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Perceived disagreement and heterogeneity in social networks:  
Distinct effects on political participation

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#### Abstract

Although the coexistence of conflicting opinions in society is the very core of democracy, people's tendency to avoid conflict could keep them away from political discussion and participation. On the other hand, being exposed to diverse political views could motivate citizens to participate. We conducted secondary analyses on two 2013 ITANES (ITALian National Election Studies) probability samples in order to test the hypotheses that perceived network disagreement (between an individual and her/his discussion partners) and heterogeneity (among discussants holding different political opinions), exert independent and opposite effects on political participation through motivation and knowledge. Results converged in showing that disagreement dampened, while heterogeneity encouraged, political participation (voting, propensity to abstain in future, offline and online activism, and timing of vote decision) by decreasing or increasing, respectively, political interest and, in turn, knowledge.

Keywords: social network, heterogeneity, disagreement, political discussion, political participation, voting.

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1 Perceived disagreement and heterogeneity in social networks:

2 Distinct effects on political participation

3 People holding and expressing contrasting opinions in social groups, and across society as a  
4 whole, is the hallmark of democracy. According to cognitive consistency theories (Heider, 1946;  
5 Festinger, 1957), however, people are conflict avoidant and, in fact, the idea that diversity in  
6 discussion networks depresses turnout and, in general, dampens political participation is widespread  
7 both in the common sense and among scholars (e.g., Mutz, 2006). Studies on the link between  
8 networks' political diversity and participation actually obtained inconsistent results (e.g., Gimpel,  
9 Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003; Mutz, 2002a; Scheufele, Nisbett, & Brossard, 2003). However, this  
10 inconsistency can be unfolded by taking into account that those findings concerned various forms of  
11 diversity (e.g., disagreement or heterogeneity) and different levels of analysis (from close  
12 relationships to electoral districts).

13 Drawing on the literature linking social network diversity and participation, we  
14 distinguished between network disagreement (between the individual and her/his discussion  
15 partners) and network heterogeneity (among individual's discussion partners holding different  
16 political opinions) and hypothesized that both factors independently affect political participation. In  
17 addition, we expected that perceived disagreement would decrease participation by weakening  
18 citizens' motivation (i.e., their interest in politics), whereas perceived heterogeneity would stimulate  
19 participation by increasing interest in politics and political knowledge. Finally, while previous  
20 studies focused either on participants' main discussants or on their whole municipality or county,  
21 we present two studies adopting an in-between level of analysis, by considering the broad set of  
22 relations experienced in the different sub-networks to which individuals belong.

23 **Social networks and Political Participation**

24 Citizens' participation is essential for the maintenance of democracy. Therefore, to  
25 understand why people vote and participate in politics, and why they do not, is a fundamental task  
26 for scholars. In synthesis, we can identify three classes of factors explaining political participation

(Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995): Individual opportunities (time, money and civic skills), psychological engagement (motivation), and contextual opportunities to be mobilized to politics (being involved by others, such as leaders, activists, parties or media).

Though mobilization has been mostly operationalized through macro-environmental factors, such as campaign spending and party or candidate contacting, involvement in informal political discussion has also been shown to mobilize to politics (e.g., Leighley, 1990; Kenny, 1992; Putnam, 2000; McClurg, 2003), and mobilization via social networks has been recognized as one of the major factors promoting turnout (e.g., Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady 1995). In addition, the size of social networks is positively associated with participation: the greater the number of people one discusses with, the more likely s/he is to engage in political activities, particularly when conversations concern politics (Leighley, 1990; McClurg, 2003, 2006a, 2006b; Pattie & Johnston, 2009). However, the wider a social network is, the more likely its members will disagree with each other (Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004b; Pattie & Johnston, 2009), and disagreement is supposed to have detrimental consequences for participation.

### **Paradoxical Consequences of Conflict Avoidance**

Both liberal (Mill, 1974; Held, 1987) and deliberative (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996) theories of democracy emphasize the need for different opinions to be held, expressed and resolved among citizens. However, Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory (1957) and Heider's balance theory (1946) acknowledged, and more recent research (Cooper & Stone, 2000; Matz & Wood, 2005) confirmed, that interpersonal disagreement is a source of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive consistency theories also claim that individuals are conflict avoidant and motivated to reduce the psychological discomfort associated with dissonance whenever possible. In the interpersonal domain, this can be done in different ways (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995): People can adapt to others' views (acquiescence or silence), persuade others, reinterpret what others say to reconcile it with their own beliefs (e.g., misperception, false consensus), or avoid political discussion and/or

discussants holding opinions conflicting with their own (selective exposure). Hence, dissonance reduction yields two paradoxes for lasting democracy.

First, the conflict avoidance tendency seems to hinder disagreement and result in politically homogeneous networks (Downs, 1957; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944), thus undermining democracy. Indeed, individuals' lifestyle choices often bring them into unanimous social groups (Cavazza & Corbetta, 2015; Huckfeldt, 2007; Mutz, 2006). However, the survival of disagreement within communication networks has been documented by several election studies conducted both in the US and in other countries (e.g., Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995; Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004a; Ikeda & Huckfeldt, 2001; Richardson & Beck, 2007; Schmitt-Beck, 2003), suggesting that this is the rule rather than the exception.

According to Huckfeldt and colleagues (2004a), political disagreement can survive because each person's communication network consists of different sub-networks (e.g., family, friends and colleagues) that rarely overlap: each person can thus be supported in her/his view in a sub-network, while holding the minority opinion in another sub-network. Therefore, while agreement seems to prevail within sub-networks, disagreement is socially sustained between the individuals connecting different sub-networks.

