Avoid Thy Neighbor?
Partisan Context and Close Social Networks

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Abstract

The relationships between political participants form networks which encourage and constrain political activity. The reality that individuals are increasingly surrounded by others who are similar to themselves along demographic and partisan lines is potentially quite consequential for the social component of attitude formation and for political polarization in the electorate. The role of social influence in public opinion and behavior is well-established, yet the mechanisms through which social ties are formed has received less attention. This work explores one such mechanism for the formation of social ties: avoidance of dissimilar others. Specifically, this work seeks to examine the level of avoidance present in forming close social networks across contexts. Moreover, to the extent that individuals exercise choice in their networks, what level of discretion is necessary to form networks which are independent of individual's surrounding partisan contexts? This work utilizes data from the 2016 CCES, which asks respondents a battery of questions about the people with whom they most frequently discuss politics, including perceived vote choice and level of political knowledge. Using this data, I demonstrate that individuals' core discussion networks reflect their environmental context. Furthermore, through avoidance of dissimilar others, partisans evade regular political discussion with members of the opposite party, in favor of their in-group. In addition, at a time of increased ideological polarization, as a partisan group approaches minority-status, avoidance of non-members tends to increase. Taken together, these results have meaningful implications for our understanding of mass polarization and the role of discussion networks in shaping citizens' politics.

1 Introduction

People are inherently social—conducting much of their lives in the company of others. They socialize, learn, and converse with individuals around them. Even as some scholars have demonstrated that participation in social activities and civics has recently declined (Putnam 2000), people still lead social lives. Indeed, individuals lean on others when forming opinions and making decisions, even if only a tight-knit group of associates.[1] People are impacted by their environment precisely because they seek out information from their surroundings. For example, with today's richness of information and choice, few would try a new restaurant without getting a recommendation from their friend or without checking Yelp before making the trip. People do not "go it alone"— their opinions and decisions are impacted by those around them. Their interpersonal discussions include political conversations which are communicated by others and through others. The reality that individuals are increasingly surrounded by others who are similar to themselves along partisan lines is quite consequential for the social component of politics.

The well-established social networks literature—with roots in the Columbia School research of the 1940s and 50s (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944) — has often focused on interpersonal communication within a core discussion group and that discussion's relationship with a range of "democratic" outcomes. Informal political discussion has been found to have a robust relationship with partisanship (Kenny, 1994; Sinclair, 2012), considered opinions (Mutz, 2006; Price, Cappella and Nir, 2002), participation (Klofstad, 2011; Mutz, 2006; Sinclair, 2012; Scheufele et al., 2004), attitude strength (Levitan and Visser, 2008, 2009; Visser and Mirabile, 2004), and vote choice (Beck et al., 2002; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Sokhey and McClurg, 2012). These investigations found that our friends, family, and close associates impact our ability to participate in politics. If it is indeed the case that decision-making and preference formation contains an important social component, then how does an individual's political discussion network develop?

[1] See Pietryka et al. (2018) for a detailed analysis of how less-immediate associates may be related to individual attitudes and behavior.

Key to the works noted above is the fact that decision-making is social. However, theories of autonomous political behavior reigned supreme in the study of politics for decades and suggest independent individuals who make decisions on their own. These atomistic theories posit that individuals act rationally and seek to maximize their utility when participating in politics (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968). Theories focusing on the individual are not incorrect, but they do leave out the social aspect of human behavior. Instead, they focus on individual-level factors to explain political activity including education, political knowledge, and civic duty (Campbell et al., 1960; Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995). By returning to basic concepts uncovered by the Columbia School, recent scholarship has incorporated the social logic of politics to increase our understanding of political behavior and opinion formation (Klofstad, 2015; Djupe, Mcclurg and Sokhey, 2016; Lupton, Singh and Thornton, 2015). I add to this resurgence in the literature by taking a step back in the social process of politics by focusing on how networks and ties are formed in everyday discussion.

In this paper, I use novel survey data collected in 2016 to consider the formation and extent of homophily[2] in Americans voters' political discussion networks. Specifically, this work analyzes how political predispositions and contextual factors influence the formation of core political discussion networks through avoidance of dissimilar others. Using a name generating question battery from the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, I demonstrate that, for both Democrats and Republicans, individuals' core networks reflect their environmental context. Furthermore, through avoidance of dissimilar others, partisans avoid regular political discussion with members of the opposite party, in favor of their in-group. This is especially true for individuals who express high levels of interest in politics since these individuals are more likely to to engage in political behaviors, including discussion and thus opening the door for avoidance. In addition, at a time of increased political polarization, as a partisan group approaches minority-status, avoidance of non-members generally increases. Taken together, these results have meaningful implications for our understanding of mass polarization and the role of discussion networks in shaping citizens'

[2]Homophily is defined as ties formed disproportionately by individuals with similar traits. More broadly, homophily can be understand as "like attracts like."

politics.

2 Polarization and Group Formation Through Avoidance

Inward-facing core networks formed through avoidance could have important implications for society as a whole. Strong in-group integration (homophily), "fragments society into groups with few connections and therefore impedes society's integration" (Blau, 1977, p. 11). These groups develop social barriers that in turn make social integration more difficult. This lack of integration has been shown to impact affect (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Mason, 2015), and tolerance (Mutz, 2006) towards in- and out-group members. Thus it is important for scholars to understand how and why individuals come to develop homophilous core discussion networks, especially networks which are different than what would be expected given an individual's environmental context. In this section, I focus on the relationship between social context and two outcomes: 1) socially transmitted political content in core discussion networks and, 2) avoidance of dissonant political views. This bias toward avoidance of dissimilar others from individuals' core social networks, given the opportunities where an individual lives, is a process which has garnered significant attention in recent years.[3].

Huckfeldt and Sprague (1987; 1995) revitalized Lazarsfeld et al.'s (1954; 1944) pioneering Columbia studies and political scientists followed suit by incorporating the social determinants of political behavior in theoretical and empirical work. Since the Columbia studies, the literature has shown that many voters operate in mostly or fully homophilous political discussion networks. That is, voters live in homophilous communication networks where they are most likely to regularly discuss politics with individuals who share their broad political orientations and preferences. Though this is the case, scholars can't take homophily for granted - there is more heterogeneity in political discussion networks than typically expected (Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague, 2004;

[3]See, for example, Mark Z. Barabak, "How Trump Supporters Survive in Blue California," The Los Angeles Times, 31 March 2017 and John Wildermuth, "How Isolated are California Republicans? Let's go to the map." San Francisco Chronicle, 20 September 2019.

Huckfeldt, Ikeda and Pappi, 2005; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague, 2005). Indeed, during the period between the Columbia studies and recent presidential elections, a substantial minority of voters (with estimates ranging between one-third and nearly one-half) had at least some heterogeneity in their immediate political discussion networks.

Though heterogeneity exists, we should generally expect homophily in political communication networks for a variety of reasons. First, trends in geographic sorting have dramatically increased the number of politically like-minded counties, cities, and neighborhoods in the United States (Sussell, 2013; Lang and Pearson-merkowitz, 2015). Even if individuals are not explicitly self-selecting into politically homogeneous areas, the overlap of cultural, lifestyle, and professional factors with partisan-ideological divisions means that choices of where to live often reflect political preferences, thus producing greater sorting (Gimpel and Hui, 2015; Mummolo and Nall, 2017). These politically sorted communities make it more likely that voters will regularly encounter and discuss politics with only those of the majority political persuasion.

