Abstract

People belong in networks. In these networks people act and interact with others. What else apart from the connections and the structure of the network activate the formation of preferences and behaviors in networks? The influence that networks exert depends on the way information is structured and is integrated as well as the way information is transmitted to the members of the network. The structure and the influence of the network are closely related to the knowledge that exists in networks. That means that knowledge is information produced, circulated and consumed in the networks. Information derives from many different sources and it is evaluated for its quality, reliability and validity. The members of the network manage this information; add to this relative importance forming respective knowledge. How people in networks manage the information it is not a conscious and controllable process. That means that the exposure of the members of the network at the information is part of their participation in a network. Most of the times, the access to this information is mediated. Thus, the members of the network are those who reproduce and disseminate this information. The present research focuses on the challenging function of the networks as well as the information management as part of the formation of behaviors and preferences. The analytical and demanding design of the conjoint analysis as statistical tool reveals the latent power that information can exert.

Keywords: Information and knowledge management; networks; conjoint analysis; behavioral influence;

1. Influence in networks

People contact, participate and interact with networks where they act and undertake roles. The social environment where we live has three basic spheres of action: The first one is the family and the personal relationships. The familial and personal networks include people that live together or cohabit. The second sphere is the professional environment that absorbs an important part of our everyday activity. The third sphere of action is the social environment where people develop relationship with friends and relatives. In each of these spheres, there exist networks with political personnel. The contact with the political personnel has different characteristics because the framework of each sphere of action is different. Networks constitute structural formations where
exists, is produced and consumed information. In this study we investigate the influence that networks exert on people’s political preferences and the role of information in that influence. Networks have a structure. This structure is connected and influences the action of the network as well as its principal characteristics. In the network, there exist actors that constitute essential feature of its structure [1]. Actors interact, cooperate and influence each other. In personal networks this actor can be the father, the mother, the son, the daughter, the husband, the wife. In professional networks the actor can be the colleague or the supervisor. In the social networks the actors are friends, people we know as well as the relatives. People come in contact and interact everyday with actors. Important feature of the network is the bond among the members of the network. The power of the bond is determinative and it is influenced by time and intimacy criteria, sentimental intensity as well as mutual trust [2]. According to Weatherford [3] three are the main variables in a social network: the local contact, the frequency of the interaction and the friendship. The present paper focuses on the formation of political preferences. Politics constitute essential part of our everyday life. The political involvement in a social network requires political interest, political knowledge, political vigilance and political motivation. In the present paper we use the term political involvement including the political information, the access on information as well as all the actions concerning the exchange of political knowledge.

2. Information and Knowledge Management in Networks

The formation of preferences in networks depends on the way information is structured and exchanged in networks [4]. Many researchers have been focused in networks with the use of computational methods [5-19]. The structure of networks as well as their influence is directly related to the political knowledge that exists in networks. Political knowledge focuses on political information that is produced, consumed, circulated in the network and derives from different kind of sources. The information is assessed for its quality, reliability and validity [4]. The members of the network manage the political information and give it relative importance forming with that way the political knowledge of the network [4]. The way people in networks interact with information is a process uncontrollable and unconscious [4] that just happens as they participate in a network. Most of the times the access in the information is mediated [3]. That means that a member or some members undertake the reproduction and the diffusion of the information. The research in networks faces many challenges. One of these challenges is to understand the connection among knowledge and influence at the formation of preferences [3]. Laumann and Cuttman [20] described the personal and friendly networks as important structural formations for the development and the diffusion of the information. Trolldahl and Van Dam [21] inaugurated the notion of knowledge diffusion.

