

## **“Blood Is Thicker Than Water”: Interpersonal Influence, Selection, and the Role of Family in Forging Italians’ Political Agreement**

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Mechanisms that are known to forge political agreement include interpersonal influence—the process by which people change their ideas according to others’ attitudes—and selection—people’s choice of their discussants according to their discussants’ preferences. Using data obtained from a longitudinal survey, we test how these two processes contribute to changing vote choices or discussants around the 2014 European elections in Italy. Results partly confirm findings from the previous literature, showing influence and selection effects. Moreover, it is suggested that the family contributes crucially in stimulating strategies that result in political agreement. Propensities to maintain agreeable discussants over time and to change voting choice are boosted by exposure to family members.

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Mechanisms of interpersonal influence are attracting widespread interest in sociology, political science, and communication studies (Bello & Rolfe, 2014; Christakis & Fowler, 2007, 2008; Fowler, Heaney, Nickerson, Padgett, & Sinclair, 2011; Guidetti, Cavazza, & Graziani, 2016; Klostad, 2007; Lazer, 2011; Rogowski & Sinclair, 2012). Interpersonal communication has been demonstrated to be a crucial element in contemporary democracies, affecting both the stability of and changes in individuals’ voting behavior. According to the so-called social logic of politics, voting can be seen as a social activity in which, by means of interpersonal communication with coworkers, relatives, and friends, citizens structure their political attitudes and preferences (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995).

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Several contributions have stressed the roles of *selection* and *influence* in shaping patterns of agreement among citizens during election campaigns (Bello & Rolfe, 2014; Klofstad, 2007). Selection can be broadly identified as a behavior that discards disagreeable discussants and maintains relationships with like-minded people. Influence is the mechanism according to which people and their discussants change their ideas, reaching a situation of agreement. Because these are relatively fine-textured mechanisms, many studies (Fowler et al., 2011; Lomi, Snijders, Steglich, & Torló, 2011; Mollenhorst, Volker, & Flap, 2008) have recommended using longitudinal data to consider influence and selection patterns. Using four-wave panel data collected during the 2010 UK elections, for instance, Bello and Rolfe (2014) found that if influence actually represents a relevant outcome of a dyadic relation during an election campaign, there is much less empirical evidence for selection. Using data from the pre- and postelection Italian National Election Studies (ITANES) longitudinal survey collected during the 2014 European elections in Italy, our study tests whether Italians' electoral behaviors are conditioned by influence and/or selection strategies. Choosing Italy as our case study allows us to test expectations in the context of interpersonal influence and its effects on political behavior, which have been poorly considered in general in the literature. Political network studies, indeed, have mainly developed expectations using Anglo-American data (Bello & Rolfe, 2014; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Klofstad, 2007), with a handful of exceptions (Eveland, Song, & Beck, 2015; Faas & Schmitt-Beck, 2010; Hopmann, 2012; Hopmann, Matthes, & Nir, 2015; Huckfeldt, Ikeda, & Pappi, 2005; Mancosu, 2016; Vezzoni & Mancosu, 2016). Focusing on the Italian case, however, means not only extending the literature by adding evidence of an additional, generic case study; we will argue that Italy presents a demographic or cultural regime that is typical of Mediterranean countries and represents a paradigm of the so-called strong family ties setting (Guetto, Mancosu, Scherer, & Torricelli, 2016; Hajnal, 1982; Reher, 1998). It will be argued that this demographic/cultural setting presents expectations that slightly differ from the Northern European, Central European, and American contexts.

From the methodological side, the study employs variables that have been rarely employed in the literature. Because the main predictor of influence processes is the level of disagreement in one's discussion network, this study tests this mechanism by using overall self-reported measures of political heterogeneity in different social circles, such as among family and friends (Baldassarri, 2009; Guidetti et al., 2016; Mancosu, 2016). Throughout the article, we argue that such a measure is more efficient in disentangling network mechanisms than the variables used in previous studies.

Finally, the article controls for design-related biases that could affect our investigation of influence and selection effects. The pre- and postelection design employed in this study is known to lead to the misreporting of vote choices. For example, bandwagon effects can affect the relevance and statistical significance of other, theoretically relevant variables (Atkeson, 1999; Carsey & Jackson, 2001; Noelle-Neumann, 1984; Schadee, Segatti, & Bellucci, 2010). This is particularly true for results of the 2014 European elections in Italy, in which the Italian Democratic Party won with a surprisingly high share of votes. Therefore, in addition, this work purifies models from these possible cognitive biases.

Results suggest that influence and positive selection effects are present. Moreover, it is argued that familial circles contribute crucially and apparently more than they do in other countries to the stimulating strategies that result in political agreement.

The next section explores the theoretical literature on influence and selection, stating explicitly the working hypotheses. The third and fourth sections present the data, some of their main characteristics, and the models that are employed in the hypothesis-testing procedures. The fifth section presents the results, and the last summarizes theoretically relevant results, presenting the limitations of the work and possible theoretical and empirical solutions.

### **Background: Selection and Influence**

The next two subsections outline the several ways that selection and influence act in changing patterns of agreement and disagreement. Similar to other studies (Partheymüller & Schmitt-Beck, 2012), the patterns to be tested will be seen only within short time periods (an election campaign or, in this case, a few weeks before and after election day); consequently, a large proportion of the interpersonal relationships that we measure in these small periods are stable relationships. Part of these stable situations, in addition, could be the result of influence and selection processes that occur before the observational window. In any case, a sufficiently large number of changes in the data considered can be observed (see Appendix A for descriptive results), particularly in times when attention toward politics is high, such as the days before and after an election.