The second paradox is that if people avoid conflict, they devalue the object of conflict, and thus escape politics which, in fact, has been often equated with conflict (e.g., Fiorina & Peterson, 1998). Indeed, Ulbig and Funk (1999) found that the more conflict avoidant citizens are, the less they participate in political activities that imply some degree of conflict, such as protest, campaign support and discussion. Looking back, the idea that disagreement dampens participation originates in Lazarsfeld and colleagues' research (1944): They found that cross-pressured people (i.e., those with contrasting affiliation, such as wealthy Protestants) were less likely to participate. More recent studies (Mutz, 2002a) confirmed that cross-cutting discussions decreased political participation, because they increased both intrapersonal ambivalence and interpersonal accountability. However, if democracy needs open dialogue with all opinions expressed, but this leads citizens to withdrawal

from politics – either to avoid dissonance or to preserve social harmony – then democracy is undermined. In sum, deliberative democracy seems to oppose participatory democracy (Mutz, 2006).

A more careful examination of this literature, however, suggests that the picture is far more complex than it appears, since inconsistent results emerged from different approaches and operationalizations of concepts. Indeed, most studies on this topic focused either on a few participants' discussants or on the whole community (such as a municipality or county) to which participants belong. The first line of research used individual-level data and usually measured perceived disagreement between respondents and up to five (usually three or four) persons with whom s/he discusses either political or important matters. The second approach used community-level data on political preferences and assessed heterogeneity in respondents' county or metropolitan area.

### **Disagreement and Participation**

At the individual level, although some empirical works indicated that disagreement discourages participation (Bélanger & Eagles, 2007; Mutz, 2002a; Mutz, 2006; Hopman, 2012), all the possible results have actually emerged: some scholars did not find any effect of disagreement on participation (Huckfeldt et al., 2004a, 2004b; Knoke, 1990; Nieuwbeerta & Flap, 2000; Nir, 2005); others found that the strength and direction of this relationship are moderated by a number of factors, such as characteristics of the network (McClurg 2006a) and the individuals (Djupe, McClurg, & Sokhey, 2010; Lee, Kwak, & Campbell, 2013), aspects of the broader social context (McClurg, 2006b), degree of disagreement (Bello, 2012; Nir, 2011), measures of disagreement and forms of participation (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Kloststad, Sokhey, & McClurg, 2013; Lee, 2012; Pattie & Johnston, 2009). Finally, other studies even found a positive effect of disagreement on participation (Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005; Leighley, 1990; McLeod et al., 1999b; Scheufele et al., 2003; Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004; Scheufele, Hardy, Brossard, Waismel-Manor, & Nisbet, 2006).

1 A more stringent analysis of these studies suggests that their inconsistent findings could be  
2 due, at least in part, to differences in the conceptualization and operationalization of network  
3 disagreement. Discussion networks characterized by disagreement have been labelled with different  
4 terms, such as “heterogeneous” (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Scheufele et al., 2004, 2006), “cross-  
5 cutting” (Mutz, 2002a, 2002b, 2006), “ambivalent” (Nir, 2005), and “diverse” (Huckfeldt &  
6 Sprague, 1995; Marsden, 1987). These expressions have been used as synonyms denoting a (certain  
7 degree of) discrepancy between an individual and her/his discussion partners. In order to measure it,  
8 most researchers used the “name generator” method, in which participants are asked to name up to  
9 five (usually three or four) persons with whom they talk about either important matters or politics,  
10 and then to indicate their political views. The degree of disagreement in the network is then  
11 estimated by comparing respondents’ opinions with their perception of their discussants’ opinions—  
12 for instance, as summed discrepancies between their vote preferences, or average perceived  
13 disagreement in political attitudes.

14 By focusing on those few discussants, scholars disregarded the broader social context in  
15 which individuals are embedded, and the overall exposure they have to diverse political views  
16 (Baldassarri, 2010), thus underestimating the actual level of disagreement (Sokhey & Djupé, 2014),  
17 hidden by selective exposure of the main discussion partners. In addition, the exclusive assessment  
18 of disagreement with a few discussants is probably reductive, being unable to capture the complex  
19 assortment of diverse opinions held in each person’s network.

20 Bello (2012) and Nir (2011) argued that the problem is the linear assessment of  
21 disagreement and actually found curvilinear effects with some disagreement to be beneficial, but  
22 complete disagreement to be detrimental, for participation. Eveland and Hively (2009) proposed to  
23 distinguish between disagreement and heterogeneity: While the former indicates a dissimilarity  
24 between the ego and the alters, the latter implies a diversity among the alters, irrespective of the  
25 ego’s position.

26 **Heterogeneity and Participation**

While most individual-level studies mainly looked at participants' disagreement with a few discussants, some of them (Kwak et al., 2005; McLeod et al., 1999b, 2003; Scheufele et al., 2003, 2004, 2006) assessed the frequency of political conversation with people that diverge from the respondents as regards to gender, ethnicity and ideology. These studies, hence, adopted a more inclusive perspective in terms of both the definition of the network and the operationalization of what their authors called "heterogeneity" or "diversity". They actually found a positive association between diversity and participation.

The second line of research, instead, adopted a structural-level perspective and measured heterogeneity or diversity looking at the distribution of partisanship or ideology in a respondent's county, metropolitan area or community. For instance, Gimpel et al. (2003) found that adolescents' political engagement increased as a function of their community political diversity.

In his dual motivation theory of public engagement, Campbell (2004, 2006) argued, and found, that political heterogeneity discourages civic participation (including volunteer activity or community service), but fosters political participation (i.e., a form of collective action aimed at influencing public policy). What is more interesting are the mechanisms expected to drive these opposite effects. Campbell proposed that civic participation is higher in homogeneous environments because people share civic norms and care about others' expectations and judgments. In contrast, political participation is rooted in conflict and should blow up in heterogeneous places, where people feel that their interests are threatened and thus participate in order to defend or advance them.

