within the Very Liberal group. It would be very difficult for a conservative candidate to attract voters using a bridging story in this group with this topic.

"The government should provide health insurance for the uninsured," shows a similar contrast, this time with party affiliation. This hot button issue found strong agreement and little divide among Democrats (71%). It helps to stabilize discourse within the group while at the same time it splits Republicans even more than Independents. For Republicans, this is a low consensus issue. Messaging this topic in channels of liberal voters would likely stabilize Democratic voters. However, messaging this topic in conservative channels would likely provoke a spirited discussion among conservatives and have a destabilizing effect. Independents can be won with bridging stories since they are nearly evenly split, as was the case with Moderates on the abortion issue.

#### Example Bridging Story

To draw high dissent Moderate voters on the crime/personal security issue to a Liberal candidate, one might design a viral bridging story about the relationship between security (where there is high dissent with Moderates) and access to opportunity (which there is high consensus with Liberals). A story such as "zero tolerance against the roots of crime" could be told by a heterogeneous Bridging Hub to bring moderate peers into liberal ideological terrain.

### Channels (HOW)

Part of the formula for creating campaign momentum is deciding how to mobilize both Community and Bridging Hubs. As we have indicated, Community Hubs should be used to mobilize the base and Bridging Hubs should be used to win swing voters. When considering the appropriate channels to reach Hubs, one must consider the network morphology and partisan composition.

In the case of Community Hubs, the survey results have little to add to the discussion of channels. The use of appropriate partisan media outlets to mobilize the base is well understood. However, the data offers useful insights into how to reach Bridging Hubs. Based on the survey results from prior FAS.research studies, we suggest that campaigners consider the following when designing a media strategy to mobilize Bridging Hubs, as well as Figure 6.3 below.

**FIG 6.3: LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITHIN IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS, HIGH CONSENSUS VERSUS LOW CONSENSUS TOPICS.**

HOT BUTTON ISSUES	VERY LIBERAL	LIBERAL	MODERATE	CONSERVATIVE	VERY CONSERVATIVE	TOTAL
The government should provide health insurance for the uninsured.	82%	76%	35%	-22%	-48%	27%
The government should do more about a widening economic divide between the rich and the poor.	41%	43%	37%	44%	32%	40%
The government should ensure the Social Security fund can continue to provide pensions to all eligible retirees.	95%	86%	36%	-45%	-73%	23%
The government should not allow gay marriage.	-95%	-87%	-43%	50%	70%	-24%
Winning the Iraq War is necessary for the future of the U.S.	-75%	-60%	-24%	37%	64%	-14%
Abortions should be restricted.	92%	70%	8%	-66%	-79%	4%
The eavesdropping associated with the War on Terror erodes the civil liberties of American citizens.	-51%	-42%	-54%	-34%	-30%	-43%
There should be a third political party that competes against Democrats and Republicans.	86%	79%	41%	-17%	-42%	32%

(The higher the number, the greater the level of agreement within a party. Negative numbers represent disagreement; the higher the number, the greater the disagreement.)

- They are educated, seek information from a variety of sources, and tend to be more influenced by what they read than by their peers.
- They are less influenced by their peers than working class voters.
- Their networks are large, but not as densely linked as those of working class voters.
- Their networks are ideologically diverse.
- They tend to be moderates.
- They tend to be middle-to-upper class.

To understand which specific media channels might be effective in mobilizing Bridging Hubs, we used social network analysis algorithms to identify media that connects Moderates to Liberals and Moderates to Conservatives. To find the bridging media, we asked respondents their ideological orientation and their media consumption habits. For instance, if a Moderate respondent

claimed to read The New York Times Online and a Liberal respondent also claimed to read it, then the below illustration shows a link connection between the Moderate base and the Liberal base through The New York Times Online. The more respondents from the Moderate and Liberal or Conservative sides were linked through a particular media channel, the more likely this channel would be effective in reaching Bridging Hubs.

As Figure 6.4 indicates, Bridging Hubs consume media that link moderates with conservatives (USA Today, US News & World Report, Yahoo News, Chicago Tribune Online, etc.) as well as moderates with liberals (Time Magazine, Newsweek, CNN.com, MSNBC.com, etc.).

As can be expected, media consumed by Community Hubs is clustered around the polarized ideological views, which link Conservatives with Very Conservatives (The Wall Street Journal, Fox News.com, Drudge.com, etc.) or Liberals with Very Liberals (BBC.co.uk, Wired, The New Yorker, etc.)

FIG 6.4: BRIDGING HUBS AND THE MEDIA