The case study for our hypothesis testing is the European election of 2014 in Italy. Italy represents a particularly interesting case for the political network literature. With a demographic/cultural setting that is typical of Mediterranean countries, Italy represents a paradigm of specific patterns of social exchange and cultural and social norms that are radically different than Anglo-American ones, particularly with regard to differences in the role of family ties (Guetto et al., 2016; Hajnal, 1982). Reher (1998) states:

It is not difficult to identify areas where families and family ties are relatively "strong," and others where they are relatively "weak." There are regions where traditionally the family group has had priority over the individual, and others where the individual and individual values have had priority over everything else. (p. 203)

Reher's classification subdivides the "center and north of Europe (Scandinavia, the British Isles, the Low Countries, much of Germany and Austria), together with North American society, . . . characterized by relatively weak family links, and the Mediterranean region, [characterized by] by strong family ties" (Reher, 1998, p. 203). Maintaining consistency with this view, it has been demonstrated that Italians (and Southern Europeans in general) tend to rely more on family ties in various aspects of their lives—for instance, when addressing economic issues (Albertini, Kohli, & Vogel, 2007) or when dealing with behaviors related to the construction of new families (Schröder, 2008). Our main expectation is that even in political relationships, the role of the family shapes patterns of political agreement and disagreement.

Mainly because of the lack of data, Mediterranean countries have been rarely considered when testing political influence and selection mechanisms. The Italian context, thus, becomes an interesting case study because for the first time, we have the opportunity to systematically test interpersonal

communication mechanisms in a country that is characterized by the presence of strong family ties. In exploring this issue, the study focuses, more than other works do, on outcomes that emerge from different strengths of the relationships. Are influence and selection more or less likely to be enacted when individuals are engaged with relatives when compared with nonrelatives? Are these differences more pronounced than they are in other works treating different contexts?

### ***Selection***

In the literature of political networks, people are usually seen to be passive recipients of political information and pressure. Simply put, people are expected to be affected by others' behaviors and attitudes. Consequently, we can only assess whether external pressure is effective in changing one's behavior (see Berelson et al., 1954). However, several studies (Bello & Rolfe, 2014; Noel & Nyhan, 2011) have stressed the active role that people play in selecting their political partners by retaining some of them and discarding others. In line with this view, the empirical evidence shows that people do not talk with the same discussants all the time, but that, in general, they select discussion partners from those who are available (Bello & Rolfe, 2014; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). At least two factors can affect the likelihood of retaining (or discarding) a political discussion partner. People might select their discussants according to the intimacy they share with others or according to the similarity they share with regard to views on politics. From an individual's perspective, avoiding political talk with someone who holds different views is an easy and relatively inexpensive strategy to escape from disagreeable situations (this strategy is termed *negative selection*). The selection process does not usually lead to behaviors that undermine relationships *tout court*; for instance,

Selection of political discussants does not necessarily mean ending pre-existing relationships or befriending all Liberal Democrats that one meets; it can be as simple as choosing to sit at the opposite end of the table from politically conservative Aunt Edna at family gatherings. (Bello & Rolfe, 2014, p. 135)

Consistently, an individual will probably retain like-minded discussants (positive selection). As widely recognized in research focusing on political homophily, indeed, people tend to select political messages from sources with whom they agree, be they media or interpersonal sources (Zaller, 1992). The following hypothesis based on the mechanism revealed:

*H1: People are more likely to retain political discussants with whom they agree than with whom they disagree.*

However, political homophily is not the only reason a person might retain or discard a political discussant. The intimacy of the ties that connect people has proven to be a crucial property that contributes to the propensity to adopt a selection strategy regardless of the agreement of the two discussants (Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995; Mutz & Mondak, 2006). Intuitively, avoiding political talk with an intimate discussant, such as a spouse/partner or a relative, has consequences that are dramatically different from avoiding political talk with, say, the mail carrier. It is possible to analytically differentiate among different degrees of *cohesiveness*, which are present in different sections of an ego

network (Huckfeldt et al., 1995). Thus, we define cohesive social groups as those in which ties among people are more intimate, such as the family (Huckfeldt et al., 1995). Conversely, noncohesive social groups are composed of circles of friends or coworkers. In general, it is recognized that in normal conditions, people who are part of cohesive social groups are subject to stronger coercive power than those who are primarily exposed to noncohesive circles (Faas & Schmitt-Beck, 2010; Mutz & Mondak, 2006). This pressure can lead to the maintenance of intimate ties regardless of their vote choice. As stressed earlier, our expectation regarding this aspect of the selection process is enhanced by the fact that we are testing it in Italy, a country where family ties are generally stronger. Thus, we can expect the following:

*H2: The likelihood of maintaining a discussant is higher when the discussant is a relative than when the discussant is a nonrelative.*

As we have established, disagreement enhances negative selection and intimacy discourages it. What happens, then, in the case of an intimate *and* disagreeable relation? We can expect two possible outcomes: Disagreement could be noxious even for intimate relationships and could thus lead to a higher likelihood of discarding discussants (this outcome could be compatible with the Italian case study, which is characterized by strong pressure from the family environment). Conversely, disagreement could increase discussions in intimate relationships, leading to a higher likelihood of retaining discussants. This can happen when two members of a dyad, particularly because of their intimacy, strive to convince each other of their opinion, even if this means arguing over political matters. By analyzing data from the United Kingdom, Bello and Rolfe (2014) empirically validated the second alternative. The hypothesis, which is based on evidence in the literature, is as follows:

*H3: The likelihood of maintaining a discussant is higher when this discussant is a relative and holds different political views.*

### ***Influence***

Influence is the mechanism through which people reach agreement over political matters. Several mechanisms can lead to this outcome—for instance, pressure, imitation, or the assimilation of new information that changes an individual's mind (Rolfe, 2009, 2012). We can essentially recognize two different types of influence. Influence can be seen as a process by which one of the two people in a dyad maintains his or her position and the other one changes his or her opinion toward the first, or, given two different attitudes in  $t_0$ , the two nodes of a dyad reach some sort of intermediate position in  $t_1$ . It has been argued that the propensity to be influenced is a function of the distribution of political opinion in one's discussion network (Bello & Rolfe, 2014). The more the disagreement present in one's network, the likelier the ego is to be pulled toward voting for one party or another (Bello & Rolfe, 2014). The hypothesis, thus, is as follows:

*H4: An individual will be more likely to change his or her vote choice conditional to disagreement in his or her broader network.*

Moreover, in keeping with previous arguments, we can expect familial networks to provide higher levels of political coercion because the relationships are more intimate and the ties are stronger than those of nonfamilial (i.e., noncohesive) networks (Huckfeldt et al., 1995; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). If disagreement is more difficult to sustain in a familial environment, we can expect attempts to recompose an agreement situation to be more intense, resulting in a higher likelihood of vote switching. Consequently, the hypothesis is as follows:

*H5: Disagreement in the family will exert a stronger effect on the likelihood of changing vote choice than will disagreement within nonfamilial social circles.*

### **The Case of the 2014 European Elections in Italy and Influence in a Pre–Post Design**

In the present study, we test influence and selection strategies by employing data from the 2014 European elections, which are organized in a pre- and postelection design (i.e., data in  $t_0$  were collected shortly before the elections, and data in  $t_1$  were collected shortly after the elections). The 2014 elections in Italy, however, were held in specific political circumstances, which could affect our results.

