

POLI-FLUENTIALS

THE NEW **POLITICAL KINGMAKERS**



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF POLITICAL MANAGEMENT

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CHAPTER 5

Toward a New Paradigm: Understanding Political Influencers

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- Poli-fluentials are far more likely to be Hubs (to have political networks of 30 or more people) than Politicals, Influencers or people who are neither political nor influential.
- Poli-fluentials are more likely to function as “Community Hubs,” at the center of a network of ideologically homogeneous members who tend to be at the ends of the ideological spectrum.
- The other three groups, Politicals, Influencers, and the Non-influential/Non-politicals, have a greater likelihood of functioning as “Bridging Hubs.” Their networks are more diverse.
- Community Hubs and Bridging Hubs occupy different places in the political spectrum. Discovering which role each of the four groups plays in their networks will help political organizations better target and message likely voters.
- Homogeneous Community Hubs (most of which can also be described as Poli-fluentials) should be used to mobilize the base.
- Heterogeneous Bridging Hubs should be used to reach out to people of different ideological persuasions.

Introduction

Politicians understand the importance of attracting the support of opinion leaders who are able to influence and mobilize large numbers of other people. For this reason, they have long courted church leaders with large congregations, union officials, precinct captains, heads of issue advocacy groups and anyone else able to act as a force multiplier by swaying the opinions of their peers.

In different contexts, these people have been called elites, community leaders, influencers, and most recently, Influentials. Social scientists such as ourselves who work in the field of social network analysis look for influencers in the general public who are not your obvious community leaders, but who do, however, influence their peers' decisions and behavior¹². Opinion leaders with big personal networks we call by a different name: Hubs.

We describe as political Hubs people who discuss politics with big networks of friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, and coworkers. About 85% of such Hubs say that they are asked “often” or “very often” for their opinion on political issues. Hubs are very similar to the people that RoperASW and others call “Influentials.”¹³ Of the people who completed IPDI's questionnaire, ap-

12 For a valuable discussion on not only the influencer, but more so -- those being influenced, see “Influentials, Networks and Public Opinion Formation” (Journal of Consumer Research, December 2007) by Peter Sheridan Dodds and Duncan J. Watts.

13 For a thorough treatment of the characteristics of people that RoperASW calls “Influentials,” see “The Influentials” by Ed Keller and Jon Berry (New York: The Free Press, 2003).

proximately 12% are Hubs.

Previous research by us and other social network analysts has shown that there are two kinds of Hubs, Bridging Hubs and Community Hubs. The IPDI survey data show that three-fourths of all political Hubs are “Bridging Hubs.” These individuals exist at the center of heterogeneous networks whose members possess many different political beliefs. The other one-fourth of political Hubs are “Community Hubs,” existing at the center of an ideological homogeneous network of friends, neighbors and colleagues who have the same political beliefs.

Bridging Hubs are people with large networks who bridge between different communities. Their personal and professional networks contain a heterogeneous mix of all kinds of people – young and old, liberal and conservative, educated and less educated. For our purposes here, we were especially interested in people whose networks contain a variety of political perspectives.

As a general rule, people who are Bridging Hubs tend to be more politically moderate. Bridging Hubs are usually found near the ideological center and often function as connectors between voters with different ideologies. They are good messengers for converting voters of different ideologies.

The other kind of Hubs are Community Hubs. While the networks of Community Hubs also contain young and old, educated and less educated, etc, their members share a similar outlook and political perspective.

Prior FAS research has shown that most of these politically interested Community Hubs can be found on the far ends of the ideological continuum, being either very liberal or very conservative. They are good messengers for political communications that mobilize like-minded supporters.

What we have discovered in this research – what is new here – is that the Community Hubs look very similar to Poli-fluentials. In other words, almost all Community Hubs are very partisan and many of them are the people that this report describes as Poli-fluentials. The implication of this is that among people with big networks, the people who are the most influential and the most political people – i.e., the Poli-fluentials – are the ones most likely to be ensconced in very polarized and ideologically extreme networks.

