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**SOCIAL NETWORKS, POLITICAL DISCUSSION AND VOTING IN ITALY:  
A STUDY OF THE 2006 ELECTION**

*Abstract*

*This article analyzes the role of interpersonal discussion networks and television as the key mediators of political information that can potentially drive citizens' electoral choices. The research relies on survey data of Italian voters in the aftermath of the 2006 general election. Findings show that the partisan intensity of discussion networks significantly affects the vote, so that citizens embedded in homogeneous partisan networks are more influenced than those who discuss politics within heterogeneous networks that do not uniformly support a unified political position. The effects of television news programs and talk shows turn out to be comparatively smaller than those of interpersonal networks, but are still significant for those programs and formats that attract politically diverse audiences. We interpret this result as a consequence of the increasing relevance of selective exposure in the Italian electorate, which has largely been documented by previous research. Thus, while the effects of interpersonal discussion networks seem to depend on the degree of their partisan intensity, the impact of television seems to be enhanced, in the Italian context, by a program's ability to present itself as less openly biased than most of the competitors, thus failing to elicit selective exposure by the viewers. The main implication of this study is that interpersonal communication has a remarkable influence on citizens' choices, and it should be studied together with mass communication, as they both constitute crucial components of voters' information environments, although their effects depend on partially different factors.*

## 1. The informed voter and democracy<sup>1</sup>

Democratic theory requires voters to be informed and aware of the substantially decisive importance of their vote. Therefore, it is essential to identify the quality and the dimension of the information flow that comes to the voters through so-called intermediaries, especially the mass media and personal networks. By complementing each other, both these intermediaries jointly contribute to creating the informational context that shapes political behavior and voting choices. Our study aims to analyze such an intermediation process by focusing on the characteristics of the intermediation context and its influence on voting choices. Following Beck (1991) and Beck et al. (2002), we are convinced that personal and media intermediaries should be taken into account simultaneously. This belief guided the survey investigation and the analysis of the data presented in our paper. Since most studies of voting behavior in Italy have paid little attention to personal networks we will, however, focus more intensively on the role of the discussion networks. Therefore, our primary object of analysis will be "the information received through social interaction, the characteristics of the relationships through which political information is conveyed, and the types of people who serve as political communicators" (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, 108).

In past decades, Italy was characterized by the existence of politically and socially cohesive communities capable of exercising very powerful influence on voting behavior. The two predominant parties, the Christian Democratic party (DC) and the Communist party (PCI), the Catholic church, and trade unions, thanks to their extensive and entrenched networks largely dominated the process of political communication, especially at the grass-roots level. Therefore, the investigation of the nature of the social structure and of its influence was always central to the analysis of voting behavior. In particular, a substantial and influential body of research took into account the remarkable differences between political traditions and cultures of Italian regional areas (Spreafico and LaPalombara 1963; Poggi 1968; Galli 1968; Parisi and Pasquino 1977; Corbetta, Parisi and Schadee 1988; Cartocci 1990; Diamanti 1993). However, notwithstanding the fundamental assumption that individual political behavior was mediated by social groups, most early research on voting by Italian scholars rarely addressed the mechanisms of this process of intermediation.

When the model of the Michigan School and of the American National Electoral Studies crossed the ocean and set the course of electoral research in other democracies (Zuckerman 2005,

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11), the research agenda in Italy absorbed the mainstream approach according to which social groups – intended as large-scale groups like social class, religion, political organizations – become objects of individual identification (Mannheimer and Sani 1987 and 1994; Parisi and Schadee 1995; Corbetta and Parisi 1997; Itanes 2001; Caciagli and Corbetta 2002). Practically no research was devoted to the analysis of the internal dynamics of small social groups, like family, friends, co-workers, peer groups, and neighbors<sup>2</sup>. The mechanisms for the transmission of information through face-to-face contacts remained substantially not explored. The intuitions and formulations of the early studies of the Columbia School, in particular, Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) famous hypothesis of the two-step communication flow, received little attention.

Likewise, research on the role of the other intermediary agent, the mass media, in shaping voting choices started in Italy quite late. In the so-called First Republic (1946-1992), the role played by the mass media prevented any kind of research to consider them as a factor in elections: while newspapers were mostly owned by the private sector, from its beginning, in the late 1950s, television was a state monopoly. Political parties controlled entirely the public television broadcasting system whose electoral role remained limited and scarcely influential for many years to come. In addition, the emergence of a private sector broadcasting company in the second half of the '80s did not significantly change this state of affairs. Although television brought some innovation to the style of campaigning, it did not alter any fundamental aspect of the political system nor did it challenge the supremacy of parties as major actors in the political game (Mancini 1993; Mancini and Mazzoleni 1995; Corbetta and Mazzoleni 1995).

As a consequence of the radical changes in the party system that occurred in the early '90s and the rapid mediatization of electoral campaigns, television began to cover political events, especially electoral campaigns, with a new approach. For the first time, the mass media turned Italian elections into shows (Mazzoleni 1996). At the same time, following the formation of two main coalitions and the emergence of bipolar competition, political elites discovered the importance of direct appeals to the voters in order to attract electoral consensus. As new or transformed political actors, parties and coalitions needed to be introduced to the public in the most rapid and effective way. For this reason, especially in the first phase of the transition, the media coverage of electoral campaigns served as an indispensable source of information. As a consequence of this revolution, studies on the impact of television on Italian elections multiplied, especially after Silvio Berlusconi, the tycoon of Italian commercial television, entered the political arena (Ricolfi 1994; Sani and Segatti 1997; Sani 2001; Legnante 2002; Legnante 2006). In several studies, the role of

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<sup>2</sup> Some glimpses with special reference to clientelist networks can be found in Tarrow 1967; Zuckerman 1975.

mass media has been sometimes overemphasized as if Italian voters, deprived of their traditional party references, drew their political information almost exclusively from television.

However, if one focuses on the role of information sources in influencing political choice, it appears evident that the political information coming from newspapers, television and the new media is only a part of a broader context in which interpersonal communication also plays a significant role. Therefore, even if the old social and political networks have been weakened and changed in nature after the collapse of the political system in early '90s, the existence of communication networks may still prove to be capable of influencing political opinions and filtering media messages. The line of research started by Huckfeldt and Sprague's (1995) seminal book found new evidence of the main assertion advanced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955): citizens are interdependent in the sense that they depend on one another for information and advice. Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) identified individuals' micro-environmental surroundings as one of the main intermediaries of voting choices. The difference from traditional research carried out by studies of the Columbia School (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944) is that the focus is on discussion networks rather than on social groups. Networks have the characteristic of not being self-contained, that is, they are capable of accommodating the fact that individuals do not usually belong to a single group, but to multiple groups that are sometimes open to different political directions (Huckfeldt et al. 2004, 18). Moreover, citizens experience their social settings in bits and pieces, that is to say they obtain their information through a series of exchanges with a number of people with whom they share a social space. As a consequence, "the central political tendency of a particular setting is never experienced directly, but it is rather reconstructed on the basis of the fragmented experiences that are differentially weighted in ways that are idiosyncratic to both recipient and the source of the information. This view marks an extension and perhaps a departure from a rich tradition of contextual studies in which individuals are seen as responding, more or less directly, to the political climate within which they reside" (Huckfeldt et al. 2004, 31).