The election climate was deeply characterized by the figure of Matteo Renzi, secretary of the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD), who had assumed the office of prime minister three months before the 2014 elections. The European elections, held in Italy on May 25, 2014, represented the first electoral test for Renzi and his government's political project (Bordignon, 2014). The results of the elections were overwhelming. The PD obtained 40.8% of the valid votes, the highest ever share of votes for an Italian party in a European election (Maggini, 2014). Compared with the previous national elections (which were held a year before, in 2013), the PD gained about 2.5 million votes. This is an even stronger result if we consider that the turnout in the European elections was lower than that in the national elections (17 percentage points lower than in 2013). The PD surpassed its main competitors, the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Star Movement) and the center-right coalition (which both lost about 1.5 million votes). According to the polls, before the "electoral blackout,"<sup>2</sup> the PD was strongly predicted to be the first party (with an average of 32.3% of the vote share); however, no one predicted such a landslide victory.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1 presents pre- and postelectoral wave percentage data collected by ITANES 2014 for parties who passed the 4% threshold (and thus obtained members of the European Parliament).<sup>4</sup> The PD

<sup>2</sup> According to Italian law, no poll can be published less than two weeks before Election Day.

<sup>3</sup> The average of the PD's share of votes, predicted by pollsters, is calculated here by considering four polls that were conducted (and published) in the last available week (March 6–9). The selected polls were conducted by IPR Marketing, Tecné, EMG, and Demopolis, mainly for use on political TV shows and in newspapers. For more information, see <http://www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it>

<sup>4</sup> The ITANES data come from a commercial online community, from which names and e-mail addresses were randomly selected. Our variables, particularly those related to vote choice, are thus not representative of the Italian population. However, the biases are systematic across both waves. Reported changes in behaviors and attitudes across different waves of the panel, which are our main concern, can

gained the most from the first to the second wave (4.4 percentage points, see Table 1). The impressive performance of the party during the 2014 elections could have led people to misreport their actual vote choice, which is consistent with a "post-electoral survey bandwagon" effect (Crow, Bowler, & Johnson, 2010).

**Table 1. Unweighted Survey Percentages of Declared Vote Choice Pre- and Postwave and Differences (in %) for Relevant Parties.**

	Presurvey ( <i>N</i> = 2,170)	Postsurvey ( <i>N</i> = 2,073)	Pre-post difference (%)
Partito Democratico	34.8	39.2	4.4
Movimento Cinque Stelle	23.9	22.8	-0.9
Forza Italia	13.2	10.9	-2.3
Nuovo Centrodestra	3.5	2.9	-0.6
Lega Nord	6.5	7.7	1.2
Fratelli d'Italia	3.8	3.5	-0.2
L'altra Europa con Tsipras	8.5	8.8	0.3
Other parties	5.8	4.2	-1.6

Source: ITANES, 2014).

Several psychological mechanisms can be considered in order to explain this behavior. According to the "spiral of silence" explanation, people might be less inclined to reveal their voting behavior if electoral outcomes did not validate their expectations (Atkeson, 1999; Carsey & Jackson, 2001; Noelle-Neuman, 1984). In other cases, it has been argued that less sophisticated voters, when asked to recall their vote choice, tend to apply their evaluation at the moment of the interview instead of trying to recollect the views they held at the time of the election. This failure to provide correct information, which is similar to the spiral of silence explanation, effectively leads to a postelectoral bandwagon effect (Wright, 1993). If misreporting is the result of a cognitive bias detached from the empirical regularities in question, then it is expected to add random noise to our correlations, leading to depressed and less statistically significant coefficients. To assess whether possible bandwagon effects can affect the statistical significance and magnitude of our coefficients, two sets of models (one including the entire sample and one with only those who did not change their vote choice in  $t_1$  toward the PD) will be fitted and differences in the coefficients will be evaluated.

### Data, Measurement, and Models

In testing for the effects of selection and influence in Italy during the 2014 European elections, our main strategy to explain these two mechanisms was as follows: With regard to selection, we ask whether being in agreement with and/or having an intimate discussant in a wave leads the respondent to name the same discussant in a subsequent wave. Conversely, with regard to influence, we model

be interpreted in a straightforward way. The interpretation of the trends of the variables of interest can thus be considered as genuine even though their absolute levels (averages or proportions) cannot be generalized for the Italian population.

respondents' electoral volatility (declaring a vote choice for different parties in different waves) by means of disagreement with the discussant. The following subsections present data, variables, and models involved in the testing procedure.

