SYMPOSIUM

Political Networks

Editors' Introduction: A Relational Political Science

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Political science is diverse in its methods, theories, and substantive interests. A quick perusal of our flagship journals reveals just how heterogeneous we are, with articles ranging from mathematical treatments of theoretical problems to textual exegesis of Plato, and qualitative studies of single countries standing in contrast to quantitative analyses of experiments designed to mobilize voters. At times, the discipline's boundaries are so fuzzy that our territory is alternatively claimed by philosophers, anthropologists, economists, sociologists, and psychologists.

Yet we persist in our inquiries, leading many of us to search for the common threads that bind us together. And while we do not agree on many things, we would probably all agree that one primary tie among political scientists is our emphasis on power, and understanding how and why power is used. We are all inherently interested in the exercise of power between and among individuals and groups and the implications that this exercise holds for social outcomes.

We contend that this unifying concept is, at its very core, *relational*. For any individual actor or institution to meaningfully exercise power, the action can only be defined in terms of how it affects some other actor or institution. This characteristic implies that our discipline should, to a significant degree, focus on describing and explaining the evolution of relationships at work in political processes, as well as the consequences these relationships hold for individual decisions and aggregate outcomes.

It is somewhat ironic, then, that a relational turn in political science appears to be absent. Arguably, the most important intellectual developments in political science—behavioralism, rational choice, new institutionalism—are built on the core belief that political decisions are made by self-interested, if cognitively limited, actors who operate independently of each other. To the degree that decisions in politics are seen as being dependent, this perception is not based on the idea of relational influence. Instead, we believe that political science maintains a clear (and understandable) focus on either institutional constraints or strategic interaction.

Such approaches to politics have served the discipline well, leading to numerous intellectual advances across substantive areas. But these approaches are limited by the assumption of independence between the actors and institutions that exercise power. To move forward in understanding the role of power in politics, we must begin to account for *interdependence* among actors and institutions. This insight leads to a whole host of questions for the discipline that have not been part and parcel of the core. To what degree are the decisions of individuals and institutions dependent upon their network of connections? Are these dependencies causal, or are they reflective of other processes, such as mutual attraction based on common attributes (homophily) or the need to assimilate to divergent views and political positions? How do these relationships develop, particularly under different institutional and environmental constraints? When do networks help people exercise political power and when do they constrain its use? In this symposium, we seek to illuminate the ways in which a particular brand of reasoning about these relationships—social network analysis (SNA)—is useful across the broad spectrum of topics in political science. Each contribution focuses on core questions from one of the main subfields of political science or considers the sociology of knowledge within our discipline, demonstrating the benefits that can accrue from a relational turn. In this introduction, we focus foremost on the potential of SNA to bind the discipline more closely around the subject of power, as well as the steps that we should take to encourage more work along these lines.

POWER, RELATIONSHIPS, AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

As classically formulated by Dahl (1969), power is when person A gets person B to do something that he or she would not otherwise do on his or her own. It is clear from this definition that power is relational. That is, power only exists when considering interactions between and among individuals and groups. Returning to the seminal concept of power, as Crozier and Friedberg suggest, "Power can develop only through exchange among the actors in a given relation" (1980, 20).

Even as political scientists have challenged Dahl's simple definition and formulation of power, the concept has always remained relational. For Bachrach and Baratz (1962), power is not exercised solely in determining which decisions are made,

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but also by determining which issues are allowed into the public domain.[1] They ask,

> [C]an the researcher overlook the chance that some person or association could limit decision-making to relatively non-controversial matters, by influencing community values and political procedures and rituals, not withstanding that there are in the community serious but latent power conflicts? (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, 949)

As this quote suggests, issues are overlooked in public discourse because of the situation of a particular actor or group in a larger web of interactions. An even more radical view of power, as espoused by Lukes (1974) and adopted by scholars such as Gaventa (1980), emphasizes a relational view of power. While this view of power examines how power is exercised on action, it also applies to inaction. As Lukes notes, this third view of power suggests that actor A exercises power over actor B "by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants" (1974, 23). Although some scholars reject this view of power as too manipulative or insidious, a social network perspective adopts a more realistic view that focuses on how relationships with others affect preferences and choices.

