



Social retrospection: conversation networks, performance evaluations, and candidate support

Brett R. Bessen

To cite this article: Brett R. Bessen (09 Jul 2026): Social retrospection: conversation networks, performance evaluations, and candidate support, Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties, DOI: [10.1080/17457289.2026.2693134](https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2026.2693134)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2026.2693134>



View supplementary material [↗](#)



Published online: 09 Jul 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Social retrospection: conversation networks, performance evaluations, and candidate support

Brett R. Bessen

Political Science and International Relations, Tecnologico de Monterrey, Monterrey, NL, Mexico

ABSTRACT

Voters' ability to assess the performance of elected leaders is central to theories of democratic accountability. I extend theories of retrospective voting by considering the influence of political discussion. Using a panel survey of Brazilian respondents, I examine the relationship between political disagreement in voters' conversation networks and changes in candidate support across party lines during President Lula da Silva's first term. I find that Brazilians with more disagreeing conversation partners are substantially more likely to update their views and support different candidates going into the next election. Further, I find suggestive evidence that network disagreement reduces support for Lula by producing more negative evaluations of his performance. The results indicate that conversation networks play a significant but underappreciated role in retrospective evaluations of elected leaders.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 30 March 2025; Accepted 12 June 2026

KEYWORDS Accountability; Brazil; retrospective voting; social networks

Voters' ability to evaluate incumbent performance is crucial for democratic accountability. While retrospective voting theories emphasize policy success as a driver of electoral support (Fiorina 1981; Lewis-Beck and Celeste Ratto 2013), identity-based perspectives center the role of partisanship in voters' political judgments (Bartels 2002; Campbell et al. 1960). Although both approaches have produced key insights into voting behavior, they tend to consider the individual voter in isolation from her social network.

Political decision-making, however, unfolds in social contexts. Scholars of social influence show us that voters lean on their peers as they form their preferences, shaping participation and vote choice (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; McClurg 2006). In Latin America, seminal research likewise demonstrates the importance of voters' social milieu (Canache, Mondak, and Conroy 1994;

CONTACT Brett R. Bessen  brettbessen@tec.mx  Political Science and International Relations, Tecnologico de Monterrey, Monterrey, NL 64700, Mexico

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2026.2693134>.

© 2026 Elections, Public Opinion & Parties

Przeworski and Soares 1971). Recently, scholars have extended such findings with analyses of social influence in presidential campaigns in Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia, demonstrating that the composition of voters' discussion networks shapes voter preferences (Baker, Ames, and Rennó 2020; Sánchez and Botero 2023).

This paper contributes to our understanding of social influence by evaluating the effect of political discussion outside of the peak campaign period. Campaigns are unique information environments that might amplify the impact of conversation networks. Increased political conversation and socially mediated clientelism (Cruz 2019; Schaffer and Baker 2015) might amplify the role of social influence shortly before elections. The impact of political discussion on candidate preferences, observed by Baker, Ames, and Rennó (2020) and others, might, therefore, be an exception that occurs predominantly during peak campaign periods.

Examining what shapes candidate preferences outside of campaigns is important because pre-campaign preferences are highly predictive of final voting decisions. This observation is central to the minimal effects paradigm, which posits that campaigns have limited influence because voters make up their minds before campaigns begin (e.g. Finkel 1993). And, despite higher levels of electoral volatility in Latin America, "election-day returns are never that far from aggregated pre-campaign vote intentions" in Brazil and Mexico (Baker, Ames, and Rennó 2020, 93). Hence, examining network effects outside of the campaign period is essential for understanding electoral outcomes, in general, and the generalizability of social influence, in particular.

I investigate changes in candidate support over Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's (Lula's) first term. Using a panel survey of Brazilian respondents (Baker, Ames, and Renno 2006), I find that the effects of political conversation networks do, in fact, extend beyond campaigns. Brazilians with more disagreeing conversation partners were more likely to update their views and support an alternative candidate. Moreover, the estimated effects of political conversation are on par with conventional predictors of preference change, partisanship and performance evaluations.

Beyond looking outside campaigns, I examine *how* political conversation shapes candidate preferences. I develop a theory of social retrospection where political conversation affects candidate preferences *through evaluations of incumbent performance*. An analysis of voter evaluations of Lula's performance and a mediation analysis support this argument. Among former Lula voters, discussions with disagreeing conversation partners corresponded with more negative evaluations of government performance. In turn, more negative performance evaluations were associated with decreased support for Lula. This analysis suggests that the effect of political conversation occurs, in part, through socially informed judgments about incumbent performance.

1. Explaining incumbent support

Theories of voter behavior look to performance evaluations and partisan identities to explain incumbent support. The first approach emphasizes leaders' performance in office. Consistent with this idea, voters reward incumbents who appear successful in key issue areas. Economic growth boosts incumbent support, as does perceived success in other areas such as crime control (Pérez 2015; Valdiní and Lewis-Beck 2018). Conversely, poor governance or corruption allegations can erode support (e.g. Klačnja, Tucker, and Deegan-Krause 2016). Performance evaluations may also drive electoral volatility associated with economic crises (Remmer 1991), as poor economic performance generates anti-incumbent sentiment, pushing voters away from ruling parties (Murillo and Visconti 2017).

A second approach centers on partisan identities, arguing that partisanship colors assessments of incumbent performance (Bartels 2002; Evans and Andersen 2006; Gerber and Huber 2010). Partisanship reduces electoral volatility, as loyal partisans consistently support candidates from their preferred party (Dalton, McAllister, and Wattenberg 2000; Lupu 2015). In countries with high levels of mass partisanship, stable voting patterns arise from partisan evaluations of the incumbent, which make partisans unlikely to switch to supporting out-party candidates. Still, partisanship tends to be more fluid in Latin America's relatively volatile party systems (Baker et al. 2016; Lupu 2015), where it may do less to stabilize incumbent support.

2. Social retrospection

The approaches considered above tend to view voters' judgments in isolation from their peers. In contrast, I develop a theory of social retrospection that posits that peer-to-peer conversation is central to incumbent evaluation and vote choice. Social retrospection refers to the influence of peer-to-peer conversation on evaluations of incumbent performance and, ultimately, candidate support. It can include discussion with agreeing or disagreeing peers, though, as discussed below, likely with different effects.