This has important ramifications for candidates, campaign managers and issue advocacy groups, who need to appreciate the differences in order to take advantage of the unique talents of each kind of Hub and to craft their messages and choose their media channels accordingly. The targeting of influential people, the framing of messages, the channels used, and the timing of messages are ripe for reinterpretation through the lens of a more nuanced view of political influencers and their networks.

Our research leads us to offer this advice: Community Hubs who have consensus or near-consensus in their political networks should be targeted for stabilizing the base. Bridging Hubs, on the other hand, are more likely

to be influencers who can win new supporters. These individuals are the key to winning new, ideologically dissimilar supporters to a campaign, for their networks contain a high percentage of members who vote for a different party than the Hub.

As we will discuss in more detail below, the data suggests that likelihood of peer conversion increases when heterogeneous Hubs who bridge between different partisan communities are empowered with bridging stories that take into account the personal values of the potential converts.

Background

For purposes of this report, we are especially interested in respondents who reported that over the last year they had ongoing discussions about political issues they considered important with more than thirty people. As noted above, 12% of all respondents fell into this category.

Social network analysts pay particular attention to the characteristics of the people within the orbit of these so-called Hubs, and the nature and structure of their micro-social environments. We also focus on the degree to which political opinions within such micro environments are similar or different. Stated in the language of social science, we distinguish between ideologically homogeneous and ideologically heterogeneous Hubs. These two types of Hubs, which will be discussed in greater detail below, operate in two different ways and serve two different functions.

For this study, we looked not only at the level of partisan homogeneity within such social networks, but also at the level of agreement on hot political topics. We found that the level of disagreement on political issues indicates an intersection between ideologically dissimilar groups and suggests that conversion opportunities exist using bridging messages. Such messages are high consensus door openers that can lead moderates to either side of the political spectrum.

To examine the implications of Hubs to political campaign management, FAS.research partnered with IPDI. Our research approach is informed by the science of social network analysis – a long established social science that provides unique insights into how people are connected and influence each other – as well as by our experience applying this science to political campaign management in several central European elections over the last five years.

To explore the partisan differences between different kinds of Hubs, IPDI included questions designed by FAS that we strongly suspected from our prior research and field experience could add to the body of knowledge about political influencers, or Poli-fluentials. Our analysis is based on the responses to questions designed to gain insight into the composition of individuals’ personal networks, especially the degree to which they are surrounded by people who agree or disagree with them

ideologically and on key political issues.

While we discuss a number of findings in this article, the key thesis we tested is the idea that there are two types of influencers, or Hubs, that campaign managers need focus on – ones that can help convert voters with differing ideological orientation and ones that can help mobilize those with the same ideological orientation.

This idea has a fairly rich heritage. Past diffusion research, not to mention common sense, suggests that people surrounded by other people just like themselves – who have little or no access to people of a differing ideological orientation – have minimal opportunity to convert them to a different perspective. They only have the chance to mobilize ideologically similar peers with conversations that reinforce existing beliefs. Conversely, those who have access to others with differing ideological orientation have an opportunity to convert.

To explore this idea further in the political context, we studied the network morphology of individuals who responded to IPDI's questionnaire who have a political network size of more than 30 people. As noted earlier, the data confirmed that 85% of these Hubs are asked for their opinions about political issues either often or very often. This is important in establishing that these Hubs not only discuss politics with a large number of people but also influence others' opinions.

We were surprised to find from the data that one fourth of all Hubs are homogeneous. Given the size of their networks (30 people or more), we expected more heterogeneity.

Significantly, the data also shows that Poli-fluentials are more likely to operate as Community Hubs. Among the 44% of Poli-fluentials who qualify as Hubs, 32% are homogeneous compared to an average of 25% among all respondents.