This approach is especially appropriate for analyzing a context such as the current Italian one where the political transition provoked so many changes in the political scenario with the decline of old social and political references and the emergence of new ones still in a constant evolution. Where organizations decline in quantity and in quality, that is, in their numbers and in their ability to structure the transmission of political communication, chances are that interpersonal networks will occupy the newly free space. In addition, we would suggest that, in any case, the analysis of discussion networks should complement research on the role of the mass media in shaping voting choices<sup>3</sup>. As Beck et al. (2002, 57) have observed, "alternative sources of

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<sup>3</sup> A similar argument has been advanced also by Lenart (1994, 40-41).

information typically vary in the extent to which they carry distinctive political biases. By relying on one information source rather than another, citizens are more or less likely to encounter information that encourages some choices and outcomes while it discourages others". Therefore, analyzing both intermediaries simultaneously should allow us to acquire better knowledge on what could not be known by just relying on separate analyses.

Our research has been designed to study the influence of social networks during the campaign for parliamentary elections, which were held on 9-10 April 2006. To address a range of issues related to interpersonal and media communication and voting choices, we carried out three nationally representative surveys conducted through a self-administered mail questionnaire in November 2005, February 2006 and May 2006 (see details in the Appendix). Moreover, we also carried out a number of focus groups a few weeks before the election. In this paper, we will focus mainly on data drawn from the post-electoral survey (N=1270). In particular, our surveys were designed to include a battery of questions investigating the frequency of discussion, the identity of the discussants, their social characteristics, political orientation and expertise, and the amount of congruence and dissonance between discussion partners. In this regard, the present study addresses two questions: 1) what were the characteristics of Italian voters' discussion networks in the 2006 elections? 2) what was the relationship between the degree of partisan homogeneity of discussion networks and voters' choices in 2006?

## **2. Interpersonal discussion networks in the 2006 Italian election**

The first objective of our study is to answer the question whether the partisan bias of interpersonal discussion networks influences people's voting choices. We formulate the hypothesis that the political composition of the respondents' discussion networks exerts an impact on their voting choices. We expect such an effect to be reinforced when networks are homogeneous, though weaker when networks are mixed. The studies conducted by the Columbia School (Berelson et al. 1954, 98-101) have already stressed that dissonant views are more likely to intrude when individuals are embedded in a mixed environment. According to Schmitt-Beck (2003, 237), the homogeneous discussion networks appear to have a significant impact because they can reinforce media messages consonant with the networks' political orientation as well as inhibit messages that are dissonant with it. By contrast, if voters regularly interact with people having different views, they are more likely to take into consideration contrasting messages. As Huckfeldt et al. (2004, 212) argued, "citizens who encounter politically diverse messages are more likely to hold intense but balanced

(or ambivalent) views regarding politics and political candidates, and they are less likely to hold intense and polarized (or partisan) views".

In constructing interpersonal discussion networks in our research, we use detailed information and evaluations given by the respondents with reference to their discussion networks. Following Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995), we argue that people with whom one has a close relationship, especially relatives and friends, play a special role in influencing a person's political views. For this reason, we asked respondents to identify the person with whom they most frequently discussed political news during the 2006 Italian electoral campaign. As shown in table 1, our respondents were more likely to name their most frequent political discussant among family members, with a clear preference for their spouse. This is not really surprising since much previous research underscored the fact that people discuss politics predominantly with their spouses or live-in partners (Beck 1991; Straits 1991; Zuckerman et al. 1998; Zuckerman et al. 2007). Regarding this, spatial proximity is considered a factor which explains, for instance, frequent discussion with co-workers (Beck 1991; Straits 1991). It should be stressed that the gender difference turned out to be definitively significant. In fact, women reporting they usually talk mostly with their husband are more numerous than men who state that they discuss politics with their wife. More generally, the large majority of women (77.5%) choose their political discussant within the family circle (husbands or other relatives). By contrast, almost half of men (42%) prefer to talk with a friend, a colleague, someone not related to them by blood or marriage. The greater accessibility is certainly a factor in determining the choice of the discussant within the family circle. Living together often leads to exposure to the same messages and stimuli, i.e. watching TV news together. Clearly, this may encourage political discussion among people in the same household.

It should also be taken into consideration that in Italy there has been a decline of some types of political participation that offer many opportunities to discuss politics outside the inner circle of family and friends, especially, party and trade union membership (see data in Scarrow 2000). This phenomenon is partly due to a general trend in all Western European democracies, but it can be explained also as a consequence of the collapse of the Italian party system in the early '90s. As for the Catholic Church, an organization that has always enjoyed political power and cultural prominence/influence in Italy (also through the once strong Christian Democratic party), it should be observed that involvement in religious activities has declined, i.e. the number of people who regularly attend religious ceremonies has decreased over time (Pisati 2000). This decline has resulted in significant consequences because for a long time Italian parishes played several roles in terms of socialization and communication. Their social activities, always bordering with political activities, often had spillover effects especially because in many areas political opinions, ideas and

preferences were exchanged and several priests were trusted and could play, as indicated by Dogan (1963), deliberately or not, but certainly not unexpectedly, the role of opinion-leaders.

**[Table 1 about here]**

The second main reason why people may prefer an intimate discussant can be found in the so-called political homophily, that is to say the tendency to select politically like-minded discussion partners (Beck 1991; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Mutz and Martin 2001). It is well known that, when it comes to their political viewpoints, married couples tend to influence each other (Stoker and Jennings 2005) and, in general, families are a source of political ties through the intergenerational transmission of political participation (Verba et al. 2005). Therefore, the choice of the most frequent discussant within the family may be driven by the preference for reinforcing interactions with people who share similar political views. Such a desire to avoid conflicts and controversial topics, particularly in the political field, tends to lead people to talk politics only with discussants who are very familiar and/or who hold consonant opinions. The typical reaction of those who are embedded in an environment characterized by opposite political views is to foreclose discussion before it begins (MacKuen 1990; Noelle-Neumann 1984). Conover, Searing and Crewe (2002) also found out that those who often talk politics within their family and in social occasions with their friends avoid discussing political issues at social gatherings with people whom they do not know very well. For this reason, we tested the hypothesis that the choice of the most frequent discussant is driven by the consonance of political opinions. In order to measure the degree of political agreement between respondents and their selected discussant, we also asked respondents to assess the political orientation of the aforementioned discussant. By matching such an assessment with the respondents' own ideological self-evaluations (see Appendix), we were able to observe a clear predominance of consonant dyads, that is to say, holding similar political views (64.3%).