### ***Data and Main Variables***

The 2014 pre- and postelectoral surveys were subsequent waves of a longer panel, which comprised a pre-electoral rolling cross-section data set collected before the 2013 national elections ( $N = 8,723$ ) and a postelectoral follow-up, which was collected after the same round of voting ( $N = 3,008$ ). The design of the 2014 survey was a pre-post panel (Schadee et al., 2010). The data from the first wave were collected from May 9 to May 19, 2014, and the subsequent wave of data was collected from June 10 to June 18, 2014 (European elections in Italy were held on May 25, 2014). The interview surveys were conducted via the Computer Assisted Web Interview method. In the pre-electoral wave, 3,244 respondents were interviewed; in the post-electoral survey, 2,599 people agreed to be recontacted, with a reinterview rate of 80.1%. This rate is much higher than the average for these types of panels in Italy; for instance, the reinterview rate in the 2006 ITANES pre-post panel was around 70% (Bellucci & Maraffi, 2008). In each wave, as shown in Table 1, respondents were asked to provide information regarding their voting behavior (i.e., the party that they were going to vote for in the pre-electoral wave and their actual choice in the post-electoral study).<sup>5</sup>

As noted, we test the selection mechanism by modeling the propensity to maintain or discard a discussant according to one's agreement and intimacy with the discussant. ITANES 2014 data contain the main discussants' information. The main discussant is identified as the person with whom the respondent has talked the most regarding politics recently. In both the pre- and postelectoral surveys, respondents were asked to report the perceived vote choice of their main discussant and the relationship they shared (whether they were spouses, relatives, friends, coworkers, or neighbors).

Finally, respondents were asked to provide the initials of the first and last names of their main discussants to clearly identify them later. With the initials of the main discussant, "it is possible to trace both whether a discussant was named at a later date . . . and how the presence of acknowledged disagreement within the dyad changes over time" (Bello & Rolfe, 2014, p. 137). Of course, since only the initials were requested, possible biases were not nullified—that is, John Smith in  $t_0$  and James Smith in  $t_1$  will be coded as the same person, JS. However, the probability of biases is undoubtedly smaller than it is for surveys in which name generators identify only generic information regarding discussants, which can be shared by several people in one's network.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In the subsequent models, only respondents who provided valid vote choices for themselves and their discussants were selected (thus, nonvoters and undecided voters were excluded from the analysis). Even though we acknowledge that other insightful information could be derived by distinguishing these other types of voters, this further comparison would have made the scope of the article too broad to be practical.

<sup>6</sup> ITANES data provide information only for a single discussant—the main discussant—whereas other contributions rely on up to five people with whom the respondent has a relationship. This tends to



With regard to influence, our hypotheses expect a relationship between the disagreement experienced in the broader network and the change of vote choice. The most straightforward method in the literature to operationalize network disagreement has been to ask respondents about the political preferences of a number of discussants (usually up to five) with whom they have engaged. The so-called name generator procedures (Huckfeldt et al., 1995; Huckfeldt, Sprague, & Levine, 2000; Klofstad, McClurg, & Rolfe, 2009) have been crucial in discovering relationships between networks and have proven to be reliable and powerful procedures. However, as Baldassarri (2009) notes, because name generator procedures focus on a few individuals who represent a sort of inner circle of a political discussion network, they systematically disregard the political views and attitudes of a person's broader social network, which usually comprises more than three or five discussants. It is thus necessary to obtain a measure of disagreement within different *social circles* instead of among *discussants*. When facing such an issue, name generator procedures become more problematic; for instance, they could result in noncohesive groups' information being systematically underreported because the people who constitute these groups are, by definition, individually less "important" than those who belong to cohesive groups (Baldassarri, 2009; Huckfeldt et al., 1995). Conversely, the importance of stronger relationships is overestimated. The solution proposed in this study accounts for this possible bias by employing another measure. The two questions that were asked in the 2013 and 2014 ITANES surveys are a variation of the theme of those originally presented<sup>7</sup> and read as follows:

1. How many of the members of your family do you think share your political opinion?
  - a. None of them (0%)
  - b. A few of them (around 10%)
  - c. Some of them (around 25%)
  - d. About half of them (around 50%)
  - e. Many of them (around 75%)
  - f. Most of them (around 90%)
  - g. All of them (100%)
  
2. Now let's think about your friends: How many of them do you think share your political opinion?
  - a. None of them (0%)
  - b. A few of them (around 10%)
  - c. Some of them (around 25%)
  - d. About half of them (around 50%)

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underestimate the possibility of finding significant selection processes. This problem will be addressed in greater detail in the last section of the article.

<sup>7</sup> Although the questions proposed by Baldassarri (2009) explicitly asked for a rough percentage of the number of people who voted for a certain party or coalition, in the 2013 and 2014 surveys, it was decided that respondents would be asked for an estimate of the number of discussants who shared their political opinions.

- e. Many of them (around 75%)
- f. Most of them (around 90%)
- g. All of them (100%)

This measure allows us to assess how voters were embedded in networks with people who agree or disagree with their views. In particular, questions were asked about family members and circles of friends (which are assumed, respectively, to be characterized by stronger and weaker ties). Appendix A presents descriptive statistics of these two measures (as well as the other variables).

### **Models**

To analyze the selection mechanism, we employ logistic regression models and base the analysis on assessing whether the dyadic relationship between a respondent and his or her discussant persists along the two waves. Following Bello and Rolfe (2014), the most promising candidate for the dependent variable is constructed to be equal to 1 when the respondent indicates the same discussant in both the waves, and 0 otherwise. The discussant's initials are used to determine whether the discussants are the same in both waves.

The first hypothesis (H1) related to the selection process expects that if selection mechanisms contribute to shape respondents' network composition, then people in the first wave who share the respondent's views are more likely to be retained in the subsequent wave. Perceived agreement between the respondent and his or her discussant is thus the main predictor, and it is constructed by comparing vote choices of respondents and their discussants in the pre-electoral wave. Second, H2 states that discussants belonging to closer social circles (e.g., the family) should present higher retention levels (i.e., it is more difficult to discard a relative than a neighbor). Finally, what happens to selection when a respondent deals with a discussant who is both intimate and of a different political opinion (H3)? Model 2 provides an interaction between perceived disagreement and the circle to which the main discussant belongs. To control for an alternative explanation of our dependent variable, we add a measure of political involvement (a 4-point scale of knowledge concerning European issues) and a measure of partisanship (a 4-point scale of party identification strength).<sup>8</sup> To avoid endogeneity issues, all the variables in the models are collected in the first wave. The models to be executed can thus be written as follows:

$$1. p(\text{INITEQ}_{w1w2} = 1) = \text{CONS} + \text{DISAG}_{w1} + \text{SOC\_CIR}_{w1} + \text{ID\_STRENGTH}_{w1} + \text{KNOWL}_{w1}$$

$$2. p(\text{INITEQ}_{w1w2} = 1) = \text{CONS} + \text{DISAG}_{w1} + \text{SOC\_CIR}_{w1} + \text{DISAG}_{w1} * \text{SOC\_CIR}_{w1} + \text{ID\_STRENGTH}_{w1} + \text{KNOWL}_{w1}$$

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<sup>8</sup> Several studies (Bello & Rolfe, 2014; Converse 1966; Zaller, 1992) have hypothesized that political involvement and partisanship can lead to a higher likelihood of selection and influence. An additional set of models (not shown) has been fitted to control for the possibility of sociodemographic variables affecting our results. By adding them to our four logistic models of social class, age, gender, and educational level variables, estimates presented in the article do not change in magnitude or significance.