Second, one of the more generally agreed upon aspects of mass polarization in contemporary American politics is the trend towards greater negative affect expressed by individuals of one party toward members of the other (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Mason, 2015). Dislike and distrust of the opposite party has grown for partisans—for instance, they are less likely to date a member of the other party (Huber and Malhotra, 2017) and are more likely to discriminate on the basis of party in their evaluations of hypothetical applicants for a scholarship (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). Accordingly, it is likely that voters have become more vigilant in weeding out counter-partisan discussants in their immediate networks.

Third, as shown by (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995), individual perceptions of discussant characteristics are correlated with the social context within which an individual lives. Put differently, people are more likely to perceive their core discussion networks as more homophilous as the density of like-minded individuals in a social context increases. This occurs not only because social context structures the supply of potential discussants but also because individuals may perceive their discussants as like-minded if they live in contexts with higher densities of other like-minded

discussants. Though there are many reasons to expect individuals to perceive homophily in their core political discussion networks, past research suggests that there is a substantial amount of heterogeneity in these networks across contexts (see Butters & Hare, 2020 for a review). Thus, we must examine what drives homophily at contextual and individual levels. One possible mechanism for this phenomenon is avoidance of dissimilar others.

2.1 Consequences of Avoidance

In developing a view of social interaction and political communication as being influenced by contextual factors, I follow a burgeoning line of literature in suggesting that individuals do not operate in a vacuum. Instead, individuals are frequently exposed to a variety of social influences which shape many aspects of their lives, including politics. Some political contexts expose individuals to others who hold similar preferences and which provide fewer opportunities to acquire information about divergent viewpoints. Different contexts allow individuals to experience discussion of contrary viewpoints more regularly, through increased supply of others with divergent points of view. Simply put, the environmental context within which an individual resides impacts the types of communication opportunities available to that individual. This phenomenon carries consequences for future political consequences.

Before scholars can understand how social context is related to any political outcome, however, it is important to draw a distinction between contextual and network effects. Contexts are not defined by individuals and are external to them. When scholars discuss contextual effects, they mean that the nature of an individual's surroundings contribute to differences in equivalent categories of individuals. In other words, an individual is expected to have different opportunities depending on where they live (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995). Indeed, a Democrat in rural Texas has far different opportunities for discussion partners than a similar person in San Francisco. In contrast, networks are constructed by individuals. Networks are a product of many life choices related to where individuals work, who they marry, how often they go to sporting events, etc. These choices are constrained by the opportunities imposed by an individual's social context.

Network effects refer to the relationship between social interaction and an individual's political behavior or opinions. Though the distinction is abstract, and the concepts overlap at times, it is useful for the purposes of this work.

Differences in environmental context matter for development of core political communication networks because context affects the available supply of political discussants and information to which individuals are exposed. Environmental context refers to the structurally imposed areas in which an individual resides.[4] The difference in partisan environment can impact individuals' attitudes and behaviors through affecting composition of discussion networks and the content of discussion within those networks (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Huckfeldt, 2014; Mutz, 2006; Granovetter, 1985; Beck et al., 2002). In turn, core social networks, developed from the larger environmental context, are places where informal interactions and conversations occurs with close associates, such as family, friends, and coworkers. These networks allow for more frequent interactions on a wider range of topics, than with mere acquaintances (Hayes, 1989), and are where "everyday political disagreement" may take place (Klofstad, Sokhey and Mcclurg, 2013).[5] It is key to understand the development of close political discussion networks in order to better understand how the information flowing through these networks impacts political behavior and attitudes.

Questions related to network formation, specifically those concerned with avoidance, have been predominantly investigated in the sociological setting, but the reapplication of concepts related to associational avoidance from sociology (Huckfeldt, 1983; Skvoretz, 2013) to politics in the modern era would be fruitful. This is especially true in the face of studies taking a group-oriented approach to social influence (Klar, 2014; Druckman, Levendusky and McLain, 2018) as well as works drawing on social identity theory (in- and out-group dynamics) (e.g., Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In addition individuals in the partisan minority of a given context have been consistently found to be more diligent than their majority counterparts in their attempts to build

[4] As I explain below, I focus on an individual's county context.

[5] Everyday political disagreement "refers to conversations where individuals are exposed to viewpoints that are different from their own" (Klofstad et al. 2013, 121).

supportive networks which insulate them from the majority opinion (Finifter, 1974; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Wolf, Morales and Ikeda, 2010). As partisan polarization has deepened in recent years, we should expect that those in the minority of a given context express a high willingness to avoid dissimilar others.

Extant research suggests that those who are politically interested in politics are more likely to engage in political behaviors, including discussion of politics with others (Delli-Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001). These interested individuals are more likely to seek out agreeable information and avoid counterattitudinal information (Taber and Lodge, 2006). Parsons (2010) further suggests that political disagreement within core discussion networks is related to a decrease in polarizing emotions. However, the effect also corresponds with a decrease in political interest and less political participation. In addition, survey and experimental evidence indicates that perceived political interest of discussants[6] exerts greater influence than dissimilarity of political preferences when a respondent received relevant political information from his or her discussion partners (Huckfeldt, 2001; Huckfeldt, Pietryka and Reilly, 2013).[7] Accordingly, we should expect those individuals most interested in politics to have the greatest propensity to avoid those with whom they do not agree with politically. At lower levels of political interest, we should expect individuals to be less motivated to avoid discussion partners. Low-interest individuals are more concerned with reducing information costs via politically expert and interested discussion partners than agreeable political preferences.

To understand avoidance as a mechanism for network formation, it is important to distinguish between what (Mcpherson, Smith-lovin and Cook, 2001) call "baseline" and "inbreeding" homophily. Ties which are formed between similar others based on random chance in a given context is referred to as baseline homophily. Inbreeding homophily refers to the ties between similar others that form above and beyond what would be expected by random chance in a given environmental context. The current work is concerned with the latter form of homophily and

[6]Political interest has been shown to be highlighy correlated with perceived expertise of political discussants (Delli-Carpini and Keeter, 1996).

[7]See (Ahn and Ryan, 2015) for suggestive opposing evidence.

how it presents itself in the modern political environment.

Scholarly understanding of political discussion networks—how they are formed, how they are structured, and the influence they may have on individual perceptions and behavior—may have changed dramatically over the last several decades. Broad trends in polarization, both in terms of ideology and affect, as well as partisan sorting among the electorate may have altered the role everyday political discussion plays in our lives. Social ties knit increasingly diverse societies together and growing political polarization is likely related to how these ties are formed. Though the choice of where to live is not often a political one (Mummolo and Nall, 2017), politics necessarily plays a role in political discussions. To the extent that people can exercise choice in the formation of their networks, what level of discretion is necessary to form networks which are homophilous above and beyond what would be expected given their surrounding partisans contexts?

The key to how avoidance relates to homophilous groups is the possible avoidance of associates *when individuals encounter dissimilar others*.[8] Structural changes in how politics is organized among the electorate may have important implications for how we think about the role of social networks in political life. Thus, it is important to evaluate our understanding of how supply affects core political network composition and to examine the mechanisms through which individuals form their core discussion networks. A major contribution of this paper is through examining avoidance of dissimilar others during the modern political era—one of deep partisan divides—where avoidance of out-groups is perceived as common.