In order to construct political discussion networks, however, "it is important to look beyond the most intimate discussants" (Beck et al. 2002, 61). In fact, discussants outside the family circle, i.e. friends (Kotler-Berkowitz 2005) and co-workers (Straits 1991; Beck 1991), may also influence one's opinions in a significant way (Levine 2005). In general, it is more likely that social acquaintances hold dissonant views and provide an opportunity for dissonant messages to intrude. As a consequence, some people are forced to engage in a critical examination of the substance of their political disagreements (Granovetter 1973; Levine 2005). As Beck (1991, 378-9) observes, "personal networks of political discussants provide protective cocoons for an individual's

preferences (...) This cocoon is more likely to be penetrated, however, as one's network expands beyond the walls of home and family into the broader world".

We asked our discussants if they considered themselves embedded: (i) in a homogeneous consonant discussion network, composed mostly of people who hold their same political views; or (ii) in a homogeneous dissonant network, composed mostly of people who hold opposing political views; or (iii) in a mixed discussion network composed of some people with similar views and some other with differing views. Despite the partisan bias that may affect the evaluations of the respondents, leading them to overstate the degree of agreement within their own networks, and in a partial departure from respondent's assessments of their most frequent discussant, we found that more than the majority of respondents do not believe that the people with whom they discuss politics lean homogeneously to one political side. While 35 percent of the respondents declared that they talk mostly with people who share their own views, only few of them (about 11%) reported to be embedded in homogenous dissonant groups. The majority of respondents (53.9%) claimed that overall the people they talk to are politically heterogeneous, with half sharing their views and half not. By combining the levels of agreement between respondents and both their most frequent discussant and their larger discussion circles, we find that, while 59.2% claim to be located in consonant networks, 12.8% report partial disagreement and a remarkable 28% claim to be in full disagreement with their discussion partners. This finding is consistent with previous research on political disagreement (Schmitt-Beck 2003; Huckfeldt et al. 2004) that has stressed the existence of a remarkable amount of disagreement within political communication networks not only in the United States, but in other democracies as well.

Building on previous analyses, which have argued that perceived discussants' opinions are a reliable proxy for their actual views (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, Huckfeldt et al. 2004), our data measure respondents' *perceptions* of their discussion partners' political opinions. Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995, 124-145) found that these perceptions tend to be fairly accurate and that limited amounts of reporting bias depend on individuals' projection of their attitudes on others – which suggests that the degree of agreement between respondents and their discussants might be slightly overestimated in our research – and on asymmetrical contextual factors, whereby “members of the political minority accurately perceive members of the majority, whereas members of the majority do not accurately perceive members of the minority” (1995, 143). This pattern results in significant suppression effects of rare minority viewpoints, an aspect that does not directly concern our analysis since we are investigating the effects on voting for the two mainstream coalitions, excluding third parties. Similarly, both Beck et al. (2002, 61) and Mutz and Martin (2001, 103) find

modest distortion effects in respondents' perceptions of their discussion partners' opinions in the same direction as did Huckfeldt and Sprague<sup>4</sup>.

One interesting phenomenon that emerges from our data is that voters with different ideological leanings tend to encounter significantly different discussion environments in terms of their consonance or dissonance. Table 2 shows the relationship between respondents' ideological self-placement, measured on a 1-10 left-right scale and aggregated in five categories, and a combined measure of their agreement with both their preferred discussant and their extended discussion network. The data reveal the existence of a relationship between respondents' ideological extremity and their exposure to homogeneous discussion networks similar to the U-shaped relationship found by Mutz and Martin (2001, 105-6)<sup>5</sup>. Thus, individuals who have stronger ideological beliefs tend to encounter a smaller proportion of dissenting views than those who are more weakly aligned. This pattern is particularly pronounced for centrist voters, who report interacting with a majority of dissonant discussants. Moreover, conservative voters, especially those locating themselves on centre-right positions, claim to encounter much fewer supporting voices in their discussion networks than voters who place themselves on the left or centre-left. Conservative voters' perception of isolation in political discussion is quite an accurate reflection of the reality of interpersonal communication in Italy. Indeed, our data show that voters who identify themselves as leftist are twice as likely than self-identified rightists to claim that they discuss politics frequently (43.5% to 21.4%). At this point, one can only speculate on the possible causes of this phenomenon referring to the historically strong presence of the left, thanks to the unions, in work environments such as factories, schools and the public administration in general, and to the cultural heritage of the 1960s and 1970s protest movements, which shaped political rhetoric and discourse among today's adult generations.

[Table 2 about here]

### 3. The role of discussion networks in the 2006 vote

Up to this point, our analysis of the characteristics of Italians' networks of discussion has shown that a significant percentage of voters encounter different views when they talk to other people,

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<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Huckfeldt et al. (2004, 91) show that both the accessibility and accuracy of judgments on others' political views increase as the campaign progresses, a finding that supports the validity of our data since the survey was administered in the immediate aftermath of the election, where voters' learning curve reached its peak. Finally, since our study focuses on the effects of political discussion, it is important to note that such effects have been found to depend entirely on respondents' perceptions of discussants' opinions rather than on their actual views (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, 173).

<sup>5</sup> A Chi-square test and Phi and Cramer's V measures reveal the relationship to be significant at the .000 level.

which do not often confirm their own political predispositions and thus create the opportunity for some persuasion to occur. We now turn to investigating whether this potential for interpersonal influence was in fact realized in the 2006 election, what was the magnitude of the phenomenon, and how it compares with the other main political intermediary: television.

Table 3 presents the results of three logit regression models predicting the vote for one of the two coalitions which competed in the 2006 election (coded as centre-left=1; centre-right=0). Model 1 is limited to standard socio-demographic variables, such as gender, age, size of the town of residence, education, and professional status. Model 2 builds on Model 1 by adding respondents' interest in politics and the two crucial blocks of variables for our study, which account for the main political communication intermediaries: discussion networks and mass media. Model 3 introduces political ideology, measured in terms of self-location along the left-right continuum. We have chosen to assume ideology as the crucial control variable since, in all likelihood, ideology is to be regarded as the current driving force of the Italian vote. Following the collapse of the Italian party system around 1993-1994 and the disappearance and/or significant transformation of the traditional parties, willingly or unwillingly, all Italian voters had to redefine their relationships with the more or less new party organizations. Since no party identification could be reshaped nor re-emphasized, it became highly flexible and conditioned by several factors such as the personality of national leaders, the candidates in single-member constituencies and the coalitions. Indeed, Italian voters have found it easier to identify themselves in one of the two, though broad and quite heterogeneous, coalitions of the centre-right and the centre-left, rather than reviving a strong party identity. For this reason, we have also decided not to include into the model a proper measure of party identification that for many voters probably does not retain a meaning independent from the coalitional alliances.