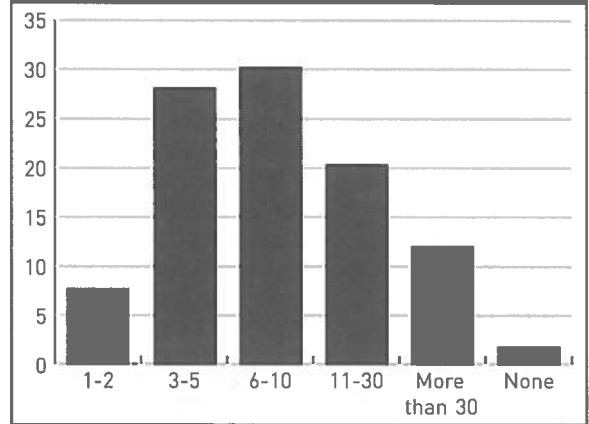
The opposite is true for influencers with large heterogeneous networks: 30% of these Bridging Hubs comprise moderates, the largest of five cohorts defined by ideological orientation (Very Conservative, Conservative, Moderate, Liberal, and Very Liberal).

The results supported our thesis that two types of hubs – Community Hubs and Bridging Hubs – have great applicability to politics. We also found that the strategic value of an influencer varies from issue to issue and depends on the network morphology that an influential is embedded in.

Targeting (WHOM)

Given the novelty of applying this concept to politics and an equally novel way of categorizing political activists and influencers, the following section is intended as a step-by-step guide to our analysis of the basic model of Community Hubs and Bridging Hubs and the corresponding findings of the IPDI survey.

FIG 5.1: POLITICAL NETWORK SIZE



Size of Political Discussion Network

To determine the size of a respondent's political discussion networks, we asked the following question. "If you look back over the last year, with how many people in your circle of friends, family and co-workers have you had ongoing discussion about political issues you consider important?"

Most (58%) respondents reported that they had a political discussion network of 3-10 people. In contrast, 12% indicated that they had a network size of more than 30. We regard people with a network of more than 30 political discussants as Hubs. Hubs have more outreach potential than people with smaller networks given the number of politically interested people they have access to and the larger potential pool of opinions.

The Relationship between Demographics and Network Size

Respondents were asked for the typical demographic information including gender, age, education, household income, religion and ethnic background. Education was the key variable determining political network size. This is also consistent with prior research by FAS.research¹⁴ and others, such as the 2004 Great Social Survey,¹⁵ that showed different social morphologies and different network patterns between working class, middle class and upper class individuals. People with less education generally have small but multiple-linked and dense networks, meaning that everybody is linked with everybody else. The reason is that working class people tend to entertain multiple relations with the same peers. They

14 Katzmaier, Harald, et al., "The Social and Political Morphology of Austria" [paper presented at the 23rd annual International Sunbelt Conference, Cancun, Mexico, 2003]

15 McPherson, Miller, Lynn Smith-Lovin and Matthew E. Brashears, "Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks Over Two Decades," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 71 (2006): 353-375.

work together, spend their leisure time together and discuss important matters, including political matters, with each other. Middle class networks tend to have a network size of 6-30 and are less densely linked. The underlying data from the Poli-fluentials study supports this view.

For example, every sixth person with some graduate school or more has a political network size of more than thirty and can be described as Hubs. In contrast, only one out of every 14 people with high school diploma has a political network size more than 30. Those with some graduate school, a graduate degree, or a professional degree had the highest network size.

ten” or “very often” for their opinion on political issues. In contrast, those with the average network size (6-10) were asked for opinions “often” or “very often” only 54% of the time. This shows that Hubs are significantly much more likely to have an influence on their peers’ opinion formation than respondents with smaller networks.

It is well established in the field of Social Network Analysis that an individual’s influence is direct and derives from their informal status as someone who is well informed, trusted, or simply well connected. We assume that the people asking for advice are part of the Hub’s political discussion network and that Hubs have an influence on these people’s opinion formation process.

Political Network Size and Distribution of Poli-fluentials

To ensure that what we describe about influential Hubs also is true for Poli-fluentials as defined by IPDI, we studied how Poli-fluentials are distributed over small, medium and large networks. And, indeed, we found that 44% of all Poli-fluentials have large networks with a size of 30 and more. About 29% of Poli-fluentials have a political network size of 11-30.