Peer-to-peer communication plays a key role in voter evaluations by addressing two issues involved in retrospective voting: limited information and responsibility attribution. First, retrospective voting requires voters to acquire information about incumbents' actions and policies. Because acquiring such information is time consuming and cognitively demanding, voters use heuristics to reduce information costs (e.g. Lau and Redlawsk 2001), basing their voting decisions on changes in their financial well-being or their ideas about the national economy (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Kramer 1983). Though such heuristics assist decision-making, they can also lead to errors. For instance, partisan heuristics can be misleading when incumbents

break from the party line (Dancey and Sheagley 2013), and individuals' changing economic circumstances may not reflect incumbents' policies.

Voters' conversation networks help them manage this informational task. Previous work shows that political discussion is associated with higher political knowledge (Eveland 2004; Smith 2018). Discussion exposes individuals to new facts as better-informed discussants pass information to their less-informed peers. Conversation networks therefore play an "intermediary role" between individuals and other publicly available information (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, 1049).

In addition, political discussion improves individuals' comprehension and retention of information (Eveland 2004). As every teacher knows, information exposure does not guarantee retention. Political discussion should help people retain information because it is more engaging than media consumption. Consistent with this, political discussion has larger effects than media consumption on news comprehension and correct voting (Baker, Ames, and Rennó 2020; Robinson and Levy 1986). By improving retention or providing new facts, political discussion should provide individuals with information to evaluate incumbent politicians.

Second, retrospective voting requires individuals interpret political information and attribute responsibility for political outcomes. Indeed, this evaluative problem is fundamental, as political events seldom have straightforward interpretations and often involve trade-offs between competing goals. Identity-based critiques of retrospective voting argue that voters make incorrect attributions by blaming incumbents for events beyond their control (Achen and Bartels 2017). Even if voters agree on the facts, they may differ in their responsibility attributions, which are shaped by varying levels of political knowledge and colored by partisan biases (Bisgaard 2019; Gomez and Wilson 2003).

Political discussion, especially with those with different opinions, should help voters manage this interpretive task. The idea that citizens interpret politics through conversation is central to theories of deliberation. Considering competing perspectives through discussion is said to help citizens "clarify information" and "sharpen their own preferences" (Manin 1987, 351). As discussed below, the interpretive function of political discussion should be most impactful in mixed political company, as conversation partners introduce competing interpretations about whether incumbents are to blame for political outcomes.

2.1. The role of disagreement

Conversations with disagreeing partners should lead individuals to change their assessments of favored (or disfavored) politicians. Political disagreement is fundamental to social influence because it underlies opportunities for

persuasion and evaluation. Even as individuals tend to avoid disagreement, it persists in social networks because people “exercise only limited discretion in their selection of informants” (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004, 21).¹ In expectation, increasing network disagreement should increase the probability that individuals switch from supporting the incumbent to the opposition, or vice versa.

Why would this be the case? First, disagreeing conversation partners selectively transmit information that favors their preferred party or candidate (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Discussants with different preferences present countervailing information that should disrupt individuals’ pre-existing views. This informational mechanism helps to explain why individuals tend to vote with their friends, family members, and co-workers (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1991).

Consistent with this, Baker, Ames, and Rennó (2020) find that network disagreement induces preference change during presidential campaigns in Brazil and Mexico. Their argument is primarily information-based: During presidential campaigns, individuals turn to their “best-informed contacts” and thereby “acquire socially informed preferences” (pg. 15). Analyses of correct voting support this informational story (Baker, Ames, and Rennó 2020, 220–23). Political disagreement should also shape judgments about the incumbent outside of the information-saturated environment of political campaigns, as those with different party affiliations selectively share information about incumbent policy.

Network disagreement may also affect incumbent support through voters’ interpretations of political events and policy outcomes. Disagreeing conversation partners offer competing perspectives, encouraging their peers to change their views by exposing them to countervailing interpretations of incumbent performance. Experimental work provides some evidence for this mechanism; disagreeing conversation partners reduce the effect of elite frames (presumably, by offering competing ones) and increase people’s understanding of out-partisans’ views (Druckman and Nelson 2003; Mutz 2006, 71–76). While novel interpretations arising from political disagreement should disrupt prior attitudes and promote candidate switching, “reasoning alone” or within homogeneous groups, can foster confirmation bias (Mercier and Landmore 2012), producing stable evaluations and candidate preferences.

Even so, it is not obvious that individuals will accept the competing interpretations offered by politically disagreeing peers. Motivated reasoning, where information is processed through prior attitudes and identities (e.g. Lodge and Taber 2013), may lead individuals to discount their discussants’ interpretations. Partisan motivated reasoning may outweigh any effect of

¹See, e.g., Mutz and Mondak (2006) on disagreement in the workplace.

disagreement on voters' retrospective evaluations, as Robison (2020) finds in the United States. The consequences of network disagreement for retrospection in other contexts, especially those where partisan attachments are weaker or more volatile, remain an open question.

2.2. Network diversity

Beyond disagreement, discussion networks vary in their diversity. For instance, a Lula-supporting respondent may disagree with two of her three discussants, while her disagreeing discussants support two different candidates. Such a network is more diverse than a similar network where both disagreeing discussants support the same candidate. While network disagreement should induce preference change, network diversity is likely to stabilize preferences (Baker, Ames, and Rennó 2020). Individuals are less likely to be persuaded toward one candidate or another when their discussants push them toward different candidates.

3. Political context

I investigate the influence of political conversation during Lula's first term in office, the PT's first presidential incumbency. Brazil's high levels of electoral volatility (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006, 208), changes to Lula's policy platform, and voters' relatively fluid partisan attachments (Baker et al. 2016), are likely to make political discussion central to responsibility attribution in this context.

While Lula and the PT were well-known for their left-wing ideology and policy platform before 2002, they moved to the center during Lula's 2002 campaign and first term (Hunter 2010). This change led many voters to divorce their image of the PT from Lula's newer personal and programmatic appeal (Zucco 2008, 33). Beyond programmatic change, Lula's PT was at the center of a major corruption scandal during his first term. The *mensalão* scandal broke in mid-2005, revealing that PT leaders, including several close to Lula, paid Brazilian legislators for their support in roll call votes. While Lula was not indicted, the scandal tarnished the PT's image as a party committed to a more ethical politics.

At the same time, Lula introduced poverty assistance programs and oversaw significant economic growth. The *bolsa família* program provided conditional cash transfers to low-income families, increasing voter support in less developed municipalities (Zucco 2008), and Brazil's GDP/capita nearly doubled between 2003 and 2006. Thus, while the PT underwent policy moderation and scandal, Lula's image benefited from impressive economic performance.