RELATIONAL ANALYSIS AT THE CORE OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

It is one thing to argue that power is inherently relational but quite another to suggest that this kind of work ought to lie at the core of the discipline. Scholars with a critical eye can reasonably suggest that outcomes that appear to be driven by relationships among actors can, in fact, be explained by other theories. Alternatively, others can argue with cause that overemphasizing relationships and networks discounts the importance of agency and self-determination—in short, they can object to the absence of self-determination. Still another objection to our argument is that the inherent need of relational approaches to study problems holistically represents a step backwards for a discipline that has recently embraced the scientific criteria of causality and experimentation. Each critique has merit. But rather than seeing them as reasons to ignore networked views of political power in political science, we see them as opportunities for political scientists to add their own insights to the existing understandings of social networks concepts and methods.

Indeed, to the extent that we want to understand power in politics, an important part of the discipline is trying to understand which relationships are influential, which ones are merely supportive, and which ones are simply irrelevant. Only the serious pursuit of strong evidence of social influence in the face of omitted variable bias, homophily, and a host of other methodological challenges to the establishment of causality allows us to make such distinctions.

As Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery (2009) note, traditional operationalizations of power are somewhat at odds with these conceptualizations, because they focus on the possession of resources. Such an approach unintentionally limits the concept of power in ways that miss the role that connections play between actors; for example, the presence of a large military but the absence of an actor to threaten with these capabilities is a fairly empty understanding of power. Instead, Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery (2009) claim that resources only make sense in the context of an actor's web of connections, which can affect both the resources that he or she has and his or her ability to use them effectively. These scholars specifically argue that SNA provides appropriate tools and concepts for bringing relationships back into our operationalizations of power.

We agree. A network approach to understanding politics explicitly adopts a relational perspective on any political process and implicitly adopts a view of power that is different from standard operationalizations. So while many in our discipline conceive of their work in terms of power—whether social status for individuals or natural resources for a state—very rarely do they explicitly consider how that power derives from or is influential because of relational context. Once we begin to consider these questions, it becomes clear that a failure to investigate these relations and their import impedes our ability to understand and explain important political and social problems.

The first objection to relational analysis derives from the straightforward principle that correlation is not causation. A scientist steeped in the network tradition sees correlation between attributes of the network and individual behavior as evidence of causality; scientists from other traditions see the same evidence as indicative of other processes, such as self-selection driven by conflict avoidance.[2] We agree with skeptics of social influence theories that unambiguous evidence of network effects is difficult to attain, but we disagree that this challenge should dissuade us from adopting a relational approach to political science. Indeed, to the extent that we want to understand power in politics, an important part of the discipline is trying to understand which relationships are influential, which ones are merely supportive, and which ones are simply irrelevant. Only the serious pursuit of strong evidence of social influence in the face of omitted variable bias, homophily, and a host of other methodological challenges to the establishment of causality allows us to make such distinctions.

We argue that such a focus is preferable to other approaches that either assume independence of actors or else make the

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assumption that dependence only flows from rules and institutions. Although there is an old, vigorous debate about whether assumptions in models should be realistic or just useful (e.g., Friedman 1953), we side-step this dispute by claiming that the assumption of independence of individuals limits the study of political science to certain questions. Relaxing this assumption brings social relations to the fore and suggests a host of new directions for political science research. Whether a social network approach is more "realistic" or "better" is ultimately an empirical question that can be resolved only through a relational versus an individualist research program (see Bueno de Mesquita 2010, 389–402).[3]

Such a discussion flows naturally into the expression of concerns that a relational approach leads the discipline down a path of social determinism. To state this differently, the objection is that prioritizing questions about the influence of networks and the origins of their structures significantly downplays the role of individual agency in politics. This critique is grounded on both intellectual and political grounds and is legitimate in both cases. However, as a practical matter, there is no reason to assume that a focus on the attributes of network structures is inconsistent with the principal of methodological individualism. To be sure, the tools for analyzing networks are more advanced when attempting to unpack structures and predict relationships as opposed to understanding how these structures and relationships interact with the attributes of the actors in the networks.

Yet here is a case in which political science can make a strong contribution to the study of networks. With so many of us studying political and economic systems that are best described in terms of how much agency is allowed for individuals, it would be untenable for us to overlook the hard questions about how this agency is balanced against the impact of networks. Only by focusing clearly on the degree to which relations constrain agency can we begin to fully explain our depictions of what the concepts of liberty, freedom, and agency mean in different political systems and contexts.

