Networked Deliberation: Building Consensus through Structured Interactions

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Background
Increasing political polarization and decreasing civic engagement pose a challenge for democratic institutions. Online platforms suggest the potential for large-scale deliberation and consensus-building, but in practice often fall back to less participatory practices such as voting as groups become large. In the absence of consensus, any ranked choice voting system can produce undesirable outcomes. Participatory methods to promote engagement and build consensus are needed. The goal of this project is to evaluate the potential of networked deliberation—multiple stages of small group deliberations. We are developing online platforms to enable small group discussion of ranked-choice proposals within larger groups. We seek to evaluate the efficacy of networked deliberation compared to large group deliberation as well as the efficacy of various discussion network topologies.

Student Role
The REMS student will be involved in analysis of quantitative and qualitative data produced by experiments and field studies, as well as platform design, development, and evaluation. Possible topics include: diffusion of preferences through deliberation networks, effect of group size and network structure on networked deliberation, evaluation of consensus metrics, and evaluation of platform features on deliberative behavior. The student will be involved in collecting new data and in thinking about evaluation techniques for the entire project. The student will also gain general experience with network science and computational social science approaches to research.

Mentoring Plan
The student will meet regularly throughout the project with the research team led by Dr. Daniel M. Romero, Assistant Professor in the School of Information and Edward L. Platt, PhD Candidate. The student will meet with the mentors weekly during individual meetings. The individual meetings will focus on developing personalized goals for academic, professional, and personal growth. These goals will include identifying research interests, outlining specific skills and/or knowledge they hope to gain through the experience, and determining strategies for reaching their goals. In addition to individual meetings, the student will participate in weekly project meetings where they will be exposed to an interdisciplinary and collaborative culture of research.

Desired Qualifications
The student should have strong programming skills (in Python, R, Ruby, Java, or C++), experience with data manipulation, and a strong interest in applying their skills to a research project. Experience with Social Network Analysis is a plus.