2.2 Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 (H_1): *Voters living in more heavily Democratic (Republican) areas have a higher proportion of Democrats (Republicans) in their political discussion networks, controlling for*

[8] I return to the process of avoidance in greater detail below though there are other mechanisms through which ties are formed, specifically, attraction to similar others. Skvoretz (2013) shows that attraction and avoidance are not merely two sides of the same coin. I do not explore the attraction mechanism here but I return to this idea in the discussion.

individual-level factors.

Hypothesis 2 (H_2): *As Republican (Democratic) political density in a county increases, Republicans (Democrats) exhibit greater bias toward avoiding dissimilar others while they are in the minority. Likelihood of avoidion should be lower when an individual is of the majority in a given context.*

Hypothesis 3 (H_3): *As Republican (Democratic) political density in a county increases, Republicans (Democrats) exhibit greater bias toward avoiding dissimilar others at higher levels of political interest.*

3 Data and Methods

3.1 Discussion Network and Contextual Data from 2016 CCES

To test the hypotheses above, I leverage a unique social network battery of questions in the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). This dataset includes some of the best available observational data for exploring the relationship between contextual supply of political discussants and social networks. A module of the 2016 CCES included a social network battery that identifies the partisanship of respondents' political communication networks. The question battery used a compound name generator, first developed by Laumann (1973), and later implemented in political science, starting with Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995). The use of name generators helps social scientists to understand who individuals talk to and what they talk about with their discussion partners (i.e., name generators capture egocentric social networks). In a variety of recent studies, name generators have been shown to capture political communication networks "quite well" (Sokhey and Djupe, 2013). Thus, we can be confident that the analysis in subsequent sections describes political communication networks from the point of view of individual respondents.

The social network battery used in the 2016 CCES is based entirely on the perceptions of survey respondents regarding the characteristics of their identified discussants. Respondents in the survey's post-election wave were asked to provide the first name of other people with whom they "discuss government, elections, and politics" (2016 CCES Codebook).[9] In the 2016 CCES, respondents could name up to three discussants. In this data, 19 percent of post-election respondents failed to provide any names, 18 percent provided one, 13 percent provided two, and 50 percent provided three.[10]

After obtaining the names, respondents were prompted online to answer a short series of questions about each discussant. The questions were meant to cover the nature of interactions between respondents and their discussants, including each respondent's relationship with the discussant and the discussant's perceived political partisanship. The discussants were not identified or interviewed. Thus all information regarding the discussants is based on the respondent's perception.[11] Information provided by respondents helps to measure the level of homophily in American voters' core political discussion networks and to examine how those networks developed. Of equal importance, the survey also provides good measures of individual-level control variables as well as county-level identifiers, which can be used to determine the partisan supply of potential discussion partners.

In using county-level identifiers to determine the supply of potential discussion partners, it must be noted that I make a distinction between context and network effects. It is possible to examine contextual effects when differences within equivalent categories of individuals can be attributed to variations in the nature of the surroundings (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995). Put differently, this implies that the same person is expected to act differently if they are moved from one environmental context with certain characteristics to a different environmental context. There are a variety of conceivable contexts whose qualities may influence the behaviour and

[9]Invalid responses to the name generator, including "NA" and "none of your business" were excluded from the analysis.

[10]The mean number of discussants in 2016 was 1.95. Individuals who do not provide discussant names are assumed to have no discussants. in our analysis, we only include those who responded to the name generator.

[11]See Appendix for question wording.

attitudes of individuals. Some contexts are geographic, e.g., a neighborhood or county, while others are defined socially, e.g., families or workplaces. In line with one strain of past work, I will focus on the politically invaluable context of the county.

There are a number of reasons to use county-level identifiers as a proxy for an individual's environmental context as opposed to, for example, an individual's state. First, the use of counties to measure political environments has a long and important history in political science (Key, 1949; Huckfeldt et al., 1995; Miller, 1956). Part of the reason that counties are such an important unit of study is that they are the smallest environmental unit for which political data (e.g. presidential election returns) exists and is readily available.

Beyond the convenience of data availability, counties are small enough to capture more immediate information about an individual's environmental context than the individual's state. For example, California seems like a safely blue state, but this masks important internal variation. When examining election returns outside of the coastal areas, many of California's inland counties are quite red. In addition, the variation in county-level support for candidates at all levels of government helps account for the fabled "swing states." The aggregation of county-level information in these states means they are neither red nor blue, but rather some shade of purple.

Counties are also large enough to capture much of the daily professional, social, and political activities of individual citizens. If scholars were to try to capture neighborhood contextual effects, they may miss out on nuanced exposure to people that do not live in an individual's neighborhood. Taken together, counties constitute the most important electoral unit below the level of the state. The way counties are tied into the American electoral process makes them one of the most significant units of political and electoral organization in American politics. One purpose of this paper is to investigate the significance of spatially defined political units for polarization in politics, in terms of avoiding out-group partisans, and for these purposes counties are particularly appropriate units. Given the available data and the research questions of interest, the unit of analysis is the individual respondent.

3.2 Measuring Avoidance of the "Other"

The model of associational avoidance applied here to examine inbreeding homophily follows from (Huckfeldt, 1983)[12], who proposed avoidance as a mechanism for association in an investigation of social class effects on friendship. In a study of white men in the Detroit-area, Huckfeldt found that as social class density increases, the likelihood of having a friend from the dominant class increases for individuals, regardless of their own class. At the same time, the tendency to avoid friendship across class lines was higher when the social density of the opposite class was high. Thus, he showed that while avoidance occurred at high levels of opposite class density, the likelihood of friendship with the opposite class was also high.

According to Huckfeldt's (1983) model of associational avoidance, social tie formation happens in two steps. In the first stage, individuals search for a potential partner from among the larger population available to them. The model assumes that individuals have repeated opportunities to interact with others at random rates. In the second stage, association between partners is formed or the individual avoids the potential partner. Whether a tie is formed depends on 1) whether the respondent and potential partner belong to the same groups and, 2) if they belong to different groups, then the respondent must choose not to avoid the potential partner. The focus in the model is on the probability that a member of a given group will associate with a member of the same group. I translate this model and its underlying logic directly from friendship to political association.

In the current work, the group of interest is the perceived partisan affiliation of respondents and those with whom they discuss politics.[13] The two-step process is the same as in Huckfeldt (1983)[14], but the ties that form are specifically between respondents and their political discussion partners rather than friends. The probability of encountering someone from an individual's own political group is determined by the density of that group in a given context, denoted as S_j below.

[12]This model is derived from Coleman (1964)

[13]I use the terms "respondent" and "discussant" interchangeably with "ego" and "alter", respectively.

[14]This process is similar to Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995), who applied Huckfeldt's (1983) model to political discussion partners.

The probability of encountering someone from outside their own group is denoted by $1 - S_j$. To simplify the modeling tasks, I separate political population density into the two-party vote of each county, relative to the individual respondent. The underlying population density of an individual's county sets the probability of encountering potential discussion partners.

