

Andy Baker, Barry Ames, and Lúcio Rennó. *Persuasive Peers: Social Communication and Voting in Latin America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. 369 pages. ISBN 9780691205786.

### Paul A. BECK

The Ohio State University

*Persuasive Peers* is an outstanding contribution to the study of voting behavior. From a base of panel surveys in Brazilian and Mexican presidential elections, it studies changes in vote preferences across election campaigns. Heavily influenced by stable preferences in electorates with strong party identifications, especially in the United States, most research on voting behavior focuses on the ultimate vote rather than the dynamics of voter opinion to reach that final choice. *Persuasive Peers* recognizes that changing preferences invite an expanded explanation: of vote preferences that are influenced by information from social networks, by **horizontal** rather than **vertical** forces.

This “peer persuasion” proves to be more significant in tracking the ebbs and flows of preferences than such frequently credited factors as media exposure, party contacts and clientelism, and strategic voting. It is particularly appropriate in accounting for outcomes in runoff elections necessitated by no majority winner in multi-candidate first round contests, such as in Brazil. With multiparty-ism and traditional-party fragmentation becoming more prominent throughout the democratic world, a focus on switching preferences and their roots in interpersonal discussion seems increasingly appropriate.

The book’s most significant contributions are two-fold.

First, its Chapter 2 directs attention to candidate preference changes (i.e., volatility or vote switching) through nine multi-wave panel surveys of at least twice-opinionated respondents in 10 Brazilian, Mexican, and Argentinian presidential elections. Such changes in preferences are common in Latin American elections and warrant a focus *per se*. In Brazil’s 2014 election, for example, “at least 40% of the electorate shifted their vote intentions across party lines at some point of the campaign” (5). They are particularly prominent in elections requiring a majority winner, such as the Brazilian presidential contests. Vote volatility as a dependent

variable rarely has been investigated systematically in voting studies. This book demonstrates that it deserves considerably more attention.

Second, in Chapter 3 Baker, Ames, and Rennó focus on a social network explanation for voting preference changes. They examine peer influences on vote preferences using measures of respondents' (ego's) political discussion networks to account for vote volatility. Survey respondents were asked to name their major discussants (alters) and the candidates they support. The authors convincingly justify how such measures can capture peer vote preferences reliably, even when based on respondent perceptions. The authors criticize the reliance on what they term "vertical" intermediation, top-down communications from elites (parties, candidates, media, secondary organizations) to voters that have characterized previous research on intermediation in Latin America (and elsewhere). In their view, even media influence, the most commonly studied intermediary, is translated through horizontal discussions in a two-step flow via peers. They conclude that "the top-down flows of persuasive political information that occur through direct vertical ties ... represent just a small share of political communications in Latin America" (9) and "assumes a level of trust toward elites that is often lacking" (11) there. They show that peer discussion of politics is frequent throughout the continent. Emphasizing it is an important new approach for explaining Latin American voting behavior and, more generally, in advancing social network research.

Chapter 4 is the key chapter in the volume, connecting horizontal peer networks to the dependent variable of vote volatility/instability. At the individual level, voters embedded in discussion networks entirely agreeing with them are less likely to change during the campaign than those in networks of discussants at least partly disagreeing with them. This analysis nicely differentiates between the too often conflated network disagreement (ego-alter differences) that heighten the probability of vote switching vs. network heterogeneity (differences among alters) that may mute it. In dyadic analysis, alters' opinions strongly affect vote choices of egos. Moreover, candidates whose supporters face high rates of disagreement in their networks are the ones who are less likely to maintain that support through election day.

The chapter tackles methodological challenges effectively through tests for robustness, omitted variables, and the accuracy of perceptions of alters. It shows especially strong alter effects in runoff elections, where voters for defeated candidates must change preferences if they are to participate in the second round. The primary mechanism of social influence is shown to be informational rather than normative modeling, with less knowledgeable people, who are more likely to change their preferences, turning to their more knowledgeable peers for guidance.

*Persuasive Peers* provides other important insights into voting behavior through the "window" of discussant networks. Relying on intensive studies of two different cities in Brazil, Chapter 5 contains an especially ingenious explanation

of how neighborhood effects are carried by the partisanship of peer networks within homogeneously partisan neighborhoods but are absent in more heterogeneous neighborhoods or a less partisan city. “Where neighborhoods have strong political leanings, political discussion during campaigns exerts a gravitational pull on their residents, assimilating many ... to their neighborhoods’ partisan tendencies” ... In contrast, no similar process unfolded ... where neighborhoods lacked stable partisan leanings.” (227) Chapter 6 extends this analysis to connect the distribution of homogeneously partisan networks to the state and regional level in Brazil and Mexico in accounting for the broader effects of context. Chapter 7 addresses the frequent clientelist explanation for voting in Latin American countries. In their contacts with voters, political operatives do not just target party loyalists, but rather are shown to concentrate their attention on the “network hubs” with large discussant networks and a commitment to persuading their peers to vote a certain way. Through this selective focus on social networks, party contacting can multiply its reach.