Various pieces of literature suggest that network heterogeneity is stimulating as it increases information seeking and knowledge. Classic pluralist accounts of democracy suggest that diversity should mobilize people to represent the different opinions at stake (Dahl, 1989). In addition, deliberative democracy theories contend that being confronted with different views motivates individuals to carefully re-evaluate the debated issues and learn about challenging ideas (Knight &

Johnson, 1994; McPhee, Smith, & Ferguson, 1963), thus promoting well-informed and firmly held opinions (Fishkin, 1995; Fearon, 1998).

Empirical work confirmed that heterogeneity should provide citizens with both the motivation and the ability to take part in politics. Indeed, some individual-level studies found a positive association between network diversity, on the one hand, and citizens' news-media use (McLeod, Sotirovic, & Holbert, 1998; Nisbet, Moy, & Scheufele, 2003; Scheufele et al., 2004, 2006) and discussion frequency (Bello, 2012) on the other hand, suggesting that heterogeneity encourages participation since it prompts information seeking and interest in politics. This heightened interest should, in turn, enhance citizens' political knowledge and understanding (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002; Mutz, 2002b; Scheufele et al., 2004, 2006). Also at a structural level, Gimpel et al. (2003) found a positive association between the partisan diversity of the community and adolescents' tolerance, political knowledge, frequency of political discussion and political efficacy – all important elements in fostering participation later in life.

A further clue came from an experimental socio-psychological study (Green, Visser, & Tetlock, 2000) investigating how people cope with accountability cross-pressures. Accountability, the social pressure to justify one's views to others, has been shown to influence individuals' ways of thinking (Tetlock, 1992). When those others hold multiple or conflicting positions, and the individual is "caught in the middle", the situation is even more complex. Green and colleagues showed that the participants that were accountable to conflicting constituencies with strong arguments were more integratively complex in their consideration of an issue (i.e., they recognize alternative viewpoints, make connections among them, and identify trade-offs) than those participants that were non-accountable, or accountable to unanimous constituencies. In other words, these results suggest that competition among different viewpoints is cognitively stimulating: expecting to confront with people holding conflicting views motivates individuals to choose high cognitive effort strategies, since an obvious solution is not immediately accessible, and needs to be reached through effortful thinking.

## Overview and Hypotheses

Summing up what we have learned from the different literatures briefly reviewed above, we can outline the objectives of the present work. First, individual-level studies mostly addressed the divergence between respondents' opinions and those of their main three or four discussion partners, as perceived by respondents, neglecting both the broader social context and the complex pattern of political differences among their sub-networks. This line of research elicited inconsistent results regarding the link between disagreement and political participation – probably due to different operationalizations of disagreement and definitions of network. Indeed, the studies adopting a more inclusive view highlighted a positive association between diversity and political participation.

Broadening the perspective, structural-level studies focused on the heterogeneity of political preferences held in citizens' whole communities and found a positive effect on political participation. However, the diversity of opinions held in an individual's county or district is probably experienced through the many people s/he is in contact with (rather than through the three persons s/he discusses politics with). Huckfeldt et al. (2004) also suggest that disagreement is more likely to survive between sub-groups than within them, hence this level of analysis may be more able to capture the degree of disagreement and heterogeneity actually perceived by citizens.

Drawing on Eveland and Hively (2009), Nir (2011), and Bello (2012), we anticipated that people need support for their opinions, but in a stimulating context where different views coexist. Therefore, we separately assessed both perceived disagreement and heterogeneity in social networks, and expected that they exert independent and opposite effects on political participation.

Based on cognitive consistency theories (Heider, 1946; Festinger, 1957) and individual-level evidence of the negative association between disagreement and participation (e.g., Mutz, 2006), we hypothesized that disagreement deters political participation (Hp1). On the contrary, based on democracy theories (e.g., Fearon, 1998), and on individual- (e.g., Scheufele et al., 2006) and structural-level (e.g., Campbell, 2004) evidence of the positive association between diversity and participation, we hypothesized that heterogeneity stimulates participation (Hp2).

1 In addition, we tried to identify the different processes accounting for these relations. As far  
2 as disagreement is concerned, we reasoned that citizens can lose interest in politics, in order to  
3 reduce cognitive dissonance, when they are surrounded by people holding opinions that are  
4 contrasting with their owns: Indeed, devaluing the object of controversy and getting away from it  
5 has been proposed as one of the strategies for avoiding conflict (Festinger, 1957; Hopman, 2012).  
6 On the other hand, as suggested in the previous section, network heterogeneity has been shown to  
7 foster political interest and knowledge that, in turn, are positively associated with various forms of  
8 political participation (e.g., Inglehart, 1979; McLeod et al., 1999a).

9 Therefore, we expected that disagreement would decrease political participation mediated by  
10 political interest (Hp3), whereas heterogeneity should increase participation mediated by both  
11 political interest and knowledge (Hp4). The effect of political interest on participation could be  
12 direct or indirect through knowledge (see Figure 1).

13 Since previous research has shown that interest in politics and political participation vary as  
14 a function of a series of socio-demographic and political factors, in order to detect the net  
15 contribution of disagreement and network heterogeneity, we controlled for participants' age,  
16 gender, education level, social class<sup>1</sup> and political efficacy in all of the subsequent analyses.

17 In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted secondary analyses on two ITANES (ITALian  
18 National Election Studies) databases: the 2013 Rolling Cross Section (RCS) two-wave panel  
19 survey, and the 2013 post-election survey (for a complete and detailed description of the general  
20 survey goals, designs, questionnaire construction, sampling and weighting procedures see Vezzoni,  
21 2014; for the descriptive results see Itanes, 2013). ITANES is a research group carrying on a

<sup>1</sup> Following Goldthorpe's theory (1980) applied to the Italian case by Cobalti and Schizzerotto (1994), social class was coded into four categories according to the participants' profession, or the previous work of those retired, or the bread-winner work of students or housewives: upper class (entrepreneurs, professionals, managers), non-manual workers (semi-professionals, technicians, routine employees in administration and commerce), petty bourgeoisie (small proprietors, artisans, shopkeepers and farmers, with or without employees), and manual workers (skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled manual workers in all sectors of activity). We entered three dummy variables into the models, with manual workers as the reference category.

longstanding Italian tradition of electoral research, which began in 1968 with the first collection of data ([www.itanes.org](http://www.itanes.org)).

