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Explicating Opinion Leadership: Nonpolitical Dispositions, Information Consumption, and Civic Participation

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What are the sources of opinion leadership? Do opinion leaders seek informational media, and if so, how do they consume it? Are opinion leaders active in civic life, or is it that those who are active think of themselves as opinion leaders? Is opinion leadership a cause or a consequence of political efficacy? To answer these questions, we use data from two large national surveys: a cross-sectional study conducted in 1998 and a panel study conducted in 1999 and 2000. Our cross-sectional analysis shows that opinion leadership is largely explained by nonpolitical dispositions such as self-assuredness, innovativeness, and sophistication. These opinion leaders, spurred by an interest in politics, tend to seek out informational content on television, newspapers, and the Internet, likely as a way to maintain their environmental surveillance and structural influence. All of this helps explain why opinion leadership is linked to civic participation, both directly and indirectly. Further analysis of panel data indicates that opinion leadership is a consequence rather than a cause of civic participation, lending support to the causal structure advanced in our model. These data also reveal a reciprocal relationship between opinion leadership and political efficacy, indicative of a mutually reinforcing cycle of relational dispositions and political competence. Implication for political communication, civic participation, and democratic theory are discussed.

Keywords civil society, community engagement, consumer culture, Internet use, newspaper reading, opinion leaders, and personality strength.

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Civic participation—public involvement in efforts to address collective problems—has long been an essential characteristic of American democracy. Historically, cooperative activities enabled citizens to efficiently pursue common goals, often creating community-wide gains that would be unlikely to emerge absent joint efforts (e.g., Bellah et al., 1985; Coleman, 1990; Taylor, 1989; Tocqueville, 1835/1969, 1840/1945; Tönnies, 1940). However, declines in social capital over the last 30 years, as reported by Putnam (1995, 2000), suggest that the resulting dearth of civic participation may leave many collective problems unresolved. Even the events of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath did little to change the levels of civic engagement of American citizens beyond a growing interest in politics and trust in institutions (Putnam, 2002).

Accordingly, scholarly interest in the factors that contribute to community engagement remains high. Although demographic characteristics, social structural factors, and communication patterns have been well studied, considerably less attention has been directed to understanding the dispositional sources of civic engagement in certain personality traits. In particular, Noelle-Neumann (1999) has argued that personality strength—that is, individuals' self-perceived leadership qualities and aptitude at shaping others' opinions—is directly relevant to research on political action and civic engagement. She contends that individuals displaying these traits are opinion leaders and, according to her data, show higher levels of engagement in their communities. Such self-reflexive assessments of social influence have demonstrated considerable divergent and convergent validity in agenda setting and political participation studies (Scheufele, 1999; Weimann & Brosius, 1994). Recent work by Scheufele and Shah (2000) extends some of these findings to the U.S. and begins to trace the role of news consumption in the relationship between self-identified opinion leadership and civic participation.

The reemergence of interest in opinion leadership creates the need for a more careful exploration of the concept and its relevance for political communication research more than 50 years after it was first introduced by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). This article provides the requisite overview. Our exploration is composed of three main parts. First, we explicate the construct of opinion leadership—its conceptualization, its antecedents, its measurement, and its consequences—and then specify its relevance for research on public opinion and civic participation. Second, we use national survey data collected in 1998 to examine self-designated opinion leadership as an endogenous variable within a structural equation model including demographic characteristics, nonpolitical dispositions, media information seeking, and civic participation. Last, we test national panel data collected between 1999 and 2001 for two alternate explanations of the relationships observed in our structural model: opinion leadership as a consequence of civic participation and opinion leadership as coinciding with political efficacy.

Sources of Opinion Leadership

This renewed emphasis on dispositional influences on political behavior recollects earlier research on opinion leadership (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Noelle-Neumann, 1985; Weimann, 1991, 1994). Most past work conceived of opinion leadership as an individual characteristic with relational implications, that is, a person's status in social interactions. Researchers have commonly agreed on definitions such as Hellevik and Bjørklund's (1991): An opinion leader is "a person who exerts influence on the opinions of others" (p. 158). They "are to be found on every level of society and presumably, therefore, are very much like the people they influence" (Katz, 1957, p. 63). Although the importance of opinion leaders has been demonstrated across numerous contexts (e.g., health, consumption, technology), opinion leaders may have particular sway over fellow citizens' reactions to political issues, setting agendas through a two-step flow (Brosius & Weimann, 1996; Weimann & Brosius, 1994).

As all of this suggests, opinion leadership is at least partly rooted in the sense of cultural, intellectual, or technical authority outside the realm of politics that some individuals believe they hold within groups of peers. That is, many different forms of social standing within groups confer a sense of knowing and reinforce self-conceptions of opinion leadership. Opinion leaders likely view themselves as aesthetic arbiters, at the forefront of social trends, and early adopters of innovations (Rogers, 1995; Summers, 1970). They are assumed to be self-assured, perceiving themselves as intelligent and independent enough to form personal judgments about public issues that they can then share with others (Chan & Misra, 1990). Studies in marketing and consumer behavior recognize these types of traits as preconditions for opinion leadership (Assael, 1987; Black, 1982; Richins & Root-Shafer, 1988; Solomon, 1999), yet research in political communication has not considered how traits such as sophistication, innovativeness, and assuredness work through opinion leadership to effect information seeking and civic participation. One reason for this gap may be challenges associated with measuring opinion leadership, both relationally and self-reflexively.

Measuring Opinion Leadership

Operational definitions of opinion leadership have varied greatly between studies. Lazarsfeld and colleagues (1944) originally suggested that "the opinion leaders of a community could be best identified and studied by asking people to whom they turn for advice on the issue at hand" (p. 49). This approach emphasizes the associational element of this individual disposition; however, without a full census of the population under study, gaps in the network structure might lead to inaccurate assessments of opinion leadership. Due to the challenges associated with this relational method, in subsequent research Columbia scholars singled out opinion leaders by asking two questions: "Have you recently tried to convince anyone of your political ideas?" and "Has anyone recently asked you for your advice on a political question?" (Katz, 1957). Although this technique required the somewhat brash approach of asking respondents for ontological data—self-reflections on their state of being—it had the virtues of face validity and parsimony.

Scholars have since refined the measurement of this disposition using the *self-designating technique*.[1] Noelle-Neumann (1985) proposed an instrument to identify opinion leaders based on their *personality strength.* As noted above, personality strength is conceived of as a feature of individuals' basic social orientation—a reflection of their leadership abilities, their aptitude at shaping others' opinions, and their perceived impact on social situations. Measured on a scale consisting of 10 statements that tap self-perceptions of leadership and social influence, respondents express agreement with each statement. This approach is well suited for cross-sectional studies, in that a reliable and valid scale "may be administered in less than five minutes [and] adapted to studies of any type of opinion leadership" (Rogers & Cartano, 1962, p. 441).