Where:

$INITEQ_{w1w2}$  equals 1 if  $initials_{w1} = initials_{w2}$  and equals 0 if  $initials_{w1} \neq initials_{w2}$ ;

$CONS$  is the constant;

$DISAG_{w1}$  is disagreement with discussant in the pre-electoral wave (based on reported respondent and discussant vote choices);

$SOC\_CIR_{w1}$  is the discussant's social circle in the pre-electoral wave;<sup>9</sup>

$ID\_STRENGTH_{w1}$  is a party identification (PID) 4-point scale in which 0 = *no PID*,

1 = *weak PID*, 2 = *moderate PID*, and 3 = *strong PID*; and

$KNOWL_{w1}$  is the respondent's political knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

The analysis of the influence mechanism follows the modeling strategy proposed by Bello and Rolfe (2014) and is based on logistic regression models. The binary dependent variable is constructed such that it is equal to 1 when the vote choice in Wave 2 is the same as the vote choice declared in Wave 1, and it is equal to 0 when it differs. Two hypotheses presented earlier (H4 and H5) state that, first, if the influence process actually exists, then changes in vote choice are a function of the level of disagreement in an individual's social network; and, second, disagreement in relatives' circles will exert stronger influence than nonrelatives' ones. This level of disagreement has been operationalized by the synthetic political homogeneity measure presented. The measure is originally coded such that 0 means 0% of circle agreement, 0.10 means 10% agreement, and so on. The variable's complement to 1 gives us a measure of disagreement in cohesive and noncohesive social groups.

An additional methodological problem concerns possible bandwagon effects that could be caused by the unexpected results of the 2014 elections. Matteo Renzi's PD obtained a result that was about 8 percentage points higher than pollsters' expectations. The ITANES data show that the number of respondents who had declared a PD vote increased by 4.4 percentage points in the postelectoral wave. If an actual postelectoral misreporting problem can be recognized in the data, then the respondents who had switched to voting for the PD in the postelectoral wave are most likely to have misreported their actual vote choice because of the bandwagon effect. In this study, we circumvent this problem by removing, in a separate model, respondents who changed their declared vote choice in favor of the PD in the second wave. The assumption behind this choice is strong—by removing the group of PD switchers, we are assuming that the entire group is subject to some form of bandwagon effect (which clearly cannot be true). This decision, however, although trenchant, permits us to check whether our coefficients are impinged on by possible forms of cognitive bias. In particular, our technical expectation is that coefficients

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<sup>9</sup> The original question concerning the main discussant's circle had seven response categories, which have been recoded into two categories: *partner* and *other relatives* were recoded into *relative*, *friend*, *workmate*, and *neighbor*; and *other person* has been recoded as *nonrelative*. Throughout the article, the term *relatives* refers to members of the family *plus* the partner.

<sup>10</sup> The ITANES 2014 data contained three knowledge questions related to European Union topics: the number of European Union members; the name of the candidate for president of the European Commission from the Popular Party; and the candidate from the Socialist Party. A 0–3 scale was formulated, in which 3 equals having answered all three questions correctly and 0 equals having answered all three questions incorrectly.

are likely to be depressed and standard errors could be larger because of misreporting issues (with misreporting adding random noise to our models).

The two models will be fitted as follows:

$$3. p(\text{DIFFVOTE}_{w1w2} = 1) = \text{CONS} + \text{FAMNET}_{D_{w2}} + \text{FRINET}_{D_{w2}} + \text{ID\_STRENGTH}_{w1} + \text{KNOWL}_{w1}$$

$$4. p(\text{DIFFVOTE}_{w1w2} = 1) = \text{CONS} + \text{FAMNET}_{D_{w2}} + \text{FRINET}_{D_{w2}} + \text{ID\_STRENGTH}_{w1} + \text{KNOWL}_{w1} \text{ if } \text{VOTE}_{PD_{w2}} = 0$$

Where:

*DIFFVOTE*<sub>w1w2</sub> equals 1 if *votechoice*<sub>w1</sub> ≠ *votechoice*<sub>w2</sub> and equals 0 if *votechoice*<sub>w1</sub> = *votechoice*<sub>w2</sub>;

*CONS* is the constant;

*FAMNET*<sub>D<sub>w2</sub></sub> is a measure of the overall disagreement with relatives<sup>11</sup>;

*FRINET*<sub>D<sub>w2</sub></sub> is a measure of the overall disagreement with friends;<sup>11</sup>

*ID\_STRENGTH*<sub>w1</sub> is a 4-point scale of PID strength (defined above);

*KNOWL*<sub>w1</sub> is respondent's political knowledge; and

*VOTE*<sub>PD<sub>w2</sub></sub> = 1 when respondent switched to PD in Wave 2 and = 0 otherwise.

## Results

We begin by presenting the results for the formal test of selection (H1, H2 and H3). Table 2 shows the coefficients for models 1 and 2. The strength of party identification does not influence the likelihood of maintaining a discussant in the subsequent wave. Political knowledge, however, increases propensities to maintain a discussant. This suggests that people who are more involved in political issues tend to be embedded in more stable networks and do not change their discussants.