In addition, the volatility of Brazil's party system (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006, 208) and the weakness of voters' partisan attachments may enhance the effect of social influence. Voters should rely more on their networks

where parties' electoral fortunes vary widely because they have a less definite sense of parties' ideological offerings in more volatile systems (Zechmeister and Corral 2013). Likewise, weaker partisan identities may lead voters to rely less on partisan heuristics and more on peer discussion. Partisan identities in Brazil were more fluid than in the United States or Western Europe, yet still structured by voters' sympathies and antipathies toward the PT during this period (Baker et al. 2016; Samuels and Zucco 2018). I investigate patterns of switching between parties related to this dynamic below. More broadly, these factors suggest Lula's first term as a likely case for observing social influence.

4. Data and methods

4.1. Interparty candidate switching

I analyze candidate switching using responses collected in October 2002, after the first round election,² and in July 2006, going into the following presidential campaign. Looking at this period, I examine opinion change *over Lula's first term*, before the start of intensive campaign activity in late summer and fall 2006.

Switching between presidential candidates from different parties is measured based on a survey question asking respondents who they would vote for "if the election were held today." Using this question, I construct a change measure capturing voters who supported a different candidate in July 2006 than they supported in October 2002, in the previous election. This *candidate switching* variable is coded as a one for respondents who switched between candidates; voters who maintained support for a candidate from the same party are coded as zeros.³ To evaluate opinion change, I necessarily only include individuals who reported their vote intention in both 2002 and 2006. Respondents who reported "don't know" or declined to answer in either wave are excluded from the measure. Of the 1,352 respondents who answered both vote intention items, 665 (49%) switched between candidates from different parties.

Looking at candidate switching during this period, I examine the role of discussion networks outside the information-saturated campaign environments analyzed in previous work. A potential concern is that informal campaign activity before July 2006 – the start of the official campaign – may have already influenced conversation networks or vote intentions. While this cannot be fully ruled out, the switching measure captures preference change prior to key campaign events including the first presidential debate

²Voter preferences were consolidated after the first round. District-level vote shares show virtually no defections from Lula or Serra (Kamakura 2016, 757), and polling from the interim period closely matched the second round results (Figueiredo and Coutinho 2003).

³Respondents who supported the PSDB in 2002 (José Serra) and in 2006 (Geraldo Alckmin) are coded as zeros.

(August 14) and the launch of state-sponsored political advertising (*horário eleitoral gratuito*, August 15).⁴ This places the analysis in a lower-intensity information environment, enabling inferences into the role of political conversation outside peak campaign periods.

4.2. Independent variables

4.2.1. Proportion disagreement

The main independent variable captures the extent of political disagreement in voters' discussion networks. I constructed ego-networks from a name generator that asks respondents to list up to four individuals with whom they discuss politics.⁵ I then create a proportional measure of network disagreement using respondents' perceptions of their discussants' vote intentions. Network disagreement is calculated as the number of discussants supporting a different candidate from the main respondent over the total number of named discussants.⁶ It therefore ranges from zero to one, with higher values indicating greater network disagreement.

4.2.2. Network diversity

I measure network diversity using Blau's index (see Perry, Pescosolido, and Borgatti 2018, 172), calculated as one minus the sum of the squared proportion of discussants supporting each candidate. The measure ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater diversity.⁷

4.2.3. Number of discussants

I also include a variable indicating the number of discussants named by the main respondent. This simple count variable corresponds with the size of the respondents' ego-networks. The average respondent names just over two discussants.

4.2.4. Network change

I include a control variable capturing network change to address the endogeneity of discussant selection and opinion change. Individuals are likely to

⁴The second vote intention question used in the switching measure was asked in July or early August. 87% of respondents in the main analysis were contacted in July, and less than 1% were contacted after August 14.

⁵Respondents named up to three discussants, except when the first three were family members (then up to four).

⁶Baker, Ames, and Rennó (2020) find that respondents' perceptions of discussant preferences are largely accurate (pg. 61–62). On the main measure, named discussants with unknown preferences are counted as agreeing with the main respondent. Appendix, Section 3 presents similar results with a measure excluding discussants with unknown preferences. See Kloststad, Edward Sokhey, and McClurg (2013) for alternative approaches to measuring disagreement.

⁷Respondents with no named discussants are coded as a zero rather than as missing to minimize listwise deletion.

choose new conversation partners when they change their preferences, discussing politics with individuals who share their latest views. This homophily threatens inferences about the effects of network disagreement (Carrington, Scott, and Wasserman 2005; Rogowski and Sinclair 2017). Unfortunately, this sorting issue is not fully addressed with repeated measures because, in this case, respondents generated a new discussant list at time two (in July 2006).

To address this, I construct an – admittedly rough – measure of change in respondents' political discussion networks between October 2002 and July 2006. The measure is calculated as the total number of discussant switches (new discussants) divided by the maximum number of possible discussants (divided by 4). Discussant switches are instances when a discussant switched their preferred candidate, changed from "don't know" to a candidate preference (and vice versa), or when a previously unnamed discussant entered the discussant list.⁸ The resulting measure ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater network change. While I included the network change measure to control for politically motivated network self-selection, it also captures natural churn in conversation networks and may correlate with dispositions for network change or stability. In expectation, it should correlate with candidate switching.

4.2.5. *Partisanship*

The analysis also includes variables that capture partisanship and performance evaluations. Primarily, I include a dichotomous partisanship measure based on the following question: "Do you sympathize with any political party? Yes or no?" In the sample, the proportion of voters who report a partisan sympathy ranges from 59% (October 2002) to 48% (July 2006).

4.2.6. *Performance evaluations*

Performance evaluations are measured using a mean index of four questions that ask respondents to evaluate the performance of Lula's government on corruption, employment, inflation, and crime control ($\alpha = .82$).⁹ Question wordings are provided in the Appendix. This index-based measure is appropriate because I am interested in general evaluations of government performance, i.e. over multiple issue areas, and because multi-item measures are less prone to measurement error. The incumbent performance evaluation measure ranges from 0 to 10, with higher values indicating more positive evaluations.

⁸Changes in the ordering of the discussant list are counted as discussant changes. Such re-ordering may capture changes in the importance respondents attribute to different discussants (c.f. Sokhey, Baker, and Djupe 2015, 577–581). Appendix Section 3 presents similar results with an alternative order-invariant volatility measure.

⁹These items were not asked in October 2002, so the model includes only the contemporaneous value of the performance evaluation measure.