Subsequent research modified Noelle-Neumann's approach to assessing personality strength and inferring opinion leadership. Most notably, Weimann (1991) formally validated the Strength of Personality Scale against social network data in Germany and Israel. He found that "the influentials" identified with this measurement technique had central network positions and more communicative activity, fitting a "sophisticated characterization of opinion leadership" (p. 267). Weimann and Brosius (1994; Brosius &

Weimann, 1996) subsequently introduced several refinements to this scale, most notably the application of a continuum rather than a dichotomy when classifying respondents to the personality strength scale and the potential of weighting individual scale items to yield a more sensitive and valid classification of self-designated opinion leaders. As these studies collectively indicate, one method of tapping self-identified opinion leaders is through a truncated but graduated personality strength scale. Yet, one potential threat to this approach is conceptual overlap with other constructs reflecting individuals' sense of confidence (i.e., self-assuredness) and their effectiveness at shaping political outcomes (i.e., political efficacy). We address the conceptual differences between personality strength and related constructs in this article.

Consequences of Opinion Leadership

Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) identified a number of key characteristics of opinion leaders that distinguish them from others. They defined them as "people who are most concerned about the issue as well as most articulate about it" (p. 49). Weimann (1994) includes most aspects of previous definitions, that is, higher levels of interest, knowledge, and social recognition than nonleaders. Beyond these factors, opinion leaders also display higher levels of political activity: "They come into contact with many people . . . through their activities in various voluntary associations . . . they speak at meetings, participate in discussions, and take part in many social events" (Weimann, 1994, p. 79). Noelle-Neumann (1999) echoes this perspective, alluding to the confluence of civic dispositions present in opinion leaders that lead to involvement. Unfortunately, these claims are based on cross-sectional data, so the causal direction of the linkage between opinion leadership and civic participation remains in question.

Some efforts to clarify the mechanism that foster participation among opinion leaders have implied indirect effects, mediated through news consumption (Scheufele & Shah, 2000). This perspective builds on the argument that opinion leaders are "considerably more exposed to the radio, to the newspapers and to magazines" (Katz, 1957, p. 64). Their status as influential members of their communities likely encourages surveillance and seeking of hard news content (Levy, 1978). As a result, they should be more active news consumers.

This conclusion, however, has not been conclusively supported by past research (e.g., Lin, 1973; Robinson, 1976), possibly because the relationships between opinion leadership and news consumption are mediated through other variables, most notably interest in politics. It is widely acknowledged that political interest spurs information seeking via mass media (Noelle-Neumann, 1999; Scheufele & Shah, 2000; Rahn, Brehm, & Carlson, 1999; Weimann, 1994). Such informational uses of media have been found to mediate the link between socioeconomic status and participation, indicating that demographic variables work through political interest, newspaper reading, and television news viewing to influence involvement in collective action (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). In this vein, some studies have explained public affairs information seeking, particularly use of newspapers, as a function of interest in politics (e.g., McLeod et al., 1996, 1999).

Information and Participation

An opinion leader who is interested in politics has a range of media options to explore. For most people, the primary tool for social surveillance is watching television news. As

Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar (1993) assert, this is partly a function of the episodic nature of television news coverage, which tends to focus on recent events and immediate reactions rather than social trends or reflective analysis. Hart (1999) echoes this perspective, noting that the "vigorously ahistorical" quality of television news may leave sophisticated viewers longing for context and perspective, something that newspapers have increasingly attempted to provide. We expect that opinion leaders, especially those interested in politics, will be driven beyond television news to sources that provide more context and perspective on social issues.

In line with this view but as yet unconsidered by political communication research, the growth of the Internet as a mass medium provides opinion leaders with a new tool in their efforts to learn about issues of interest. Individuals can search for information across a range of topics that are relevant for interpersonal discussion, group leadership, and social influence. Thus, use of the Internet can provide personally pertinent details about issues and ideas encountered in other contexts, permitting opinion leaders to gather information that enhances their potential influence. Recent research has highlighted the importance of the Internet as a tool for learning about politics and engagement with public life, often as a supplement to traditional news sources (Bimber, 1998; Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). In fact, a recent Pew Internet and American Life survey showed that a majority of Americans would go to television as an initial news source during a crisis but favor newspapers and the Internet over other media as secondary sources of information (Rainie, 2003).

Another possible explanation for these oft-observed linkages is that interest in politics reflects a broader sense of collectivism, in contrast with individualism (Rokeach, 1973; Triandis, 1995). Research by Funk (1998) explored whether a value commitment to the community explains civic engagement. Using data from the 1990–1992 National Election Study (NES), she found that endorsement of collectivism, which she termed *societal interest*, does contribute to "efforts to solve community problems and giving money to charities" (p. 610). Awareness and concern about community needs, it is argued, fosters civic participation (Unger, 1991). This is not to say that participation always reflects an "other-regarding" disposition (see Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Schaller & Cialdini, 1988) but that political interest may foster engagement apart from its role in spurring information seeking.

Likewise, research has repeatedly found that reading newspapers and viewing public affairs programming has a positive effect on participation in civic life, since the informational resources provided by mass media facilitate engagement (e.g., Chaffee, 1982; McLeod et al., 1999; Norris, 1996). Recently, these insights have been extended to information seeking via the Internet (Shah et al., 2001), supporting the view that informational uses of media are critical to civic participation. Accordingly, news consumption and Internet use may largely mediate the effects of dispositional variables on civic participation, just as they do for socioeconomic status.

Hypotheses

Research on opinion leadership and community life has just begun to clarify the linkages among dispositional factors, patterns of media use, and civic participation. Although many studies have traced the factors that contribute to opinion leadership in nonpolitical contexts, the antecedents of opinion leadership have received little attention when considered in relation to civic and political participation. Likewise, the general relationship between news media use and civic participation has been established, yet the specific linkages between opinion leadership and information seeking, particularly use of the Internet, remain obscured. In an effort to clarify these connections, this study tests 10 hypotheses concerning novel causes and consequences of opinion leadership within the context of civic participation. Relationships specified by previous research are implemented in the model but not formally hypothesized so that the unique contributions of this study can be highlighted (see Brosius & Weimann, 1996; Scheufele & Shah, 2000).

Beginning with the antecedents of opinion leadership, we contend that opinion leadership is often rooted in cultural, intellectual, or technical authority that individuals hold within groups. These forms of expertise reinforce self-conceptions of opinion leadership. As such, opinion leaders achieve their social status because they are aesthetic arbiters, early adopters of innovations, and self-assured decision makers (Chan & Misra, 1990; Rogers, 1995; Summers, 1970). Thus, three nonpolitical dispositions seem particularly relevant for communication and community life: being cosmopolitan, self-assured, and an innovator (Assael, 1987; Chan & Misra, 1990; Solomon, 1999). Accordingly, we offer the following hypotheses:

> *H1*: A cosmopolitan disposition will be positively related to opinion leadership.
> *H2*: A self-assured disposition will be positively related to opinion leadership.
> H3: An innovation disposition will be positively related to opinion leadership.