The discussion about the diffusion of the political information in networks is not recent [22]. The formation of the two – step flow hypothesis from Lazarsfeld et al. [23] constitutes one classical and temporal theory. This theory has several implementations at the mass diffusion of information and it is connected to the formation of preferences in networks. According to the theory the information is transmitted to the opinion leaders and then it is transmitted to the networks. Many respondents in researches affirm that some other persons constitute for them important sources of information. Thus, the influence is exerted by some persons that belong to the network [24]. Opinion leaders use more than other people the sources of information and thus exert influence to less energetic and less dynamic persons. Opinion leaders motivate others more and are differentiated from others due to their social role and social status [24]. People’s exposition to information does not happen directly with the sources of information. It is mediated by opinion leaders and by discussion teams in networks [23]. The filtration and the absorption of the information in the networks are influenced by the pre- existed knowledge and beliefs. People prefer exposing themselves at the supporting information that means at the information that supports the already existing information or opinion [25]. Researches focused mainly on the flow and the diffusion of the information during the election campaigns [25]. But without data about networks it would be impossible to understand the influence of that flow. The political knowledge in networks is a crucial factor for the formation of the political preferences and voting behavior [4]. Political discussants with political knowledge offer to the others access to it and make them capable to recognize and to reject political opinions, to develop trust as well as to reduce doubts and thus to form preferences or to participate in political actions [4]. Research during the presidential elections
of 1996 showed that the good knower of politics in networks can motivate the participation, can influence the formation of preferences and can facilitate the decision making process [4].

The political knowledge of the network augments the members’ influence in networks? Political discussants have added value for the members of the network? The exchange of valid, reliable and qualitative information in networks creates initiatives, opportunities and pressures that motivate people, form preferences and make politics parts of their life [4]. The knower of politics can recognize the “useless” information, can reject it and thus reduce the doubts in networks [4]. People prefer discussing about politics with good political discussants because thus they can assess opinions and form in a conscious way their preferences. Thus knowledge in networks makes people decide more wisely how to form their preferences [26].

Research [27] with data of 2000 from the American National Election Study on 1.807 persons examined the direct influence of the opinion leaders on voting behavior and on the political knowledge of the network. The research revealed that the political knowledge is bidirectional. That means that networks produce and consume information and people who know about politics can exert a greater influence. More specifically the influence that one member exerts on the other fluctuates according to the opinions and the knowledge that exists on network. The identification on political preferences augments 5% from the influence that the political knowledge of the network exerts as well as from the homogeneity, the frequency of the political discussion, the educational level, the motivation, the identification in the network, the ideology and the political interest that have the discussants. As far as it concerns opinion leaders, the political influence that exert, depends on how well and how effectively communicate with the network. Many researches focus on the informal social networks with friends and family where the contacts are more frequent [27]. This fact helps and motivates them to form political preferences, to vote or to participate in a political action. In networks people form their voting preferences. Some others influence them. Thus it is important for researchers to know what people think about those who influence them politically and who give them political information. Huckfeldt et al. [28] used the snowball method in their research and revealed that the more information exist in networks the more impossible is for two members to form the same political preferences. 7% of the members form the same political preference as they discuss frequently about politics with others [28]. In networks with strong bonds participants are more possible to have the same voting behavior. There people get information and political knowledge that seem to have a positive influence on them [29, 30]. The social interaction exposes people to political information in a different way more collective than individual [26,30,31,32]. Discussions with people who are active and involved in politics help the others to decide for their political preferences. In order to depict the role of information and the role of political knowledge in the voters’ personal interactions in networks a research [24] revealed that: 39% of the respondents discuss and reproduce the political information in the network. The research also revealed that the personal interaction has an essential influence at the formation of political preferences. Multivariable analysis showed that the exchange of the political information changes the political preferences in a rate of 7% and 18% of the respondents diffuse the political information to those who are less politically informed. Thus the production, the diffusion and the consumption of political information happens via the exchange process and influences the political preferences. People prefer discussing with political experts and having access to a reliable and valid political information from different sources [31]. These political experts - discussants give important information to the members of the network so as to change their political behavior. People express their ideas to those with whom they are connected. Thus the formation of political preferences must be considered as a collective process where the interpersonal communication and information passes on networks. When the diffusion of the information is not strong then people do not participate in such a process and it is less possible for them to change their political preferences [25].