Rather than using the “name generator” method, the ITANES surveys we analyzed employed a recently introduced (Baldassarri, 2010; Pattie & Johnston, 2009) measurement of political discussion networks. For our purpose, we examined a set of questions tapping the perceived proportion of political agreement participants find in some of the different groups to which they belong. It is worth noting that the data were not gathered directly from respondents’ networks, thus we do not truly know if the persons in those networks actually agree or disagree with participants’ political inclination. Indeed, as in most research on this topic, we measured the perceived rather than the actual disagreement and heterogeneity in participants’ networks. In this way, disagreement is probably underreported and underestimated. However, in our opinion, this is not a problem, but even an advantage, given our purpose of investigating the individual consequences of disagreement and heterogeneity, which can occur only when they are recognized and experienced by respondents.

Before proceeding with the test of our hypotheses, it seems useful to provide some contextual information. The 2013 general election was particular because it came in the middle of a deep economic crisis, recession and social tensions, with an overall public opinion climate characterized by extreme political dissatisfaction and lack of trust in the party system as well as in democratic institutions (Vezzoni, 2014). It followed the so-called “technocratic government” finalized to deal rapidly with the dramatic economic problems, and led by Mario Monti who resigned after 15 months of office. This election was characterized by a diversified and new political supply, with four main coalitions (and related leaders) contesting each other at the voting booth. Among them, the Five Stars Movement, guided by the former comedian Beppe Grillo, ran for the first time and unexpectedly became the second most voted party. This situation may have made more difficult the voting decision, in fact 26% of the respondents to the RCS post-election survey reported they decided with certainty for whom to vote in the week preceding the election,

1 while 9% decided in the booth. In addition, overall voter turnout decreased from 80.5%, in 2008, to  
2 75.2%.

3 **Study 1**

4 **Data and Measures**

5 For the first study, we used data from the 2013 ITANES RCS two-wave panel survey,  
6 administered via Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) system to a probability sample of  
7 3,008 Italian electors. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in  
8 the study. As the general election took place on 24-25 February, the pre-election questionnaires  
9 were filled in from the 5<sup>th</sup> of January to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February, and the post-election questionnaires  
10 were filled in from the 26<sup>th</sup> of March to the 8<sup>th</sup> of April.

11 For our purposes, we focused on two questions (included in the first section of the pre-  
12 election questionnaire) tapping the proportion of political agreement participants perceived in their  
13 family and friendship networks. The items read as follows: “Think of the members of your family /  
14 your friends. How many of them have political views similar to yours?”. Participants answered on a  
15 7-point scale with the following options: *None of them (0%)*, *A few of them (around 10%)*, *Some of*  
16 *them (around 25%)*, *About half of them (around 50%)*, *Many of them (around 75%)*, *Most of them*  
17 *(around 90%)*, *All of them (100%)*, plus the *I don’t know* response (chosen by 3.8% of respondents  
18 for the family members item and 6.1% for the friends item), which was subsequently recoded into  
19 missing.

20 We computed our predictors from those two items. First, the response scales were recoded  
21 as proportions of disagreement ranging from 0 to 1: for instance, when participants selected the  
22 answer *Some of them (around 25%)*, we equated that level of disagreement to .75. We then  
23 computed the mean of these proportions as *perceived disagreement* score and their absolute  
24 difference as *perceived heterogeneity* score. Both scores range from 0 to 1 and were computed only  
25 for participants who indicated the level of agreement encountered in both networks.

Dependent variables were indicators of political participation. As in most research on political engagement (e.g., Hopman, 2012; Huckfeldt et al., 2004b; Mutz, 2002a, 2004; Nir, 2005, 2011; Pattie & Johnston, 2009), we first considered whether respondents reported, in the post-election survey, that they had voted in the previous general election (dummy variable). However, this variable is oddly distributed since Italian turnout is quite high, compared with other Western countries, and the turnout question over-estimated actual participation in the vote. Indeed, 91.4% of respondents declared that they did vote. We thus considered a further indicator of electoral engagement, namely the *propensity to abstain*. In the pre-election questionnaire, a question placed at the end of a scale measuring the propensity to vote for each party asked “How likely is it that in the future you will abstain from voting?” (answer from 0 = *not likely at all* to 10 = *very likely*).

Besides self-reported voting and propensity to abstain, we also computed an index of *online political activism*<sup>2</sup> as the sum of six items measuring the occurrence of the following behaviors in the previous week: visiting political parties’ or candidates’ websites, visiting parties’ or candidates’ social network profiles/pages, sharing campaign-related contents on social networks, taking part in online discussions about political issues or the electoral campaign, taking part in a political event after being invited online, subscribing to a mailing list or activating RSS feeds to be updated on the campaign. These items were presented in the pre-election questionnaire. We computed a summative score of online political activism by summing the number of participatory behaviors enacted in the previous week (range 0-6).

Finally, though not directly concerning participation, we also included the *timing of vote decision* as a further dependent variable. Following previous studies considering this dependent variable (e.g., Mutz, 2002a; Nir, 2005, 2011), we reasoned that deciding late should make participation in the campaign activities unlikely. In the post-election questionnaire, respondents were asked “Could you please tell me when you decided with certainty for whom to vote in the last

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<sup>2</sup> While access to Internet was quite widespread in Italy, with 76% of the population older than 2 years having access to the web in February 2013 (Audiweb data), the actual use of internet is slightly lower. Indeed, according to Eurostat, 58% of Italians aged 16-74 used internet at least once in the three months preceding their 2013 survey.

general election?”. They answered on a 4-point scale where 1 = *In the booth, while I was voting*, 2 = *In the week preceding the election*, 3 = *A few weeks before the election*, 4 = *Much earlier*.