Opinion leadership, in turn, will have a series of consequences, beginning with a direct effect on civic involvement, interest in politics, and surveillance of news media. As found by Weimann (1994), Noelle-Neumann (1999), and Scheufele and Shah (2000), opinion leaders are predisposed to participate in discussions, speak at meetings, appear at social events, and hold associational membership—all forms of civic participation. Their status as influential members of their communities may encourage surveillance and seeking of hard news content (Katz, 1957; Levy, 1978). Thus, we anticipate a direct relationship to civic participation and political interest and specifically hypothesize associations with the use of broadcast and print news:

> *H4*: Opinion leadership will be positively related to broadcast hard news use.
> *H5*: Opinion leadership will be positively related to print hard news use.

Interest in politics and hard news use may also channel effects of opinion leadership. Individuals who are interested in politics are especially likely to make use of hard news content to satisfy their desire to stay informed. This is consistent with extant research that has explained public affairs information seeking, generally, and use of newspapers, in particular, as a consequence of generalized interest in politics (e.g., McLeod et al., 1996, 1999). Thus, we anticipate the oft-confirmed relationship between interest in politics and print and broadcast hard news use.

Of course, the rise of the Internet offers motivated individuals the opportunity to learn more about current affairs from a range of ideological perspectives. Recent research has emphasized that the Internet increasingly serves as a tool for learning about politics and gathering additional information after interest is sparked by television and newspaper reports (Bimber, 1998; Shah et al., 2005; Rainie, 2003). Thus, we hypothesize effects on online information seeking from political interest and hard news use:

> *H6:* Interest in politics will be positively related to online information search.

H7: Broadcast hard news use will be positively related to online information search.
H8: Print hard news use will be positively related to online information search.

Some of these factors, namely interest in politics and newspaper consumption, have long been linked to civic participation (Chaffee, 1982; McLeod et al., 1999). Others are less clear. Although some uncertainty has surrounded the role of television hard news consumption, an increasing number of studies have linked it to civic participation (Norris, 1996). Recent research has also begun to clarify how informational uses of the Internet contribute to civic participation (Shah et al., 2005). Given that interest in politics and newspaper consumption have been linked to civic participation, we focus on television news consumption and Internet information seeking:

H9: Broadcast hard news use will be positively related to civic participation.
H10: Online information search will be positively related to civic participation.

The relational model predicted above does not address two important questions: Does opinion leadership prompt civic participation, or does it result from it? and What is the relationship between opinion leadership and political efficacy? Although contrary to the structure of our theorized model, individuals who engage in community life with more frequency and energy may come away from their experiences more convinced of their status as opinion leaders. Likewise, opinion leadership, especially when measured through a self-designating technique, may simply be functioning as a proxy for political efficacy. To examine alternate explanations for our theorized model, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between opinion leadership and civic participation?
RQ2: What is the relationship between opinion leadership and political efficacy?

Method

The Data Sets

Two data sets were used to test the hypotheses and research questions outlined above. The first data set, the 1998 “Life Style Study” (i.e., 1998 LSS), was collected as part of an annual mail survey conducted on behalf of DDB-Chicago. Although not a conventional random sample, the LSS recruits respondents using a complex stratified quota sampling technique that holds up extremely well to comparable General Social Survey (GSS) and NES data sets (Putnam, 2000; Putnam & Yonish, 1999). Initially, researchers acquire the names and addresses of millions of Americans from commercial list brokers, who draw available information from drivers’ license bureaus, telephone directories, and other centralized sources. Via mail, large subsets of these people are asked to indicate whether they would be willing to participate periodically in surveys for small incentives ranging from prepaid phone cards to “Post-It” notes, depending on the length of the survey.[2] It is from this prerecruited “mail panel” of roughly 500,000 people that demographically balanced samples are drawn for inclusion in the annual LSS. In an effort to achieve a study sample that is representative of the population, stratified quota sampling procedures are then employed.[3]

This stratified quota sampling method was used to select an initial sample of 5,000 respondents for the 1998 LSS. Consistent with past performance, 3,350 usable responses were received, which represents a response rate of 67.0% against the mailout. As noted above, this stratified quota sampling method differs markedly from more conventional probability sample procedures yet produces highly comparable data. Putnam, who used 1975 to 1998 LSSs as the primary data for his book *Bowling Alone*, took great care to validate these data against the GSS and Roper Poll (Putnam, 2000; Putnam & Yonish, 1999). This validation involved longitudinal and cross-sectional comparisons of parallel questions found in the LSSs and conventional samples. He concluded that there were "surprisingly few differences between the two approaches," with the mail panel approach producing data "consistent with other modes of measurement" (Putnam, 2000, pp. 422–424). Other efforts to validate the LSS data against conventional random samples support Putnam's assertion (Groeneman, 1994).

The second data set analyzed in this study was collected as part of the "Connecting" and "Disconnecting" with Civic Life project (i.e., Civic Life Panel), a three-wave panel study built off of the 1999 LSS. The national survey data were collected by mail in February 1999, June 2000, and November 2000 from a single panel of respondents. The February data were collected as part of the 1999 LSS using the stratified quota sampling method described above. Of an initial sample of 5,000 respondents, 3,388 usable responses were received, for a response rate of 67.8% against the mailout. For the June 2000 wave of the study, individuals who completed the 1999 LSS were recontacted. Due to some erosion in the panel, 2,737 questionnaires were mailed out, with 1,902 respondents completing the questionnaire (a response rate of 70.1% against the mailout). For the November 2000 wave of the study, individuals who completed the prior survey were recontacted. Due to some erosion in the panel, 1,850 questionnaires were mailed to June 2000 respondents. The response rate against the mailout for this survey was 71.1%, with 1,315 respondents completing the questionnaire. These nonprobability panel data were tested against the 2000 NES, a probability sample panel study. The demographic composition of these two data sets was highly comparable.[4]

1998 LSS Measurement

Our cross-sectional analysis included seven exogenous variables. The measures of *age* ($M = 47.80$) and *gender* (56% females) were relatively straightforward. *Education* levels were assessed on a seven-point scale ranging from "attended elementary school" to "postgraduate school." The sample median was 5 (i.e., having attended some college). *Household income* was measured on a nonlinear 15-point scale that increased in $5,000 increments between incomes of below $10,000 and $49,999 and in $10,000 increments for incomes higher than $50,000. The mode of responses fell between $50,000 and $59,999. Items available in the 1998 LSS were used to construct three trait variables: *cosmopolitan disposition* ($M = 10.13$, $SD = 3.49$, $\alpha = .78$), *self-assured disposition* ($M = 20.58$, $SD = 3.03$, $\alpha = .77$), and *innovation disposition* ($M = 7.57$, $SD = 2.21$, $r = .45$). The first trait variable reflects an urbane and refined self-conception, the second an intellectual and confident self-conception, and the third a trendsetting self-conception.[5]