Political opinions may and do change, but most often, they remain bounded within each coalition and rarely entail a decision to cross the borders (Bardi 2006; Natale 2007). While a certain instability persists concerning the vote for individual parties, ideological orientations have become quite stable and polarized<sup>6</sup> (Schadee and Segatti 2002; Sani 2006; Baldassarri 2007). Elections have often been won because of the ability of some leaders to create the most encompassing of coalitions, which are now perceived by citizens as the main actors of electoral competition (Baldassarri and Schadee 2004). Building on such a body of empirical evidence, we assume that political ideology is antecedent to voting choice, that is to say, voters do not locate themselves on the scale of political ideology by generalizing from their vote, but rather make their electoral choices based on their ideological affiliations. Since we expect ideology to emerge to a large extent as the most powerful predictor of the vote, first, we have run Model 2 without ideology in order to

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<sup>6</sup> The limited crossing between the major blocs has also been noted in Britain and Germany (Zuckerman et al. 2007).

single out the magnitude and the impact of the variables related to the communication intermediaries and, then, we have included ideology in Model 3 in order to measure the impact of personal networks and mass media in proportion to the influence of the ideological orientation, as well as to control for selective exposure effects that might affect the results in Model 2.

As for the two blocs of variables related to the main intermediaries, discussion networks and mass media, the variable regarding the political composition of the respondents' discussion networks is constructed in order to account for the influence of both the most frequent discussant and the interpersonal network in general. By matching the political orientations of the respondent with his/her assessment of the consonance/dissonance of his/her views with the network of people with whom he/she commonly talks politics, we were able to assign an ideological bias to each respondent's network. Keeping in mind that the influence of the most frequent discussant should be regarded as deeper than that of people encountered on a less regular basis<sup>7</sup>, we have put together information on the ideological location of both the discussant and the network. By doing so, we have constructed a variable with five categories: (i) respondents embedded in a homogeneous leftist environment (with both the most frequent discussant and the network on the left or centre-left); (ii) respondents embedded in an environment with a prevalence of leftist discussants (with the most frequent discussant on the left and a mixed network); (iii) respondents embedded in a mixed environment (with the most frequent discussant and the network on the opposite sides); (iv) respondents embedded in an environment with a prevalence of rightist discussants (with the most frequent discussant on the right and a mixed network); (v) respondents embedded in a homogeneous rightist environment (with both the most frequent discussant and the network on the right). Frequencies of this cumulative network variable in the sample resulted as follows: Homogeneous Left (19.1%); Prevalent Left (27.6%); Mixed (17.5%); Prevalent Right (23.1%); Homogeneous Right (12.8%). Our starting hypothesis was that the ideological bias of the discussion networks has an influence on voting choices in the sense of filtering messages and providing voting cues. We expect this influence to be more pronounced in case of homogeneous networks, where the people are insulated from the influence of contrasting viewpoints, which may elicit a higher degree of group conformity, while mixed groups, because of their internal political diversity, are supposed to be less influential since the effectiveness with which a partisan opinion is communicated may be neutralized by other contrasting and equally partisan opinions transmitted by the full range of discussants.

As for the second set of variables dealing with mass media intermediaries, it is worth noting that a particular emphasis is devoted to television. While diffusion of newspapers has always been

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<sup>7</sup> A belief that has been confirmed by a number of logit regressions in which we included the two variables separately and found higher explanatory power for the most frequent discussant than for the extended discussion network.

limited, television is commonly regarded by Italians as their main source of political information (Legnante 2006). To explore the use of television for news coverage of the 2006 electoral campaign, we included a variable referring to the type and amount of exposure to television news. We took into consideration only TV news offered by the three channels of the State broadcasting company RAI and the three channels owned by Mediaset, the main Italian commercial network. Exposure to RAI and Mediaset TV news is widespread and, considered as a whole, the two media giants attract most of the viewing audience<sup>8</sup>. In the survey, we asked respondents to mention the two TV news programs they watch most frequently. In constructing our variable, we divided respondents into three groups: (i) those who either named two RAI news programs, or named a RAI program as their first option and did not answer the question on the second favorite news program; (ii) those who either named two Mediaset news programs, or named a Mediaset program as their first option and did not answer the question on the second favorite news program; (iii) those who named one RAI and one Mediaset news program, and are thus expected to receive the most diverse information diet.

Concerning the partisan bias of TV news, even though the State broadcasting company (RAI) ought to be committed to a rule of equal and balanced coverage of all parties and candidates, usually the incumbent government is expected to take advantage of the significant opportunities to influence the content of television messages. In 2006 the Casa delle Libertà, the centre-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi, was in control of the government and, therefore, enjoyed an advantageous position. As is well known, Mediaset, the largest pole of commercial television, was founded by Berlusconi and is still controlled by his family. It is difficult to demonstrate the existence of blatant partisan favoritism in news reports. However, some data from the Osservatorio di Pavia, which monitors the appearance time (“tempo di parola”) offered to leaders’ and candidates’ speeches and declarations, clearly show that the public service was quite balanced (46.8% to the centre-left vs 49.6% to the centre-right) even considering that the incumbent government usually is more visible than the opposition. RAI news programs, however, are quite differentiated in their coverage since the news on RAI3 (Channel 3) is notoriously more tilted to the left than the other two TV channels<sup>9</sup>. By contrast, the commercial television Mediaset openly

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<sup>8</sup> According to Auditel, the institute in charge of monitoring TV audiences, in April 2006 – the month when the elections were held – the public service RAI totaled a share of 45.91% and Mediaset a share of 41.48%. Together they reached a share of 85.9% corresponding to 22,003,000 viewers (all together the other commercial TV channels had only 3,610,000 viewers). Data source: <http://www.primaonline.it>.

<sup>9</sup> The disaggregated data for the three RAI TV news show that TG3 covered the Unione (centre-left) more than House of Liberties (centre-right): 49.3% vs.46.8% while the news on RAI1 and RAI2 did the opposite (TG1: 46.1% for the centre-left vs. 50.4% centre-right; TG2: 45.2% for the centre-left vs. 51.8% centre-right). Data source: Osservatorio di Pavia.

offered more space and visibility to the centre-right leaders (62.5%, as opposed to 33.5% to the centre-left)<sup>10</sup>.