The model is presented in terms of the probability that a member of group i in context j will form an association with another member of group i after k sequential encounters. Later encounters only occur after earlier encounters with dissimilar others are avoided. As individuals have more communication opportunities with others, k becomes large. The probability of association is represented by F_{ij} and is given by the equation below.

$$F_{ij}(k) = \frac{S_{ij}}{1 - a_{ij}(1 - S_{ij})} \text{ as } k \to \infty \tag{1}$$

In equation 1, a_{ij}, what Huckfeldt (1983) calls the "rejection parameter"[15], is the probability of avoidance given that an individual has encountered an out-group member of group i in context j. In other words, the model assumes that people communicate with members of their own group, but avoiding association with out-group members varies across i individuals and j contexts.[16] In this case, the avoidance parameter, a_{ij} is applied to a political setting where a Democrat (Republican) avoids a Republican (Democrat). The model represented by equation 1 is a causal statement that after k encounters, associations are formed based on an underlying population density and communication beyond one's own social group. After a large number of k encounters, Equation 1 can be rearranged to isolate a_{ij}, as a function of F_{ij} and S_j.

$$a_{ij} = \frac{F_{ij} - S_{ij}}{F_{ij}(1 - S_{ij})} \tag{2}$$

F_{ij} is best understood as the probability that association occurs between Democrats (Republicans) in context j after k encounters. The avoidance parameter, a_{ij} is the probability that

[15] In this work, I refer to the phenomenon as avoidance rather than rejection as the term more accurately represents the concept of interest.

[16] The model also implies that members of group i will associate with out-group members. I return to this idea below.

Democrats (Republicans) avoid Republican (Democrat) associates in context j, depending on the definition of S_j and $1 - S_j$. While a_{ij} cannot be observed, it can be estimated once a pair of values for F_{ij} and S_j are obtained. For a Democratic respondent in the 2016 Presidential Election, S_j is the proportion of the two-party presidential vote for the Democrat (Hillary Clinton) in their county and $1 - S_j$ is the proportion of the two-party presidential vote for the Republican (Donald Trump). The pattern is the same for Republican respondents: S_j is the proportion of the two-party presidential vote for the Republican (Donald Trump) in their county and $1 - S_j$ is the proportion of the two-party presidential vote for the Democrat (Hillary Clinton). Thus, in the next section, I estimate F_{ij} then examine partisan patterns of association and avoidance across population densities.

4 Environmental Constraints on Discussion Partners

4.1 Homophily in Voters' Discussion Networks

Given the highly polarized political environment of 2016, we might expect partisan out-group avoidance to be nearly automatic, but there are plenty of reasons to associate with others which have little to do with politics. Indeed, individuals often speak with others who are members of a different political party through shared rec-league teams, workspaces, or places of worship (Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague, 2005; Huckfeldt, Ikeda and Pappi, 2005). It has also been shown that many people still had diverse core political discussion networks in 2016, though at lower rates than in the past (Butters & Hare, 2020). The model of association applied here suggests that the search for an associate continues either until an individual encounters someone from their own group, or until they agree to associate with someone outside their own group. So how often do individuals report association with partisan in- and out-group members?

The simplest form of a social network consists of a pair of individuals with some form of relationship between them - a dyad. Researchers have focused on how political attitudes are tranmitted between parents and children (Jennings, Stoker and Bowers, 2009). Political dyads

also exist outside the family, extending into the realms of co-workers and friends (Mutz, 2002). In this section, I am interested in political dyads between an ego and any one of their alters. I report dyads in which an ego and an alter, who may be a friend, family member, or co-worker, have the same partisanship. For example, an ego may report Republican partisanship and their alter, a friend with whom they discuss politics, is reported also to be a Republican. I also report dyads in which ego and alter have differing partisanship.

Figure 1 shows the level of political homophily in respondent discussion networks in 2016. Here homophily means the proportion of discussants who voted for the same candidate as the respondent.[17] In other words, homophily means the tendency to associate with in-party members. Among those respondents who name at least one discussant, only 12.3 percent of the Clinton supporters and 12.4 percent of Trump supporters fail to name a discussant who shares the same candidate preference.[18] Put differently, nearly 90 percent of Republican and Democratic voters in the 2016 presidential election could name at least one other person who supported the same candidate in their political communication network. Figure 1 makes clear that voters have little trouble naming fellow supporters of their preferred candidate in their political communication network. Indeed, Republican and Democratic voters demonstrate remarkably similar propensities to discuss politics with their in-party members.

Figure 2 shows the level of heterogeneity in respondent discussion networks in 2016. The figure provides evidence that individuals do not typically discuss politics with members of the out-group. Among respondents who name at least one discussant, 79 percent of both Trump and Clinton voters fail to name someone who voted for the opposing party's presidential candidate. However, 15 percent of Republican voters and 16 percent of Democratic voters discuss politics with one other discussant. Indeed, as opposed to Figure 1 , Figure 2 shows that individuals have difficulty naming out-partisans in their communication networks. In terms of the association model applied in this work, most individuals agreed to associate with someone of their own group,

[17] There are a variety of alternatives to measuring political homophily. See (Klofstad, Sokhey and Mcclurg, 2013) for a review.

[18] Note that the maximum number of discussants was three in 2016.

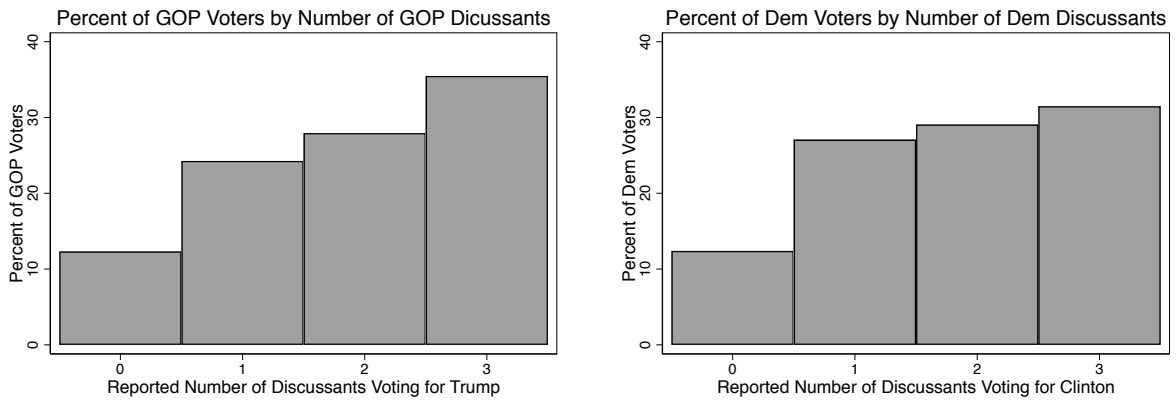

Figure 1: Level of homophily within Democrat and Republican voter communication networks, 2016 CCES.

while a minority agreed to associate with someone outside their group.

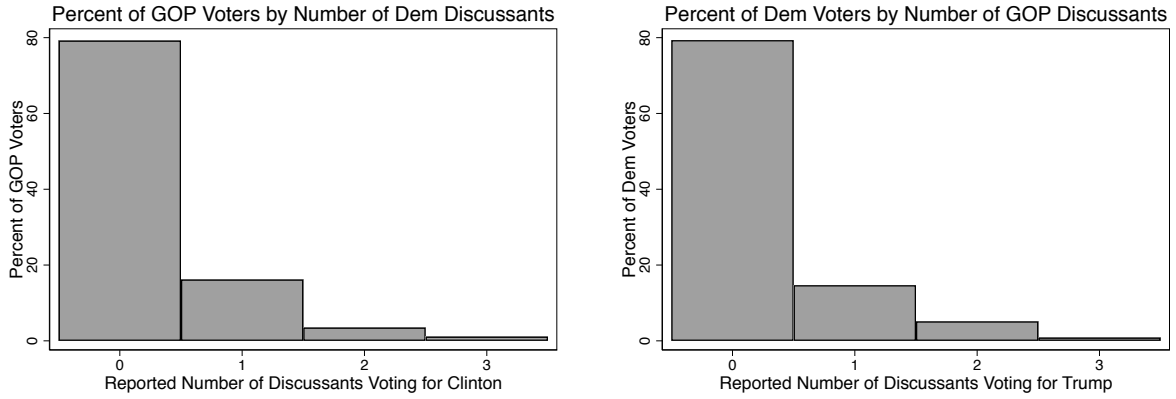

Figure 2: Level of heterogeneity within Democrat and Republican voter communication networks, 2016 CCES.