The research about networks faces many difficulties concerning especially problems about the connection between political knowledge and influence for the formation of political preferences [3]. People have different sources of information in networks. Most of the researches in America as well as in Europe focused on the voting behavior as a result of a personal decision and less as a result of the political knowledge in networks. [33]. But the role of the political knowledge and information cannot be neglected.
3. Methodology

The scientific foundation of the Conjoint Analysis was on 1920 even if the first article was published on 1964 from Luce and Tukey. After its foundation conjoint was used in different scientific fields e.g. on Marketing [34], on Finance [35] and on sciences related to behavior and psychology [36]. Conjoint Analysis is an effective methodology for researches concerning the formation of behaviors via the scenario technique. We focus on the formation of political preferences which are influenced by different factors: the gender, the relationship among people, the sphere of action and the involvement in politics and in political information. Conjoint analysis can depict the importance of each factor separately. In the present study we focus on political involvement. Via a complicated design, this methodology examines the representative combinations, covering all the width of combinations that can exist without burdening the participants in the research. The combinations present series of different profiles related to the formation of political preferences. The respondents assess the different profiles that they are asked to prioritize. The results of the method have a Constant, which represents the average response to the different profiles and a set of useful path - worth each of which corresponds to the contribution of each factor level (independent variable) in the overall utility. From the part-worth we can count, using percentage, the Relative for each factor. We used a questionnaire with nine different combinations - profiles. We asked the respondents to assess and prioritize the person that they believe that can exert the most influence on others but also to assess the person who can be mostly influenced by the others. The assessment begins with the number “one” and finishes with the number “nine”. At the first scenario the number “one” represents the person who influences most the others and progressively the number “nine” represents the persons who influences less the others. At the second scenario the number “one” represents the person who is influenced most by the others and progressively the number “nine” represents the persons who is influenced less by the others. The research took place in Greece. 1.032 questionnaires were collected all over Greece. The research took place the first 6 months on 2011 from January to June. The average time for completing the questionnaire was twenty minutes.

4. Results

From 1.032 respondents, the 48.4% were men and the 51.6% were women. Firstly we examine the role of the involvement in politics and in political information for the total sample of the research.

The table below consists of an intercept (constant), which represents the average response to the different profiles and a set of useful path - worth each of which corresponds to the contribution of each factor level (independent variable) in the overall utility. Thus the table shows the scores of the utilities (utility) and the relevant path-worth as well as the standard error for each factor level. If we add the utilities we can have a total utility. Higher utility values indicate greater preference. Minus before the value shows a less preferable factor level. That means that if we ask: “who is going to influence most”? The answer will be a man according the gender, friend or kid according the relation, at work according the sphere of action and with involvement in politics. We focus on the political involvement because it is close connected to political knowledge and political information. People that participate in politics are those who are closer to sources of information, they participate in political actions and activities. They are often the mediators of the political information. They manage the political information in networks and they influence most the other members of the network in order to form their political preferences.

|        | Utility Estimate | Std. Error |
|--------|------------------|------------|
| Gender |                  |            |
| Woman  | -.489            | .083       |
| Man    | .489             | .083       |
| Relation |                |            |
| Friend / kid | .045 | .110 |
| Parent / supervisor | -.034 | .110 |
| Husband/ colleague | -.011 | .110 |
| Sphere |                  |            |
| Work   | .379             | .083       |
| Family | -.379            | .083       |

Table 1. UTILITIES
These results are also confirmed by the second table of the conjoint analysis that shows the importance of each factor as score of importance. The values represent percentages that sum 100.

### Table 2. Factor Utilities

| Factors                | Importance Values |
|------------------------|-------------------|
| Gender                 | 23.276            |
| Relationship           | 1.528             |
| Sphere of action       | 17.876            |
| Involvement in politics| 57.320            |

As we see at the table above the involvement in politics plays the most crucial role of the total influence that means the 57.32%, the gender represents the 23.27% of the total influence; the sphere of action represents the 17.87% of the total influence and finally the relation the 1.52% of the total influence. It is very important to understand the role of the involvement that is directly connected to information management, in comparison with other factors as gender, relationship and sphere of action. From that table we see how important is to have informed and thus active and politically involved discussants in networks.