Furthermore, we tested the effects of exposure to the main four talk shows that were broadcast during the 2006 election season<sup>11</sup>. *Porta a Porta* is the most famous program of this genre and has been running for more than a decade in the late-night block on RAI's first channel. Its host is an experienced journalist who portrays politics in a traditional fashion and interprets his role as that of a "master of ceremonies" and adopts a deferential and gentle posture toward his guests. In the 2001 campaign, the program became controversial for allowing then-candidate Berlusconi to sign his "Contract with Italians" live in a pseudo-event that was fully orchestrated by his campaign, a move that alienated many center-left viewers of the show. In our sample, 23% claimed to watch it often and 42.1% to do so sometimes. *Ballarò* is a more recent prime-time production aired on RAI's left-tilted third channel and its host is younger and more aggressive as he engages his guests, and for this reason is often charged with bias by centre-right politicians. 26.5% of our respondents said they watch it often and 41.1% sometimes. *Matrix* is Mediaset's main late-night talk show and its host employs a dynamic, conversational style, by which he often interrupts his guests but rarely challenges them. 16.1% of our sample claimed to watch it often and 44.8% sometimes. Finally, *Otto e Mezzo* is the main prime-time political talk show broadcast by independent channel La7 and stands in contrast with the previous three by various counts. First, it lasts only one hour, while the others often run for longer than two hours. Second, it runs every day, while the others run either weekly (*Ballarò*) or three times a week (*Porta a Porta* and *Matrix*). Third, it has two hosts, one male and one female, both of whom clearly express their differing political views, the former conservative, the latter progressive, and often engage each other in spirited discussions. *Otto e Mezzo* is the least popular talk show among our respondents: 13.4% watch it often and 29.9% do so sometimes. Finally, our model also includes two other variables that measure, respectively, attention to articles about politics on newspapers and exposure to campaign communications by parties and candidates like posters and other propaganda materials.

[Table 3 about here]

#### 4. Discussion and Interpretation

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<sup>10</sup> We thank the Osservatorio di Pavia and, in particular, its director Antonio Nizzoli and Professor Giacomo Sani for having kindly made these data available to us.

<sup>11</sup> One common feature of these programs is that, although they sometimes deal with everyday-life and entertainment issues, they clearly present themselves and are considered by most of the public as information programs, as opposed to tabloid entertainment shows and satirical programs. As in many other countries, tabloid and satirical shows often discuss political issues in Italy, but they are not the focus of our study.

As the analysis in Model 1 shows, socio-demographic variables display very little predictive power, even when they are considered in isolation from political and communication variables. Such an outcome was far from unexpected, as recent literature has highlighted a significant decline in the electoral influence of class, religious and territorial cleavages in Italy, while gender, age and education have always exercised modest effects on the vote (Corbetta 2006). By contrast, after including the communication intermediaries variables, the regression in Model 2 results much more explicative, with both blocks of variables related to the intermediaries appearing significant. The magnitude of the coefficients supports our hypothesis that the relationship is more remarkable in the case of homogeneous networks and weaker in the case of media variables.

As expected, once we introduced ideology in Model 3, this variable turned out to be the most powerful predictor of the vote<sup>12</sup>. This was not at all surprising for the peculiar reasons we have mentioned above. Not only has ideology always been important in the Italian political context, but, after the collapse of the party system in the early '90s, it has also represented the main reference point and anchoring for voters to find their way in the new political environment (Campus 2000; Baldassarri 2007). Therefore, in our study, ideology played the role occupied by party identification in other models (see for instance, Beck et al. 2002 who reported party ID as the most powerful predictor of the 1992 American presidential vote and found a weaker, although still significant, relationship between ideology and vote). The absence of party ID in our model contributes to explaining how the explanatory power of ideology largely surpasses that of all the other variables<sup>13</sup>.

The second most significant variable in Model 3, and this is our key finding, appears to be the voters' discussion networks. The variable is largely significant and shows that the political composition of discussion networks is strongly related to vote choice even when ideology is

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<sup>12</sup> The reduction in cases included in Models 2 and 3 compared to Model 1 is mostly due to respondents who refused to locate themselves on the left-right continuum (about 7% of the sample) and to the fact that Models 2 and 3 exclude from the analysis those respondents who could not identify their most frequent discussant's political orientation (12% of the sample) and those who indicated the news program of independent TV network La7 as either their first or second TV news choice (9% of the sample), as our goal was to highlight the effects of exposure to the two main Italian TV poles. To verify that the loss of cases from Model 1 to Models 2 and 3 does not introduce biases, we reestimated our models including only the 695 respondents for whom information is available for all the variables included in Model 3 (listwise deletion). The results are comforting. Among the twelve variables in Model 1, all coefficients in the reestimated model were markedly similar in magnitude and in the same direction as in Model 1, except for housewives, who exhibited a negligible change from -0.072 in the original Model 1 to 0.001 in the reestimated model.

<sup>13</sup> As can be seen at the bottom of Table 3, Model 2 and, especially, Model 3 achieve remarkable values in terms of predicted variance. We find these results consistent with similar studies (see for instance Beck et al. 2002; Schmitt-Beck 2003), also in light of the fact that our dependent variable is not the vote for an individual party, but the vote for one of the two coalitions, which, in the 2006 Italian elections, both comprised a large amount of parties with significant internal differences in terms of voting motivations. We also emphasize that the largest gain in predicted variance is due to the introduction, in Model 2, of variables related to communication intermediaries, while adding ideology in Model 3 allowed us to better specify our model, especially in terms of the magnitude and statistical significance of the coefficients of communication variables, but improved the model's goodness of fit (from a Nagelkerke  $R^2$  of 0.649 up to 0.889) to a lesser degree than in the passage from Model 1 to Model 2, in which the Nagelkerke  $R^2$  rose from 0.24 to 0.649.

included in the model. It is worth noting that we normalized the variable in order to represent the overall effect and to make it comparable with the ideology coefficient. The normalization is justified by the results of a previous regression in which we entered the variable on a five-category scale and obtained a linear relationship<sup>14</sup>. In such a way, we find that the impact of the homogeneity of political discussion networks on the vote is more than one fourth of that of ideology. The magnitude and the significance of the coefficient support our hypothesis that the relationship is more remarkable in the case of homogeneous networks, where respondents are embedded in an environment that is clearly biased in favor of one side; less strong in the case of networks showing only a prevalence of partisan bias, but where a certain degree of disagreement still survives; still weaker in the case of a mixed environment. This seems to be consistent with previous research on homogeneous/heterogeneous networks (Schmitt-Beck 2003) which has highlighted the power of homogeneous networks in blocking contrasting information and eliciting high degrees of group conformity.