Taken together, the basic statistics shown in Figures 1 and 2 indicate that there was a substantial level of political homophily in discussion networks in 2016. While a minority of voters reside in politically diverse political communication networks, many voters are exposed to confirmatory views in their communication networks. Partisans in 2016 were not provided the same opportunities to talk to supporters from the other side as partisans in previous elections.[19] Put differently, most voters did not regularly discuss politics with supporters of the opposite party's

[19]See Butters & Hare, 2020 for more in-depth discussion.

presidential candidate in their core social networks in 2016.[20] The objective reality that discussion networks were largely homogeneous in 2016 provides an important backdrop for discussion related to avoidance. The next question we must answer is what drives the levels of observed homophily in political discussion networks? Avoidance of dissimilar others is one such mechanism for network formation, which may explain American voters' homophilous networks. To further explore this mechanism we must next estimate the probability of association with in-group members, F_{ij}.

4.2 Probability of Associating with Same-Party Discussion Partners

The first task in estimating avoidance of the "other" requires calculation of F_{ij} in terms of S_j. I utilize a set of logistic regression models (one for self-identified Democrats and one for self-identified Republicans) to assess how the underlying population of an area is related to the probability of having same-party political discussants. The dependent variable is coded as one if the ego perceives one of their alters to be of the same party, and zero otherwise. Put differently, the model includes dyads in which the ego and any one of their alters share the same partisanship. Controlling for individual and contextual attributes, I expect that voters living in more heavily partisan areas will have a higher probability of same-party associates in their close political discussion networks.

Whether a discussant shares the same party preference as the respondent is regressed on several explanatory variables. In each regression, I control for various contextual- and individual-level variables which might impact the probability of having a same-party political discussant. The contextual variables are the political composition of an individual county's electorate and are analogous to S_j and $1 - S_j$ from Equations 1 and 2. Democratic (Republican) County indicates the percentage of an individual's county that voted for the Democratic (Republican) candidate in 2016.

[20] It is important to note that some research, including Eveland, Hutchens and Morey (2013), shows that individuals experience higher levels of disagreement in their larger (and more peripheral) networks. This disagreement does not get picked up by name generators, which capture core discussion networks.

Individual partisanship[21] is included as a control variable in the regression models to account for the well documented tendencies toward political homophily that exist within the closely held discussion networks of individual citizens. Formal education and political interest have been shown to produce more extensive communication networks—the highly educated and the politically engaged are more likely to have more discussion partners, independently of partisanship. In a highly polarized setting, we should see more like-minded discussion for those with high levels of education and interest.

As Table 1 indicates, the expected patterns are largely sustained for both Democrats and Republicans in 2016. Importantly, the table provides some support for Hypothesis 1. That is, individuals who live in Republican counties are more likely to report association with other Republicans. In addition, individuals living in Democratic counties are more likely to associate with Democrats. While the coefficient for Democratic respondents is in the correct direction, it is not statistically discernible from zero. This suggests that it may not matter if Democrats are in a Democratic or Republican county—they simply want to associate with other Democrats, regardless of supply. At the same time, income is related to having same-party associates only for Democrats and political interest is related to having same-party associated only for Republicans. These results are used to estimate F_{ij}, the probability of association with agreeable others, thus there are down-the-line consequences for our understanding associational avoidance.

Results in Table 1 echo past findings that context constrains individuals' choice of discussion partners (e.g., Huckfeldt et al., 1995; Brundidge, 2010). Even during a period of intense partisan rancor, environmental supply continues to meaningfully shape the choices individuals can make regarding their core political discussion partners.[22] The logistic regression coefficients are used to estimate F_{ij}, which is the probability that egos from each partisan group will have an alter who is of the same party, contingent on context. I evaluate the magnitude of contextual effects by setting the values of all other explanatory variables at their mean value and adjusting county partisan composition.

[21] Democrats are negative values, while Republicans are positive.

[22] Recent research suggests the same is true of online discussion networks (Brundidge, 2010).

Table 1: Factors Predicting Whether Respondent Shares Partisanship with Any Discussant by Respondent Partisanship, 2016 CCES Logistic Regression

	Democrat Respondent	Republican Respondent
Democratic County	0.86 (0.77)	-
Republican County	-	3.23 (2.42)
Party Identification	-2.09 (-3.69)	0.26 (0.45)
Education	0.17 (1.30)	-0.16 (-0.98)
Interest	-0.09 (-0.45)	0.54 (2.86)
Age	-0.02 (-0.17)	-0.02 (-1.32)
Income	0.15 (2.68)	0.05 (0.69)
Constant	0.47 (0.52)	0.29 (0.24)
N	566	404
pseudo R^2	0.12	0.07

z statistics in parentheses.

The partisan composition of the county vote demonstrates corresponding effects on whether a discussant shares the same party as the respondent. That is, individuals who live in counties with proportionally more Democratic (Republican) voters are more likely to name a core political discussant who shares their partisanship. Figure 3 shows the aggregate change in magnitude of partisan county composition's effect on the respective probability of having a same-party discussant, contingent on individual partisanship. For supporters of both parties, the probability of associating with a discussant who shares an individual's partisan preference increases as a function of increased same-party density within a county. In counties where same-party support is high, having an agreeable discussant is all but guaranteed. It is also the case that at lower levels of same-party county support, Democrats and Republicans are less likely to name agreeable discussants. Indeed, in this case, partisans may have the opportunity to associate with members from the opposing group.

Figure 3 provides additional evidence in support of Hypothesis 1 that increased supply of same-party discussants in an area is related to the probability of having a same-party discussant. The figure also indicates that, for both Democrats and Republicans, when they are in a county's minority, there is an opening to discuss politics with members of the opposing party. However,