Five antecedent endogenous variables were included in our cross-sectional analyses. Foremost among these was *self-designated opinion leadership*, for which we employed a modified version of a personality strength index. Using four items available in the 1998 LSS an additive index ($M = 15.03$, $SD = 3.67$) was created from statements tapping respondents' perceptions of self-confidence and social influence in their community. The wording of the items used to measure this construct (e.g., "I have more self-confidence than most of my friends" and "I like to be considered a leader") reflected the long standing conceptualization of opinion leadership as a dispositional characteristic that is coupled with relational features, *an assessment of the social self*. This measurement approach also closely paralleled the operationalization of the strength of personality scale in previous research, albeit with 4 instead of 10 items. Each of the items had considerable face validity and similarity to statements included in Weimann (1994) and Noelle-Neumann's (1999) research.[6] This approach also integrates elements of Weimann and Brosius's method of identifying influentials along a continuum (Brosius & Weimann, 1996; Weimann & Brosius, 1994) and is consistent with Scheufele and Shah's (2000) measures in the U.S. context. The four other antecedent variables—*interest in politics* ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.59$), *newspaper hard news use* ($M = 1.31$, $SD = 0.68$, $r = .29$), *television hard news use* ($M = 1.21$, $SD = 0.77$, $KR\text{-}20 = .62$), and *Internet information search* ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.37$, $KR\text{-}20 = .81$)—focused on information consumption and relied on conventional measurement techniques.[7]

The final endogenous variable was civic engagement. It was measured as an additive index of three items tapping how often respondents had engaged in civic or community activities: volunteering, working on a community project, and attending a club meeting ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 3.63$). Each item was measured on a nonlinear 7-point scale ranging from "none" to "52 times and more." The reliability (alpha) coefficient for this three-item index was .65.

Civic Life Panel Measurement

The Civic Life Panel included identical versions of the seven demographic and dispositional variables found in the 1998 LSS. The measures of *age* ($M = 53.15$), *gender* (60% females), *education* ($M = 5$; i.e., attended some college), and *household income* (mode between $50,000 and $59,999) were comparable across data sets. Likewise, the three trait variables—*cosmopolitan disposition* ($M = 11.02$, $SD = 3.64$, $\alpha = .81$), *self-assured disposition* ($M = 21.12$, $SD = 2.80$, $\alpha = .70$), and *innovation disposition* ($M = 7.18$, $SD = 2.16$, $r = .47$)—were highly consistent.

Waves 2 and 3 of the Civic Life Panel contain measures of self-designated opinion leadership (Wave 2, $M = 10.59$, $SD = 2.97$, $\alpha = .62$; Wave 3, $M = 10.50$, $SD = 3.12$, $\alpha = .60$) and civic participation (Wave 2, $M = 8.24$, $SD = 4.72$, $\alpha = .77$; Wave 3, $M = 9.20$, $SD = 6.36$, $\alpha = .84$) that largely parallel the construction of these variables in the 1998 LSS. This data set has the added merit of including measures of internal political efficacy at Waves 2 and 3; this variable was tapped using three items that concerned perceived influence on political outcomes (Wave 2, $M = 7.44$, $SD = 2.10$, $\alpha = .59$; Wave 3, $M = 9.20$, $SD = 6.36$, $\alpha = .54$).[8]

Analytical Methods

In order to be able to test interrelationships among independent and dependent variables, we employed structural modeling techniques, in this case using LISREL 8.3 (Jöreskog, 1993; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). In contrast to other multivariate techniques, structural equation modeling allows for the simultaneous estimation of all relationships in the model. Any given coefficient therefore represents the linear relationship between two variables controlling for all other variables in the model (MacCallum, 1995). By treating endogenous variables as both independent and dependent variables, structural equation modeling also allows for estimation of direct and indirect effects.[9]

After testing our hypotheses with the cross-sectional data, we turn to two-wave-two-variable (2W2V) cross-lagged structural modeling of the panel data to address Research Questions 1 and 2 (Finkel, 1995). Prior to examining the nature of the relationship of opinion leadership with civic participation and political efficacy, we residualized the Time 2 and 3 measures of opinion leadership, civic participation, and political efficacy on the demographic and dispositional variables.[10]

Results

Cross-Sectional Analysis

After testing an initial model that contained all anticipated and hypothesized paths, a final model emerged (see Figure 1) that fit the data very well.[11] The variables included in this model accounted for 12% of the variance in political interest, 33% in opinion leadership, 11% in television hard news use, 19% in newspaper hard news use, 19% in informational Web use, and 11% in civic engagement.

As is apparent from Figure 1, almost all predicted paths were statistically significant and in the hypothesized direction. The three exceptions, which were parsed from the initial model, are the expected direct links between self-designated opinion leadership

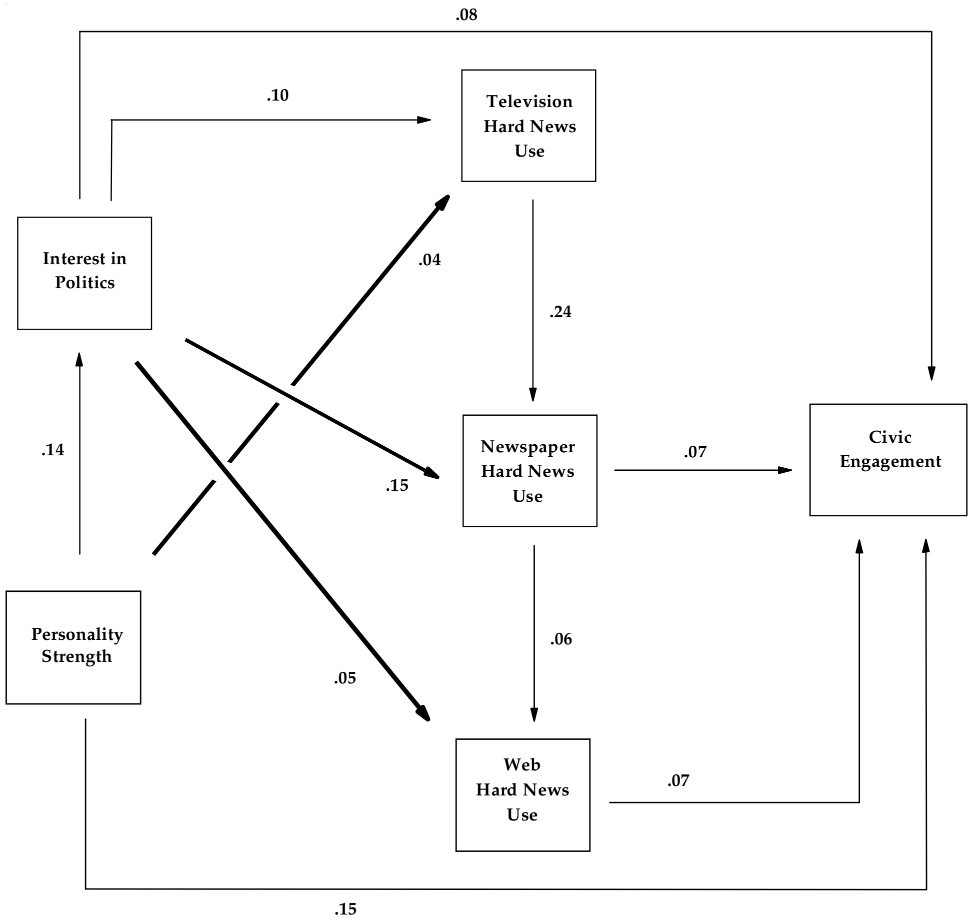
.08
.10
Television Hard News Use
Interest in Politics
.04
.24
.14
.15
Newspaper Hard News Use
.07
Civic Engagement
Personality Strength
.06
.05
Web Hard News Use
.07
.15

