

No Person Is an Island. Political Discussion Networks and Electoral Behavior in an Context of Weak Partisanship

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Introduction

During the past few decades, electoral democracy has expanded to an important number of developing nations. Almost every Latin American country and a growing number of African and Asian states use democratic procedures to select its governments. In many of these nations party allegiances are nonexistent or very volatile as political parties are new or because politics revolves around individuals rather than parties. An extreme example of this situation is Libya a country in which elections were recently held after decades of despotic rule, and in which all competing political parties were created weeks before the electoral process. A less extreme example is represented by many Latin American nations in which, despite of the existence of old political parties, the emergence of new ones is a constant, and a relative small percentage of citizens typically identifies with them. Furthermore, during the past 15 years in countries such as Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, the emergence of charismatic leaderships displaced political parties as the main actors of political competition. Beyond the weakness of partisan identifications, several of these new democracies coexist with a myriad of problems such as high levels of criminality, internal conflicts, or dire economic conditions. Consequently, in these countries, citizens are expected to be concern about multiple issues in addition to the state of the economy. For instance, according to LAPOP data, the American public is mainly concerned about economic issues as 44% of respondents mentioned this topic as their main worry. After the economy, political issues are the main preoccupation of less than 25% of the public. In contrast, in Colombia the distance between public's first and the second main concerns is only 8 percentage points. Public safety is the main worry of 40% of Colombians and the economy of 32% of them.

This type of democracies represent a challenge to the literature on political behavior as vote choices have been traditionally explained as a consequence of party identifications and citizens' evaluations of the economy. In a political environment in which partisanship is very volatile and elections do not revolve around a single issue, it is necessarily to explore other variables to understand the factors influencing citizen's political decisions. Thus, in this paper we inquire about the relationship between discussion networks, political participation, uncertainty, and vote choice. Our main argument is that, in cases in which traditional theories are wanting, political behavior can be explained in light of the influence of other individuals. In other words, we posit that people may decide to participate in elections or decide form whom to vote using the information they obtain from their discussion networks. As people engage in informal conversations with friends, relatives and coworkers, they gather information and shortcuts that may be used to make a political decision. Similarly, through personal interactions people may be persuaded to participate or to change their vote intention.

To explore the role of discussion networks on participation and electoral choices, we use survey data from an original panel study conducted in Bogotá in 2011. Bogotá is an exceptional case to explore the role of discussion networks on political behavior as it fully represents the situation described above. Only 26.4% of Bogotanos identify themselves with a political party, and political identities seem to be very volatile. For instance, *Partido de la U*, the party with the highest number of sympathizers, dwindled from 42.5% of all party identifiers in 2010 to 29.6% in 2011. Likewise, in 2011 the third most popular party was *Progresistas*, a political movement created for the 2011 local elections. On the other hand, the economy appears not to be the most important concern of people living in the Colombian capital. In fact, most Bogotanos consider public safety to be the city's main problem. Finally, there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that social networks are very relevant in urban environments such as Bogotá. Weeks before the first round of the 2010 presidential elections, most surveys showed that a growing number of people, particularly urban dwellers, expressed their intention to support Antanas Mockus, an independent politician representing the brand new Green Party. According to many journalists and some political analysts, the momentum gained by Mockus was the consequence of the so-called "Green Wave", an innovative electoral campaign that used social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as one to one interactions among citizens to convince voters that Mockus was a viable candidate.

Our approach is innovative as it studies the relationship between discussion networks and political behavior in a context that challenges the ability of traditional theories to explain participation and vote choices. Thus, interactions among voters are expected to be a strong predictor of political behavior.

Networks, political participation and vote choices in a developing democracy

In this paper we follow a sociological approach to the analysis of political behavior (Zukerman 2005). According to this perspective, individual characteristics alone cannot fully elucidate people's political actions and opinions. Political behavior must be understood in terms of citizens' relationship with contexts and contextual factors surrounding individual choices (Huckfeldt 1986). Social structures and political events that are exogenous to the individuals, interpersonal interactions, and even institutions, constitute the environment in which citizens form their political opinions and make their political decisions.

The literature on contextual effects identifies at least two different mechanisms through which social and political contexts can affect political behavior. First, certain social and political conditions external to individuals may have a direct

effect on political behavior as they limit people's experiences and choices. These social conditions, known as structurally imposed contexts (Huckfeldt 1986; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987), include factors such as the ethnic and socioeconomic composition of a neighborhood, or the local distribution of political preferences. A second mechanism through which social and political contexts affect political behavior is the social network. That is, individually constructed interpersonal interactions that, although a product of individuals' choices, are defined by environmental opportunities and constraints (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987). Here context has an influence on individuals' political behavior as people exchange points of view or are exposed to new political information as they interact with other individuals. The contextual influence in this case depends primarily on the existence of interpersonal communication; and the intensity of these contacts defines the strength of contextual influence (Weatherford 1982). In this paper, we focus on the second mechanism of contextual influence, namely, the social network.

One of the main findings about the effect of social networks is that people who discuss politics are more susceptible to experiencing changes in their opinions that are consistent with the views prevalent in their environment (Mutz 1997; Huckfeldt 1986). This line of research has also explored the relationship between discussion networks and political participation and vote choices. Thus, as the size of discussion networks increases, citizens' chance of participating in politics also augments (Nir 2005). Other authors have shown that the ideological diversity of discussion networks also has a role in mobilizing people to vote, as individuals exposed to a heterogeneous group of political discussants are exposed to the mobilization efforts of several political leaders (Kotler-Berkowitz 2005). Similarly, others have argued that the highest chance of participating in politics of those surrounded by a non homogeneous social network derives from the fact that these people are exposed to several and divergent visions about politics, which increases individuals' level of political information and consequently their chances of voting (Gimpel y Lay 2005, Scheufele et al. 2003).

The literature on the effects of discussion networks on political opinions and electoral choices suggest that the dynamics of persuasion and opinion change are closely related to interpersonal interactions. When the political preferences of an individual's discussion network are aligned with certain political party or candidate, it is very likely that this individual will support that particular party or candidate (Beck et al. 2002, Huckfeldt et al. 2004, Kenny 1998, Levine 2005, Baker et al. 2006). Thus, when there are opinion discrepancies between an individual and her discussion network, a process of opinion change is very likely to take place. However, when political discussants and individual share the same political opinions, networks contribute to strengthen citizens existing preferences. Most of this literature has studied established democracies, where networks appear to have an influence on political behavior despite of the fact that in these

countries party identities are relatively stable over the long terms. Furthermore, in established democracies electoral debates tend to revolve around economic issues. Therefore, outside advanced industrial democracies the impact of discussion networks is expected to be a crucial factor explaining political behavior (Ames et al. 2012).