As far as it concerns the second main question about who is going to be influenced most we test the total sample in order to see the importance of the involvement in politics e.g. to test the importance of information, action and activity in networks. At the table below higher utility values indicate greater preference. Minus before the value shows a less preferable factor level. That means that if we ask: “who is going to be most influenced”? The answer will be: a woman, daughter or friend at work with no involvement in politics. The term “not involvement” includes the access to information, the management of the information, the participation that occurs from that active interaction with information.

### Table 3. Utilities

|                          | Utility Estimate | Std. Error |
|--------------------------|------------------|------------|
| Gender                   |                  |            |
| Woman                    | .099             | .072       |
| Man                      | -.099            | .072       |
| Relation                 |                  |            |
| Friend / kid             | .144             | .096       |
| Parent / supervisor      | -.182            | .096       |
| Husband / colleague      | .038             | .096       |
| Sphere                   |                  |            |
| Work                     | .076             | .072       |
| Family                   | -.076            | .072       |
| Involvement in politics  |                  |            |
| Political personnel      | -1.251           | .096       |
| No involvement           | 1.681            | .096       |
| Syndicalism              | -.431            | .096       |
| Constant                 | 4.942            | .076       |

These results are also confirmed by the fifth table of the conjoint analysis that shows the importance of each factor as score of importance. The values represent percentages that sum 100.

### Table 4. Factor Utilities

| Factors          | Importance Values |
|------------------|-------------------|
| Gender           | 5.495             |
| Relationship     | 9.041             |
| Sphere of action | 4.189             |
As we see the involvement in politics plays the most crucial role for someone to be influenced as represents the 81.27% of the total and explains the major part of the total importance. At the second place is the relationship that represents the 9% of the total. At the third place is the gender with 5.49% of the total and finally the sphere of action which represents the 4.18%. The involvement in politics, thus the relation with information, is the crucial element for someone in order to be influenced.

The discussions constitute a main element of political influence. During the discussions people exchange information or manage it. This information influences them in order to form their political preferences. After the results from the total sample we focused on the variables related to discussions and exchange of influence and information. Conjoint Analysis with those that have discussions with friends and relatives concerning the first main question about who is going to influence most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. For respondents that evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “not at all” informative the importance value is 60.2%, for those who evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “little” informative the importance value is 56.9% and for those who evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “very” informative the importance value is 51.4%. Conjoint Analysis, with those that have discussions with friends and relatives concerning the second main question about who is going to be influenced most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. The values are high. For respondents that evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “not at all” informative the importance value is 85.4%, for those who evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “little” informative the importance value is 80.4% and for those who evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “very” informative the importance value is 80.4%.

Conjoint Analysis with those that have discussions with colleagues concerning the first main question about who is going to influence most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. For respondents that evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “not at all” informative the importance value is 58.6%. For those who evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “little” informative the importance value is 54.8% and for those who evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “very” informative the importance value is 58.9%. Conjoint Analysis, with those that have discussions with colleagues concerning the second main question about who is going to be influenced most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. For respondents that evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “not at all” informative the importance value is 85.4%, for those who evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “little” informative the importance value is 80.4% and for those who evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “very” informative the importance value is 80.4%.

Conjoint Analysis with those that have discussions with family members concerning the first main question about who is going to influence most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. For respondents that evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “not at all” informative the importance value is 52.1%, for those who evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “little” informative the importance value is 59.3% and for those who evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “very” informative the importance value is 55.9%. Conjoint Analysis, with those that have discussions with family members concerning the second main question about who is going to be influence most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. For respondents that evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “not at all” informative the importance value is 90.1%, for those who evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “little” informative the importance value is 80.6% and for those who evaluated the discussions with friends and relatives as “very” informative the importance value is 79%. People exchange information expressing their opinions. This information can influence people in the formation of their preferences. Respondents were asked to evaluate the influence they believe they can exert when they transfer information to others.