In contrast, the Non-Influential/Non-political respondents in the study account for 77% of all 1-2 person networks. Thus, most respondents who act as Hubs are Poli-fluentials. Another 28% of respondents who act as Hubs are Influencers.

Segmentation of Targets: The Degree of Partisan Diversity in Networks

Campaign managers who wish to segment their targets and deliver the right messages to them must understand the degree of partisan diversity of anyone’s network, but in particular – because of their outsized influence – the degree of partisan diversity in the network of a Hub/Poli-fluential.

The first question to ask is about party affiliation: Is the Hub a Democrat or a Republican or a member of

FIG 5.2: NETWORK SIZE AND POLITICAL OPINION

NETWORK SIZE	VERY OFTEN	OFTEN	SELDOM	NEVER
One to Two	1.5	12.3	70.4	15.7
Three to Five	2.7	27.8	65.9	3.7
Six to Ten	6.3	47.6	44.0	2.0
11 to 30	14.7	58.4	26.5	0.3
More than 30	37.9	47.3	14.2	0.6
None			55.8	44.2

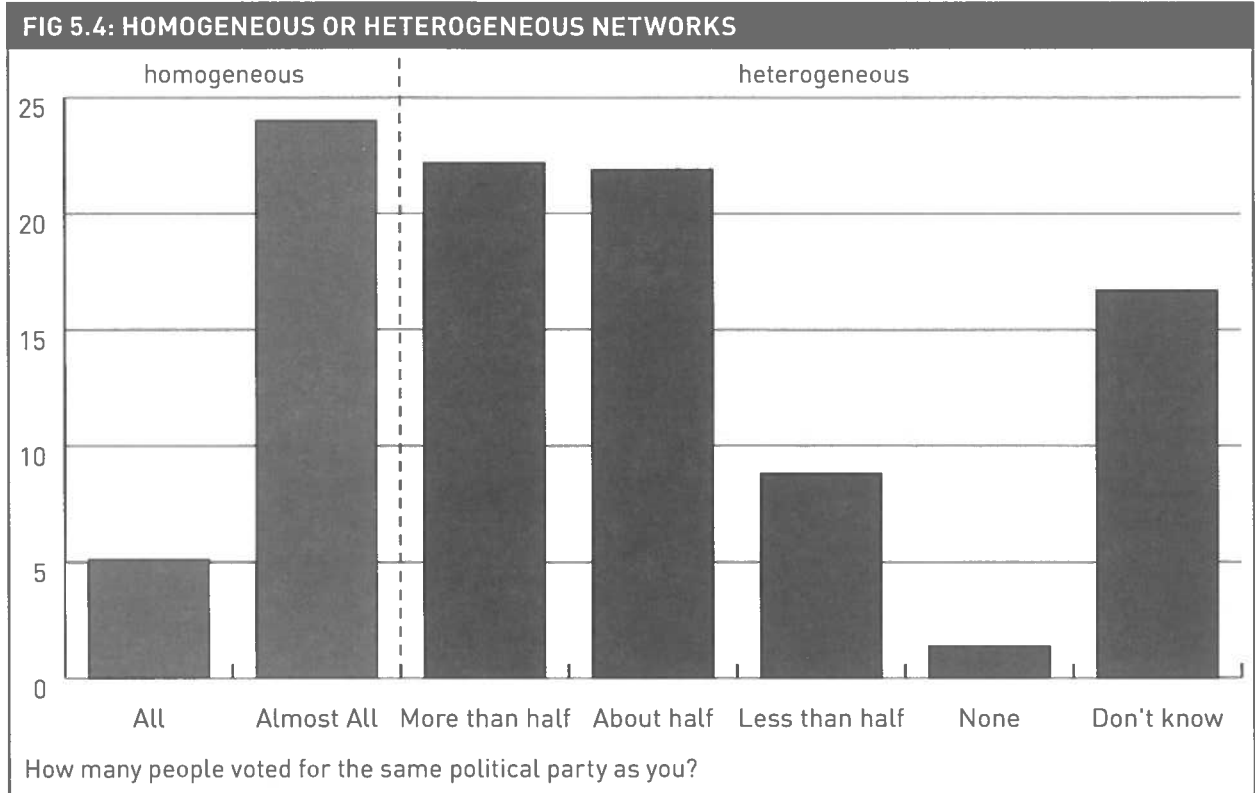
Political Network Size and How Often Hubs are Asked for Advice