In Latin America the effect of discussion networks on political behavior has been studied only for the case of Brazil. Baker, Ames and Renno (2006) showed that given the weakness of partisan cues in Brazil people tend to make their vote decisions relying heavily on persuasive information gathered from their immediate social context. Similarly, Ames, García and Smith (2012) found that social contexts are a major source of decisions stability and change. Brazilians whose discussants disagree with their original vote choices are very likely to switch to a different candidate. Thus, political discussion in new democracies is highly meaningful and politically consequential, as it can lead to massive preference change.

The scarce literature on political behavior in Colombia has never explored the role of discussion networks on political behavior. Most analyses have studied the relationship between individual level factors and political actions (Losada and Velez 1981, Hoskin et. al. 2002, García and Wills 2009). Only recently a handful of works have analyzed the impact of structural contexts on political decisions and opinions (García 2010, García 2010, García et. al. 2011).

The apparently simple process of casting a ballot implies a relatively complex process from a cognitive perspective. In order for an individual to make an electoral decision she needs to start by obtaining information about the competing candidates and their proposals, and then assessing them in terms of where they stand with regards to their own political preferences. Ultimately, the individual will vote for the candidate or party closer to her opinions (Downs 1957). Similarly, a citizen decision to participate in elections depends on this analysis as she need to establish if there is a candidate or party that surpasses the others in terms of the benefit she will obtain should that candidate win the elections. If all candidates or parties represent the same benefit to the voter, she will be likely to abstain from casting a ballot (Downs 1957). Thus, we argue that both participating in elections and vote choices are highly dependent on the information citizens have prior to the election and that gathered during the electoral process.¹.

Many studies have shown that individuals rely on several cognitive heuristics to simplify the complex process of forming a political opinion and making a decision (Sniderman et. al. 1991, Lau y Redlawsk 2001). Ideological and partisan identities are one of these shortcuts, as they simplify electoral choices. Instead of paying attention to numerous of competing candidates, partisan identifiers will

¹Vote choices and participation in particular are affected by other factors such as free time, money and civic skills. We do not discuss these theories as our emphasis is on information. (NEED CITES)

support the candidate representing their party. Similarly, when political debates revolve around single issues such as the economy, electoral decision are relatively easy as individuals make their electoral choices considering one dimension instead of a plethora of public debates. In a political environment such as that of Bogotá in which partisanship is very volatile and elections do not revolve around the economy, we expect partisanship and evaluations of the economy to play a weak role explaining political behavior. In these cases, we argue that citizens obtain political information and cues to make electoral decisions from discussion networks. By discussing politics with others individuals obtain information about candidates, their proposals, public debates and relevant issues. Thus, discussion networks reduce the cost of obtaining political information, and consequently they contribute to reduce the cost of participating and making a political decision. In addition, talking about politics with others inform citizens about political attitudes and opinions of their peers. Here networks operate as a shortcut as people may articulate the following reasoning: “most of my discussants prefer candidate *X*. I am like my discussants, therefore I will vote for candidate *X*.”

More specifically, we hypothesize that people who discuss politics with others will be more likely to vote, and less likely to be undecided about their vote choice. In other words, as the number of political discussant increases, the probability of voting will increase. Likewise, the likelihood of not having an electoral decision before the election will decrease. Regarding the nature of vote choices we, expect that individuals will align their electoral decisions with the dominant preference of the discussion network. In other words, as the number of discussants supporting a single candidate or party increases, the probability a person will support the candidate preferred by her network also increases.

If one of the main roles of discussion networks is to provide individuals with political information, one can expect that individuals with high levels of political knowledge will rely less on their discussion networks, to make up their minds about electoral decision than their less informed counterparts. We assume that the effect of discussion networks on political behavior is not homogeneous as it is mediated by the individuals’ level of political sophistication. Thus, as the level of political sophistication increases the effect of discussion networks on participation, indecision and vote choice will decrease.

Data and Methods

Unlike prior races, the 2011 election was extremely competitive featuring about five solid, well-prepared candidates with chances win. It was a true toss-up and eventually the elected candidate —Petro— ended up winning with 32% of the vote, scantily 8% more than the runner-up —Peñalosa. This context of uncertainty

about the election’s result proved very valuable for our interests in modelling the decision to participate, the uncertainty over for whom to vote and the actual vote choice. To track the changes in the decision processes, we conducted a two-wave panel study of eligible voters during the 2011 local elections in Bogotá between September 2011 and January 2012. The first wave took place about four weeks before the election and finished the first week of 2012. The second wave was launched a week after the elections. We were able to interview 713 individuals in the first wave and 601 in the second one; the attrition rate was, thus, about 15%.

In order to explore the effects of discussion network’s on a person’s decisions, we included a network generator. That is battery of questions about political interlocutors designed to capture the main characteristics of interviewers’ discussion networks. We asked our interviewees to give us the number of people with whom they frequently talked about politics. We also asked them to give us the first names or initials of up to four of said interlocutors. For each of them, we had interviewees answer a series of questions about the political views of their interlocutors and the level of agreement they had when discussing politics. This way we were able to measure different aspects of the individuals’ discussion networks and use them in our models.

For instance, in our sample, 43% of the people claimed that they did not talk about politics with anyone, while the majority —the remaining 57%— acknowledged talking about politics regularly with one or more people. Of these, about 87% said that they “sometimes” or “always” agree with the views of their interlocutors. Most of these interlocutors are family members (41%), but people also discuss this issues with friends (35%) or with a combination of friends and family (24%).

Variables

In this paper we study three dependent variables: **participation**, **uncertainty** and **vote choice**. The first dependent variable, **participation** captures whether an individual voted in the local elections of October 2011. This is a dummy variable coded 1 if the respondent reported that she cast a ballot in the local elections, and 0 otherwise. It was measured in wave two. The variable **uncertainty** measures whether a person, who was planning to vote in the 2011 local election, had decided for whom to vote a few weeks before the election. Thus, this variable was coded 1 if the interviewer reported that she had a vote choice by the time wave one was conducted and 0 otherwise. Finally, the variable **vote choice** captures whether a respondent voted for Gustavo Petro in the October local elections. It was coded so that 1 is equal to vote intention for Petro, and 0 is equal to vote intention for any other candidate.

