

# Social Class, Networks May Influence Political Behaviors

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(PhysOrg.com) -- It appears that social class and race may have varying affects on the political actions and views of individuals, University of Arizona professor Jan E. Leighley and her colleague have noted in a newly-published article.

Conversations across the nation about topics such as health care reform, the war in Afghanistan, unemployment and the national debt have been particularly heated in recent months.

But at the micro level, how do the social networks people maintain and types of political conversations they have - which may or may not contain entirely accurate information or even a range of perspectives - inform their political views and ways they choose to behave?

University of Arizona professor Jan E. Leighley - who has long studied issues related to elections, voter registration and the [political behavior](#) of populations across the United States - investigated the topic and co-authored a paper that has been published in the September issue of American Politics Research.

Despite the seemingly unlimited access to a universe of information via media outlets, blogs, government reports and other sources, Leighley and her colleague indicated in their co-authored article that socioeconomics and an individual's ethnicity or race do influence the type of information people have access to and, ultimately, their actions and beliefs.

Leighley, a professor in the UA's School of Government and Public Policy, co-authored the article, "The Implications of Class, Race, and Ethnicity for Political Networks," with her former graduate student, Tetsuya Matsubayashi, now an assistant professor of political science at the University of North Texas, Denton.

The two set out on the research because a substantive body of knowledge - particularly in political science - about the ways in which social networks influence the political behaviors of people of color is lacking. They were especially keen on evaluating differences between African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, individuals classified as "noncitizens" and Caucasians.

"The studies political scientists have used to study political behaviors from about the 1960s to the 1990s have used mostly nationally representative samples," Leighley said.

"There was a hole in the research," she said. "When you have these representative samples, what you do is to pluck people out of the political and social contexts in which they live."

Ultimately, they found in their sample that while one's environment and socioeconomic characteristics - both of individuals and the communities within which they live - are key factors, social networks tended to have a great direct influence over political views and behaviors.

Leighley studied under and was a mentee of John D. Sprague, who holds the Sidney W. Souers Professor Emeritus of Government at Washington University in St. Louis. Sprague has long argued that people's political perceptions cannot be removed from their contexts.

"Individuals are not atomistic actors in political life, but are situated

within multiple social and political networks that provide information, cues, and opportunities to engage in politics," the co-authored article noted.

Other findings suggested that Caucasians in the study were less likely to have a more divergent social network with people of varying inclinations and beliefs while people of color in the study were less likely to have access to "expert information," among a range of other findings.

To study these effects, Leighley and Matsubayashi studied survey-based data from the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality, comparing the characteristics of social networks among Caucasians and people of color in major cities such as Boston, Detroit and Los Angeles.

In doing so, the researchers considered socioeconomic status and interracial interactions. Among the variables considered were income, education, employment, age, marital status and gender, network size, expertise, diversity, civic engagement, neighborhood characteristics and church attendance.

Leighley and Matsubayashi concluded that those with a higher income and more education had larger social networks, more of which were well versed in political happenings regardless of racial or ethnic background, though people of color tended to have more interracial interactions.

But the team noted that people of color tended to have smaller and "less expert" social networks than did Caucasians and do not necessarily benefit from what the authors term "information shortcuts."

Findings suggested that Caucasians enjoyed a "notable advantage" on the type of expert information they were able to access with African Americans having access to lower levels, but Hispanics and Asians having access to even lower levels, particularly if those individuals are

not citizens of the United States.

"In sum, these patterns suggest that the resources associated with individuals' social networks are consistent with other individual-level resources, such as education and income, and thus enhance the socioeconomic advantages typically enjoyed by Anglo-Caucasians," the article noted.

One concern was that Caucasians tended to interact more often with like-minded people, leaving Leighley and Matsubayashi to question whether the perspectives of those in their sample were exposed enough to other perspectives and experiences.

The authors also found that the networks of each racial category tended to be dominated by people of the same race. However, people of color in particular were more apt to have more active interracial interactions when they were classified as having a higher income and education.

This did not hold true for Caucasians, Leighley noted, though civic engagement appears to have less to do with race or ethnicity.

The article also noted that those who were actively involved in associations who were not affiliated with a religious group tended to have "more resourceful, more expert and more diverse social networks."

In concluding their findings, Leighley and Matsubayashi did, add a note of caution, however - notably that a more involved study and empirical analysis of such findings is required.

The co-authors indicated that they also were curious about ways in which socioeconomics may also influence an individual's attitudes about education, criminal justice, the welfare system and other topics.

They, too, wanted to know ways in which socioeconomics could influence an individual's attitudes about education, criminal justice, the welfare system and other topics - issues not covered in the present study.

But the immediate implications of the findings, Leighley said, indicate that researchers - particularly in the area of political science - studying peoples' behaviors must always consider the context from which people speak.

The findings also imply that people of all backgrounds and inclinations must strive to seek out varying perspectives and ideas when considering how they, as individuals, feel about political issues.

"I hope this research has consequences for scholars who are studying these issues," Leighley said, adding that implications also exist for the general public.

"People go to the people like themselves and who share their own beliefs," she said. "But in my ideal world, this could evoke reflection about why we should take the risk to have a civil conversation with someone who has had a different experience."

Provided by University of Arizona ([news](#) : [web](#))

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