4.3. Modeling changes in candidate support

I estimate transition models to examine the effect of network disagreement on switching among Lula and opposition supporters separately. These are logistic regression models where the estimated effect of each independent variable depends on whether respondents reported support for Lula or another (losing) candidate in October 2002 (see Diggle et al. 2002, ch. 10). The models therefore provide two sets of estimates: one for those who supported Lula and another for those who supported a losing candidate.

The models include contemporaneous (July 2006) and past values (October 2002) of key independent variables, including the network measures. For these variables, the coefficient on the contemporaneous value (indexed by t) indicates the effect of that variable in July 2006, after accounting for its past value. The lagged variables, along with the network volatility measure, help address individuals' tendency to self-select into networks with agreeing discussion partners.¹⁰

5. Changes in candidate support

Discussion with disagreeing partners is associated with changes in candidate support. In Table 1, the first model includes only network disagreement; the second introduces additional network measures, partisanship, and performance evaluations; and the third adds controls for media consumption and political knowledge. The coefficient on contemporaneous network disagreement, *Prop. Disagreeing_t*, is positive and statistically significant, indicating that increases in the proportion of disagreeing conversation partners are associated with inter-party candidate switching. It is positive both for those who supported Lula and those who supported a losing candidate in 2002, but is larger among former Lula supporters.

To gauge the substantive effect, Figure 1 presents predicted probabilities of candidate switching over network disagreement. Network disagreement corresponds with substantial increases in candidate switching among Lula voters. Among these voters, moving from 0 to 0.33 on the network disagreement measure – akin to adding 1 disagreeing partner to a 3-person network – corresponds with a 34 percentage point increase in the probability of switching away from Lula. The estimated effect of network disagreement is smaller among individuals who supported a losing candidate, partly because the baseline rates of candidate switching are already quite high among these respondents.¹¹ Among these voters, an identical increase in network disagreement corresponds with a 12 percentage point increase in candidate switching.

¹⁰A further concern is confounding by respondent personality traits correlated with network selection and candidate preferences (Mondak et al. 2010). See Appendix, Section 3, for models incorporating additional controls proxying for respondent traits.

¹¹The baseline switching rate among non-Lula voters is high because several opposition parties did not field candidates in 2006.

Table 1. Models of inter-party candidate switching between October 2002 and July 2006. The dependent variable is a one if a respondent switched parties and a zero otherwise.

Model number Oct. 2002 Vote:	DV: Switched Candidate Support					
	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	Lula	Other	Lula	Other	Lula	Other
Prop. Disagreeing _t	2.93*** (0.34)	1.36*** (0.38)	4.15*** (0.55)	1.94*** (0.52)	4.60*** (0.76)	1.92** (0.60)
Prop. Disagreeing _{t-1}	0.44 (0.46)	1.38*** (0.34)	0.72 (0.77)	1.75*** (0.46)	1.36 (0.93)	2.22*** (0.55)
Performance Evaluation _t			-0.36*** (0.06)	0.07 (0.05)	-0.42*** (0.08)	0.01 (0.06)
Num. Discussants _t			-0.14 (0.11)	-0.33** (0.11)	-0.07 (0.14)	-0.40** (0.14)
Num. Discussants _{t-1}			0.03 (0.11)	-0.16 (0.11)	0.08 (0.16)	-0.16 (0.14)
Network Diversity _t			-1.63* (0.65)	-0.87 (0.63)	-1.72* (0.84)	-0.23 (0.78)
Network Diversity _{t-1}			-0.87 (0.85)	-0.09 (0.66)	-1.28 (1.04)	-0.52 (0.77)
Network Change			2.22*** (0.54)	1.08* (0.50)	3.17*** (0.76)	1.45* (0.63)
Party Identity _t			-0.87** (0.27)	0.08 (0.27)	-0.81* (0.35)	0.05 (0.33)
Party Identity _{t-1}			-0.50 (0.27)	-0.14 (0.27)	-0.74* (0.36)	0.01 (0.34)
Media Consumption _{t-1}					-0.29** (0.10)	-0.03 (0.09)
Political Knowledge _{t-1}					-0.15 (0.15)	-0.64*** (0.18)
Observations	941		887		639	
Correctly Classified	73.4%		77.5%		80.9%	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1072.2		893.2		610.8	

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

As with network disagreement, changes in network composition correspond with candidate switching. A 1-s.d. increase from the mean of the network change measure corresponds with a 20 percentage point increase in switching among Lula voters and a 6 percentage point increase among other voters. Changes in network composition may introduce novel viewpoints and thereby induce preference change. Moreover, the network change measure likely captures sorting effects, where individuals choose to discuss politics with individuals who match their changing views.¹²

Turning to the other network variables, network diversity is associated with decreased switching among Lula voters but does not reach significance among those who supported a losing candidate. The number of discussants, meanwhile, corresponds with decreased switching among opposition voters but is not statistically significant among those who previously supported Lula.

¹²Appendix, Section 2, presents a sensitivity analysis addressing the possibility of confounding following Cinelli and Hazlett (2020).

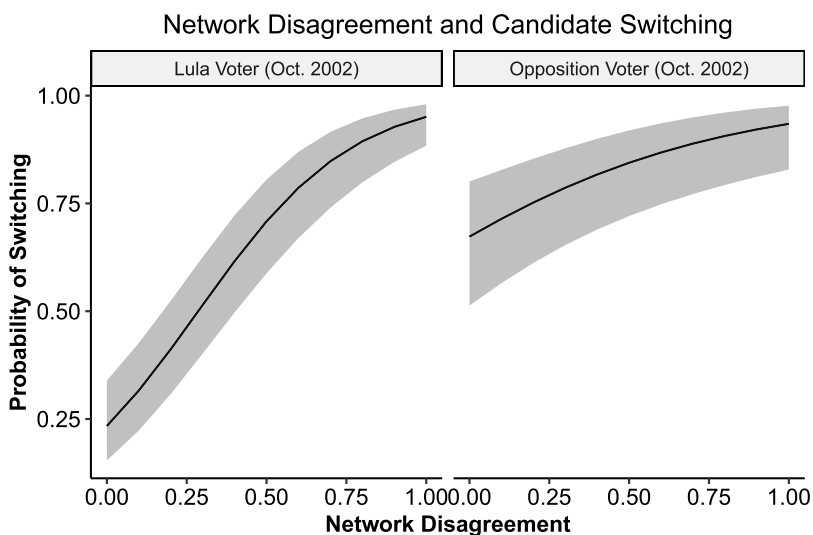


Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of switching between candidates from different parties.