The probabilities of voting, being undecided and supporting Petro are func-

tions of demographic, political, attitudinal and network variables. The main focus of this paper is on the effects of political discussants on the three dependent variables. As such, discussion networks are captured using three variables: **number of members**, **social network supporting Petro** and **social network supporting Peñalosa**. Respondents named up to four political discussants and reported those discussants' vote choices. Thus, the number of discussants is an ordinal measure that goes from 0 to 4. The variables **social network supporting Petro** and **social network supporting Peñalosa** capture the number of discussants the respondent reported as planning to vote for Petro or for Peñalosa. To construct each variable, we created a series of dummy variables assigning a value of 1 if the discussant, in the respondent's view, was planning to support either candidate. We then summed these dummies, creating two indexes running from 0 to 4, one for each contender.

We argue that the effect of social networks on political behavior is conditioned by respondent's level of **political sophistication**. This variable is an index based on the answers given by respondents to six questions which ask interviewees to name the current presidents of the United States and Brazil, identify the number of departments in Colombia, state the length of the presidential term, name the political party of the local incumbent, and identify the number of localities in Bogotá. This variable originally ranged from 0 to 6, but we recoded it to a 0–100 scale for ease of interpretation.

Several other factors that the literature on political behavior has found to have impact participation, indecision and vote choice are considered as control variables. These variables include age, gender, education, socioeconomic status, ideology, party identification, system support, internal and external efficacy, corruption as Bogotá's main problem, attitudes towards the State, social values, sociotropic and pocketbook evaluations of the economy and vote in the local elections of 2007. A detailed description of these variables is presented in Appendix A.

Analytical Strategy and Results

We estimated the relationship between discussion networks and political behavior using a series of logit models for binary outcomes. For each of the three dependent variables we estimated two types of models. The first one includes the independent variables described above; the second one adds to these variables an interactive term between the individual's discussion network and her political sophistication. In what follows, we present the results of the model estimation.

Decision to Participate

In our first set of models, we explore the reasons why people decide to participate. As mentioned, the decision to get out and vote is often moved by strong ties with political parties or for heightened concerns with the state of the economy. Thus, citizens have reasons to vote because either they are loyal to their party and would like to see its candidate win, or because they are concerned with the performance of the economy and would like for the new incumbent to handle economic affairs properly. Where the traditional clues fail, we believe that political discussion networks may provide much needed information for citizens to decide whether it is worth voting at all.

Thus, we estimate a set of models in which the dependent variable is a dichotomous variable that informs whether the individual plans to vote in the forthcoming election. To assess our main claim, we include the number of members in the individual's discussion network. We believe that talking about politics with other people has a positive impact on the likelihood that an individual decides to cast a vote. Additionally, the models take into account the predictors often used in the literature to explain political participation. As such, we include a variable that measures the perception of institutional legitimacy, measures for internal and external efficacy, political sophistication and the usual sociodemographic control variables. The results of the models are shown in table 1. The first column in the table shows the results of a basic model and the second column shows the results of a model that includes a variable that interacts the effects of the number of members of an individual's discussion network and her level of political sophistication.

[Table 1 here]

Looking at the coefficients of model 1 in table 1, we are able to see that the number of network members turns out statistically significant and positive in sign. Thus, we gather evidence in support of our hypothesis that as the number of members in an individual's discussion networks increases, so does the likelihood that she votes in the election. Similarly, a positive evaluation of institutional legitimacy is related to a higher likelihood of participating. Political sophistication, income level and age all are statistically significant and show signs in the expected direction. Oddly, **external efficacy** is statistically significant and negative. Substantively, this means that as people believe that their vote has an impact in the decision over public policy, they are less likely to vote. We had hypothesized external efficacy to be positively related with participating, so this is a result into which we will look in future iterations of this paper.

Table 1 reports raw logit coefficients which have no intuitive way of being interpreted. In an effort to clarify the substantive meaning of the coefficients, we estimated predicted probabilities of voting given changes in different covariate

profiles in the model.² These results are graphed in figure 1, which plots predicted probabilities along with 95% confidence intervals about them.

[Figure 1 here]

Figure 1 depicts the change in the predicted probability of voting in the election as a covariate of interest spans across its range and the remaining variables in the model are fixed at their mean values. The upper-left panel of the figure shows how the estimated probability of voting increases from about 0.57 to about 0.8 as the number of members of the network increases from 0 to 4. In other words, the size of the network has a large impact of about 23% in the likelihood of voting. This supports our claim that talking about politics with peers has a strong influence on an individual's political behavior. Granted, the baseline probability of voting in our model for those with no political network is rather high. That is, the model predicts that an individual whom does not discuss politics with anyone has a probability of voting of about 57%. But this probability, reaches almost certainty as the size of the discussion networks approaches its upper limit. It should be also noted that the cap in the network's size is arbitrarily set at four members. We do so because of pragmatic reasons: collecting information on more than four members of an individual's discussion network would have made the field work excruciatingly long. It is conceivable that people have discussion networks larger than four members, in which case the likelihood of voting may be even greater.

The upper-right panel in figure 1 shows the effect of changes in the level of legitimacy of local institutions on the probability of voting. As expected, while an individual's perception of the legitimacy of local institutions increases from 0 to 100, her predicted probability of voting increases from about 54% to 81%. The bottom-left panel shows the changes in the expected probability of voting given changes in the external efficacy —one's belief that voting affects the resulting public policies. As pointed out above, this result is puzzling because the model predicts the behavior contrary to what we had anticipated. It estimates a decrease in the probability of voting from about 71% for individuals who show very low levels of external efficacy to a probability of about 52% for those with higher levels of efficacy. Finally, the bottom-right panel shows the effect of political sophistication on the likelihood of voting. The model predicts a rather steep increase in the probability of voting that spans from about 49% for individuals with low levels of sophistication to a probability of about 80% for those with high levels of sophistication.