Since the items assessing factual knowledge were placed in the post-election questionnaire, while some of the dependent variables were assessed in the pre-election questionnaire, we could not include knowledge as a potential mediator in Study 1. Therefore, in this first study we could only partially test the expected model, including *interest in politics* as the only intervening factor. This was computed as the mean of three items measuring the general interest in politics, the frequency of conversations about politics in the previous week and the interest in the election results ( $\alpha = .72$ ). As different response scales were associated to these items, we normalized the ratings before computing the mean, thus the variable ranged from 0 to 1.

In order to obtain an index of *political efficacy* to be used as a control variable, we averaged the degree of agreement with the two statements: “People like me don’t have any say in what the government does” and “Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on” (response scale from 1= *Not at all true* to 4= *completely true*). The scores were reversed before computing the mean ( $\alpha = .49$ ;  $r = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Results**

Table 1 reports correlations among the measures, along with descriptive statistics. Perceived heterogeneity was positively correlated with interest in politics but not with the dependent variables, whereas perceived disagreement was correlated in the expected direction with interest, voting, propensity to abstain and early decision, but not with online activism. Perceived heterogeneity and disagreement were positively correlated, probably because in this study we could only consider two social contexts. Interest was correlated in the expected direction with all the dependent variables.

In order to test our hypotheses, we ran a mediational analysis on each dependent variable using PROCESS, the SPSS macro provided by Hayes (2013). We tested four Models 4, setting 5,000 bootstrap resamples, in order to estimate the effects of network heterogeneity and disagreement on our dependent variables directly and indirectly, through interest (see Figure 1). As

1 stated above, we controlled for participants' age, gender, education level, social class and political  
2 efficacy. Results are displayed in Table 2.

3 Beginning with the total effects, perceived heterogeneity significantly lowered, and  
4 perceived disagreement marginally increased, the propensity to abstain. In addition, perceived  
5 heterogeneity significantly fostered, while disagreement discouraged, the earliness of decision.  
6 Finally, voting was marginally more likely at increasing levels of perceived heterogeneity, and  
7 significantly less likely at increasing levels of disagreement. Online activism, in contrast, was not  
8 affected by the predictors.

9 Concerning the indirect effects, perceived heterogeneity significantly increased, while  
10 disagreement decreased, participants' interest in politics, even after controlling for each other and  
11 for the covariates. In turn, interest in politics made voting significantly more likely and increased  
12 online activism, fostered early decision and decreased propensity to abstain. More importantly, the  
13 95% confidence intervals reported in the last four rows of Table 2 indicated that both perceived  
14 heterogeneity and disagreement in social networks exerted significant indirect effects on all of the  
15 dependent variables through interest – the former encouraging, and the latter discouraging, voting,  
16 early decision and online activism, and, respectively, reducing and increasing the propensity to  
17 abstain.

18 As the total effects of perceived heterogeneity on voting, propensity to abstain and early  
19 decision, and those of perceived disagreement on voting and propensity to abstain became non-  
20 significant after entering the mediators into the regressions, we can affirm that those effects are  
21 fully mediated by political interest. In contrast, the total effect of perceived disagreement on early  
22 decision weakened after controlling for the mediator, but it remained significant, suggesting that  
23 interest only partially mediated this relation. Finally, although both predictors did not significantly  
24 affect online activism, they exerted significant indirect effects on it through interest.

## 25 Discussion

Our analyses allowed us to show that, as expected, perceived disagreement in social networks indirectly reduced political participation and delayed vote decision, whereas perceived heterogeneity indirectly promoted political participation and early decision, through interest in politics. However, due to database constraints, we could not verify whether political knowledge also mediated the effects of disagreement and heterogeneity. In addition, our predictors were computed with reference to only two social contexts, namely family and friends. A third limitation is that the RCS survey only assessed online activism, neglecting more traditional forms of political participation such as taking part in political meetings and rallies. This variable would be important, since propensity to abstain and, particularly, voting could be weakly sensitive to social influence in Italy, where the majority of people do vote.

This is why we turned to the second ITANES 2013 survey that included a measure of factual knowledge (in the same questionnaire assessing the independent and dependent variables), information about four social contexts and a battery assessing traditional offline activism.

**Study 2**

**Data and Measures**

For the second study, we employed data from the 2013 ITANES post-election survey, administered via Computer Assisted Personal interviewing (CAPI) system by trained interviewers immediately after the general election. Respondents were a probability sample of 1,508 Italian electors. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The interviews were held from the 21<sup>st</sup> of March to the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, 2014.

In order to build our predictors, we focused again on the questions regarding the perceived agreement encountered in some of the different groups to which participants belong. The questions were the same as in the first study but, besides family and friends, they also concerned colleagues and Facebook friends (the “I don’t know” responses were again chosen by a minority of respondents: from 2.2% for the FB friends item to 7.6% for the friends item). As in Study 1, we computed *perceived disagreement* as the mean of the proportion of disagreement perceived in those

social contexts. *Perceived heterogeneity* was computed as the coefficient of variation of the same four proportions. Both variables were computed for participants who indicated the proportion of agreement perceived in at least two networks.

Four indicators of political participation and one measure of decision timing were examined. *Voting* (83.8% voted), *propensity to abstain* and *early decision* were measured by the same questions used in Study 1. *Offline activism* was obtained by summing eight questions asking whether respondents engaged in each of the following political activities in the previous two years (range 0-8): Signing a public request for a referendum or law; sending letters or complaints to public authorities or newspapers/media; attending political debates or rallies; participating in a demonstration; buying or refusing to buy a product for political, ethical or environmental reasons; donating money to a party or political movement; distributing fliers or other materials for a party or movement; and voting in the primary elections of a party or movement.