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<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the data at our disposal did not collect information on networks' overall agreement in the pre-electoral wave. This could raise questions concerning the endogeneity of the predictor. However, we can reasonably respond to such a concern by assuming that changes in a whole network (or at least in respondents' perceptions about this network) can be expected to be weak and that our self-reported variable is relatively stable over time. To enhance the empirical working of the variable and to test our hypotheses with stronger constraints, Appendix B presents the same set of models for the influence process, which was fitted using the overall disagreement variable measures on the same individuals, which in turn, were collected during the 2013 national elections (i.e., more than one year before the two waves considered). Assessing the data as far as possible, we find that even if significance levels are weaker, no substantive differences emerge from this new set of models.

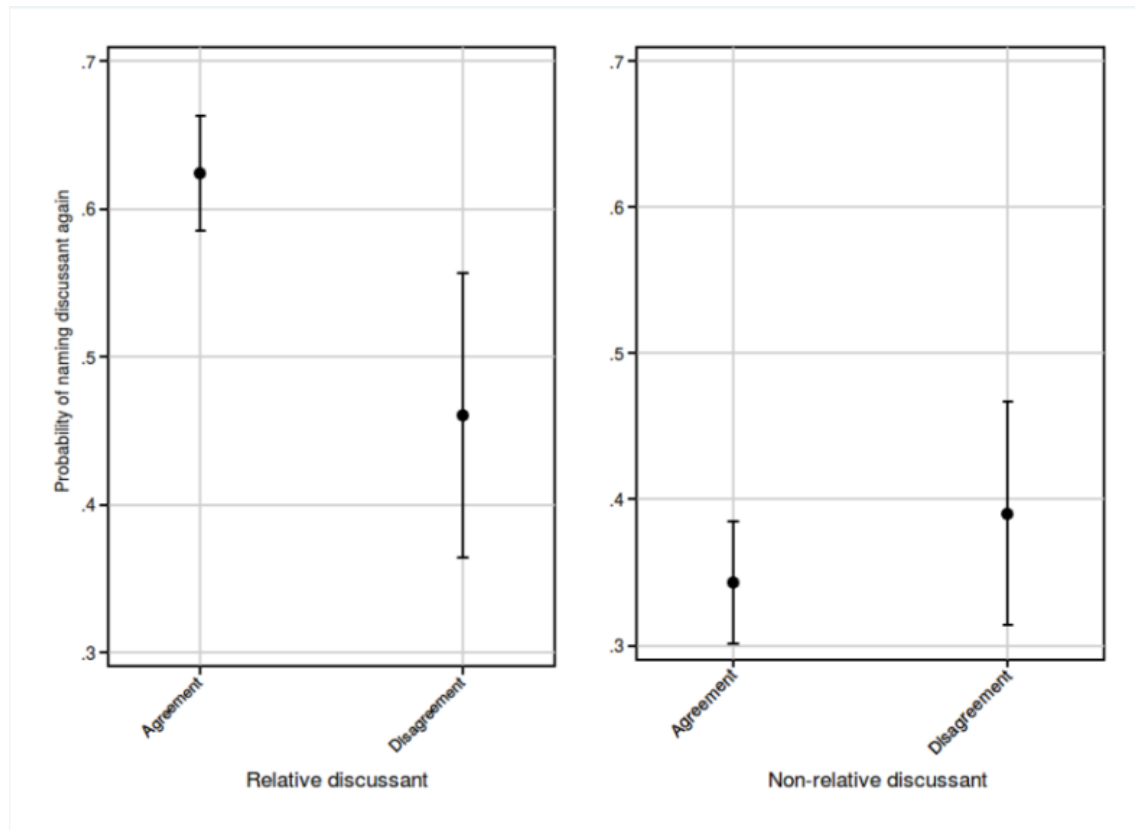
**Table 2. Logistic Regression Models for the Study of Naming the Same Discussant in Wave 2.**

<i>Regressors</i>	Model 1		Model 2	
	No interaction		Dyadic interaction	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Political knowledge	0.19***	0.05	0.19***	0.06
Party identification strength (ref: not partisan)				
Weak	0.30	0.33	0.32	0.33
Moderate	0.30	0.32	0.31	0.32
Strong	0.13	0.33	0.15	0.33
Discussant (ref: relative)				
Nonrelative	-1.00***	0.11	-1.17***	0.13
Disagreement in Wave 1	-0.18	0.15	-0.67***	0.22
Nonrelative × Disagreement			0.88***	0.29
Constant	-0.10	0.33	-0.05	0.33
Number of observations	1,331		1,331	
Log-likelihood	-872.8		-868.2	

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

In Model 1, it is possible to see that disagreement in Wave 1 does not lead to a significant change in naming the same discussant in Wave 2. Conversely, exposure to a nonrelative discussant in Wave 1 leads to lower propensities to retain the discussant in Wave 2. This is consistent with the argument made earlier that people who are exposed to members of noncohesive social groups tend to dismiss these discussants more easily regardless of their political attitudes. Thus, Model 1 tells us that exposure to a discussant with whom one disagrees does not lead to selection strategies; however, simultaneously, exposure to a nonrelative leads to selection. Our results, thus, seem to disconfirm H1 and corroborate H2. What happens when someone is exposed to a discussant who both holds a different political view and is a relative?

Model 2, by means of a two-way interaction between the discussant's social circle and disagreement, shows what happens to selection strategies when we consider both these characteristics of the main discussant. First, we can see that Model 2 has a better goodness of fit than Model 1 (the interaction and the likelihood-ratio test results are both significant). To better understand the empirical working of the model, the predicted probabilities for the four combinations of characteristics are presented in Figure 1. The likelihood of retaining in a later wave relatives with whom one disagrees and nonrelative discussants (both agreeable and disagreeable) is not significantly different from the others. The only situation in which respondents show a form of positive selection is with relatives who hold similar political views.



**Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of naming the same discussant in Wave 2, conditional on disagreement and social circle (Model 2 coefficients).**

In other words, people are more likely to retain discussants with whom they agree and who are relatives, and they tend to discard discussants with whom they disagree regardless of the relationship they share. This finding conflicts with Bello and Rolfe's (2014) hypothesis (and with our H3); however, it is consistent with the strong family setting argument—a relative with whom one agrees is a close person who also shares one's political views. Consequently, an individual is highly unlikely to discard such a discussant.