In the theory section above, we posited that the effect of discussion networks on political behavior should be mediated by the individuals' level of political sophistication. That is, the effects of the discussion network may have a greater impact on individuals whose disposition towards politics is more favorable than

²Predicted probabilities are computed with the `spost` routine for Stata, as described in Long and Freese (2006).

for those individuals that seem to care little about politics. Despite its bombastic name, political sophistication is a rather simple measure. As described above, it is constructed from a series of questions that help us determine how much does an individual knows about politics. But we are not asking about complex concepts, just about mere facts that anyone with a mild interest in politics should be able to answer (the name of the president, the number of departments in the country, etc.). Thus, if someone who appears to care very little about politics claims to have a political discussion network, we believe that the effects of the network on that subject's political behavior should low. In contrast, if the individual appears to care a lot about politics, the effects of the network on her political behavior should be greater.

In order to capture this mediating effect, we estimated the logit model but included an interaction term between the size of an individual's network and her political sophistication. The results of this model are reported in the right-most column of table 1. In order to aid in the interpretation of the coefficient for the interactive term, figure 2 plots the predicted probability of participating for individuals with the minimum level of sophistication vis-à-vis those with the maximum level.

[Figure 2 here]

Although the effect of sophistication does not appear to be a large one, figure 2 shows that the differences in the slope. Thus, as the number of members in the network increase, the probability of voting also increases. The different slopes indicate that the probability of voting increases at a greater rate for those with lower levels of political sophistication. That is, people with low political sophistication seem to be more susceptible of being influenced into voting by their peers than those with high sophistication.

Uncertainty over for whom to Vote

For the second set of models, we use **uncertainty** as the dependent variable. This variable indicates whether people who had already decided to vote in the following election had made up their minds about for whom to vote. As stated, traditional clues (partisanship and economic issues) do not seem to help Bogotanos in their vote choices. Therefore, we believe that discussion networks step in and provide assistance to voters in their decision making process. Table 2 shows the results of two models of uncertainty. From the coefficients of model 1 in table 2, we find that the size of the discussion network, party affiliation and ideology are statistically significant predictors of whether or not people are uncertain about their vote choice. As expected, increments in the size of the discussion network are related to reductions in the likelihood of being uncertain. This result suggests that in the absense of the typical clues, reliance on a discussion network is key

for making up one's mind about for whom to vote. However, partisan clues are not necessarily absent from the decision making process, as captured by the **party affiliation** variable. For those individuals who claim to have a party affiliation, the likelihood of being uncertain is smaller than for those who do not have party affiliation. Similarly, ideology played a role helping people in their vote choices. The model results show that the further right an individual locates herself in ideological terms, her probability of being uncertain increases. The political context of Bogotá's election is required to understand this result. Mayoral candidates were not homogeneously distributed across the ideological spectrum. There was only one leftist contender —Petro— whereas the remaining candidates identified with the center or center-right. Therefore, for voters on the left of the ideological spectrum resulted easier to decide for whom to vote as there was a salient choice: Petro. For voters on the right, making a decision was more complicated because competition there was more crowded.

[\[Table 2 here\]](#)

In order to better explain the effects of these variables, figure 3 depicts predicted probabilities of uncertainty for different values of the size of the discussion network and the individual's ideology. Thus, it becomes clearer that the size of the discussion network plays an important role in reducing voter uncertainty. The model predicts that as an individual widens her discussion network, her uncertainty about for whom to vote declines from about 37% to about 19%, a rather large effect. Again, this result supports the main claim in this paper that discussion networks are a valuable heuristic for individuals to navigate a political process that may appear daunting at first. Similarly, the right panel in the figure shows how as ideology ranges from left to right, or from 0 to 100, the model predicts an increment in the likelihood of being uncertain that goes from about 18% to about 37%.

[\[Figure 3 here\]](#)

Furthermore, model 2 in table 2 estimates the effects over uncertainty of the same variables as model 1 plus it includes an interaction between the size of the discussion network and the levels of political sophistication. Again, here the expectation is that the effect on the level of uncertainty is mediated by the level of political sophistication. The effect of the interactive term is graphed in figure 4. This figure shows that for those individuals with a greater level of sophistication the reduction of uncertainty occurs at a greater rate —i.e. the slope of the dotted line is steeper— than it is the case for individuals with low levels of sophistication.

[\[Figure 4 here\]](#)

Decision to Vote for Petro

In the last set of models we explore the role of discussion networks on vote choice. We expect that the probability of supporting a given candidate or party increases as the number of discussants supporting that candidate or party augments. Similarly we anticipate that this relationship will be conditioned by respondent's level of political sophistication. Thus, we model the probability of having voted for Gustavo Petro as a function of: discussants' level of support for Petro and Peñalosa (**social network supporting Petro** and **social network supporting Peñalosa**); respondents' sociotropic and ideotropic evaluations of the economy; closeness to *Polo Democrático* and *Partido de la U*; having voted for the incumbent in 2007; political sophistication; an index of progressiveness based on respondents' opinions on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, divorce, euthanasia, and marihuana consumption; attitudes toward State's involvement on pensions, education and health care; attitudes towards corruption; and a vector of socioeconomic controls.

This set of variables attempts to test our main hypothesis as well as some of the theories traditionally used to explain vote choice. In addition, we attempt to control for some factors that may have had an impact on the election of Gustavo Petro as mayor of Bogotá. Some analysts insist that many citizens voted for Petro as a way of rewarding him for his role unveiling several corruption scandals that involved the local government. Based on this perspective, one can expect that those respondents very concern about corruption have a higher probability of supporting him. Other possible interpretation of Petro's success states he was able to capture a significant group of voters that traditionally vote for the left. This interpretation takes into account that during the last 10 years the left, particularly the *Polo Democrático*, has been able to build a loyal electorate based on a strong network of political leaders. Once Petro left the *Polo Democrático*, he presumably attracted many of these political bosses and consequently the leftist support. Thus, one can expect the likelihood of having voted for Petro to be higher among citizens ideologically closer to the left and among those who previously supported the *Polo Democrático*.