Figure 1. Predicting civic engagement (exogenous variables controlled).

and newspaper hard news use (H5) and the hypothesized connections of television hard news use with Internet information seeking (H7) and civic engagement (H9). Although direct relationships between these variables were not observed, indirect effects were detected. The pattern of direct and indirect relationships observed in these data yielded an interesting portrait of the role of opinion leadership in civic engagement.

Before we turn to the relationships observed among the endogenous variables, we begin with the effects of exogenous variables in the model. As Table 1 shows, older respondents tended to be more interested in politics ($\gamma = .19$) and they used newspapers ($\gamma = .23$) and television ($\gamma = .27$) more often for hard news. Even though they were less likely to turn to the Web for informational purposes ($\gamma = –.27$), they displayed higher levels of civic engagement ($\gamma = .15$). This is consistent with past research exploring generational differences. Men showed greater levels of political interest ($\gamma = –.14$) and self-designated opinion leadership ($\gamma = –.16$). However, they were less frequent users of newspaper hard news ($\gamma = .07$) and television hard news ($\gamma = .13$), turning instead to the Web for informational purposes ($\gamma = –.06$). They were also less likely to engage in civic activities than women ($\gamma = .13$). Education and income had similar effects on other endogenous variables. More educated respondents showed higher levels of political interest ($\gamma = .18$). Those who reported higher levels of income and education were also more likely to claim opinion leadership ($\gamma = .05$ for both links), exposed themselves more to hard news content in newspapers ($\gamma = .04$ for each), and were more likely to use the Web for

Table 1

Relationships among exogenous and endogenous variables

	Age	Gender	Education	Income	Cosmopolitan	Assured	Innovation
Opinion leadership	—	–.16	.05	.05	.20	.32	.26
	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	—	–.16	.05	.05	.20	.32	.26
Political interest	.19	–.14	.18	—	.04	—	.08
	—	–.02	.01	.01	.03	.05	.04
	–.19	–.17	.18	.01	.07	.05	.11
TV hard news use	.27	.13	–.07	—	.04	—	—
	.02	–.02	.02	.00	.02	.02	.02
	.29	.11	–.05	.00	.06	.02	.02
Newspaper hard news use	.23	.07	.04	.04	—	.05	—
	.10	—	.02	.00	.02	.01	.02
	.33	.07	.05	.04	.02	.06	.02
Information Web use	–.27	–.06	.19	.18	–.07	—	.03
	.03	—	.01	.00	.01	.01	.01
	–.24	–.06	.20	.18	–.06	.01	.04
Civic engagement	.15	.13	.14	—	–.05	—	—
	.02	–.04	.04	.02	.03	.06	.05
	.17	.09	.18	.02	–.02	.06	.05

Note. All coefficients are at least 1.96 times larger than their standard error. Coefficients in the first row represent standardized direct effects, coefficients in the second row represent standardized indirect effects, and coefficients in the third row represent standardized total effects.

informational purposes ($\gamma = .19$ and $\gamma = .18$, respectively). In addition, educated respondents were less likely to use television hard news use ($\gamma = -.07$) and were more engaged in civic life ($\gamma = .14$).

Turning next to the relationships of the dispositional factors to the endogenous variables, individuals who considered themselves cosmopolitan tended to be more interested in politics ($\gamma = .04$) and used television ($\gamma = -.04$) more often for hard news than those who did not. They were less likely to turn to the Web for informational purposes ($\gamma = -.07$), and they displayed lower levels of civic engagement ($\gamma = -.05$). Respondents who believed they were self-assured were more frequent users of newspaper hard news ($\gamma = .05$). Individuals who were innovators tended to be more interested in politics ($\gamma = .08$) and were more likely to turn to the Web for informational purposes ($\gamma = .03$). As hypothesized, these predispositions were strongly related to opinion leadership (γ = .20 for cosmopolitan, γ = .32 for mastery, and γ = .26 for innovation). The strength of the relationships between these nonpolitical dispositions and opinion leadership was notable.

After accounting for demographic and dispositional variables, both opinion leadership and political interest showed strong positive links to civic engagement with total effects of .17 and .10, respectively. These total effects were due to a combination of direct and indirect links (see Table 2). Consistent with previous research, we found self-designated

Table 2
Relationships among endogenous variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Opinion leadership	—	—	—	—	—	—
	—	—	—	—	—	—
	—	—	—	—	—	—
2. Political interest	.14	—	—	—	—	—
	—	—	—	—	—	—
	.14	—	—	—	—	—
3. TV hard news use	.04.	.10	—	—	—	—
	.01	—	—	—	—	—
	.05	.10	—	—	—	—
4. Newspaper hard news use	—	.15	.24	—	—	—
	.03	.02	—	—	—	—
	.03	.17	.24	—	—	—
5. Information Web use	—	.05	—	.06	—	—
	.01	.01	.01	—	—	—
	.01	.06	.01	.06	—	—
6. Civic engagement	.15	.08	—	.07	.07	—
	.01	.02	.02	—	—	—
	.17	.10	.02	.07	.07	—

Note. All coefficients are at least 1.96 times larger than their standard error. Coefficients in the first row represent standardized direct effects, coefficients in the second row represent standardized indirect effects, and coefficients in the third row represent standardized total effects.

opinion leadership to be positively related to political interest (β = .14) and television hard news use (β = .04). However, in contrast with prior theorizing, we did not find significant direct links between opinion leadership and newspaper hard news use or Web-based information seeking (cf. Weimann, 1991). Opinion leadership did show significant indirect effects, however, for both types of media use, with weak coefficients of .03 for newspaper hard news use and .01 for informational Web use. In addition to its indirect effects through communication variables, opinion leadership showed a strong (β = .15) unmediated link to civic engagement that held with all other factors controlled.