To understand if someone with a large political discussion network of family, friends and co-workers is also influential on his or her peers’ opinion formation we tested the relationship between Hubs’ political network size and the frequency with which people asked them for their opinion on a political issue. We asked, “How often are you asked for your opinion with regard to political issues?”

Among the Hubs, 85% claim to have been asked “of-

FIG 5.3

IPDI DEFINITION	1-2	3-5	6-10	11-30	MORE THAN 30	NONE
Poli-fluentials	4%	10%	18%	29%	44%	-
Politicals	9%	14%	15%	14%	8%	7%
Influencers	10%	15%	21%	22%	28%	5%
Not Influential/ Not Political	77%	61%	46%	35%	19%	88%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%



another political party? The second question – since we want the Hub to become our advocate – is whether the Hub talks to like-minded people (i.e. Is the Hub a Democrat influencing a group of Democrats?) or is the Hub bridging into different partisan communities (a Democrat influencing Independents, Liberals, Green Party members or Republicans). Common sense tells us an influential Democrat among Democrats will mobilize and stabilize the base, whereas empowering an influential Democrat within a circle of differing partisan leanings can help to expand the base.

In a first step we determined the degree of diversity with regard to party affiliation in any respondent’s network, irrespective of whether somebody indicated that he or she discusses politics with two or more than thirty people. We can generally distinguish between homogeneous and heterogeneous networks.

To make this determination, we asked, “How many of these people vote for the same political party as you.” Of all respondents, 29% indicated that all or almost all of their peers voted for the same political party. Respondents who indicated that “all” or “almost all” of their networks were made up of discussants with the same party preference we classified as homogeneous networks. Fifty-four percent of all respondents said that more than half, about half, less than half or none voted for a different party. These were classified as having heterogeneous networks. The remaining 17% indicated that they didn’t know their peers’ party preference.

Having determined the degree of diversity with regard to party affiliation in a respondent’s network, we then analyzed how Poli-fluentials differ from the general respondent with regard to their partisan network

composition. We found that regardless of whether respondents indicated that they have a political discussion network of two or thirty people, Poli-fluentials have a significantly higher degree of homogenous networks (37.1%) as compared to the average respondent completing the survey (29%).

In a second step, which will be shown in more detail below, is to determine the degree of partisan diversity for our main targets, the Hubs. And there again, we looked at whether Poli-fluential Hubs had more homogeneous or heterogeneous networks.

Targeting Hubs

In analyzing the data, we found that there are three times more heterogeneous Bridging Hubs than there are homogeneous Community Hubs. Specifically, homogeneous Community Hubs (in which all or almost all of their peers voted for the same political party) account for 25% of all Hubs, and Heterogeneous Bridging Hubs (in which at least half of their peers voted for a different party) account for 75%.

Since the vast majority of all Hubs are bridging between different partisan communities and can be used to open doors for expanding the voter base let us describe what a Bridging Hub might look like in real life. While we do not know the ideological leaning or partisan preference of each of the peers in a Bridging Hub’s network, we do know that many of them vote for a different party than the Hubs themselves. A Bridging Hub could be a Libertarian with a political network of other Libertarians but also Democrats and Republicans. A Bridging Hub could also be a Republican with a network of fellow Republicans, Green Party voters and Independents.

Distribution of Poli-fluentials over Community and Bridging Hubs

A key interest for us was whether Poli-fluentials, who make up 44% of all Hubs, are functioning as a stabilizer for the existing voter base or as bridges into different partisan communities. We found that Poli-fluential Hubs are more homogeneous than the average Hub. Keeping in mind that 25% of all Hubs are Community Hubs, Poli-fluential Hubs are significantly more homogeneous (32%). We assume that in real life Poli-fluentials are individuals with a strong political identity, meaning they lend their voices and dedicate their time and money to a very specific political cause. Poli-fluential Hubs are not just politically interested or knowledgeable people with a large political network size, they are also very active, and thus important to stabilizing and motivating the existing base of supporters.