If we are right that political science can expand its ability to understand fundamental issues of power by confronting the issue of social influence and balancing this element against individual agency, we still leave open the question of whether we can investigate this subject rigorously. Although significant debates rage about what constitutes rigorous research, these arguments often rest on epistemological differences over the meaning of causation and interpretation. SNA and its accompanying methods should not be exempt from these same debates, but neither should they be rejected outright on the basis that fundamental assertions of interdependence complicate our studies and make causal effects difficult to establish.

To take dependence seriously often means placing questions of external validity, randomization, statistical independence, and even contextualization of data in the background. Instead, such a focus suggests a different set of criteria, such as completeness of the network, identification of the appropriate links, and connection of knowledge about relationships with information about the parties involved. Thus, the study of networks—including large scale-networks such as co-sponsorship links in a legislature or social media connections—often requires us to rethink standard assumptions about what constitutes meaningful evidence of an interesting social process. Only after this reconsideration does it make sense to bring those criteria back to the foreground. Yet again, we feel that this process presents more opportunity than opposition. Trying to challenge standard assumptions about what is a meaningful relationship for politics is a potentially fruitful way to begin expanding the methodological toolbox of our discipline.

HOW TO ADVANCE THE AGENDA

For a truly relational political science to succeed, we must recognize that this approach can provide a common thread across the subfields. We hope that the articles in this symposium—each devoted to explaining the importance of political networks in different corners of our intellectual cafeteria (Almond 1988)—will demonstrate exactly these kinds of connections while being faithful to the questions that motivate those subfields.

But what other steps are necessary? We argue here for three pragmatic steps that could go a long way toward incorporating a relational view into our thinking about politics and political science. First, we must begin to integrate social network topics into the core of our methods training in the discipline. While a great deal of the SNA methodological core is quantitative in nature, we also believe that this advice holds for training in qualitative methods. The core methodological problems of SNA as practiced in other fields involve the question of how to model dependence among actors, the importance of relational patterns that show up regularly in social processes, and the fact that what looks chaotic and random often emerges from simple and elegant problems. These issues are not well incorporated into our research training, even though large bodies of literature in sociology, economics, medicine, computer science, biology, and even physics exist that suggest that the world is rife with such complexities.

Second, we believe that the discipline should begin to rethink the standards we use to determine what data are "good" and what data are "bad." To be clear from the outset, we are not arguing that relational studies are lacking in rigor or that the criteria used to judge nonrelational studies are unreasonable. Rather, we suggest that the data that can be used to study relations are often of a different nature than many more standard forms of evidence. For example, to understand the role of networks in many areas of American politics, we may have to accept that external validity will be difficult if not impossible to achieve.[4] Important scientific criteria to which we should adhere have been established for relational analyses, set forth in a voluminous literature in other disciplines.

However, we should not, as it were, throw the baby out with the bathwater. As techniques for gathering network data on a large scale become more available, we believe that the characteristics of good relational research and standard political science study will converge. In the meantime, we argue that good relational studies should be judged on grounds appropriate for the questions they raise. Consider, as an example, that the impact of the Columbia sociology research on networks and voting behavior first conducted in the 1950s is

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still felt decades later, even though that study was constrained to a representative sample of residents in unrepresentative Elimira, New York (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). Simply by raising the question of how cross-cutting networks influence voters, this research made a valuable contribution by opening the door to new concepts and forcing us to think more critically about the conditions under which political conversations inhibit tolerance, participation, and voting (Mutz 2006; Huckfeldt et al. 2004).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the pathways toward professional success in the discipline should not only encourage but also seek out the best relational work that is being done at any given time. Here we are referring, of course, to the choices that are made about what articles are accepted to journals, what kinds of jobs are listed by universities and other institutions, and similar indicators. Rather than dismissing relational studies of politics as better suited to other disciplines and journals, we should be encouraging this work within the boundaries of our own.

We have seen some encouraging steps in this area. A new organized section of the APSA devoted to political networks has been created, meaning that there is now space set aside at our national meeting for the best research in this vein. Through the generous support of the National Science Foundation (NSF), three summer conferences have now been devoted to training in social network methods and the presentation of political networks research.[5] *American Politics Research* devoted a special issue to political networks, with eight articles spanning subjects across the subfield.[6] Temple University Press has begun to publish a political science series entitled *The Social Logic of Politics*. Despite these advances, more progress along these lines is welcome.

CONCLUSION

We encourage readers to look carefully at the arguments laid bare in this symposium. Although each author comes from a different subfield and holds his or her own views on the benefits of a relational political science, all agree that this approach offers a key to many more important advances. Additionally, each author suggests some issues and limitations related to the study of social networks.