Not surprisingly, political interest showed a significant direct link to civic engagement (β = .08). This link was indirect as well through its influence on all types of communication behavior, with betas of .10 for television hard news use, .15 for newspaper hard news use, and .05 for Web use. Both newspaper hard news use and Web use, in turn, promoted civic engagement, with betas of .07 each. We found that political interest and television hard news use directly and indirectly contributed to newspaper hard news use and Internet information seeking. It appears from these data that opinion leaders motivated to use television to learn about politics were more likely to follow up on similar content in newspapers (β = .24) and via the Internet (β = .06), suggesting a sequence from TV surveillance to print and online enrichment, ultimately leading to civic engagement.

Panel Analysis

Next, we ran a pair of cross-lagged models to investigate the nature of the causal relationship of opinion leadership with civic participation and political efficacy.[12] Two 2W2V models were run to examine the role of opinion leadership, first with civic participation and then with political efficacy, using the residualized covariance matrixes of the observed variables as input.

Figure 2 presents the 2W2V model for opinion leadership and civic participation. The model accounted for 35% of variance in opinion leadership and 48% of variance in civic engagement. Both self-designated opinion leadership (β = .59, $p < .001$) and civic

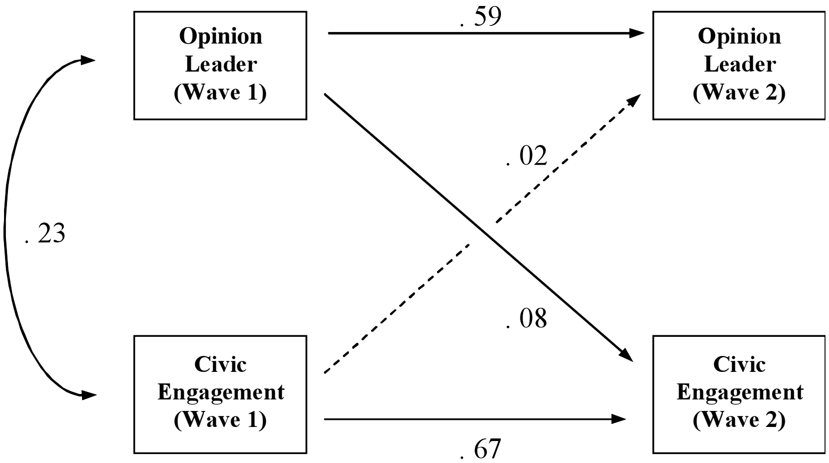

Figure 2. Relation between opinion leadership and civic engagement (demographic and dispositional variables controlled).

participation ($\beta = .67$, $p < .001$) were highly stable between June 2000 and November 2000. The cross-sectional correlation between error terms of national news use and civic participation in June 2000 was intermediate at .23 ($p < .001$). The causal relationship between opinion leadership and civic participation was found to run from opinion leadership to participation. The standardized effect of self-designated opinion leadership in June 2000 on civic participation in November 2000 was significant ($\beta = .08$, $p < .001$). In contrast, the effect of civic participation in June 2000 on self-designated opinion leadership in November 2000 was not found to be significant ($\beta = .02$, *ns*). This supports our structural ordering of civic participation as a consequence of opinion leadership.

Figure 3 presents the model for opinion leadership and political efficacy, which accounted for 36% of variance in opinion leadership and 29% of variance in political efficacy. Like opinion leadership, political efficacy was found to be stable ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$) between June 2000 and November 2000. The cross-sectional correlation between error terms of opinion leadership and political efficacy in June 2000 was modest at .16 ($p < .001$), suggesting that these two constructs are conceptually distinct. More interesting, the relationship between opinion leadership and political efficacy appears to be reciprocal. The standardized effect of opinion leadership in June 2000 on political efficacy in November 2000 was significant ($\beta = .10$, $p < .001$). The effect of political efficacy in June 2000 on self-designated opinion leadership in November 2000 was only slightly less strong than the inverse ($\beta = .08$, $p < .001$). This pattern of reciprocal relationships, especially in light of the modest correlation between the error terms in June 2000, suggests that these constructs are independent yet mutually causal. That is, opinion leadership and political efficacy may be linked in a cycle wherein one's structural influence promotes a sense of political competence which in turn fosters a stronger assessment of oneself as an opinion leader.

Discussion

This study revealed much about the causes and consequences of opinion leadership as it relates to civic participation. Scholars like Noelle-Neumann (1999) have suggested that

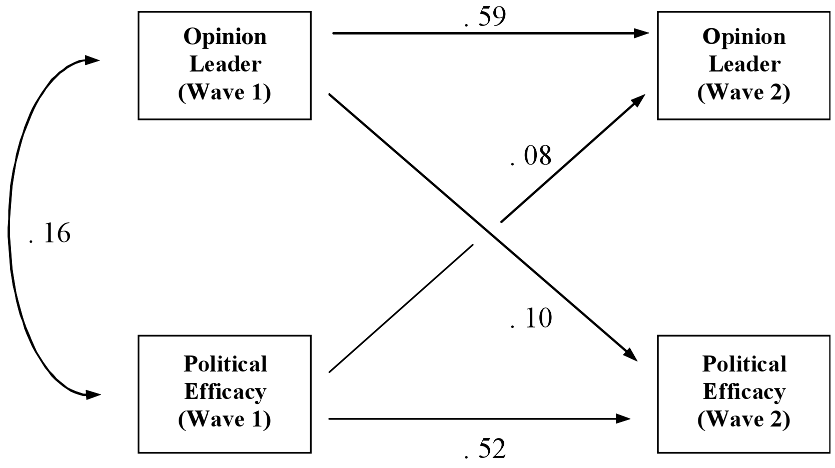

Figure 3. Relation between opinion leadership and political efficacy (demographic and dispositional variables controlled).

opinion leadership as reflected in one's strength of personality, an amalgam of self-confidence and social influence, plays a role in civic participation that goes beyond socioeconomic status (e.g., Verba & Nie, 1972), personal resources (e.g., Verba et al., 1995), or informational variables (e.g., McLeod et al., 1996). Our findings support this assertion. Yet, our findings also expand the conception of opinion leadership and our understanding of the importance of this key construct for research on political communication and civic participation. Before discussing these implications, we first review and situate our findings, providing some interpretations of their relevance for empirical research and theory building.