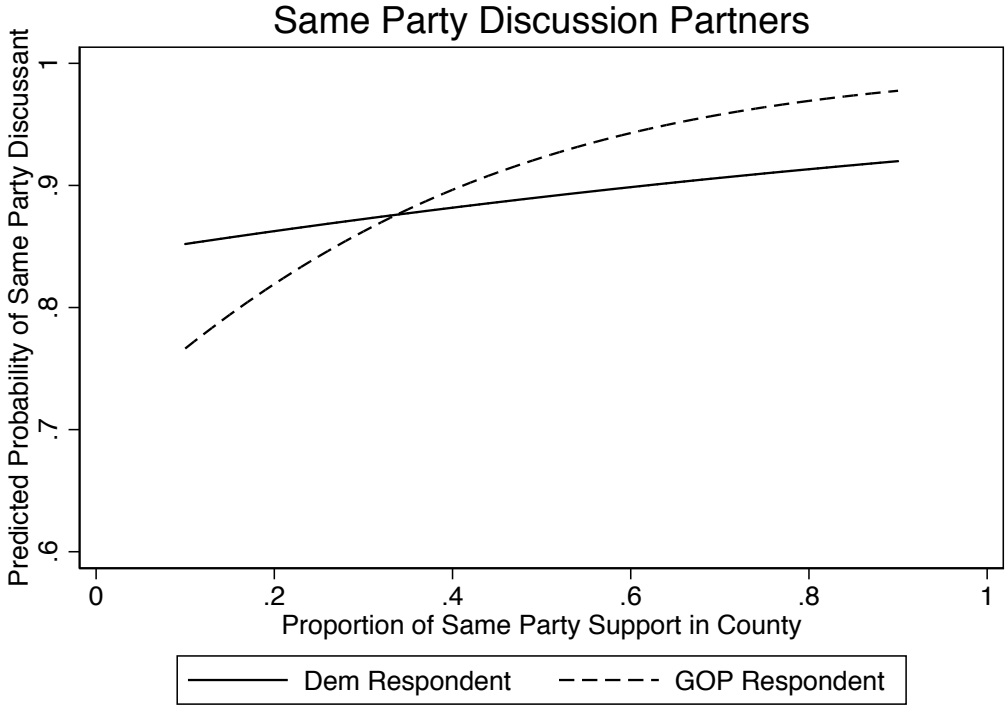

Figure 3: Aggregate predicted probability of partisan homophily by respondent party identification and county partisan composition.

when partisans are in the majority in a county, they are more likely to name like-minded discussants. Evidence presented thus far suggests that homophily is indeed the modal outcome for individuals. The observed homophily increases as the supply of agreeable discussants in a county increases. In the next section, I examine how supply of discussants is related to avoidance of dissimilar others.

4.3 Avoiding Out-Partisans

The avoidance parameter, a_{ij}, for respondents from each party is shown in Figure 4. Recall from Equation 2, that a_{ij} is the probability that Democrats avoid Republican individuals as associates, or the probability that Republcians avoid Democratic individuals, depending on the definition of S_j and $1 - S_j$. Values for F_{ij} were calculated based on the logit results above, thus I use a paired sequence of F_{ij} and S_j to arrive at values of a_{ij}, which range from 0 to 1. Higher values

of a_{ij} indicate a higher propensity to avoid association. Figure 4 expounds on this nuance by showing the probability of avoiding an out-group partisan given that an individual has encountered a member of the opposing party across a range of political contexts.

In large part, Figure 4 indicates very high rates of avoidance of out-party discussants for both Republicans and Democrats in 2016. The avoidance parameter for Republican respondents is nearly automatic across the range of county party densities, with an average avoidance parameter of 0.90. Though this is the case, there is some variation across contexts. In counties which have the lowest level of GOP support, Republican respondents have the highest avoidance parameter values. When the proportion of residents who supported Donald Trump was at 0.2, Republicans had a avoidance parameter of 0.94. Generally, as supply of Republicans in a county increases, the avoidance parameter decreases. At high levels of GOP support, Republicans appear to be slightly less willing to avoid association with Democrats. When the proportion of residents who supported Donald Trump was at 0.8, Republicans had a avoidance parameter of 0.87. Lower avoidance parameters may suggest that Republicans felt less threatened by disagreeable associates and were less willing to avoid them after the encounter phase. Regardless of their motivations, Republicans were indeed quite willing to avoid Democratic associates from their core political networks across contexts.

Since the density of Democratic supporters in a county is treated as the inverse of the density of Republican supporters in a county, interpretation of the avoidance parameter curve is also the inverse. Democrats largely display the same willingness to avoid out-partisans as their Republican counterparts, with an average avoidance parameter of 0.79. At low levels of same-party support Democrats were quite willing to avoid Republicans as associates after the encounter stage. When the proportion of residents who supported Hillary Clinton was at 0.2, Democrats had a avoidance parameter of 0.98. At high levels of Democratic density in a county (i.e., low levels of Republican support), avoidance is far from certain. When the proportion of county residents who supported Hillary Clinton was at 0.8, Democrats had a avoidance parameter of only 0.36. In other words, Democrats were not very likely to avoid the minority opinion in their county—perhaps they felt

confident in being part of the majority. Again, as supply of agreeable partisans in a county increases, the avoidance parameter generally decreases.

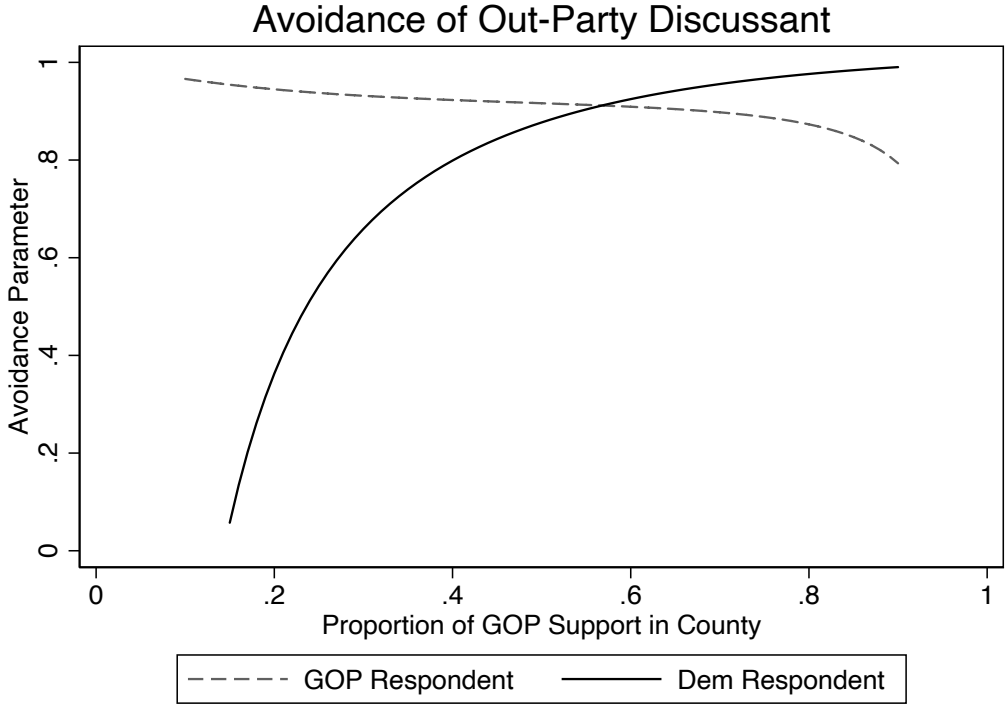

Figure 4: Avoidance parameter by respondent party identification and county partisan composition.

The analyses thus far provide support for Hypothesis 2, that as same-party political density decreases, partisans exhibit higher avoidance parameters while they are in the minority. Likelihood of avoidance also appears to be lower when an individual is of the majority in a given context. Indeed, evidence presented here suggests that above certain levels of same-party support in a county, partisans become less willing to avoid out-partisans. Figure 4 indicates that the process described by Finifter (1974) might still be at play in the context of the 2016 presidential election. That is, core discussion networks may insulate minorities in a given context from the overall opinion climate of that context. Individuals may achieve homophilous networks through avoiding disagreeable partners. Put differently, the relationship between discussant supply and core network formation is different for members in the partisan minority and majority.