Table 3 displays the results from the vote choice models. As we expected, the results show that discussion networks had a strong impact on the decision of supporting Petro. As the number of political discussants favoring Peñalosa increases, the probability of having voted for the current mayor of Bogotá decreases. Conversely, the probability of voting for Petro, increases as the number of discussants favoring Petro augments. The change of the probability of having supported the local incumbent for both the Peñalosa and Petro networks is depicted in figure . When the number of discussants favoring Peñalosa changes from 0 to 4 the probability of having supported Petro drops from 0.47 to 0.005. On the other hand,

this probability increases from 0.34 to 0.82 as the network moves from none to all discussants supporting Petro. Both of these effects are truly remarkable given their magnitude. In both instances, the effect of the discussion networks has a net effect of about 50% change in the probability of voting for Petro. Not surprisingly, when an individual is surrounded by *peñalistas* her likelihood of voting for Petro is nil. Conversely, for individuals surrounded by *petristas*, the model predicts that voting for Petro is almost a certainty.

[\[Table 3 here\]](#)

Results also suggest that there was in fact and ideological vote in the 2011 local election in Bogotá. The variables capturing respondents' closeness to *Polo Democrático* and the rightist *Partido de la U* are positively and negatively correlated with the dependent variable, respectively. Figure indicates that, holding all other variables on their mean values, going from the minimum to the maximum closeness to *Polo Democrático*, the probability of having voted for Petro increases from 0.29 to 0.61. Conversely, an increase from zero to the maximum level of closeness to *Partido de la U* represents a reduction of 52 points (0.63 to 0.11) in the probability of having supported Petro. Another result that suggest and ideological vote is the positive and significant relationship between the progressiveness index and the dependent variable. Thus, for those individuals with the lowest score on this index the probability of supporting Petro is 0.25, while the same probability for those respondents with the highest progressiveness score in 0.61. In other words, support for Petro was high among citizens favoring a liberal social values agenda.

Income also showed a negative and significant relationship with the dependent variable, suggesting that citizens with a high socioeconomic status were less likely to support Petro, in the October election, than their poorer counterparts. As depicted in figure , as we move from the lowest to the highest income level the probability of having voted for petro drops from 0.72 to 0.23; that is a reduction of 39 points.

It is worth to mention some variables that, according to our models, are not related to vote choice for Petro. Firstly, as we expected, sociotropic and pocket-book economic evaluations of the economy do not play a role explaining electoral decisions in Bogotá. This result supports the idea that the in certain political scenarios electoral decisions do not revolve around economic issues. As we mentioned before, this may be the consequence of a political environment in which citizens are concerned about various issues, so the economy does not have the preeminent role it has in other political settings. Additionally, people assume that the handling of the economy is mainly a responsibility of the President and not of the local executive, therefore this issue is not considered by citizens when deciding their vote.

[\[Figure 5 here\]](#)

Finally, the most surprising result from our analysis has to do with the non significant relationship between corruption and vote for Petro. Those citizens that mentioned corruption as Bogotá's main problem did not have a higher probability of supporting a candidate —like Petro— who publically presented himself as a corruption crusader. Despite, of the embarrassing corruption scandal that involved the Polo administration under Moreno, voters seem to have not consider this issue in their calculus of voting. This result does not imply that corruption did not play any role on citizen's opinions about local politics. We ran a model about citizens' approval for Clara López, the politician who replaced Moreno after he was removed from office, and we found corruption to be a significant predictor of Mayor's job approval.³ These results clearly indicate that people punished the political party responsible for the corruption scandal and did not reward Petro for his fight against corruption. Apparently, Bogotanos made a direct link between corruption and political support and not a relatively complex analysis of the sort: "corruption is a big problem of the current administration, Petro fought against corruption, therefore I will vote for Petro." Furthermore, Petro's strategy of leaving the Polo Democrático was very successful as he was able to avoid paying an electoral price his former party eventually paid.

[Figure 6 here]

The last step in our analysis relates to the mediating role played by **political sophistication** in the relationship between discussion networks and vote choice. Model 2 in table 3 displays the results of an analysis including and interactive term between **Peñalosa network** and **political sophistication**. The predicted probabilities of supporting Petro as the number of discussants favoring Peñalosa increase, for respondents with the minimum and maximum levels of political sophistication, are depicted in figure . As we expected, less sophisticated individuals are more likely to be influenced by the opinions of their political discussant. On the contrary, among sophisticated citizens, a more horizontal slope indicates that the change in the probability of having voted for Petro, given an increase of Peñalistas discussants, is small. Figure also indicates that this difference exist when the number of political discussant supporting Peñalosa jumps from zero to one. For networks of 2, 3 or 4 Peñalistas the probabilities converge. Overall this result suggest that the most sophisticated are less influentiable by their political acquaintances, as they probably made up their minds about who to vote for using the political information they collect by their owns, and not the political information disseminated through one to one interactions.

³Not reported; available upon request

Conclusions

The analyses presented in this paper indicate that for our sample of Bogotanos, discussion networks are related with participation, uncertainty and vote choice. Thus, those individuals having more political discussants were more likely to vote in the 2011 local elections, and less likely to be undecided about their electoral choice weeks before the election. In the same way, citizens whose political discussants supported a single candidate exhibited a higher probability of having voted for that candidate, than those individuals surrounded by heterogeneous social network, in terms of electoral preferences.

Variables measuring discussion networks appeared to be among the strongest predictors of political participation and vote choice. As we manipulated all significant independent variables moving them from the lowest to the highest values, we observed that in the participation and vote choice models the **number of discussants** and **social network supporting Petro**, respectively, predicted the second biggest impact on the dependent variables. In the participation model the impact of **number of discussants** was clearly surpassed by political sophistication, while in the vote choice model **social network supporting Petro** predicted almost the same probability change that **closeness to Partido de la U**. These results support the idea that in a political setting in which partisanship is very volatile and elections do not revolve around a single issue the political information disseminated through one to one interactions plays an very relevant role helping citizens to solve the dilemmas associated with political participation an electoral decisions.

Regarding the mediating role of political sophistication on the relationship between discussion networks and political behavior we found that, among less sophisticated individuals, the number of discussants and the homogeneity of discussants' electoral preferences augmented the impact of these independent variables on participation and voting for Petro, respectively. In the case of indecision, the more sophisticated seem to have taken more advantage of political discussion than the less politically informed. Despite of these results, it is worth mentioning that differences in the effect of number of discussants on the probabilities of voting and being undecided, for different sophistication levels are small. Thus, only in the case of electoral choice, our results offer clear evidence to state that the relationship between discussion networks and political behavior is conditioned by political knowledge.

