Chapter 12
Comparing the Influence of Social Networks Online and Offline on Decision Making: The U.S. Senate Case

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ABSTRACT

Along with individuals’ ideological factors, various network properties play a crucial role in the process of legislators’ political decision-making. Social networks among legislators provide relational resources through which communication occurs, exerting social influence among the members in a network. This chapter examines six social relationships among the members of the 109th United States Senate as predictors of senatorial voting (roll call votes), (1) shared committees, (2) co-sponsorships, (3) party membership, (4) PAC donation, (5) geographical contiguity, and (6) internet hyperlinks, which may be considered as direct or indirect representations of communication networks. The six networks are modeled using MRQAP. Results suggest that roll call voting was predicted by party membership, co-sponsorship, geographical proximity, and PAC donation networks, while shared committee membership did not contribute significantly. As for hyperlinks, the result was mixed, showing a small variance of contribution in a simpler model but not significant with more complex models. Suggestions for future research are addressed.

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INTRODUCTION

Extant political communication studies focused mainly on media and their impact on political opinion and activism. Only rarely have studies investigated communication among politicians and its influence on congressional decision making. Recently, some scholars raised the importance of social networks in the co-sponsorship of congressional bills (Burkett & Skvoretz, 1996; Fowler, 2006a, 2006b; Hug, 2010) and this trend opens up a new horizon for political communication discipline.

Ideally, recording all communication behavior among congressmen including conversations, official and unofficial remarks, mails and emails would make it possible for us to evaluate communication as a predictor of congressional decision-making. Among politicians’ social networks, social relationships composed of such contingencies as social support, acquaintanceship, contact, communication, presence at a common event or organizational membership may be factors influencing political decision-making behaviors such as voting (Fowler, 2006a, 2006b). However, it is extremely difficult to aggregate and analyze those variables.

Given this difficulty, scholars have shown interests in Web as a reliable record of communication and similarity of politicians. Park and his colleagues (Park & Kluver, 2008; Park, Theelwall, & Kluver, 2005) have stipulated that the structure of hyperlinks among political actors (i.e., parties, government, civil activist group, interest group) reflect the behavioral patterns with an intent to mobilize and organize public support. The importance of Web also lies in promoting activism on the street. The impact of Web as a mass mobilizer has been confirmed by “the Tulip Revolution” in Kyrzystan (Srinivasan & Fish, 2009) and anti-FARC rallies ignited by a Facebook posting (Rosen et al., 2010).

This study uses social networks including multilateral exchange of hyperlinks and other interactions as predictors of congressional decision making. Social networks play a key role in politics. For example, voters’ choice and turnout behaviors are influenced by the flow of political information exchanged through social relationships (Beck, Dalton, Greene, & Huckfeldt, 2002; Fowler, 2005; Highton, 2000; Straits, 1990). Likewise, legislators’ decision-making processes are not immune from the influence of their connections with other politicians (Fowler, 2006a, 2006b). Social networks could be constructed by various aspects ranging from close friendships to acquaintance within a formal context. Using several extant predictors and communication networks, this study predicts roll call voting in the United States Senate, a reliable and measurable indicator of congressional decision-making (Oleszek, 2005).

From the perspective of communication, the rationales how these congressional social connections influence legislators behavior may be underlain by three social theories: homophily theory (e.g., Knoke, 1990; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Marsden, 1987; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Rogers & Bhowmik, 1971); contagion theory (e.g., Burt, 1987; Carley, 1991; Feeley & Barnett, 2002); and convergence theory (e.g., Barnett & Rosen, 2007; Rogers & Kincaid, 1981). According to the homophily theory, “similarity breeds connection” (McPherson et al., 2001, p. 415). People tend to feel less discomfort when they communicate with other people with similar beliefs than with the people with dissimilar viewpoint (Heider, 1958). As value homophily, political belief is one principle on which even ordinary adults associate with others (Knoke, 1990; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Verbrugge, 1977, 1983).

Both convergence and contagion theories argue that information shared in communication networks promote similar beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes that are similar to those of other members in their network (Carley, 1991; Carley & Kaufer, 1993). According to these theories, there are high likelihoods that similar political beliefs and attitudes lead to relationships among