Perliger and Pedahzur illustrate the potential of studying terrorism and political violence using the tools of SNA. As the authors argue, SNA can help us understand how and why certain people join violent groups, as well as how the structure of networks can affect targeting, motives, and tactics. For Perliger and Pedahzur, the ties or relations among actors are critical for understanding the activities of violent networks. Identifying the important actors in these decentralized networks is a more difficult task than in more traditional hierarchal organizations. SNA offers a unique approach to solving this problem, and Perliger and Pedahzur offer a range of possibilities for approaching it.

While analyzing social ties is one of SNA's innovations, Perliger and Pedahzur also address one of its critical methodological problems—the boundary problem, or the question of which actors to include in the analysis. Although contending approaches have been suggested to solve this dilemma, this issue is illustrative of the need for specific methods training for future SNA researchers.

Siegel applies SNA insights to the study of comparative politics and political context. Consistent with our previous suggestion, Siegel argues that SNA can bridge divides between political scientists with different methodologies (e.g., quantitative vs. qualitative) by explaining how context matters for political behavior. Notably, Siegel suggests how a relational research approach can be effective: "A mapped-out network of relations allows one to employ . . . theoretical insights to produce predictions about how a population of individuals within such a network will behave, given a particular distribution of individual incentives" (52). However, according to Siegel, one central concern is data. Networked data are more difficult to collect and analyze, and they are less prevalent. He concludes by providing examples of the possibilities for SNA research in comparative politics, such as prominent research on democracy, social movements, party systems, and government formation.

Djupe and Sohkey echo our argument that networks are about power, but they focus on how the exchange of information between voters influences their behavior. Of particular note is their article's focus on the fact that the idea of power in networks is still consistent with the idea of choice in American politics. Even given the lack of interest that average Americans display in politics, Djupe and Sohkey make a strong case that social influences still play an important role in the formation of opinions and the propensity toward action. As a consequence, they raise important questions about whether average citizens are more strongly influenced by their network because of their own disinterest or in spite of it. As such, they raise significant issues about the degree to which networks operate on their constituent elements and vice versa.

Lazer provides a deeper intellectual history of SNA and its roots in sociology and political science, noting in particular the evolution of two themes relevant to the discipline—the effects of networks and their origins. Building on his insights about the origins of SNA and its relevance to political science, he makes a number of poignant observations about our discipline's failure to embrace these concepts in the past and how it might do so in the future. According to Lazer, the principal contributions that political science can make will result from an acute focus on causality in networks. He strongly recommends attention to longitudinal research designs and greater use of the large reams of data that are now becoming available from the Internet, phone and computer logs, and other "passive" data sources. His insights show us important ways to move forward in the discipline and stretch beyond particular subfields.

The symposium ends with Ramiro Berardo's study of how networkers themselves are networked. This self-conscious sociology of the emerging body of work among political networkers makes two important points that overlap with our own arguments. Drawing on survey data from the NSF-supported summer network meetings in 2008 and 2009, he first demonstrates that the ability to learn from others and access training with experts has significant professional benefits. This finding fits nicely with our recommendation for more of these kinds of opportunities in moving the subfield forward. But

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even more important, the analysis shows that subfield homophily—that is, networks in which people in subfields only talk with others in the same subfield—declines in the wake of these conferences. Even though Berardo's research deals with a small group of scholars specifically interested in networks, we feel that his results illustrate the unifying potential of SNA as a method and theory among political scientists. To return to the theme with which we opened this brief introduction, our field is often fragmented and in search of the things that can bring coherence to our wide-ranging interests. Because politics is relational at its core, the analysis of political networks is one such tie that can bind us. ■

NOTES

1. Schattschneider (1960) calls this the *mobilization of bias*.
2. For example, a person is not necessarily a Democrat because his or her friends have influenced him or her, but because that individual avoids encounters with Republicans because they make him or her uncomfortable.
3. This way of evaluating competing theories suggests a Lakatosian philosophy of science. See Elman and Elman (2002) for a discussion related to the study of international relations.
4. It is hard to envision what a study of the network of all American voters would look like, let alone how we would obtain such information. The question of whether we can get a sense of "the" network of American voters from random sample surveys has already been put to rest by sociologists.
5. As well, a summer meeting is already being planned for 2011 at the University of Michigan.
6. Volume 37, number 5.

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