Even though our results are the product of a study conducted in Bogota, we believe that they give us strong clues about the factors influencing voting behavior in new democracies, and more importantly, they offer evidence about the strong importance of political conversation in forming opinions and decisions in these type of political settings. Finally, we believe that overall there is very

little data about public opinion and vote decision in less developed democracies. Thus, the analysis of these data represent an important contribution to the field of comparative political behavior as data availability continues to be an obstacle to conduct this type of research outside developed democracies.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Decision to Participate

	Model 1 Coef.	Model 2 Coef.
Number of network members	0.24*	0.28
Institutional legitimacy	0.01*	0.01*
External efficacy	-0.01*	-0.01*
Internal efficacy	0.00	0.00
Political sophistication	0.01*	0.01*
Income level	0.02*	0.02*
Sex (F)	-0.04	-0.04
Age	0.03*	0.03*
Education	0.02	0.02
Members × sophistication		-0.00
Constant	-3.16*	-3.20*
<i>N</i>	522	522
Log likelihood	-299.2	-299.2
χ^2	87	87

* p<0.05

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Estimated probabilities of voting

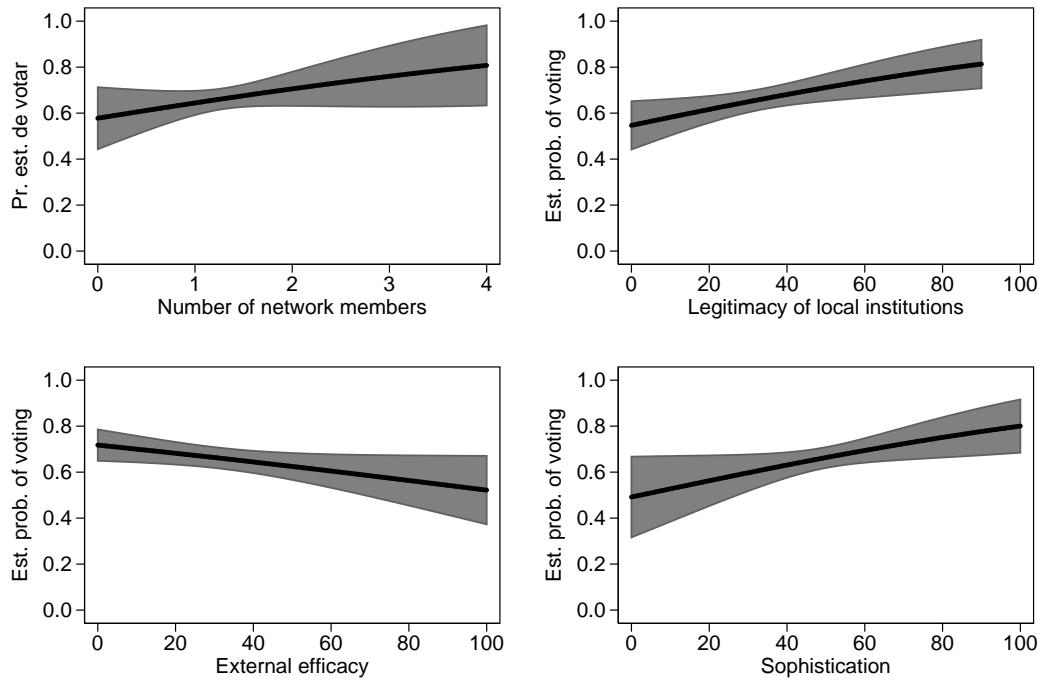


Figure 1: This figure depicts the changes in predicted probabilities associated with changes in the values taken by different model covariates. These probabilities are computed based on the parameter estimates reported in the logit model shown in column 1 in table 1. The dark lines show the predicted probabilities and the shaded areas represent the 95% confidence intervals about the respective probabilities.

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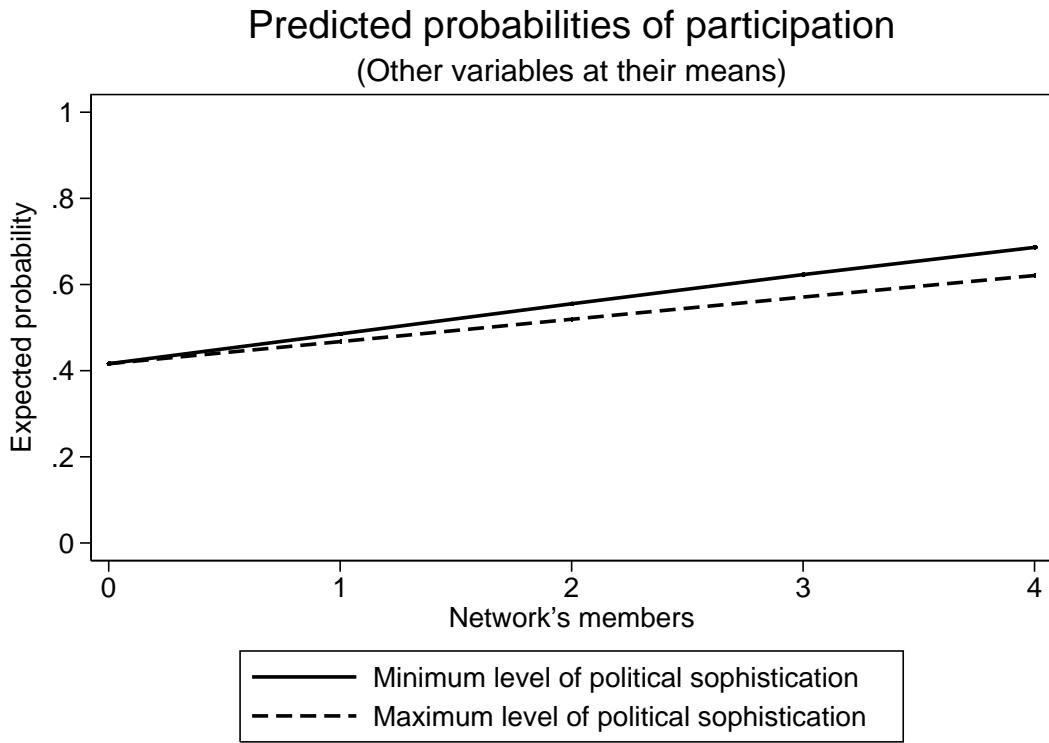


Figure 2: This figure depicts the difference in predicted probabilities of participating in elections for those individuals with minimum levels of sophistication vis-à-vis those with maximum levels. These probabilities are computed based on the parameter estimates reported in the logit model shown in column 2 in table 1.