Implications of the Findings

There are a number of insights that grow out of these analyses that deserve to be highlighted. Foremost is the relationship between opinion leadership and civic participation. Even after accounting for demographic and dispositional variables, we observed a direct effect of opinion leadership on participation in the cross-sectional analysis that was distinct from indirect effects through political interest and informational media use. Analysis of panel data supported this ordering, with lagged effects from opinion leadership to civic participation, but not the reverse. This indicates that opinion leadership encourages involvement in civic life, not that those who are active simply think of themselves as opinion leaders. Clearly, opinion leadership has considerable import for those interested in civic participation, yet past research has rarely considered the potential power of this factor (see Putnam, 2000; Verba et al., 1995). Even research that has examined the structural underpinnings of political participation (e.g., Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995) has not fully considered the role played by "the influentials" or the dispositional sources of relational differences.

Our cross-sectional analysis also revealed that opinion leadership, working through interest in politics, appears to activate a broad range of information seeking behaviors, beginning with television news surveillance. These two factors—concern about community needs and surveillance of pubic affairs—are in turn linked to more comprehensive information seeking through newspapers and the Internet, with the effects of TV news viewing on civic engagement fully mediated by newspapers reading and online information search. Consumption of information found in newspapers and on the Internet is directly tied to engagement in community life, indicating the importance of exposure to public affairs content beyond television news for civic participation. This pattern of mediated effects through interest in politics provides some clarification of previous research, which has shown opinion leadership to be "independent of the flow of mass communication" (Weimann, 1991, p. 276; see also Noelle-Neumann, 1985). Future research on opinion leadership must account for the potential mediated effects of opinion leadership that are channeled through political interest and information consumption.

Turning to the sources of opinion leadership, we observed the clear connection between nonpolitical dispositions and classification as an influential. Cosmopolitan dispositions, self-assured dispositions, and innovation dispositions all made individuals more likely to be deemed opinion leaders. Indeed, our examination of the antecedents of opinion leadership showed that cultural, technical, and intellectual authority played a much more prominent role in self-assessments of opinion leadership than traditional markers of social and cultural authority such as age, gender, education, and income. These traits are critical to understanding the social roots of opinion leadership (Black, 1982; Richins & Root-Shafer, 1988) and explain a considerable amount of variance in the measure. It seems that individuals who view themselves as arbiters of style, innovations, or information serve as opinion leaders within their social networks, providing them with opportunities to influence others. Accordingly, opinion leaders may owe their status as social influencers less to their political acumen than their sense of fashion, mastery, or modernism.

Perhaps most intriguing, our panel analysis distinguishes self-designated opinion leadership from the seemingly related concept of political self-efficacy and examines the causal flow between these two factors. The analysis reveals reciprocal causation between these two distinct constructs, with structural influence and political effectiveness linked in a cycle of mutual support. This finding is reminiscent of Pateman's (1971) longstanding critique of the "one-sided view of the relationship between political culture and political structure" and her corrective that these factors are mutually constitutive and sustaining. As Pye (1968) likewise asserted, if political culture, of which political efficacy is one aspect, is to be effectively utilized in the study of civil society, it should be complemented with structural analysis—that is, political structures must be seen as both products reflecting the political culture and givens that shape the political culture. The findings presented here support the dynamic connections between the social psychological and social structural.

Given the close connections between political efficacy and political participation, the importance of opinion leadership for civic life becomes that much sharper. The social structural positions that individuals occupy appear to have direct implications for their subjective competence and civic engagement. Accordingly, efforts to increase efficacy and participation may be well served by greater attention to opinion leaders, recognizing them as a group that is likely to be responsive to efforts to change the political culture. That mass media variables played a relatively minor role in civic participation compared to opinion leadership further highlights this untapped potential of "the influentials"—both directly and indirectly—to shape civil society. The somewhat limited role of public affairs media use observed here suggests some challenge for news organizations, especially those working to encourage engagement in their communities as part of civic journalism efforts. Our findings raise the question of how successful these attempts have been, particularly those that are broadcast focused, given the absence of a direct relationship between television hard news use and civic participation. The results do provide some guidance, however. The direct relationship between newspaper use and online information search suggests that civic journalism and other media-based outreach programs must make use of local print and Internet resources, possibly through partnerships involving multiple communication channels.

Limitations

Nonetheless, these findings, particularly those concerning media, must be interpreted with caution. The dichotomous measurement strategy and limited number of items employed to tap television news and newspaper use in the LSS may underestimate the actual effects of traditional news media use. In contrast, the measures of self-designated opinion leadership and interest in politics rely on a 6-point Likert-type scale. Even information search via the Internet is comprised of five dichotomous items, as opposed to two or three items, as is the case with hard news consumption via newspaper and television, respectively. Thus, differences in scale variance may explain some of the divergence in variable performance. Future research should attempt to replicate these findings with more comprehensive measurement of constructs.

In addition, our model certainly simplifies reality and therefore suffers from a number of weaknesses endemic to such efforts. Most important, this research makes a distinction between types of media but not between types of media content. It seems likely that the consumption of other types of mass media content, such as entertaining television and Internet fare, discourages participation in public life. Indeed, recent research suggests that television and Internet use can have both positive and negative effects on interpersonal trust and civic engagement, dependent on whether the content encountered is informational or recreational (Shah, 1998; Shah et al., 2001).

We also did not validate our measure of self-designated opinion leadership against corresponding social network data, as was done by Weimann (1991) when he adapted the German scale to Israel. Although our use of the approach in a U.S. context comes with certain questions, the cross-national pedigree of the construct provides some assurance that it translates across cultures. Nonetheless, future research should attempt to validate this truncated version of the strength of personality scale against actual relational social influence data to examine whether the scale provides an accurate representation of opinion leadership with social structures. These findings have a set of broader implications for the health of civil society and the proper functioning of a democracy. First, this study points to the highly intersecting nature of four factors: political culture, social structure, media information, and civic participation. Almond and Verba's (1965) initial conception of civic culture stressed individual psychology, with a particular focus on political efficacy or competence, which they considered to be a "key political attitude" (p. 207). However, this emphasis on individuals and their aggregation has led to some neglect of the role of political structure in sustaining political culture, and more fundamentally, the role of individual dispositions in encouraging certain social selves that exist within the social structures of all societies. Clearly, information and participation are important aspects of this dynamic, as this research demonstrates. What needs to be further explored is the complex interplay of the psychological and the structural with sources of information.

As noted above, many of the efforts to "revive" civic society have focused on supplying citizens with information. However, these efforts rarely consider the social position and structural influence of the actors toward whom they are directed. This research suggests that it may be more important to identify individuals who are opinion leaders and direct resources toward them. To this end, opinion leaders and the structural role they play may be more consequential for the health of American democracy than the public journalism efforts behind which so many institutions and individuals have directed their efforts. This is because opinion leaders not only shape the views of others, they sustain a sense of democratic competence that is critical for engagement in civic life.