Knowing that Poli-fluentials represent classic Community Hubs and knowing also of their political engagement and interest this is not surprising. It also supports our previous studies and other scientific research, which suggests strong homophily effects, meaning that birds of a feather flock together, among people with a strong and clear political orientation.

Such individuals, however large their network, prefer to remain among themselves and within their shared frame of reference. Such networks have an echo chamber effect where political opinions tend to be reinforced. The prevalence of Community Hubs in clearly declared partisan groups or extreme ideological groups is well illustrated by the example of the Green Party. Hubs among Green Party supporters are almost three times more likely to have a homogeneous network. In this way, they are similar to those who are very conservative or very liberal.

Quite the opposite is true for Bridging Hubs, who are distributed more evenly among Democrats (37%), Republicans (32%), and Independents (24%). In addition, they cluster around the ideological center. This indicates that moderate Hubs are three times more likely to have a diverse network and broker to the political left or right than stay among themselves (11% vs. 31%). It also indicates that moderate Hubs are the ideal targets to empower for voter conversion.

FIG 5.5: POLI-FLUENTIALS AND HUB TYPE

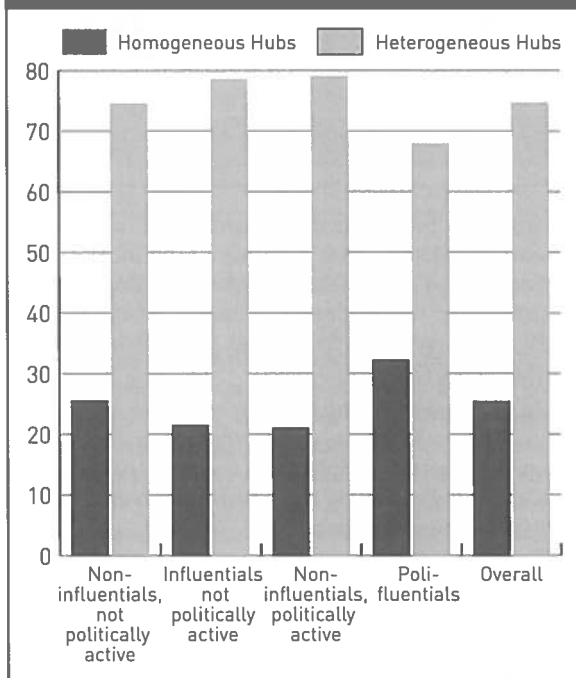


FIG 5.6: HUBS AND POLITICAL AFFILIATION

	COMMUNITY HUBS (HOMOGENEOUS HUBS)	BRIDGING HUBS (HETEROGENEOUS HUBS)
Democrat	46.4	37.2
Republican	36.4	31.9
Independent	9.1	24.1
Libertarian	1.8	3.4
Green Party	5.5	1.9
Other third party	0.9	1.5

Segmentation of Targets: The Distribution of Hubs Over the Ideological and Partisan Spectrums

One key question that should be of major interest to political candidates and their campaign managers still remains to be addressed: What is the partisan preference of the Hubs being targeted, who are identified as either Community Hubs or Bridging Hubs? What side are they on? We find that an astounding number of Community Hubs not only have a clear partisan preference for either Democrats (46%) or Republicans (36%) we also find that Community Hubs are significantly more likely to be found on the extreme poles (45%) of the political spectrum.

FIG 5.7: HUBS AND IDEOLOGY

	COMMUNITY HUBS (HOMOGENEOUS HUBS)	BRIDGING HUBS (HETEROGENEOUS HUBS)
Very Conservative	15.3	6.9
Conservative	22.5	29.0
Moderate	10.8	31.2
Liberal	21.6	21.2
Very Liberal	29.7	11.8