Table 3 presents the results of our tests of the influence hypotheses presented earlier (H4 and H5). The control variables for political knowledge and partisanship strength lead to lower probabilities of changing party choice. That means that, consistent with our expectations, people who have stronger opinions are less likely to change their minds from the pre-electoral wave to the postelectoral one. Our main substantive expectation is that a higher level of disagreement in one's network would lead to higher propensities to switch parties. The coefficients shown in Table 3 indicate that network disagreement leads to higher propensities to switch party preferences only with regard to family networks. Disagreement in

circles of friends (i.e., our proxy for noncohesive heterogeneity) does not lead to significant changes in the likelihood of switching parties. Thus, similar to the positive selection mechanism, our findings stress that influence mechanisms are more likely to be discovered among the familial—that is, cohesive—circle.

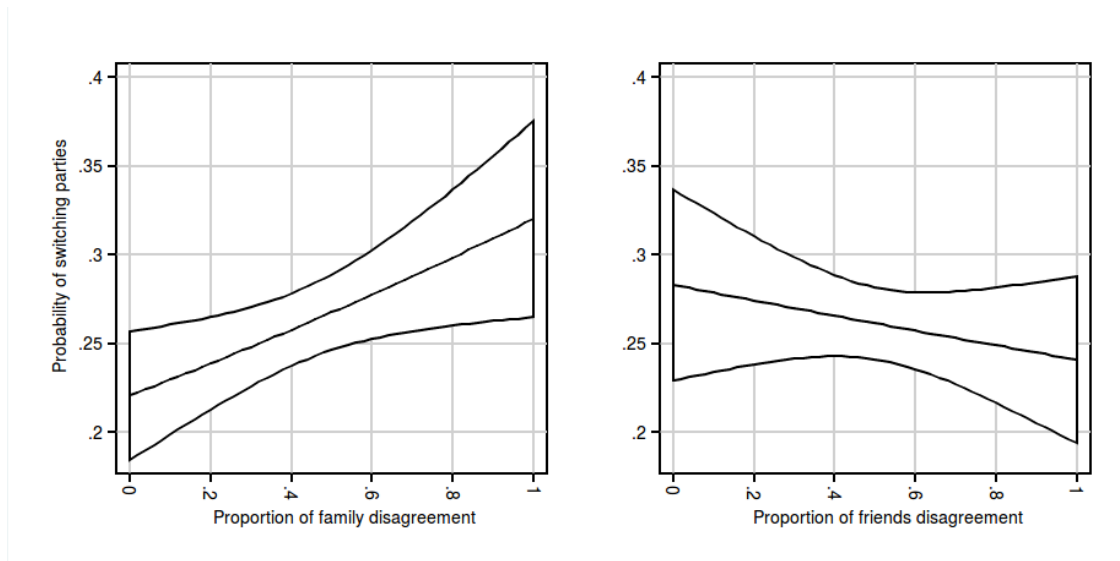
**Table 3. Logistic Regression Models for the Study of Vote Choice Change.**

Regressors	Model 3		Model 4	
	Whole sample		Only non-PD switchers in Wave 2	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Political knowledge	-0.26***	0.05	-0.31***	0.06
Party identification strength (ref: not partisan)				
Weak	-0.19	0.20	-0.17	0.21
Moderate	-0.41**	0.19	-0.37*	0.21
Strong	-0.92***	0.22	-0.84***	0.23
Self-reported relatives disagreement	0.52**	0.22	0.63***	0.23
Self-reported friends disagreement	-0.23	0.26	-0.28	0.27
Constant	-0.37	0.23	-0.53**	0.24
Number of observations	1,752		1,684	
Log-likelihood	-974.3		-878.1	

\*  $p < 0.1$ . \*\*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Figure 2 shows the predicted probabilities for the two main predictors. The left panel shows that family disagreement leads to higher propensities to switch parties—on the order of 11 percentage points (from 0.22 to 0.33). Conversely, the right panel shows that disagreement within circles of friends does not lead to significant differences in the probabilities of dependent variables (even though the slope is negative, standard errors are large).

Model 4 (see Table 3) removes all the cases that switched to the PD in the postelectoral wave. Even though we acknowledge that this is a trenchant technical solution, it is useful to identify the direction in which possible misreporting of voting behavior could affect the coefficients. Removing cases from a regression model could lead to different outcomes; when we remove cases, we could obtain, with respect to the same regression model, larger standard errors and less stable estimates. As stated earlier, however, if some of the cases we remove are affected by some kind of cognitive bias, and if the theoretical correlation we look for is real, then the coefficients of the purified model should show a clearer pattern of results (as we partly delete random noise). Results show that having erased the PD switchers in the second wave, the significance and magnitude of the family coefficient rise slightly. This could be indirect proof of the fact that part of the group of PD switchers was affected by some sort of postelection bandwagon effect. However, the coefficient of the circle of friends remains insignificant. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that this latter model does not change our substantive understating of discussion network effects that took place in the 2014 elections.



**Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of changing vote choice among different levels of relatives' and friends' disagreement (Model 3 coefficients).**

### Conclusion and Discussion

This article evaluates the contribution of two relational mechanisms—*influence* and *selection*—in forging the political attitudes of individuals embedded in different social circles. The article presents several innovative points with respect to the previous literature. First, and most important, the literature dealing with politically diverse networks and their consequences in terms of voting behavior has been based mostly on American data (Eveland et al., 2015; Hopmann, 2012). At the same time, a sizable demographic and sociological literature has demonstrated that Italians (and Southern Europeans in general) rely more on their relatives in many aspects of their life, thus presenting a social structure in which the family is more important than it is in other countries (Guetto et al., 2016; Reher, 1998). Our findings indicate that even in political relations, the family has a role in shaping mechanisms forging political agreement. More precisely, the coercive effect of the family is stronger in our case study than it is in other studies that consider the Anglo-American context.