Chapter 8 considers the important question of the consequences of peer influence. It focuses on two topics: whether there are inherent biases by SES (wealth and education), race, and gender in political discussion as well as whether discussion fosters “correct” voting (votes in line with issue preferences). Using data from 12 elections in 6 Latin American countries, it finds greater SES than racial or gender biases in political discussion, with wealth and education promoting more political talk. Propensities for contacting and being paid off by party benefits, by contrast, are much less likely to be stratified by SES. Women are less likely than men to discuss politics but generally do not have smaller networks. The results for correct voting are less definitive. The politically talkative and politically knowledgeable are more likely to vote correctly for president. By contrast, neither media exposure nor contacts from party operatives promote correct voting. Nor are people increasingly likely to vote correctly over the course of the campaign.

The study’s results are most convincing when they focus on first to second round changes in runoff elections (covered in pp. 113-115 especially). Though still important, the research is less convincing when it documents changes within the election campaign, especially if as the authors concede “... election-day vote tallies ... did not diverge significantly from the distribution of vote intentions prevailing at the campaign’s onset. In other words, momentum runs by outsider candidates were short-lived” (226). Additional evidence of peer effects might be found for the nine countries in Latin America where run-offs are required if no candidates surpass the majority threshold (or 40-45% in three more, including Argentina) in the first round. Cross-sectional data from Comparative National Election Project surveys in Chile 1994 and 2000 and Colombia 2014 and 2018 could be mined in this fashion to expand the empirical base in runoff elections. Not only are such runoffs common in Latin America, but they also occur in more than

a dozen European democracies, many of them (most notably France and Poland) where numerous longitudinal election surveys have been conducted. *Persuasive Peers* has paved the way for additional studies of social influence, both within campaigns and in runoff elections, and one hopes that their lead will be followed.

*Persuasive Peers* is distinguished by its methodological rigor. It employs the appropriate techniques in its quantitative analyses and meticulously documents what it has done either in the main text or the appendices – and why. It relies on multiple panel surveys, taking advantage of discussion network measures where they are available to support its conclusions. Its hypothesis testing often is ingenious, making and then empirically documenting logical connections and ruling out alternative explanations. In addition, it nicely illustrates some of its quantitative results with in-depth voter interviews.

Primarily following the lead of *The American Voter* (Campbell *et al.* 1960) rather than the Columbia School (Berelson *et al.* 1954; Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944), the study of voting behavior has been dominated by a concentration on final vote choices and explanatory variables for them that are commonly included in surveys – party loyalties, voter demographic characteristics that capture social cleavages in the society, personal and societal economic conditions, and social identities. The field of voting behavior has flourished under this approach. Yet overlooked has been the Columbia School focus on the campaign and social influences within it.

*Persuasive Peers* resuscitates this alternative path, relying on more modern measures of discussion networks to make promising advances in the study of both voting behavior and social influence. Research on American elections, where there is little change over the course of the campaign and even between elections, undoubtedly underestimates peer influence on voting preferences. This American “exceptionalism” limited the scope of the Columbia studies just as it has limited American voting studies ever since. Many democracies, however, lack the stabilizing force of longstanding party identifications and experience considerable volatility and instability in voting preferences across the election campaign and even between elections. Multiparty systems, often debuting new “flash” parties under the pressure of fragmenting traditional parties, foster volatility in voting outcomes and even voting preferences in the heat of the campaign. Presidential elections that require majority winners necessarily force switching by many voters. Underdeveloped media systems and lack of trust in elite political messaging put a premium on person-to-person communications in guiding vote choices. These are common features of Latin American electoral politics, so it is natural for a study of voting there to address them. Yet, Latin American elections are not alone in possessing these characteristics. Parties are many and often fleeting in fledgling democracies, and volatility has heightened even in long-standing democracies. Many presidential elections require majority or near-majority winners, thus necessitating runoffs between the top two vote-getters in the first round. For example,

almost half of French voters in 2022 supported candidates for president who did not survive into the second round. *Persuasive Peers* demonstrates that citizens in such circumstances may look for guidance in choosing candidates to their networks of political discussants, particularly their most knowledgeable peers.

The book is an exemplary guide to broadening the focus on voter preferences beyond final votes and to more fully capturing the sources of voting behavior by including peer influences. It is an impressive book that should be widely read by scholars of voting behavior well beyond the Latin American continent.

## REFERENCES

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