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Table 2: Uncertainty about for whom to Vote

	Model 1 Coef.	Model 2 Coef.
Number of network members	-0.29*	-0.22
Political sophistication	-0.00	-0.00
Party affiliation	-0.97*	-0.97*
Ideology	0.01*	0.01*
Income level	-0.01	-0.01
Sex (F)	0.19	0.19
Age	-0.00	-0.00
Education	0.01	0.01
Members × sophistication		-0.00
Constant	-0.04	0.04
<i>N</i>	402	402
Log likelihood	-232.7	-232.7
χ^2	41	41

* p<0.05

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Estimated Probabilities Uncertainty Model

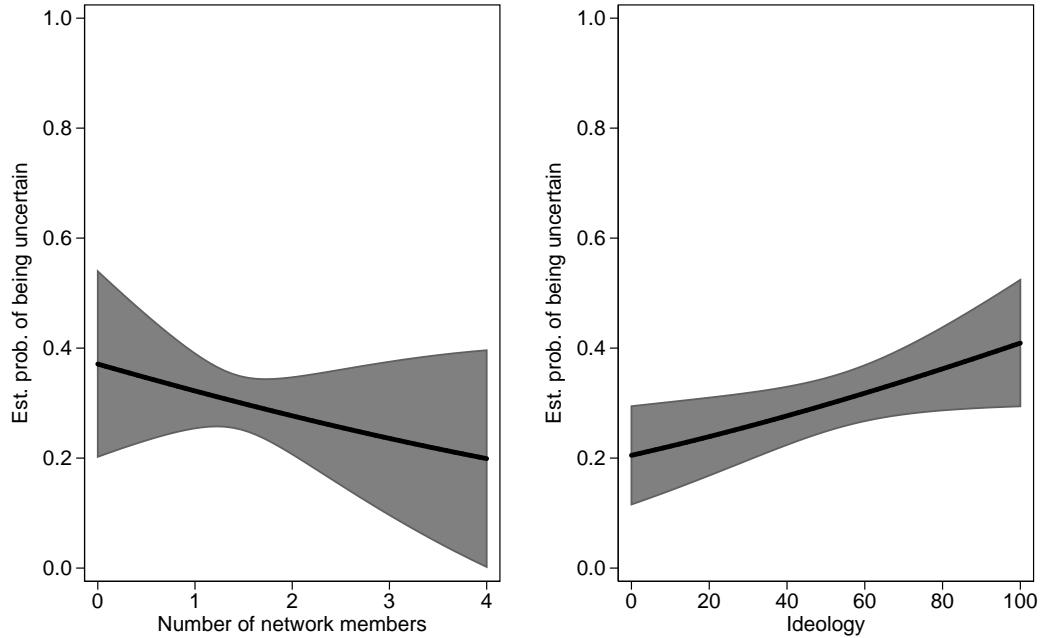


Figure 3: This figure depicts the changes in predicted probabilities associated with changes in the values taken by different model covariates. These probabilities are computed based on the parameter estimates reported in the logit model shown in column 1 in table 2. The dark lines show the predicted probabilities and the shaded areas represent the 95% confidence intervals about the respective probabilities.

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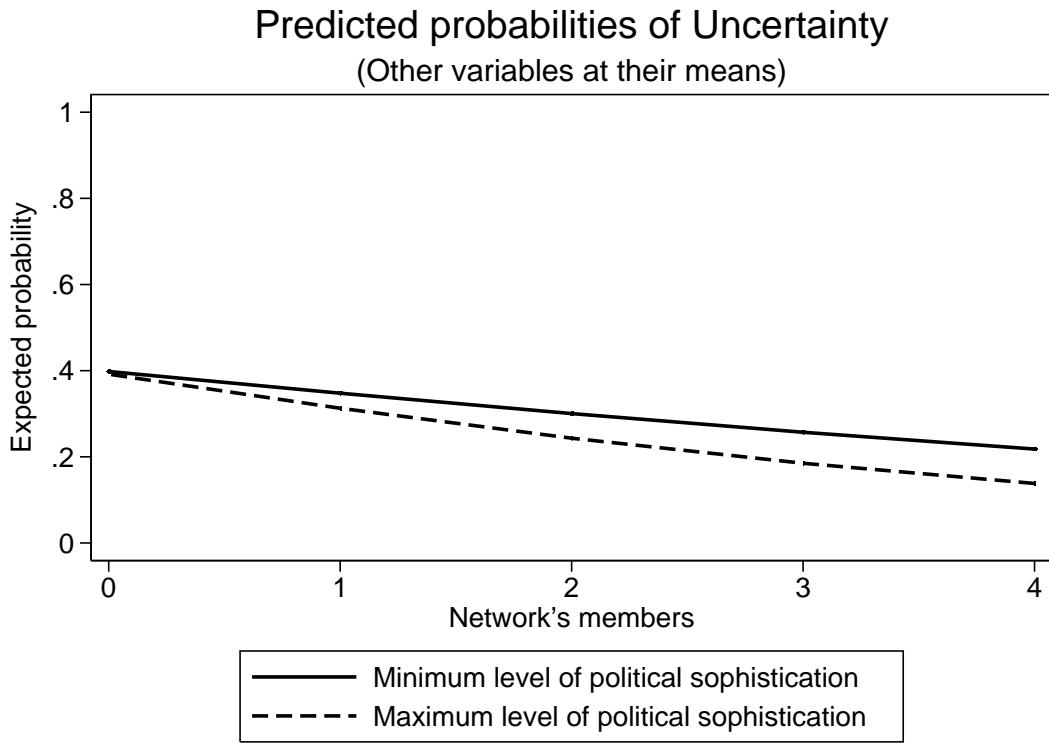


Figure 4: This figure depicts the difference in predicted probabilities of being uncertain about for whom to vote for those individuals with minimum levels of sophistication vis-à-vis those with maximum levels. These probabilities are computed based on the parameter estimates reported in the logit model shown in column 2 in table 2.