As for the other main intermediaries, mass media, our research offers evidence of television's influence, albeit much inferior than interpersonal discussion. Particularly, the impact of television variables appears weaker in Model 3 than in Model 2, which confirms our expectations that, once selective exposure is taken into account, the effects of television are significantly reduced compared to what a simple bivariate analysis would suggest. This leads us to emphasize the conspicuous selective exposure which characterizes the Italian case. As highlighted by previous research (Sani and Legnante 2002; Legnante 2006), there is a strong relationship between political attitudes and the preferred outlet for TV news. In particular, the level of trust in the State television and in Mediaset varies remarkably depending on the self-location of the respondents on the left-right continuum (Sani and Legnante 2002, 132). This helps to explain why in our final model, among TV news programs, prevalent exposure to news offered by the State company RAI, which were assessed as more balanced in their coverage or slightly more pro-left (as in the case of TG3), turned out to be related to the vote for the centre-left, while exposure to Mediaset TV news programs does not appear equally significant once ideology is included in the regression equation. Our finding that RAI news influenced the vote more than Mediaset, resulting in a net positive effect for the centre-left coalition, is also consistent with other Italian research that has identified the same phenomenon in both the 2001 and 2006 general elections (Testa et al. 2002; Loera and Testa 2007). However, at least two political talk shows, *Otto e Mezzo* and *Matrix*, turned out to significantly counterbalance the effect of TV news, this time favoring the centre-right by quite large margins. This finding leads us to stress that research on media effects must take serious steps to differentiate

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<sup>14</sup> Coefficient values: Homogenous Right = -1.115; Prevalent Right = -1.101; Mixed = 0; Prevalent Left = 1.382; Homogeneous Left = 2.240.

not only among different media channels and networks, but also among various formats and genres within them. Finally, we found a significant correlation between newspaper reading and the vote for the centre-left. This result largely confirms the conclusions of earlier studies that have shown that Italian left-wing voters tend to read more newspapers than right-wing voters (Legnante, 2002). However, since Italian newspapers are quite differentiated by their political alignments, and since we did not ask our respondents which newspapers they read in particular, we cannot further speculate on the specific impact of this variable.

More generally, our research offers suggestive evidence of a salient difference between the two main intermediaries: while most media variables achieve statistical significance only in Model 2, but lose a great part of their explicative power in the final regression, the influence and significance of homogeneous political networks remain unaltered even when ideology is included in the model. In our view, such a difference also emerges more clearly as a consequence of the particular morphology of the Italian political communication system. The exposure to a discussion network is partly due to voluntary selection, partly due to a number of conditions that determine the concrete opportunities for the exchange of political information. As Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995, 124) have clearly stated, "people often choose their associates and the content of their conversations, but each of these choices is, in turn, bounded by an environment that for many purposes must be taken as given rather than chosen". This means that, when individuals are located in homogeneous and polarized networks, the right conditions for conforming to the group and being pushed in a certain direction are present. By contrast, when the mass media as sources of information, are pluralistic and are clearly perceived to represent different viewpoints, exposure to TV news is often a matter of choice. In Italy, the high degree of polarization and the fact that the leader of the centre-right coalition is also the owner of the main pole of commercial television have created a high potential for a strong selective exposure.

In constructing the relevant variable, we have deliberately stressed this aspect by isolating those respondents who watch only RAI TV news and those who watch only Mediaset TV news. While, among those who watch only Mediaset, one may presume to find a high percentage of people with a clear affiliation with the centre-right, the profile of RAI viewers is more mixed from the ideological point of view, ranging from the extreme left to the centre<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, the message coming from RAI was more balanced and more heterogeneous due to the different political orientations of the three RAI TV news programs. Such a higher degree of ambivalence and

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<sup>15</sup> As confirmed by our group of respondents, 68% of Mediaset viewers located themselves on the right, 25% on the centre, and 7% on the left. Among RAI viewers, 50% located themselves on the left, 35% on the centre, and 15% on the right.

disagreement has produced an information mix that may well exert a certain impact on less ideologically affiliated viewers and those inclined, albeit slightly, toward the centre-left.

Further evidence of this pattern can be found in the results for the talk shows included in our model. The talk show most commonly identified as politically biased, *Ballarò*, has small and insignificant coefficients in Model 3, and the same is true for *Porta a Porta*. Our data show that the audiences of both programs are significantly unbalanced in their ideological leanings<sup>16</sup>. However, both *Otto e Mezzo* and *Matrix*, which in our final model display strong and statistically significant effects on the vote in favor of the centre-right, seem to fit our causal explanation for mass media effects. First, their content is less blatantly partisan than Mediaset's TV news, as *Otto e Mezzo* employs the aforementioned two-host formula to suggest balance and *Matrix*'s host tends to avoid taking sides and applies a confidential, relaxed posture with all his political guests. As for their audiences, *Otto e Mezzo* is the most "catch-all" program in our model, with the smallest left-right gap in viewers and the largest percentage of centrist watchers<sup>17</sup>. *Otto e Mezzo* and *Matrix*'s significant effects on the vote are even more remarkable in light of the fact that, as specified above, they are the least watched among the talk shows included in our model.

## 5. Conclusions

The line of reasoning that has motivated this study contains a major challenge for future research on Italian elections. Citizens are exposed to a great deal of political messages that come from two intermediaries: discussion networks and mass media. Political information may be more or less heterogeneous, more or less dependent on the political environment. Both intermediaries may vary considerably in the nature and in the extent of their partisan nature (Beck 1991, Beck et al. 2002). An analysis that focuses on citizens' exposure to the mass media without taking into account the networks of interdependent citizens runs the risk of ignoring a fundamental aspect of politics. Therefore, only by analyzing both blocks of intermediaries simultaneously, it is possible to acquire better knowledge of their impact on contemporary voting.

Research on Italian voting has largely ignored the role of micro-environmental surroundings. Our research has attempted to analyze the Italian case by building on classical voting

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<sup>16</sup> Among respondents who claimed to often watch *Ballarò*, 64% located themselves on the left, 25% on the centre, 11% on the right. Among frequent viewers of *Porta a Porta*, 48% identified themselves on the right, 30% on the centre, 22% on the left.