Conjoint Analysis for people who assessed the influence of their opinion on others, concerning the first main question about who is going to influence most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. For respondents who believe that their opinion does not count on
others at all the importance value was 56.6%. For those who affirm that their opinion counts a little the importance value is 55.1% and 63.5% for those who believe that their opinion count on others a lot. Conjoint Analysis for people who assessed the influence of their opinion on others, concerning the second main question about who is going to be influenced most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. For respondents that believe that their opinion does not count on others at all the importance value was 58.5%. For those who affirm that their opinion counts a little the importance value is 80.5% and 74.7% for those who believe that their opinion count on others a lot. Conjoint Analysis for people, who assessed if their discussants form their voting behaviors after having consulted them, concerning the first main question about who is going to influence most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. For those who affirms “not at all” the importance value is 53.6%, for those who affirm “a little” 59.7% and for those who affirm “a lot” 66.9%. Conjoint Analysis, concerning the second main question about who is going to be influenced most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. For those who affirms “not at all” the importance value is 78.1%, for those who affirm “a little” 86.1% and for those who affirm “a lot” 58.4%.

Conjoint Analysis for people, who assessed if their political opinion – information influenced the voting behavior of their discussants, concerning the first main question about who is going to influence most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. For those who affirms “not at all” the importance value is 53.2%, for those who affirm “a little” 63.3% and for those who affirm “a lot” 65.3%. Conjoint Analysis for people, who assessed if their political opinion – information influenced the voting behavior of their discussants, concerning the second main question about who is going to be influenced most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. For those who affirms “not at all” the importance value is 81.2%, for those who affirm “a little” 80.3% and for those who affirm “a lot” 76.4%. Conjoint Analysis for people, who assessed if they consult others in order to form their political preferences, concerning the first main question about who is going to influence most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. For those who affirms “not at all” the importance value is 56.6%, for those who affirm “a little” 56.1 % and for those who affirm “a lot” 58.5%. Conjoint Analysis for people, who assessed if they consult others in order to form their political preferences, concerning the second main question about who is going to be influenced most, showed that the involvement in politics is the main crucial factor of influence for the formation of preferences. For those who affirms “not at all” the importance value is 82.5%, for those who affirm “a little” 78.3 % and for those who affirm “a lot” 76%.

5. Discussion

The research does not focus on social or psychological characteristics that can also be determinant for the formation of political preferences. The present paper focuses on the role of information in networks and its influence on people’s political preferences. The definition of political involvement in politics and in political information is a wide notion that combines information management, action, activity as well as participation. Respondents may focus on all or on some aspects of this definition when they answer the questionnaire. The results reveal the importance of the information that constitutes part of the involvement in politics. People evaluate positively and accept the influence from those who manage the political knowledge. The results depict that in comparison with the gender, the relationship, the sphere of action, information remain the main factor of influence for people in order to form their political preferences. This characteristic is much more intense when people are asked to evaluate those “who will be influenced more”. The results reveal the importance of the information when someone “receives” the influence and that is why we have higher values. The results of the total sample show that people who know about politics that means people who can have access to sources of information, people who participate in political activities and manage information, people who exchange political information via political action, can exert political influence on others. On the contrary politically less involved
people are more influenced. The results certified the finding of previous researches [1,3,25,27] about the influence in networks but also reveal the importance of information in that procedure. The results reveal also the way people assess their influence on others. People do not believe that they can exert influence on others for the formation of the political preferences although they prioritize the involvement in political information and in politics. Finally, in this paper we use conjoint analysis which is a statistical methodological tool that reveals the hint preferences of respondents via a complex design putting different parameters together and examining their importance comparatively. For the future it would be essential to complete the analysis and present all the results in order to have an idea about the structure of that influence and compare the role of the involvement in political information and in politics with others crucial characteristics. It is also important to see how the influence is structured in others countries via a comparative research.

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