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Table 3: Decision to vote for Petro

	Model 1 Coef.	Model 2 Coef.
Peñalosa network	-1.24*	-1.72
Petro network	0.56*	0.55*
Sociotropic evaluation	0.01	0.01
Ideotropic evaluation	0.00	0.00
Closeness to Polo	0.01*	0.01*
Closeness to PU	-0.03*	-0.03*
Voted for Moreno in 2007	1.08*	1.09*
Political sophistication	-0.02	-0.02
Progressiveness	0.02*	0.02*
State role	0.01	0.01
Corruption	0.35	0.33
Income level	-0.02*	-0.02*
Sex (F)	0.69*	0.69*
Age	-0.01	-0.01
Education	-0.04	-0.04
Peñalosa network \times sophistication		0.01
Constant	1.11	1.11
<i>N</i>	275	275
Log likelihood	-137.3	-137.2
χ^2	102	102

* p<0.05

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Estimated probability of voting for Petro

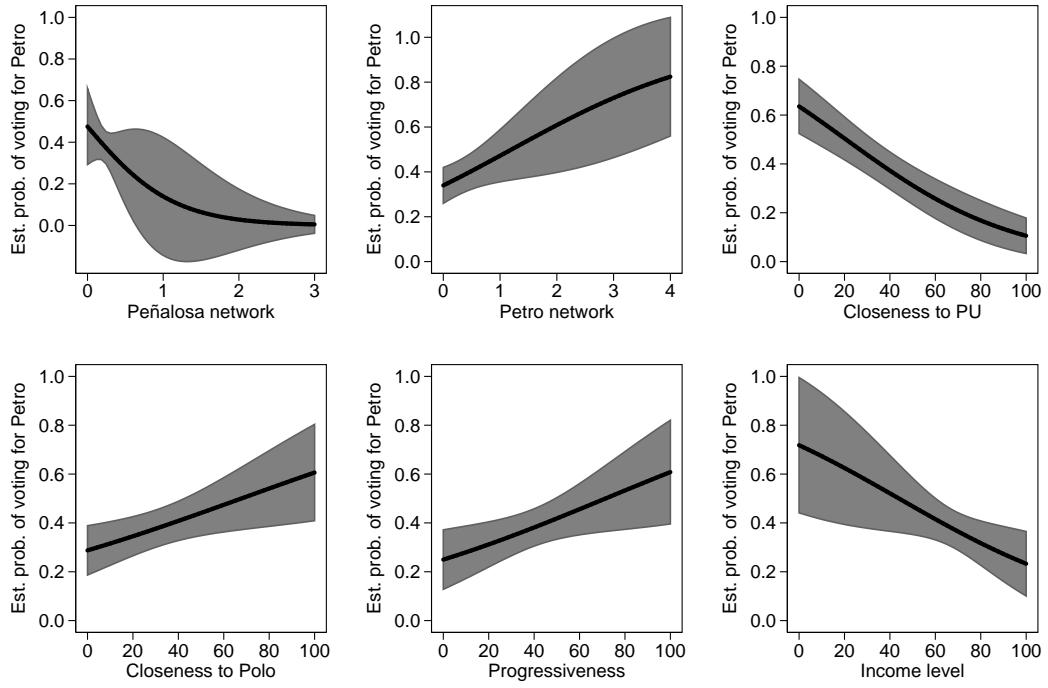


Figure 5: This figure depicts the changes in predicted probabilities associated with changes in the values taken by different model covariates. These probabilities are computed based on the parameter estimates reported in the logit model shown in column 1 in table 3. The dark lines show the predicted probabilities and the shaded areas represent the 95% confidence intervals about the respective probabilities.

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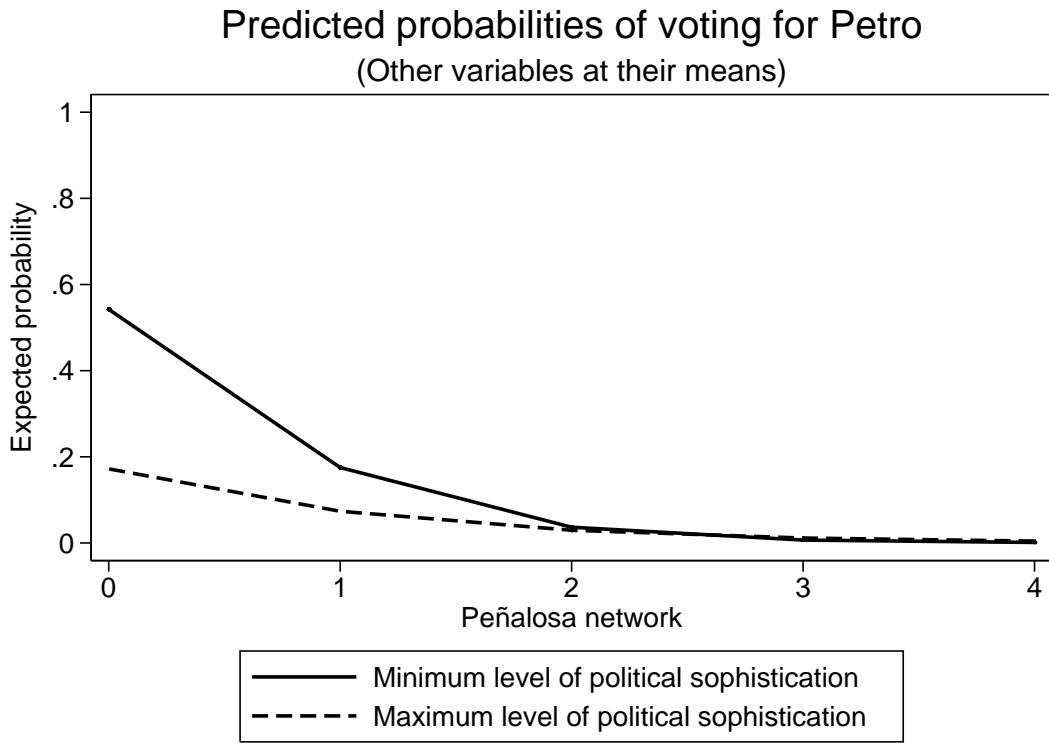


Figure 6: This figure depicts the difference in predicted probabilities of voting for Petro for those individuals with minimum levels of sophistication vis-à-vis those with maximum levels. These probabilities are computed based on the parameter estimates reported in the logit model shown in column 2 in table 3.

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