<sup>17</sup> In our sample, among frequent viewers of *Otto e Mezzo*, 40% located themselves on the right, 35% in the centre (the highest figure for all talk shows), and 25% on the left. Those who often watch *Matrix* aligned themselves more clearly on the right (52%, although more than three-fourths located themselves on the moderate right), while 21% claimed to be centrists and 27% identified as leftists. Thus, although conservatives clearly prevail in its audience, *Matrix* mostly draws from moderate conservatives and attracts a proportionally larger share of progressives than all other talk shows save the more explicitly partisan *Ballarò*.

studies (Berelson et al. 1954; Lazarsfeld et al. 1944) and on the more recent body of research that has rediscovered the impact of families, friends, workplaces, and communities on political choice and behavior (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt et al. 2005; Beck et al. 2002; Zuckerman 2005). We believe that the efforts of the scholars who are trying to revive and update the original research of Lazarsfeld and his collaborators should be taken as a positive example. We understand that our study is only a preliminary step. Our hope is that a wider and more articulated research agenda will follow.

Despite its preliminary character, our research has shed some light on the processes determining voter choices. First, ideology appears to be a key factor. This is a largely expected finding confirming previous research that has stressed the high polarization of the current Italian political scene. Second, the most important finding is the fact that, holding other factors equal, a citizen is significantly more likely to vote for a coalition if he/she has a discussion network that is clearly biased in favor of that side. This result suggests that information coming from the voter's proximate social context plays a considerable role and encourages a return, once more, to the traditional insights of the Columbia School in order to illuminate contemporary horizons.

Third, the mass media are certainly the principal actors in the overall transmission of political information; however, their clear partisan bias did not turn out to be highly influential. We argue that the main reason for this lack of impact lies in the strong selective exposure of Italian voters to different sources of information. The consequence of this may well be that new information coming from a source that is perceived as openly aligned cannot really affect political orientations that are already well formed. Mediaset's news programming fails to significantly alter public opinion because its messages, though ideologically stronger than RAI's, fail to reach open audiences, that is, voters who do not already support those viewpoints. On the other hand, RAI news, which were more balanced, appeared to exert at least a modest influence because some segments of its audience are more permeable to attitude change. The same pattern was found for political talk shows, where those programs that captured the most politically diverse audiences also exerted the largest effects, although their cumulative viewership was smaller than other, more polarizing shows that turned out not to be influential on the vote.

However, we do not believe that this evidence allows us to reach the conclusion that mass media has only "limited effects". Answers to such a question cannot be clear-cut and, in any case, this aspect requires further research along two main directions: first, a thorough investigation of how citizens perceive the partisan bias of the various media; second, the inclusion in the analysis of new media. Albeit still not very important as a source of political information in Italy, where a notable digital divide still persists (Sartori 2006), we may expect that the new media will become

increasingly influential. Of course this evolution is supposed to play a role in the way networks and their influence should be conceptualized and analyzed in the future. As Livingstone (2006, 244) has observed: “the evocative image that captured, and worried, the public imagination is no longer that of the immobile viewer sitting on the sofa silently staring at the screen. Rather, it is of multi-tasking in front of the computer, creating as well as receiving messages, networked online as well as embedded in noisy worlds of interaction offline”.

## **Appendix**

### *Design of Citizen Survey*

Our data were collected on the occasion of the 2006 national election by a research team composed of researchers from seven Italian universities (Bologna, Catania, Milano Statale, Milano Bicocca, Perugia, Trieste, Torino) and sponsored by the MIUR (Italian Ministry for University and Research). The analyses are based on data collected through the third wave of a three-panel survey executed with self-administered questionnaires sent by mail. The third wave was conducted as a post-election survey. Questionnaires were sent to all people (N=2800) who had answered to the first wave. Complete responses, defined as questionnaires with 80% of more questions answered, were 1167, while partial responses, defined as questionnaires with less than 80% questions answered, were 103. The resulting response rates, defined according to guidelines set by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (2006), were 41.6% (Response Rate 1, which counts complete responses only) and 45.3% (Response Rate 2, which counts both complete and partial responses).

Compared to census data, the resulting sample shows no discernible overall gender bias, but slightly overestimates adults aged between 45 and 64, especially among men, and underestimates voters aged over 75, particularly women. Our sample also over-represents citizens with high-school diplomas and under-represents those with elementary education, a phenomenon that typically occurs with self-administered questionnaires. After weighting by standard socio-demographic variables, however, age biases are effectively eliminated, while biases related to education are significantly reduced, although voters with elementary schooling are still under-represented and those with intermediary education are over-represented. In terms of voting behavior, the sample overestimates turnout, as is usually the case in all surveys, and the pre-weighting sample over-represents center-left voters. However, the weighted sample reflects real election results quite accurately, as the estimated vote percentages for individual parties are within 0.6% of the official vote and those for coalitions are within 3.8%.

### *Survey Question Wording and Construction of Variables*

#### *Vote in 2006 election*

Respondents coded as 1 if voted for the centre-left; 0 if voted for the centre-right. Abstainers or other choices excluded.

#### *Gender*

In the logit analysis, coded 1 for male, 0 for female.

#### *Political Interest*

“Please locate your interest in politics on a 10-point scale from no interest (1) to the highest level (10)”. Coded low interest=1 (if 1-2-3-4-5); medium interest=2 (if 6-7); high interest=3 (if 8-9-10).

#### *Ideology*

"In politics we talk about left and right. Please locate your own political position on a 10-point scale from most leftist (1) to most rightist (10)". In the logit analysis, the variable was normalized ranging from 0= extreme right to 1= extreme left.

#### *Newspaper and Magazine Reading*

"During the recent electoral campaign, did you read newspaper and magazine articles on politics: often, some, a little, never?". The variable was normalized on a 0-1 scale.

#### *Exposure to electoral posters and other propaganda materials*

"During the recent electoral campaign, did you pay attention to electoral posters or other propaganda materials: often, some, a little, never?" The variable was normalized on a 0-1 scale.

#### *Most Frequent Discussant*

“Who is the person with whom you most frequently discussed the political news you heard on TV or read on newspapers? Husband/wife/partner; another relative (parents, brothers, children); a friend (male); a friend (female); a colleague (male); a colleague (female); others”.

#### *Agreement with the respondent's main discussant*

This variable has been constructed by matching the respondent's ideological self-placement (1-10, see above) with the perceived political position of the discussant (right; centre-right; centre; centre-left; left; see below).

		<i>Respondent's ideological self-placement</i>									
		1-Left	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 – Right
<i>Perceived political orientation of the discussant</i>	<i>Right</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>
	<i>Centre right</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>
	<i>Centre</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
	<i>Centre left</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
	<i>Left</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>

### *Network homogeneity*

The variable has been built through two steps:

#### 1) *Exposure to dissonant or consonant political views*

"In general, do people you talked with about politics: most hold your same political views; most do not share your political views; half hold your same view; half do not".

By matching this measure with the respondent's ideological self-evaluation, we build the variable "Perceived network" (Left/Mixed/Right).