Accordingly, future public journalism efforts may be better served by identifying and spurring action among opinion leaders. Efforts by the Public Broadcasting Service and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to foster discussions around social issues among opinion leaders and community activists through efforts such as the Public Broadcasting Service program club and media dialogue projects may provide a model for this approach to civic renewal (Rojas et al., 2005). This strategy does not stand in opposition to broad-based civic participation among a range of citizens, as is the normative orientation of most work on this topic. Instead, the focus is to direct informational and other resources toward those who are not only predisposed to participate but likely to activate others into civic participation through a two-step flow of influence.

Future research should also examine whether efforts directed at building a sense of democratic competence and efficaciousness increase assessments of opinion leadership.

In this vein, the present study suggests that the dispositional roots of opinion leadership should be more fully explored. In addition to cultural, commercial, and intellectual authority, there may be other exogenous factors that are deserving of exploration, namely diversity of discussion networks, cognitive complexity, collectivism, and prior leadership experience. Research should examine these variables in relation to opinion leadership within the context of civic and political engagement. If possible, panel designs should be encouraged to further clarify the causal mechanisms that foster opinion leadership and lead from opinion leadership to involvement in civic life.

Notes

1. Of course, such measurement is open to challenge from a number of perspectives. As far as the general design of our study is concerned, it is important to note that the self-designating technique applied here is only one of four possible approaches. In addition to *self-designation*, opinion leaders can be identified through *observation*. In this design, an observer monitors a group's activities, the main actors, and the flow of information. The shortcoming of this method is self-evident: It is "limited to only small social units (a class, a village, a military unit, etc.), and requires a relatively longer time than . . . other methods" (Weimann, 1994, p. 46). Second, opinion leadership has been measured using the *sociometric technique*. This method is very similar to Lazarsfeld et al.'s (1944) original suggestion. Group members are asked whom they go to for advice or information about a given issue. This method is most applicable to a "design in which all members of a social system are interrogated than to one in which a relatively small sample within a larger universe is contacted" (Rogers & Cartano, 1962, p. 438). Finally, in order to address the problems of the sociometric technique in studies with large populations, *key informants* can be interviewed and asked to identify opinion leaders (Weimann, 1994).

2. Rates of agreement vary widely across demographic categories. For example, less than 1% of "racial minorities and inner city residents" typically consent, compared to 5% to 10% of "middle-aged, middle class, middle-Americans" (Putnam & Yonish, 1999).

3. That is, the sample is drawn to reflect the demographic distribution of the population within the nine census divisions in terms of household income, population density, age, and household size. Further, the starting sample of mail panelists is adjusted within the subcategories of race, gender, and marital status to compensate for expected differences in return rates.

4. Comparing the second wave of the 2000 NES to the June data collection (the second wave of this study), we found few, if any, demographic differences (see Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003). Our respondents were comparable with NES respondents in terms of sex, age, household income, and education. Given the high response rate to the November 2000 wave of this panel study, there is no reason to believe these data would be any different from a third wave of the NES, had another wave been conducted.

5. The measures of cosmopolitan and self-assured dispositions were constructed from a battery of questions containing different personality traits. Individuals responded to individual traits on a 6-point scale ranging from "least liked to be seen as . . ." to "most liked to be seen as. . . ." Those who indicated they wanted to be perceived as "sophisticated," "stylish," and "a trendsetter" were coded high on the cosmopolitan scale, whereas those who wished to be seen as "independent," "intelligent," "logical," and "trustworthy" were coded high on the self-assurance scale. Innovation was built from responses to the following attitudes statements on a 6-point Likert scale with no neutral category: "I like to buy new and different things" and "I am usually among the first to try new products."

6. The exact wording of the four items was "I have more self confidence than most of my friends," "I like to be considered a leader," "I am the kind of person who knows what I want to accomplish in life and how to achieve it," and "I am influential in my neighborhood." Validity and reliability considerations guided development of the scale. Specifically, an item analysis revealed that a number of the items on the questionnaire—designed to measure opinion leader-

ship—did not scale well with other opinion leadership items. These items were therefore excluded from our analyses. Additional items that had originally not been designed to tap opinion leadership, but tapped aspects of self-confidence and leadership abilities, were included based on their similarity to items included in Weimann (1994) and Noelle-Neumann's (1999) measurement systems. These were tested for whether they showed high levels of internal consistency with the other items in the index. Notably, even though the Cronbach alpha of .66 of our final index might be considered relatively low, it should be noted that the average item-total correlation among the four items was .44 (see Carmine & Zeller, 1979).

7. Interest in politics was measured on a 6-point Likert scale with no neutral category. The newspaper hard news use index was constructed using dichotomous measures of exposure to the news section and the editorial section in daily newspapers. Television hard news use combined three dichotomous measures of television exposure: evening network news, local news, and news magazine programs. Finally, Internet information search was measured using five dichotomous items measuring if people had used the Internet for educational purposes, professional purposes, or research purposes.

8. Three statements, two of which were reversed, were used to construct this scale: "People like me don't have a say in government decisions," "people like me can solve community problems," and "No matter whom I vote for, it won't make any difference." The comparably low alphas for these scales were largely a function of the low item count (see Carmine & Zeller, 1979).

9. That is, structural equation modeling allows the testing of both the unmediated influence of an independent variable on a dependent variable and the influence through one or more intervening or mediating variables (Bollen, 1987; Hoyle, 1995). We follow Jöreskog's (1993) two-step model generating approach. In a first step, an initial model is specified, based on "some tentative ideas of what a suitable model should be" (Jöreskog, 1993, p. 313). In a second step, based on this core model, paths can be freed or fixed based on the so-called Lagrangian multiplier (LM) test (Bollen, 1987). All parameters added based on the LM test should be meaningful and substantively interpretable.

10. To construct the residualized matrix for structural equation modeling, the variables of interest—opinion leadership, civic participation, and political efficacy in Waves 2 and 3—were regressed onto age, gender, education, household income, cosmopolitan disposition, self-assured disposition, and innovation disposition. The unstandardized residuals of these regressions, the part not explained by the controls, were used for modeling.

11. The model fit statistics for this model were as follows: χ^2 (16, $N = 3{,}350$) = 15.26, which translates into a BIC statistic (see Raftery, 1995) of –114.60; the goodness-of-fit index and the adjusted-goodness-of-fit index—accounting for multivariate nonormality—indicate an equally excellent fit, with coefficients of 1.00 each.

12. Some important restrictions are built into the 2W2V cross-lagged model to permit estimation of the causal directions. Most important is the assumption that lagged causation is the sole causal force; simultaneous causation between opinion leadership and civic participation (or political efficacy) at the same time point is ruled out. Thus, the cross-lagged parameters represent the reciprocal causal effects between the variables. The correlation between the error terms of the variables at Time 1 is estimated, because variables measured at the same time may be related due to factors such as political interest that are not included in the model. Thus, five estimates are presented in each figure, two for the reciprocal causal effects of the variables, two for the causal influence of the variable on itself over time, and one for the correlations between error terms of the Time 1 variables (see Rogosa, 1979).

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