We also computed a measure of *online political activism* as the sum of participatory behaviors enacted during the electoral campaign (range 0-8): visiting political parties' or candidates' websites; visiting parties' or candidates' social network profiles/pages; watching campaign-related TV content; sharing campaign-related contents on social networks; taking part in online discussions about political issues or the campaign; taking part in a political event after being invited via the Internet; following a politician or a political party/coalition on Facebook; and exchanging ideas about the campaign with Facebook friends (594 participants reported not having access to the Internet, thus they were not asked these questions).

As far as the hypothesized mediators are concerned, *political interest* was computed as the mean of two questions asking about the general interest in politics and the frequency of conversations about politics in the previous two months ( $r = .58, p < .001$ ). We also computed a *factual knowledge* index, based on the correctness of three open-ended questions concerning the electoral system: "Who elects the President of the Republic?", "How many years does the President of the Republic stay in office?", "Do you know, approximately, how many representatives sit in the

Chamber of Deputies?”. The answers to the first two questions were coded as either wrong (=0) or correct (=1), whereas those to the third question were coded as wrong (=0), nearly correct (=1) or correct (=2). Then the three scores were summed in a total score ranging from 0 to 4.

*Political efficacy* was computed as the mean ( $\alpha = .71$ ) of four reversed items, the same two included in Study 1 plus “Usually, people we elect to the Parliament quickly lose touch with the people” and “Parties are only interested in people's votes, but not in their opinions” (response from 1= *not at all true* to 4= *completely true*).

**Result and Discussion**

Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables are displayed in Table 3. Perceived heterogeneity was positively correlated with interest and with both offline and online activism. Perceived disagreement was correlated in the expected direction with all the mediators and the dependent variables. Political interest and knowledge were, in turn, associated with all the dependent variables. Perceived heterogeneity and disagreement were not correlated in this study assessing those measures across four social contexts.

In order to test our hypotheses, we verified a two-step model in which perceived heterogeneity and disagreement induce interest in politics which, in turn, improves factual knowledge that finally makes the various kinds of participation more likely and leads to earlier vote decision. To this end, we ran five Models 6 of PROCESS, setting 5,000 bootstrapped resamples. This analysis, besides providing the total and direct effects, allows testing three indirect paths: the first includes only political interest as the intermediate factor, the second includes only knowledge as the intermediate factor, and the third includes the complete sequence whereby interest affects knowledge. Again, we controlled for participants’ age, gender, education level, social class and political efficacy in all of the analyses. Results are displayed in Table 4.

Total effects of perceived heterogeneity in networks were only significant, and positive, on offline and online activism, whereas those of perceived disagreement were significant and negative

on all of the dependent variables – except on propensity to abstain, which increased with disagreement.

Both perceived heterogeneity and disagreement significantly predicted participants' interest – the former positively and the latter negatively – even after controlling for each other and for the covariates. Knowledge, in contrast, was not affected by any of the predictors but increased with interest and, in turn, significantly encouraged voting and online activism, marginally increased the earliness of decision, and reduced the propensity to vote. Political interest also made voting more likely, fostered offline and online activism and lowered the propensity to abstain. The coefficients and standard errors of the indirect effects, along with the 95% confidence intervals, were displayed in the last six rows of Table 4. The models that included only interest as an intermediate factor were largely significant for all of the dependent variables – except for decision earliness, which was not significantly predicted by interest. As it marginally increased with knowledge, however, the complete path with interest promoting knowledge, which in turn fosters early decision, was significant. The complete sequence was also significant for the other dependent variables – except for offline activism, which was not impacted by knowledge.

As the total effects of perceived heterogeneity on voting, propensity to abstain and early decision were not significant, its effects on those variables through interest and knowledge were indirect effects, rather than mediation. Instead, since the total effects of perceived heterogeneity on both offline and online activism, and the total effects of perceived disagreement on propensity to abstain, early decision and offline activism got lower, but remained significant, after entering the mediators into the regressions, we can affirm that these were partial mediations. Finally, the total effects of perceived disagreement on voting and online activism were fully mediated by interest and knowledge, as they became non-significant after controlling for the mediators.

### General Discussion

Two studies conducted on two large representative samples of Italian citizens supported our hypotheses, showing that perceived disagreement and heterogeneity in social networks exerted

independent indirect effects on political participation through interest and knowledge, even after controlling for structural variables and political efficacy. Those effects were opposite in their direction, as perceived disagreement (between respondents and their contacts) discouraged, while perceived heterogeneity (among sub-networks) encouraged, participation. Our results are in line with previous findings and reconcile their inconsistencies, confirming that, as already suggested by others (Bello, 2012; Eveland & Hively, 2009; Nir, 2011), individual participation is promoted by a social context that is supportive but also diverse and, hence, stimulating.

In addition, we examined the processes explaining the above illustrated relations: as expected, both perceived disagreement and heterogeneity impacted upon participation through interest in politics. Study 2 also showed that, for all the dependent variables except offline activism, interest affected participation by increasing factual knowledge. An unexpected result emerged with regard to this: indeed, while we hypothesized this sequence for perceived heterogeneity only, we also found it for disagreement. In other words, the negative effect of perceived disagreement on interest extended to knowledge as well.

Some of the paths were full or partial mediations and some were indirect effects, but the substance of the processes does not change, and informs on the psychological mechanisms driving opposite consequences for the two predictors. Indeed, in line with cognitive consistency theories (Heider, 1946; Festinger, 1957) and individual-level evidence on the detrimental effects of disagreement (Bélanger & Eagles, 2007; Mutz, 2002a, 2006; Hopman, 2012), the perception of being surrounded by people with opinions conflicting with one's own seems to lead to disregard for the object of controversy, and loss of interest in politics, maybe in order to reduce the cognitive dissonance that originates from interpersonal disagreement. In contrast, the perception of being surrounded by significant others with political preferences that are conflicting with each other, seems to be cognitively stimulating, since it increases interest, political knowledge and, in turn, political participation. These results are consistent with studies indicating that network heterogeneity induces information seeking, political knowledge (Bello, 2012; Gimpel et al., 2003;

McLeod et al., 1998; Nisbet et al., 2003; Price et al., 2002; Scheufele et al., 2004, 2006) and integrative complexity in reasoning (Green et al., 2000), and suggest that the positive effects on participation are driven by this heightened motivation to learn about, and understand, politics.