		<i>Respondent's ideological self-placement</i>	
		Left (1-5)	Right (6-10)
<i>Exposure to dissonant or consonant political views</i>	Mostly consonant	Left	Right
	Mostly dissonant	Right	Left
	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed

#### 2) *Perceived political orientation of the discussant*

"Do you think your discussant's ideological position is: right; centre-right; centre; centre-left; left, do not know?"

By combining the perceived political orientation of the discussant and the perceived network, we obtained a single measure of network ideological homogeneity, as shown in the following table:

		<i>Perceived Network</i>		
		<b>Right</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Left</b>
<i>Perceived political orientation of the discussant</i>	<b>Right</b>	Homogeneous Right (1)	Prevalence Right (2)	Mixed (3)
	<b>Centre-Right</b>	Homogeneous Right (1)	Prevalence Right (2)	Mixed (3)
	<b>Centre</b>	Prevalence Right (2)	Mixed (3)	Prevalence Left (3)
	<b>Centre-Left</b>	Mixed (3)	Prevalence Left (4)	Homogeneous Left (5)
	<b>Left</b>	Mixed (3)	Prevalence Left (4)	Homogeneous Left (5)

To simplify comparison with the ideological self-placement variable, the variable was then normalized with values included between 0 and 1.

#### *Exposure to TV news*

“During the last month, among the following TV news (RAI1, RAI2, RAI3, TC5, TG4, Studio Aperto, TG La7) which are the two you watched more frequently (you may indicate your first and your second choice)?”.

The variable was constructed as follows: Exposure only to RAI TV news: first and second choice RAI TV news or first choice RAI TV news and second choice missing; Mixed Exposure: first choice Mediaset TV news and second choice RAI news or first choice RAI TV news and second choice Mediaset TV news; Exposure only to Mediaset: first and second choice Mediaset TV news or first choice Mediaset and second choice missing. Respondents who indicated independent TG La7 as their first or second choice were excluded from the analysis.

#### *Political Talk shows*

“During the last month, how frequently did you watch (*Porta a Porta/Ballarò/Otto e Mezzo/Matrix*)? Often, Sometimes, Never. The variable was normalized on a 0-1 scale.

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Tab. 1 – “Who is the person with whom you talked most frequently about the political news heard on TV or read on newspapers?”

	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Wife/husband (or live-in partners)</b>	195	286	481
	35.9%	48.7%	42.5%
<b>Another relative (parents, brothers/sisters, children)</b>	120	169	289
	22.1%	28.8%	25.6%
<b>A friend (male)</b>	135	38	173
	24.8%	6.5%	15.3%
<b>A friend (female)</b>	7	44	51
	1.3%	7.5%	4.5%
<b>A co-worker (male)</b>	59	20	79
	10.8%	3.4%	7.0%
<b>A co-worker (female)</b>	6	19	25
	1.1%	3.2%	2.2%
<b>others</b>	22	11	33
	4.0%	1.9%	2.9%
<b>N</b>	544	587	1131
	100%	100%	100%

Tab. 2 – Degree of political agreement between respondents and their discussion networks depending on R’s political ideology

	<b>Left</b>	<b>Centre- left</b>	<b>Centre</b>	<b>Centre- right</b>	<b>Right</b>	<b>All sample</b>
Networks mostly consistent with R’s political views	76.3%	76.2%	22.0%	61.6%	74.3%	59.1%
Networks only partially consistent with R’s political views	6.9%	11.3%	19.9%	13.1%	8.0%	12.9%
Networks mostly inconsistent with R’s political views	16.8%	12.5%	58.1%	25.3%	17.7%	28.0%
N	131	257	241	229	213	971

Tab. 3 – Effects of some variables on the vote for coalitions (centre-right = 0; centre-left = 1; excluding third parties)

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>
	<b>B (S.E.)</b>	<b>B (S.E.)</b>	<b>B (S.E.)</b>
<i>Gender</i>			
Female = 0	-0.164 (0.135)	-0.088 (0.265)	0.240 (0.463)
<i>Age</i>			
18-29	0.142 (0.284)	2.190*** (0.613)	2.913** (1.011)
30-48	0.129 (0.229)	1.598** (0.510)	2.237** (0.772)
49-64	0.038 (0.204)	1.090* (0.458)	1.377* (0.669)
Over 65 = 0			
<i>Size of town of residence</i>			
Less than 10.000	-0.123 (0.169)	-0.285 (0.342)	-0.602 (0.583)
10.000 -100.000	-0.111 (0.158)	-0.083 (0.321)	-0.204 (0.528)
Beyond 100.000 = 0			
<i>Education</i>			
Primary or secondary school = 0			
High School	0.196 (0.334)	-0.041 (0.603)	-1.169 (1.021)
Degree (BA, MA, PhD)	0.169 (0.343)	-0.121 (0.620)	-1.084 (1.044)
<i>Professional status</i>			
Entrepreneurs, professionals, autonomous workers	-0.247 (0.253)	-1.038 (0.541)	-0.436 (0.755)
Employees	0.392 (0.218)	-0.565 (0.461)	-0.163 (0.652)
Students and unemployed	-0.074 (0.297)	-0.786 (0.583)	0.110 (0.995)
Housewives	-0.072 (0.254)	0.302 (0.530)	1.383 (0.870)
Retired = 0			
<i>Political Interest</i>			
		-0.066 (0.598)	0.534 (1.000)
<i>Discussion Network Ideological Homogeneity (right-left)</i>			
		4.597*** (0.433)	4.206*** (0.826)
<i>Newspaper and magazine reading</i>			
		0.355 (0.428)	1.913** (0.746)
<i>Attention to campaign communications</i>			
		0.059 (0.445)	0.530 (0.692)
<i>Exposure to TV news</i>			
Only RAI TV news		1.221*** (0.283)	1.254** (0.472)
Mixed = 0			
Only Mediaset TV news		-1.128*** (0.345)	-0.399 (0.589)

<i>Exposure to political talk-shows</i>			
<i>Porta a Porta</i>		-0.530 (0.368)	0.536 (0.610)
<i>Ballarò</i>		2.104*** (0.359)	0.714 (0.600)
<i>Otto e Mezzo</i>		-1.943*** (0.400)	-1.763** (0.627)
<i>Matrix</i>		-0.760* (0.387)	-2.010** (0.692)
<i>Ideology (right-left)</i>			15.731*** (1.726)
<hr/>			
<b>N</b>	<b>1108</b>	<b>700</b>	<b>695</b>
<b>% predicted</b>	<b>54.7%</b>	<b>84.9%</b>	<b>94.9%</b>
<b>Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>0.240</b>	<b>0.649</b>	<b>0.889</b>

Note: \*p≤0.05 \*\*p≤0.01 \*\*\*p≤0.001