While conversation with disagreeing conversation partners corresponds with candidate switching, conventional predictors also matter. The estimate on the performance evaluation variable is negative and statistically significant among Lula voters, indicating that favorable evaluations are associated with fewer defections from Lula. With covariates held at their mean values, a 1-s.d. increase on the performance evaluation measure corresponds with a 23 percentage point decrease in the probability of defecting from Lula. Hence, favorable evaluations correspond with stable incumbent support. I return to this point later to evaluate the possibility that these evaluations are themselves influenced by individuals' social networks.

Partisanship is also associated with stable incumbent support. Based on Model 2, approximately 26% of former Lula supporters who reported a party identity in both survey waves defected from Lula. In comparison, about 63% of former Lula supporters who did not report a partisan identity in either period defected. Partisanship does not appear to stabilize vote intention among opposition supporters during this period, perhaps in part because several parties that competed in 2002 did not field candidates in 2006.

5.1. Patterns of candidate switching

While this evidence so far is consistent with social retrospection, the binary switching variable does not indicate which party respondents *switched to* – a crucial detail for assessing the persuasive power of political conversation. Even if network disagreement induces preference change, it may not

convince voters to support candidates from a party they have previously regarded as anathema.

During this period, electoral politics were structured by competition between Lula's PT and the main opposition party, the PSDB. Identification with or against the incumbent PT structured Brazilians' views of the economy, corruption, and other issues (see Samuels and Zucco 2018), suggesting that switching between the PT and PSDB should be relatively uncommon. To examine patterns of candidate switching, I re-estimate the specification introduced above using a categorical measure of candidate support. I estimate separate multinomial logistic regression models among respondents who supported Lula and who supported another candidate in October 2002. The dependent variable is candidate support in July 2006, at the start of the presidential campaign.¹³

Figure 2 presents the results, showing predicted candidate support over the range of network disagreement. Predictions are shown separately for partisans (panel A) and non-partisans (panel B), as partisanship strongly conditions patterns of candidate switching among former Lula voters. Consistent with the previous analysis, increasing network disagreement is associated with substantially decreased support for Lula. Yet, even at high levels of disagreement, few Lula supporters switched to supporting the primary opposition candidate, the PSDB's Geraldo Alckmin. Partisan Lula supporters were particularly unlikely to cross the PT-PSDB divide, instead switching to Heloísa Helena, a former PT senator who challenged Lula from the left.

Crossing the PT-PSDB divide was also uncommon among former opposition voters (Panel C). Predictions are shown for non-partisan respondents, as partisanship is less consequential in this group. Even at high levels of disagreement – and without partisan constraints – less than 5% of former opposition supporters are predicted to switch to supporting Lula. Like their PT counterparts, opposition voters facing substantial disagreement tended to switch to Helena over crossing the PT-PSDB divide.

6. Performance evaluations

The theory developed above posits that network disagreement promotes switching by introducing countervailing interpretations of incumbent performance. For instance, conversations with PSDB supporters might lead former Lula supporters to downgrade their evaluations of Lula's performance on corruption, in turn making them less likely to support him electorally. In this way, network disagreement should increase candidate switching through performance evaluations. To substantiate this, I first

¹³For tabular results, see Tables A8 and A9 in the Appendix.

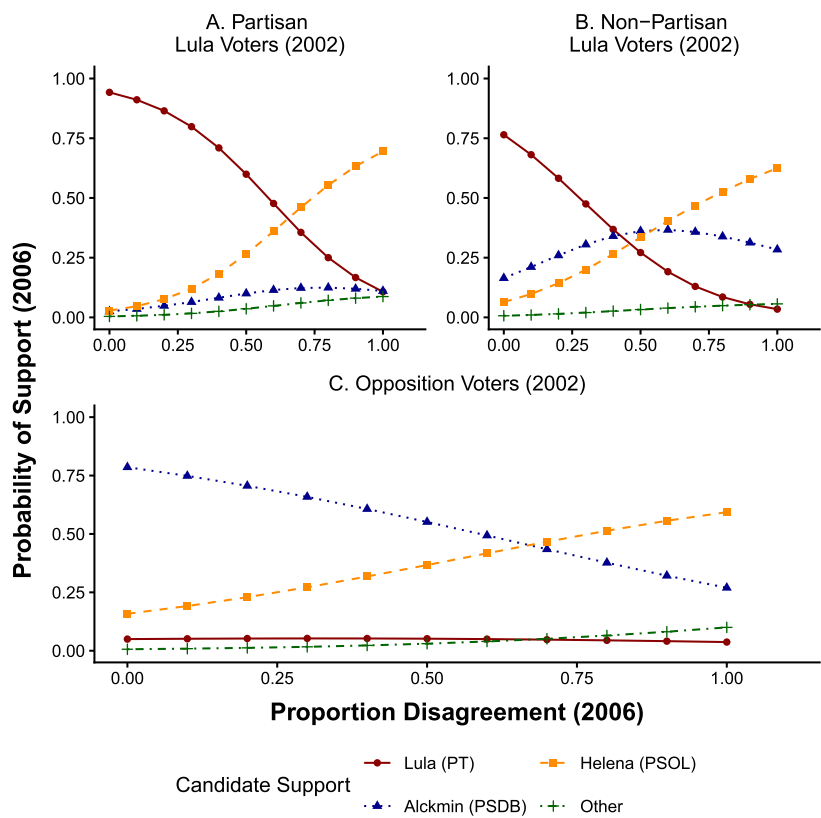


Figure 2. Network disagreement and predicted candidate support among former Lula and opposition voters.

examine the relationship between network disagreement and evaluations of Lula’s performance. I then conduct a mediation analysis to provide suggestive evidence of the causal pathway from network disagreement through performance evaluations.

Among former Lula voters, increased disagreement is, indeed, associated with more negative views of his performance. Figure 3 presents performance evaluations in July 2006 over the range of contemporaneous network disagreement. These are predicted values from an OLS model reproducing the specification used above (in Model 3) with performance evaluations as the dependent variable.¹⁴ Network disagreement is associated with more negative performance evaluations ($p<0.05$), such that a 0.33-point increase in network disagreement corresponds with a 0.39-unit decrease on the performance evaluation measure. This pattern is consistent with the idea that

¹⁴Tabular results are available in Appendix, Table A10.