In line with previous literature (Bello & Rolfe, 2014), evidences of *selection* (among the whole sample) were not found. More precisely, disagreement with any discussant in  $t_0$  does not lead the individual to discard this discussant in  $t_1$ . This does not mean, however, that it is impossible to find any selection processes whatsoever. A relevant and significant effect of positive selection was found, though only among people who were exposed to a family member as discussant. In other words, people tend to maintain discussants who share the same political view and only if they are relatives. Even though this result is, in principle, quite straightforward, it contrasts with the work of Bello and Rolfe (2014), who demonstrated that, in the United Kingdom, people tend to remain familiar with those they *disagree* with. On the contrary, the result is fairly consistent with the expectations that see the family as a strong agent



of political coercion (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). In particular, a comparison between our results and the evidence collected by Bello and Rolfe suggests that the differences emerging in the studies could result from the different family settings that rule in the two contexts.

With regard to the influence process, our findings indicate that, as expected from previous works, disagreement in the social network, which is measured by the overall judgment of the disagreement level in a network, leads to a higher likelihood of switching vote choices in the subsequent wave. Again, it is important to stress the role of the family, which is revealed to be the environment in which strategies to reach political agreement are enacted. This result suggests that in more intimate social circles, disagreement among Italians is less sustainable than it is in circles that are characterized by weaker ties.

By removing respondents who switched to support the PD (to consider the bandwagon effect) from the analysis, the results remain the same, and we see a marginal rise in the statistical significance and the magnitude of the familial disagreement effect, as expected. Possible misreporting due to the bandwagon effect thus impinges only marginally on our coefficients, and our substantive interpretations remain unaltered. Even though the two models shown in Table 3 are practically identical, this additional control shows us that, at least in a weak way, what happens between the two waves of a panel, particularly in a time of dense political stimuli such as an election campaign, could affect our results and must be considered carefully.

This study also presents several limitations. Even though we demonstrated that Italians' behavior presents different results than other sociopolitical contexts, it is not yet clear whether the strong/weak family distinction holds true in more than two European contexts. For this reason, a broader comparative perspective, with more data collected in various contexts, should be employed to test influence and selection hypotheses more systematically (as suggested by Hopmann et al., 2015). In addition, it is important to underline that the limited pool of discussion partners, combined with the small time span for which data are available, led us to expect that the effects of the influence and selection processes are largely underestimated. For instance, with regard to selection mechanism tests, collecting data on a small number of discussants in a survey led to more people reporting that they had changed their discussant (in fact, respondents could have simply chosen another discussant in  $t_1$  as their main discussant while continuing to have relations with the former reported in  $t_0$ ). More refined data, such as longer longitudinal data sets with information on more discussion partners, would help us to address questions that this and previous studies have left unresolved.

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### Appendix A

**Table A1. Descriptive Statistics for Variables Included in Tables 2 and 3.**

Variables	Table 2 descriptive statistics		Table 3 (whole sample) descriptive statistics		Table 3 (only non-PD switchers) descriptive stats.	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Dependent variables</i>						
Same initials in Waves 1 and 2	0.48	0.50				
Respondent changed vote in Wave 2			0.26	0.44	0.23	0.42
<i>Main predictors</i>						
Disagreement in Wave 1	0.20	0.40				
Relative discussant	0.52	0.50				
Nonrelative discussant	0.48	0.50				
Self-reported relatives disagreement			0.42	0.30	0.42	0.30
Self-reported friends disagreement			0.50	0.25	0.50	0.25
<i>Controls</i>						
Political knowledge	1.58	1.05	1.54	1.06	1.54	1.06
Party identification strength: not partisan	0.04	0.18	0.08	0.28	0.08	0.27
Party identification strength: Weak	0.29	0.45	0.28	0.45	0.28	0.45
Party identification strength: Moderate	0.43	0.49	0.41	0.49	0.41	0.49
Party identification strength: Strong	0.25	0.43	0.23	0.42	0.23	0.42
<i>N</i>	1,331		1,752		1,684	

### Appendix B

The self-reported overall disagreement variables presented in Table 3 are measured in the second wave. Measuring these predictors in the same wave as the dependent variable could raise concerns regarding endogeneity. To address this potential issue, it has been argued that the overall judgment of disagreement in a whole social circle should be sufficiently stable to dispel questions of endogeneity. Table B1 presents an additional piece of evidence. Relatives' and friends' disagreement variables were collected in 2013—more than a year before the collection of the dependent variable.

**Table B1. Logistic Regression Models for the Study of Vote Choice Change.**

<i>Regressors</i>	Whole sample		Only non-PD switchers in Wave 2	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Political knowledge	-0.25***	0.05	-0.28***	0.06
Party strength (ref: not partisan)				
Weak	-0.18	0.20	-0.20	0.21
Moderate	-0.40**	0.19	-0.40**	0.20
Strong	-0.85***	0.22	-0.82***	0.23
Self-reported relatives disagreement (2013)	0.39	0.24	0.44*	0.25
Self-reported friends disagreement (2013)	-0.17	0.26	-0.10	0.27
Constant	-0.41*	0.21	-0.56**	0.22
Number of observations	1,802		1,740	
Log-likelihood	-989.9		-900.9	

\*  $p < 0.1$ . \*\*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

We must stress that the relations between the dependent variable on one side and the main substantive regressors on the other are partially compromised by the dramatically different political situations in which the two variables were collected (the dependent variable was collected during a second-order election and the independent regressor during a first-order election—that is, in very different political circumstances). We are thus conscious that employing such “old” variables adds some noise to the coefficients shown in Table B1. Despite these issues, the signs of the coefficients in the two models displayed in Table B1 are consistent with the results reported in Table 3, and the magnitudes of the effects are roughly similar. The significance of the relatives' disagreement coefficient approaches 10% in the first model ( $p$ -value is 0.103), and it is firmly significant at the 10% level in the second model, in which potential misreporters in 2014 are excluded. In summary, it is possible to conclude that the models presented in Table B1 and Table 3 are substantially interpretable in an equivalent way.