A 61-Million-Person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization

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Abstract
Human behaviour is thought to spread through face-to-face social networks, but it is difficult to identify social influence effects in observational studies, and it is unknown whether online social networks operate in the same way. Here we report results from a randomized controlled trial of political mobilization messages delivered to 61 million Facebook users during the 2010 US congressional elections. The results show that the messages directly influenced political self-expression, information seeking and real-world voting behaviour of millions of people. Furthermore, the messages not only influenced the users who received them but also the users’ friends, and friends of friends. The effect of social transmission on real-world voting was greater than the direct effect of the messages themselves, and nearly all the transmission occurred between ‘close friends’ who were more likely to have a face-to-face relationship. These results suggest that strong ties are instrumental for spreading both online and real-world behaviour in human social networks.

Biography
James H. Fowler earned a PhD from Harvard in 2003 and is currently Professor of Medical Genetics and Political Science at the University of California, San Diego. His work lies at the intersection of the natural and social sciences, with a focus on social networks, behavior, evolution, politics, genetics, and big data.

James was recently named a Fellow of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, one of Foreign Policy’s Top 100 Global Thinkers, TechCrunch’s Top 20 Most Innovative People in Democracy, and Most Original Thinker of the year by The McLaughlin Group. He has also appeared on The Colbert Report.

His research has been featured in numerous best-of lists including New York Times Magazine’s Year in Ideas, Time’s Year in Medicine, Discover Magazine’s Year in Science, and Harvard Business Review’s Breakthrough Business Ideas.