Our results were partially derived from cross-sectional data. Therefore, the problem of direction of effects arises for all of the associations hypothesized and observed. It is, indeed, possible that the more involved and expert in politics individuals are, the more they perceive their significant others as holding their own opinions or selectively talk with people who agree with them. However, many individual-level studies have drawn causal inferences about the effect of disagreement on participation (e.g., Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Mutz, 2002a) despite using cross-sectional data for their analyses. In addition, we believe that the network assessment employed in our studies makes the problem of selective exposure far less serious than it could be with the traditional “name generator” method. On the contrary, the false consensus bias risk remains; hence we can cautiously consider the relation between network disagreement and interest/knowledge as bidirectional, whereas the community-level research (see Campbell, 2004, 2006; Gimpel et al., 2003) on the effects of heterogeneity on political engagement reassured us about this direction. In addition, two dependent variables (voting and decision timing) were measured in the second wave of Study 1, excluding the possibility that they affected the predictors – rather than the reverse.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, this investigation helps to clarify the previous contrasting findings, making a unique and valuable contribution to the understanding of the association between social networks’ characteristics and political participation. Indeed, our research relied on a set of questions tapping respondents’ overall social context, while retaining the specificity of individuals’ personal relations (see also Baldassarri, 2010): This approach allowed us to capture the level of network disagreement and heterogeneity actually perceived by respondents and more likely to affect their behavior. Thanks to the adoption of an in-between level of analysis, rather than an individual- or community-level, and by considering the broad set of relations experienced in the different sub-networks to which individuals belong, we showed that perceived

1 disagreement and heterogeneity in social networks exerted distinct and opposite effects on political  
2 participation. These effects, however, were driven by the same motivational processes: indeed,  
3 disagreement dampened participation by decreasing political interest and, in turn, knowledge, while  
4 heterogeneity encouraged participation by increasing political interest and, in turn, knowledge.

5 Moreover, although the present studies concern a specific domain (politics), a specific kind  
6 of social behavior (political participation) and were carried out in a specific context (Italy), we  
7 believe that our results may be generalized to other domains and contexts where different opinions  
8 coexist and perceived disagreement and heterogeneity in social networks could affect individuals'  
9 commitment in pursuing their ideas. The former process is well known: as people are conflict  
10 avoidant, social support is crucial to undertake any difficult or costly action. For example, support  
11 from social networks has emerged as a major factor in maintaining a vegetarian or vegan diet (Jabs,  
12 Devine, & Sobal, 1998), while absence of support seems one of the most common barriers to these  
13 choices (Lea & Worsley, 2003). The detrimental effect of disagreement we documented is thus  
14 easily recognizable in many domains other than politics. Less known is the general effect of  
15 perceived heterogeneity. Our findings suggest that people are willing to take action if they have to  
16 face with different views in their social environment: individuals in heterogeneous social networks  
17 need to collect information to increase their knowledge in order to defend and exchange their  
18 opinions, and this in turn makes them more involved and committed. There is no reason to expect  
19 that this effect would be specific to Italian politics. Further research is needed to understand  
20 whether the processes we highlighted apply to different domains and political contexts.

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Table 1. Correlations and descriptive statistics for dependent and independent variables (Study 1).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Perceived heterogeneity	--	.108***	.083***	.030	-.036	.022	-.010
2. Perceived disagreement		--	-.229***	-.049*	.045*	-.128**	-.029
3. Interest			--	.217***	-.352***	.233***	.329***
4. Voting (0/1)				--	-.314***	-- <sup>a</sup>	.068***
5. Propensity to abstain					--	-.247***	-.054**
6. Early decision							.079***
7. Online activism							--
<i>M</i>	.18	.61	.67	.91	3.23	3.00	1.70
<i>SD</i>	.19	.24	.24	.28	3.73	1.03	1.94
<i>N</i>	2742	2742	2989	2883	2888	2591	2928

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Point b-serial correlations were reported for voting.

<sup>a</sup> The correlation between turnout and early decision was not computed because only participants who voted were asked to report the timing of decision.

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Table 2. Direct and indirect effect, through interest in politics, of perceived heterogeneity and disagreement on political participation (Study 1).

	Interest	Voting (0/1)	Propensity to abstain	Early decision	Online activism
Age	.18***	.01** (.00)	-.05*	.09***	-.15***
Gender (1=males)	.13***	-.08 (.15)	-.03	.05*	.03°
Education	.16***	.25* (.12)	.01	-.03	.02
Upper class	.08**	.02 (.25)	.00	-.03	-.02
Non-manual workers	.06*	-.09 (.21)	-.06*	.03	-.07*
Petty bourgeoisie	.06**	.16 (.30)	-.02	-.01	-.03
Political efficacy	.19***	.01 (.10)	-.12***	.09***	.10***
Interest		2.87*** (.34)	-.30***	.16***	.30***
Perceived heterogeneity	.09***	.68° (.41) (.28 (.41))	-.04* (-.01 )	.04* (.03 )	-.01 (-.04*)
Perceived disagreement	-.20***	-.68* (.29) (-.15 (.30))	.03° (-.03)	-.11*** (-.08***)	-.02 (.04*)
$R^2$	.18	.10 <sup>a</sup>	.14	.07	.13
$N$	2721	2640	2665	2405	2693
Bootstrapped indirect effects estimates ( $SE$ )					
Perceived Heterogeneity $LLCI, ULCI$	.30 (.07), .17, .46	-.56 (.12), -.81, -.34	.07 (.02), .04, .11	.28 (.06), .17, .41	
Perceived disagreement $LLCI, ULCI$	-.53 (.09), -.72, -.38	1.00 (.11), .79, 1.24	-.14 (.02), -.19, -.09	-.51 (.06), -.64, -.40	

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Results of linear regressions for mediators and continuous dependent variables (beta standardized coefficients are reported), and of binary logistic regression for turnout (b unstandardized coefficients are reported along with standard errors in parentheses).