Taken together, Figures 3 and 4 illustrate an interesting paradox. Specifically, at low levels of Republican support in a county, the probability of same-party association is lowest (Figure 3) and avoidance of the out-party is highest (Figure 4). At high levels of Republican support in a county, the probability of same-party association is highest and avoidance of the out-group is lowest. This pattern persists for Democratic respondents. Both Republicans and Democrats tend to avoid association across party lines at higher rates when 1) the probability of having a same-party encounter is lower and 2) the partisan density of the opposite party is higher. When an individual is of the majority group in a county, they are less likely to avoid the "other." When they are in the minority, they will avoid. Thus, while there may be more opportunities to encounter dissimilar others, and individuals are less likely to associate with their in-group, individuals still choose to avoid oters with whom they disagree with politically.

4.4 Avoidance Most Likely Among Interested Voters

The results in Figure 4 echo past findings that minorities are more likely than majorities to turn inward through avoidance of dissimilar others (e.g., Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995)). However, these findings mask interesting nuance. In particular, we should expect to see that those who are most interested in politics are also those most determined in their avoidance of dissimilar others. This should be the case for two reasons. First, individuals with high political interest generally have more political discussion partners, thus having more opportunities to avoid disagreeable associates. Second, interested individuals care about politics and likely value agreeable discussants in a way that is different than individuals who are uninterested in politics. Indeed, analyses separating individuals by level of political interest reveal that avoidance of dissimilar others appears to be more likely among those who are interested in politics.

Figure 5 shows the avoidance parameter for Republican respondents by their political interest. At high levels of interest, Republicans are almost guaranteed to avoid Democrats from their core discussion networks. As individual political interest decreases, the likelihood of avoidance is substantially less. When Republicans are uninterested in politics, they open the door to discussing

politics with the other side. The difference between low and high interest individuals is especially striking when considering an individual's context. A Republican living in a minority Republican county, who has little interest in politics is quite likely to avoid association with a Democrat. At the same time, a Republican who lives in a highly Republican county, but has little interest in politics has almost a 50-50 chance of avoiding association with a Democratic discussant. Figure 5 clearly demonstrates that context and political interest play key roles in how Republicans construct their core political networks.

It is important to note that the relationship shown in Figure 5 may be subject to questions related to whether variation in political interest is causing variation in partisan avoidance or whether partisan avoidance is causing variation in political interest. While the possibility of endogenous causation cannot be ruled out, it does not seem likely that people are becoming more interested in politics because they are avoiding dissimilar others. It is more plausible that political interest is exogenous to avoidance and that low-interest individuals seek to develop networks which they use to reduce information costs while high-interest individuals seek out agreeable information and avoid counter-attitudinal information in their core political discussion networks. This relationship requires more research.

Figure 6 paints a constrasting picture of the avoidance parameter for Democratic respondents by political interest. The figure does not indicate much difference in propensity to avoid across levels of political interest. Democrats appear to avoid Republicans at approximately the same rate, regardless of political interest. While there is not much separation between low and high interest Democrats, it is noteworthy that across contexts low-interest individuals are slightly more likely to avoid than medium- and high- interest individuals. That is, Figure 6 suggests low-interest Democrats are more determined to turn away Republicans than high-interest individuals, regardless of context. Thus, context plays a key role in Democratic discussion network construction, but interest does not.

Figures 5 and 6 provide some evidence that individuals are more likely to avoid disimilar others when the individuals themselves are highly interested in politics. It is important to note that the

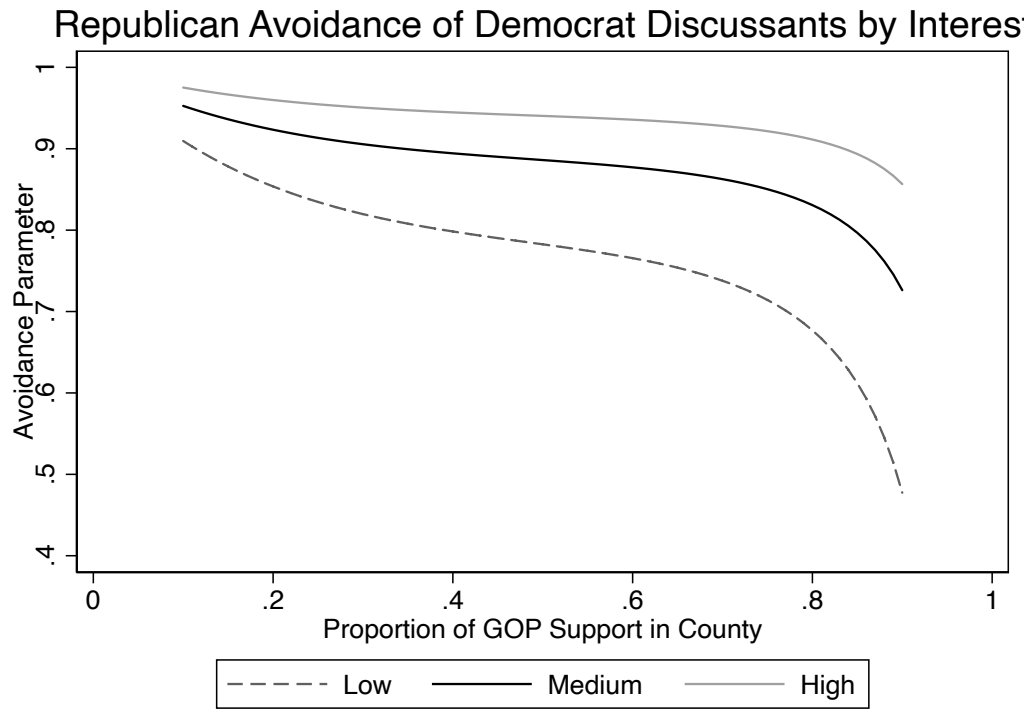

Figure 5: Republican avoidance parameter by respondentounty partisan composition and interest.

relationship described here may also run in the opposite direction. That is, avoidance of dissimilar others may allow individuals, at least Republicans, to maintain high levels of political interest. The key point in this analysis is not whether avoidance of dissimilar others leads to political interest or if political interest leads to avoidance of dissimilar others. These processes are two roads to the same place - politically interested individuals exhibit higher levels of avoidance. The avoidance parameter varies substantially across interest levels for Republicans, but not for Democrats. Individuals who are less interested in politics are generally the ones most likely to be exposed to conflicting information by their core discussion network. This potential exposure is especially prevalent when individuals are in the political majority of a county. These findings have significant implications for social aspect of human behavior. Those who are interested in politics often have the most crystalized opinions and are least open to persuasion (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944). We now know that, at least among Republicans, the most interested individuals in