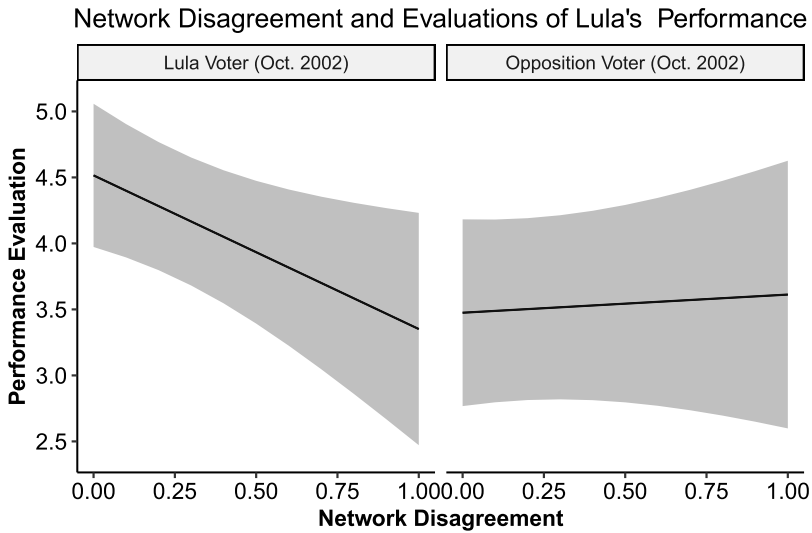


Figure 3. Predicted values of Lula performance evaluations over network disagreement.

disagreeing conversation partners introduce countervailing information and interpretations, producing more negative views of Lula's government.

The pattern is more ambiguous among former opposition voters, as shown in the right-hand panel of Figure 3. Among these voters, increased disagreement corresponds with modestly more positive evaluations of Lula, though the estimate is imprecise and non-significant. This noisy estimate is unsurprising, as opposition voters' disagreeing conversation partners do not necessarily favor Lula. I focus exclusively on former Lula supporters to assess the mediating effect of performance evaluations on incumbent support below.

6.1. Performance evaluations as a mediator

I test whether performance evaluations mediate the effect of network disagreement on candidate switching using the approach recommended by Imai et al. (2011). This approach estimates separate models of the mediator and dependent variable, using predicted values from these models to gauge the mediation effect.¹⁵ Here, I evaluate the effect of a 0.33-point increase in the proportion of network disagreement *on switching away from Lula* through performance evaluations.

To be clear, this analysis aims only to provide initial evidence for the proposed mechanism. Mediation analysis requires additional assumptions about the non-confoundedness of the mediator, which are questionable given that

¹⁵For details, see Imai et al. (2011).

performance evaluations and candidate preferences are measured concurrently.¹⁶ Accordingly, the results can be understood as suggestive evidence for a theory of social retrospection, but should not be seen as fully-identified causal estimates.

With this caveat in mind, the analysis suggests that performance evaluations mediate a small but significant portion of network disagreement. As noted, increases in the number of disagreeing conversation partners are associated with more negative evaluations of Lula's government ($p < 0.01$). In turn, more negative performance evaluations correspond with increased switching away from Lula ($p < 0.001$). The mediation analysis suggests that about 10% of the effect of network disagreement is mediated by performance evaluations, though the confidence interval is fairly wide (95% CI: 2%, 19%; $p < 0.05$).¹⁷

While the estimated mediation effect is modest, we would not expect the relationship between network disagreement and candidate switching to be wholly mediated by performance evaluations. Some of the influence of networks likely runs through other channels, such as social pressure (compare to Sánchez and Botero 2023). It is also logical that performance evaluations independently influence support for Lula to some degree. Voters acquire information about incumbent and policy performance from many sources, including their own experience (Bessen and Connell 2024), in addition to their social networks.

7. Discussion and conclusion

The literature on presidential support emphasizes partisan identities and retrospective evaluations as determinants of voter behavior. Although these variables have social dimensions – partisanship is itself a social identity – most research examines decision-making without considering voters' social circles. This leaves us with an incomplete picture of how voters form retrospective judgments and decide which candidates to support.

This paper extends the literature on socially-informed preferences in Latin America by considering the role of political disagreement outside the peak campaign period. Focusing on presidential support during Lula's first term, I find that peer influences on candidate support do, in fact, extend beyond the campaign environment. Increasing network disagreement correlated with individuals updating their views and supporting new candidates, increasing defections from the incumbent among former Lula voters. The estimated effect of network disagreement was comparable to conventional predictors of candidate support, partisanship, and performance evaluations.

¹⁶See Imai et al. (2011) on the sequential ignorability assumption.

¹⁷Table A11, in the Appendix, presents the models used in the mediation analysis. Figure A4, presents estimated effects and a sensitivity analysis.

Yet, the multinomial models indicated that partisan antipathies constrain candidate switching. Even at high levels of network disagreement, partisan Lula voters were less likely to support the most viable opposition candidate than non-partisan Lula voters. And – partisan or not – very few former opposition supporters switched to supporting the PT (c.f. Samuels and Zucco 2018).

These patterns raise questions about the generalizability of social influence on retrospective judgments and candidate choice. Namely, switching from major-party candidates (PT or PSDB) to a minor-party candidate (PSOL's Heloísa Helena) under high disagreement suggests that socially driven switching may be more common in multiparty systems, where voters can find acceptable alternative candidates. Social networks may be less influential in more stable party systems or those with fewer parties; the limited network effects on retrospective judgments in the United States point in this direction (see Robison 2020). However, more structured cross-case comparisons are needed to draw firm conclusions about where social retrospection is most likely.

This paper makes a further contribution by linking social influence to individuals' retrospective judgments about incumbent performance. Studies focused on the campaign period present network effects as products of information sharing or social pressure. While these mechanisms may also operate outside campaigns, I emphasize the interpretive function of political conversation: individuals use political discussion to evaluate incumbents and form judgments about their performance.

To corroborate this argument, I presented a mediation analysis suggesting that conversations with politically dissimilar discussion partners shape candidate switching through performance evaluations. Among former Lula supporters, conversations with out-partisans were associated with more negative assessments of his performance, which, in turn, corresponded with defections from the incumbent. As noted, the mediation effects are susceptible to the confoundedness of the mediator. Even if the effect of network disagreement is (partially) identified, other variables – including other mediators – correlated with performance evaluations and defections from Lula may bias the estimated mediation effects.

Hence, this paper makes two interrelated arguments: (1) that network disagreement influences candidate choice outside the peak campaign periods and (2) that the influence of disagreement occurs, in part, through retrospective evaluations of incumbent performance. The latter claim is theoretically more novel and, for the reasons noted above, empirically less certain. Additional research should therefore confirm this evaluative mechanism and gauge its magnitude.