Direct effects of perceived heterogeneity and disagreement were displayed in parentheses below the total effects.

<sup>a</sup> Nagelkerke  $R^2$ .

<sup>o</sup>  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

*LLCI* = Lower Level Confidence Interval, *ULCI* = Upper Level Confidence Interval.

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Table 3. Correlations and descriptive statistics for dependent and independent variables (Study 2).

	1	2	3	4	6	7	8	9	10
1. Perceived heterogeneity	--	-.044	.070*	.017	-.002	-.008	.007	.085**	.106**
2. Perceived disagreement		--	-.263***	-.059*	-.089**	.118***	-.155***	-.210***	-.115**
3. Interest			--	.374***	.255***	-.277***	.124***	.461***	.358***
4. Knowledge				--	.212***	-.197***	.064*	.238***	.199***
6. Voting					--	-.371***	-- <sup>a</sup>	.193***	.087**
7. Propensity to abstain						--	-.172***	-.186***	-.105**
8. Early decision								.113***	.100**
9. Offline activism								--	.464***
10. Online activism									--
<i>M</i>	.375	.594	.441	2.234	.851	2.986	3.142	1.092	1.441
<i>SD</i>	.365	.216	.278	1.332	.356	3.481	.932	1.493	1.960
<i>N</i>	1178	1182	1508	1508	1499	1429	1270	1508	910

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Point b-serial correlations were reported for voting.

<sup>a</sup> The correlation between turnout and early decision was not computed because only participants who voted were asked to report the timing of

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decision.

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Table 4. Direct and indirect effect, through interest in politics and factual knowledge, of perceived heterogeneity and disagreement on political participation (Study 2).

	Mediators models		Dependent variables models				
	Interest	Knowledge	Voting (0/1)	Propensity to abstain	Early decision	Offline activism	Online activism
Age	.17***	.08**	.00 (.01)	-.03	.14***	-.03	-.22***
Gender (1=males)	.12***	.15***	-.53** (.20)	.01	.07*	.01	.08*
Education	.26***	.24***	.24 (.16)	-.04	-.08°	.11**	.03
Upper class	.03	.09**	.00 (.43)	.01	.01	.05	.04
Non-manual workers	.03	.13***	-.19 (.28)	-.02	-.03	.05°	.02
Petty bourgeoisie	-.04	.05°	-.32 (.27)	.02	-.02	.00	.02
Pol. Efficacy	.04	.03	.36° (.20)	-.09**	-.03	.07*	.06°
Interest		.21***	1.54*** (.43)	-.14***	.04	.36***	.31***
Knowledge			.29*** (.08)	-.11***	.06°	.03	.11**
Perceived heterogeneity	.08**	-.01	-.07 (.25) (-.17 (.25))	-.01 (.00)	.04 (.03)	.08** (.05*)	.11** (.08*)
Perceived disagreement	-.23***	.03	-1.24** (.47) (-.89° (.49))	.10*** (.06*)	-.14*** (-.13***)	-.19*** (-.11***)	-.10** (-.03)
$R^2$	.17	.21	.12	.08	.07	.24	.18
$N$	1174	1174	1171	1125	1039	1174	790

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Bootstrapped indirect effect estimates (*SE*)

Perc. heterogeneity → Interest → DV <i>LLCI, ULCI</i>	.09 (.04) .02, .20	-.11 (.05) -.22, -.03	.01 (.01) -.004, .03	.12 (.05) .03, .21	.18 (.06) .07, .32
Perc. heterogeneity → Interest → Knowledge → DV <i>LLCI, ULCI</i>	.02 (.01) .005, .04	-.02 (.01) -.04, -.01	.00 (.00) .0003, .01	.00 (.00) -.002, .008	.01 (.01) .003, .029
Perc. Heterogeneity → Knowledge → DV <i>LLCI, ULCI</i>	-.01 (.02) -.07, .04	.01 (.03) -.04, .08	.00 (.01) -.02, .003	-.00 (.00) -.02, .004	-.04 (.02) -.10, -.003
Perc. disagreement → Interest → DV <i>LLCI, ULCI</i>	-.43 (.15) -.73, -.17	.51 (.14) .27, .83	-.04 (.03) -.11, .02	-.60 (.09) -.79, -.44	-.67 (.13) -.94, -.44
Perc. disagreement → Interest → Knowledge → DV <i>LLCI, ULCI</i>	-.09 (.03) -.15, -.03	.09 (.03) .04, .16	-.01 (.01) -.03, -.001	-.01 (.01) -.03, .01	-.04 (.02) -.09, -.02
Perc. disagreement → Knowledge → DV <i>LLCI, ULCI</i>	.05 (.05) -.03, .19	-.08 (.06) -.23, .002	.01 (.01) -.01, .03	.01 (.01) -.005, .04	.04 (.04) -.03, .14

Results of linear regressions for mediators and continuous dependent variables (beta standardized coefficients are reported), and of binary logistic regression for turnout (b unstandardized coefficients are reported along with standard errors in parentheses).

Direct effects of network heterogeneity and disagreement were displayed in parentheses below the total effects.

<sup>a</sup> Nagelkerke  $R^2$ .

<sup>°</sup>  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

*LLCI* = Lower Level Confidence Interval, *ULCI* = Upper Level Confidence Interval.

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Figure 1. The expected and final mediation model. The continuous arrows were the paths confirmed in the final model.