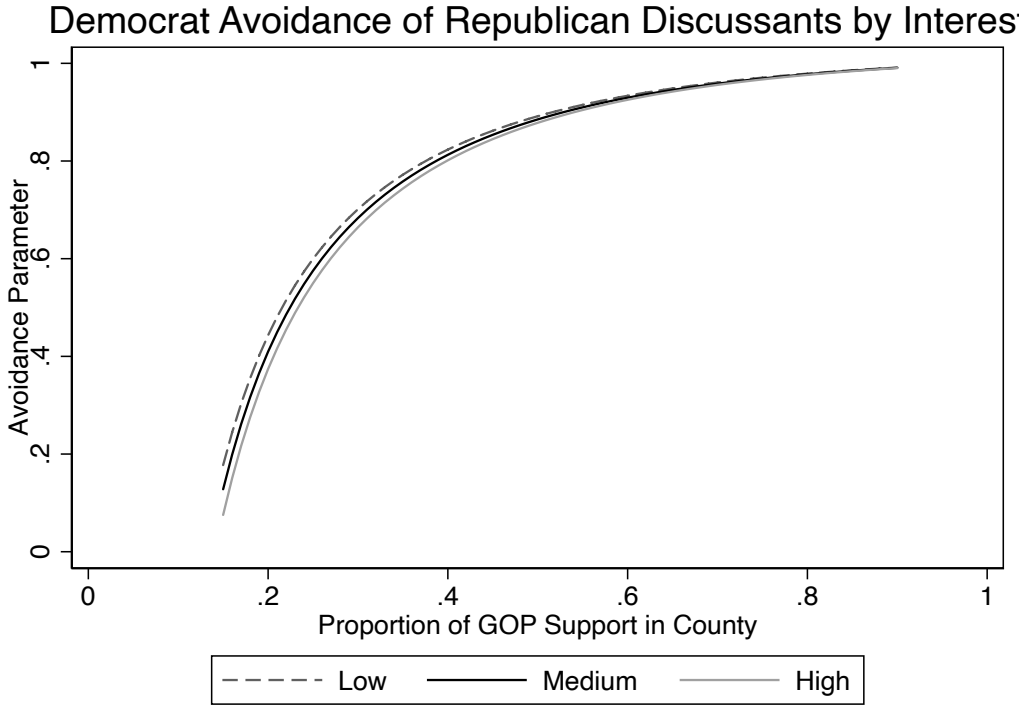

Figure 6: Democratic avoidance parameter by respondent county partisan composition and interest.

2016 protected themselves from dissonant information by avoiding those who disagreed politically.

5 Discussion

One of the fundamental regularities of human behavior is that they are inherently social. Individuals converse and learn from others within their larger environments. But do individuals choose political discussion partners who share the individuals' preferences? Past research suggests that the short answer is: *it depends on the context within which they live*. To the extent that individuals are able to exercise choice, individuals will choose discussion partners who agree with them politically if those partners are readily available Huckfeldt (1983); Buttice, Huckfeldt and Ryan (2009). The analysis presented here suggests that during the modern political era, where avoidance of dissimilar is thought of as rampant.

Few people choose to be exposed to politically disagreeable information, but as shown above,

many people live in contexts where they are likely to be exposed to political disagreement. The composition of core political networks is not only driven by personal preference, but also by the context within which personal preference is excerised. In this paper, I examine unique data from the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study to consider the formation of American voters' political discussion networks as well as the homophily present in those networks. Specifically, I investigate the role played by individual and contextual factors in forming core political discussion networks through avoidance of dissimilar others. During a time of increased negative affect (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Mason, 2015) and purported sorting in the electorate (Sussell, 2013; Lang and Pearson-merkowitz, 2015) it is likely that voters have become quite vigilant in avoiding dissimilar others.

But have these changes actually led to homphily in Americans' close political discussion networks? And if so, to what extent is avoidance used as a mechanism to help create these homophilous networks? Scholars and pundits have conjectured about polarization and its consequences, but little work has been done to examine how polarization filters to everyday political discussion. I examine one possible mechanism which helps to explain low levels of diversity in core political discussion networks: partisan avoidance of those with whom individuals disagree. I demonstrate that, for both Democrats and Republicans, individuals' core networks reflect their social context (i.e., county partisanship). Furthermore, partisans avoid allowing members of the opposite party into their networks, in favor of their in-group. In addition, avoidance of Democrats is near automatic for Republicans across observed levels of political density in environmental contexts. Democrats appear less willing to avoid in 2016. For what variation does exist, as a partisan group approaches minority-status, avoidance of non-members generally increases. These results are even more striking for individuals who express high levels of interest in politics. Taken together, these results have meaningful implications for our understanding of mass polarization and the role of discussion networks in shaping citizens' politics.

Given the findings presented above, which are likely to persist based on general trends in political sorting, it is surprising that avoidance is not examined more often in political settings.

My work seeks to fill this apparent gap in the literature by expanding the current work in several areas. Specifically, now that the level of avoidance is determined for 2016, I will examine exactly who is avoiding out-partisans. Do men and women treat avoidance differently? Does age play a role in an individual's willingness to avoid out-partisans? Were there interesting patterns of avoidance among individuals who voted differently in the 2016 primaries (e.g., Bernie Sanders vs. Clinton and Trump vs. the field)? In addition, is the strength of avoidance uniform across individuals? There may also be utility in adding additional datasets to the analysis—for instance, there are possible differences or consistencies across time. Analysis of data from additional election years can be leveraged to craft a long-term story of political avoidance. Network batteries have been used in several nationally representative surveys over the last twenty years. In a time of deep affective polarization, such avenues of research have taken on new meaning. The present political climate is perhaps the most important time for scholars to examine the social determinants and consequences of political homophily.

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A Appendices

A.1 Political Discussion Network Battery: Question Wording

The political discussion networks battery was composed of the following variables from the post-election wave of the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. The three-letter module code is omitted at this time for purposes of peer review.

XXX401 From time to time, people discuss government, elections and politics with other people. We'd like to ask you about the people with whom you discuss these matters. These people might or might not be relatives. Please enter the first letter of the person's first name, or any other letter that will help you identify each person in the questions that follow. Do not enter the person's full name (for example, type "T" for Tom or "J" for Jennifer).

XXX402 Please select all that apply. Is "name1" / "name2" / "name3" a: (1) Coworker of mine; (2) Goes to the same place of worship as me; (3) Lives in my neighborhood

XXX403 How often do you discuss politics with each of these people ("name1" / "name2" / "name3")? (1) Often; (2) Sometimes; (3) Rarely; (4) Never; (9) Don't know

XXX404 Generally speaking, how much do you think each of these people know about politics ("name1" / "name2" / "name3")? (1) A great deal; (2) An average amount; (3) Not much at all; (9) Don't know

XXX405 How do you think each of these people voted in this year's presidential election ("name1" / "name2" / "name3")? (1) Hillary Clinton; (2) Donald Trump; (3) Other candidate; (4) Probably didn't vote; (9) Don't know

XXX406 Do you think each of these people normally supports political candidates who are ("name1" / "name2" / "name3"): (1) Democrats; (2) Republicans; (3) Both; (4) Neither; (9) Don't know

XXX407 How often does "name1" talk with "name2"? (1) Every day; (2) Every week; (3) Every month; (4) Less than every month; (9) Don't know

XXX408 How often does "name1" talk with "name3"? (1) Every day; (2) Every week; (3) Every month; (4) Less than every month; (9) Don't know

XXX409 How often does "name2" talk with "name3"? (1) Every day; (2) Every week; (3) Every month; (4) Less than every month; (9) Don't know

XXX410A [Asked of split-half sample] In your opinion, what percentage of voters in your county voted for Donald Trump in the presidential election? (0) 0%; . . .; (100) 100%

XXX410B [Asked of split-half sample] In your opinion, what percentage of voters in your county voted for Hillary Clinton in the presidential election? (0) 0%; . . .; (100) 100%

XXX411 Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you think each of these people attend religious services ("name1"/"name2"/"name3")? (1) More than once a week; (2) Once a week; (3) Once or twice a month; (4) A few times a year; (5) Seldom; (6) Never; (9) Don't know