An additional question involves the distinction between the informational and interpretive mechanisms underlying social retrospection.

While these are distinct mechanisms – conversation can introduce new facts or prompt reinterpretations of old ones – they should be empirically overlapping and mutually supportive, as new facts can invite new interpretations. The predominance of either mechanism is likely context specific. For example, the interpretive mechanism may be more likely in higher-information (and lower-polarization) environments, where interlocutors engage with a common set of facts. Future work might disentangle these mechanisms by collecting additional information on the content of political conversation.

Stepping back, the role of social influence in incumbent evaluations has important implications for democratic accountability. I have argued that discussions with politically unaligned peers help individuals meet the informational and interpretive challenges of retrospective voting. Such socially-informed retrospection is, in a sense, more fully considered – it involves engagement with competing perspectives. But discussion with disagreeing partners does not necessarily lead to retrospective judgments that are *more correct* in any absolute sense. It may even deter individuals from supporting candidates who match their preferences on some dimensions (Sokhey and McClurg 2012). Future studies might therefore examine how the style and content of everyday political conversation enhance or detract from its accountability function.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Andy Baker, Carew Boulding, Jennifer Fitzgerald, Kevin Reuning, Anand Sokhey, Eli Rau, and Guillermo Rosas for their thoughtful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. 2017. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Baker, Andy, Barry Ames, and Lúcio Rennó. 2020. *Persuasive Peers: Social Communication and Voting in Latin America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Baker, Andy, Barry Ames, and Lúcio R. Rennó. 2006. "Social Context and Campaign Volatility in New Democracies: Networks and Neighborhoods in Brazil's 2002 Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2): 382–399. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.2006.50.issue-2>.
- Baker, Andy, Anand E. Sokhey, Barry Ames, and Lucio R. Renno. 2016. "The Dynamics of Partisan Identification When Party Brands Change: The Case of the Workers Party in Brazil." *The Journal of Politics* 78 (1): 197–213. <https://doi.org/10.1086/683609>.

- Bartels, Larry M. 2002. "Beyond the Running Tally: Partisan Bias in Political Perceptions." *Political Behavior* 24 (2): 117–150. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021226224601>.
- Bessen, Brett R., and Brendan J. Connell. 2024. "Another Day, Another Currency: Self-interest, Experience, and Attitudes toward Dollarization in Ecuador." *Political Behavior* 46 (1): 587–608. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-022-09840-z>.
- Bisgaard, Martin. 2019. "How Getting the Facts Right Can Fuel Partisan-Motivated Reasoning." *American Journal of Political Science* 63 (4): 824–839. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.v63.4>.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Canache, Damarys, Jeffery J. Mondak, and Annabelle Conroy. 1994. "Politics in Multiparty Context: Multiplicative Specifications, Social Influence, and Electoral Choice." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 58 (4): 509–538. <https://doi.org/10.1086/269445>.
- Carrington, Peter J., John Scott, and Stanley Wasserman. 2005. *Models and Methods in Social Network Analysis*. Vol. 28. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Cinelli, Carlos, and Chad Hazlett. 2020. "Making Sense of Sensitivity: Extending Omitted Variable Bias." *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series B: Statistical Methodology* 82 (1): 39–67. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rssb.12348>.
- Cruz, Cesi. 2019. "Social Networks and the Targeting of Vote Buying." *Comparative Political Studies* 52 (3): 382–411. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414018784062>.
- Dalton, Russell J., Ian McAllister, and Martin P. Wattenberg. 2000. "The Consequences of Partisan Dealignment." In *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, 37–63. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Dancey, Logan, and Geoffrey Sheagley. 2013. "Heuristics Behaving Badly: Party Cues and Voter Knowledge." *American Journal of Political Science* 57 (2): 312–325. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.2013.57.issue-2>.
- Diggle, Peter, Patrick Heagerty, Kung-Yee Liang, and Scott Zeger. 2002. *Analysis of Longitudinal Data*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Druckman, James N., and Kjersten R. Nelson. 2003. "Framing and Deliberation: How Citizens' Conversations Limit Elite Influence." *American Journal of Political Science* 47 (4): 729–745. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.2003.47.issue-4>.
- Evans, Geoffrey, and Robert Andersen. 2006. "The Political Conditioning of Economic Perceptions." *The Journal of Politics* 68 (1): 194–207. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2006.00380.x>.
- Eveland Jr., William. 2004. "The Effect of Political Discussion in Producing Informed Citizens: The Roles of Information, Motivation, and Elaboration." *Political Communication* 21 (2): 177–193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600490443877>.
- Figueiredo, Rubens, and Ciro Coutinho. 2003. "A Eleição De 2002." *Opinião Pública* 9 (2): 93–117.
- Finkel, Steven E. 1993. "Reexamining the 'Minimal Effects' Model in Recent Presidential Campaigns." *The Journal of Politics* 55 (1): 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2132225>.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 1981. *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Gerber, Alan S., and Gregory A. Huber. 2010. "Partisanship, Political Control, and Economic Assessments." *American Journal of Political Science* 54 (1): 153–173. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.2010.54.issue-1>.
- Gomez, Brad T., and J. Matthew Wilson. 2003. "Causal Attribution and Economic Voting in American Congressional Elections." *Political Research Quarterly* 56 (3): 271–282. <https://doi.org/10.1177/106591290305600303>.

- Huckfeldt, Robert, Paul E. Johnson, and John Sprague. 2004. *Political Disagreement: The Survival of Diverse Opinions within Communication Networks*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Huckfeldt, Robert, and John Sprague. 1991. "Discussant Effects on Vote Choice: Intimacy, Structure, and Interdependence." *The Journal of Politics* 53 (1): 122–158. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2131724>.
- Huckfeldt, R. Robert, and John Sprague. 1995. *Citizens, Politics and Social Communication: Information and Influence in an Election Campaign*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Hunter, Wendy. 2010. *The Transformation of the Workers' Party in Brazil, 1989–2009*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Imai, Kosuke, Luke Keele, Dustin Tingley, and Teppei Yamamoto. 2011. "Unpacking the Black Box of Causality: Learning about Causal Mechanisms from Experimental and Observational Studies." *American Political Science Review* 105 (4): 765–789. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055411000414>.
- Kamakura, Wagner A. 2016. "Using Voter-Choice Modeling to Plan Final Campaigns in Runoff Elections." *Revista de Administração Contemporânea* 20 (6): 753–776. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-7849rac2016160116>.
- Kinder, Donald R., and D. Roderick Kiewiet. 1981. "Sociotropic Politics: The American Case." *British Journal of Political Science* 11 (2): 129–161. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400002544>.
- Klašnja, Marko, Joshua A. Tucker, and Kevin Deegan-Krause. 2016. "Pocketbook Vs. Sociotropic Corruption Voting." *British Journal of Political Science* 46 (1): 67–94. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123414000088>.
- Klofstad, Casey A., Anand Edward Sokhey, and Scott D. McClurg. 2013. "Disagreeing about Disagreement: How Conflict in Social Networks Affects Political Behavior." *American Journal of Political Science* 57 (1): 120–134. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.2013.57.issue-1>.
- Kramer, Gerald H. 1983. "The Ecological Fallacy Revisited: Aggregate-versus Individual-Level Findings on Economics and Elections, and Sociotropic Voting." *American Political Science Review* 77 (1): 92–111. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1956013>.
- Lau, Richard R., and David P. Redlawsk. 2001. "Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making." *American Journal of Political Science* 45 (4): 951–971. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2669334>.
- Lewis-Beck, Michael S., and María Celeste Ratto. 2013. "Economic Voting in Latin America: A General Model." *Electoral Studies* 32 (3): 489–493. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2013.05.023>.
- Lodge, Milton, and Charles S. Taber. 2013. *The Rationalizing Voter*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Lupu, Noam. 2015. "Partisanship in Latin America." In *The Latin American Voter: Pursuing Representation and Accountability in Challenging Contexts*, edited by Ryan E. Carlin, Mathew M. Singer, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, 226–245. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Mainwaring, Scott, and Mariano Torcal. 2006. "Party System Institutionalization and Party System Theory after the Third Wave of Democratization." In *Handbook of Party Politics*. Vol. 11, edited by Richard S. Katz and William Crotty, 204–227. London, UK: Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848608047>.
- Manin, Bernard. 1987. "On Legitimacy and Political Deliberation." *Political Theory* 15 (3): 338–368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591787015003005>.

- McClurg, Scott D. 2006. "The Electoral Relevance of Political Talk: Examining Disagreement and Expertise Effects in Social Networks on Political Participation." *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (3): 737–754. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.2006.50.issue-3>.
- Mercier, Hugo, and Hélène Landemore. 2012. "Reasoning Is for Arguing: Understanding the Successes and Failures of Deliberation." *Political Psychology* 33 (2): 243–258. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.2012.33.issue-2>.
- Mondak, Jeffery J., Matthew V. Hibbing, Damarys Canache, Mitchell A. Seligson, and Mary R. Anderson. 2010. "Personality and Civic Engagement: An Integrative Framework for the Study of Trait Effects on Political Behavior." *American Political Science Review* 104 (1): 85–110. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055409990359>.
- Murillo, M. Victoria, and Giancarlo Visconti. 2017. "Economic Performance and Incumbents' Support in Latin America." *Electoral Studies* 45:180–190. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2016.10.007>.
- Mutz, Diana C. 2006. *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Mutz, Diana C., and Jeffery J. Mondak. 2006. "The Workplace as a Context for Cross-Cutting Political Discourse." *The Journal of Politics* 68 (1): 140–155. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2006.00376.x>.
- Pérez, Orlando J. 2015. "The Impact of Crime on Voter Choice in Latin America." In *The Latin American Voter: Pursuing Representation and Accountability in Challenging Contexts*, edited by Ryan E. Carlin, Matthew M. Singer, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, 324–345. Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press.
- Perry, Brea L., Bernice A. Pescosolido, and Stephen P. Borgatti. 2018. *Egocentric Network Analysis: Foundations, Methods, and Models*. Vol. 44. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Przeworski, Adam, and Glaucio A. D. Soares. 1971. "Theories in Search of a Curve: A Contextual Interpretation of Left Vote." *American Political Science Review* 65 (1): 51–68. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1955043>.
- Remmer, Karen L. 1991. "The Political Impact of Economic Crisis in Latin America in the 1980s." *American Political Science Review* 85 (3): 777–800. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1963850>.
- Robinson, John P., and Mark R. Levy. 1986. "Interpersonal Communication and News Comprehension." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 50 (2): 160–175. <https://doi.org/10.1086/268972>.
- Robison, Joshua. 2020. "Does Social Disagreement Attenuate Partisan Motivated Reasoning? A Test Case concerning Economic Evaluations." *British Journal of Political Science* 50 (4): 1245–1261. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123418000315>.
- Rogowski, Jon C., and Betsy Sinclair. 2017. "Causal Inference in Political Networks." In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Networks*, edited by Jennifer Nicol Victor, Alexander H. Montgomery, and Mark Lubell, 131–146. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Samuels, David J., and Cesar Zucco. 2018. *Partisans, Antipartisans, and Nonpartisans: Voting Behavior in Brazil*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Sánchez, Miguel García, and Felipe Botero. 2023. "The Power of Political Discussion: Uncovering the Influence of Networks on Vote Choice and Its Mechanisms. Evidence from Colombia." *Revista Latinoamericana de Opinión Pública* 12 (1): 159–201. <https://doi.org/10.14201/rlop.2023121>.

- Schaffer, Joby, and Andy Baker. 2015. "Clientelism as Persuasion-Buying: Evidence from Latin America." *Comparative Political Studies* 48 (9): 1093–1126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414015574881>.
- Smith, Amy Erica. 2018. "Talking It out: Political Conversation and Knowledge Gaps in Unequal Urban Contexts." *British Journal of Political Science* 48 (2): 407–425. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123415000721>.
- Sokhey, Anand E., Andy Baker, and Paul A. Djupe. 2015. "The Dynamics of Socially Supplied Information: Examining Discussion Network Stability over Time." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 27 (4): 565–587.
- Sokhey, Anand Edward, and Scott D. McClurg. 2012. "Social Networks and Correct Voting." *The Journal of Politics* 74 (3): 751–764. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381612000461>.
- Valdini, Melody E., and Michael S. Lewis-Beck. 2018. "Economic Voting in Latin America: Rules and Responsibility." *American Journal of Political Science* 62 (2): 410–423. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.2018.62.issue-2>.
- Zechmeister, Elizabeth J., and Margarita Corral. 2013. "Individual and Contextual Constraints on Ideological Labels in Latin America." *Comparative Political Studies* 46 (6): 675–701. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012463880>.
- Zucco, Cesar. 2008. "The President's 'new' Constituency: Lula and the Pragmatic Vote in Brazil's 2006 Presidential Elections." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 40 (1): 29–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X07003628>.