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Both Sides of the Aisle: How Bipartisan Couples Reconcile with their Identities

Natalie Mitchell

Clark University, nmitchell@clarku.edu

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Both Sides of the Aisle: How Bipartisan Couples Reconcile with their Identities

Natalie Mitchell '20 – (Sponsor: Dr. James Córdoba)



Introduction

In the wake of the tumultuous 2016 presidential election, the citizens of the United States of America were left feeling more divided than any other time in modern American history (Campbell, 2018). With arguments flying across dinner tables and Facebook comments sections, Americans were left feeling defensive of their beliefs and fearful of ideologies that did not align with their own. Many Americans are finding themselves in an "echo chamber", both intentionally and inadvertently consuming and discussing biased information and with people of the same beliefs. This, however, is not the case for all. There has been extensive research on couples who have similar political beliefs and how that similarity helps to promote a stable relationship (Jennings & Stoker, 2001), but what becomes of a couple that has different political beliefs? The purpose of this explorative study is to investigate these couples, an under-researched population in a political climate where fraternizing with members of opposing political parties is seen as increasingly taboo.

Couples who don't subscribe to same political ideology are certainly a minority. Within this polarized era, spousal agreement in politics has increased substantially (Iyengar et al., 2018). Couples often lean into like-mindedness in politics, as similarities in general are sought out during partner selection (Jennings & Stoker, 2001). Whether it is an intentional decision or the underlying desire to have a partner who agrees, when choosing a romantic partner, individuals often tend to choose one who agrees politically. Additionally, once together, couples' political opinions tend to assimilate into one another over time due to a reciprocal influence that partners have on one another, making their beliefs even more similar (Jennings & Stoker, 2001). Studies have shown that similar beliefs lead to stability within a relationship and a likelihood to continue the union, whether these beliefs pertain to larger-scale issues like politics or smaller-scale issues such as division of household chores (Hohmann-Marriott, 2006).

There are several reasons why a couple would have differing political beliefs. Education levels among individuals within a couple impact if they tend to vote similarly or oppositely (Goldberg, 2019). Patterns of media consumption, made more impactful by selective exposure and a growing availability of media to choose from, may also radicalize one member of a couple's beliefs against their partner's beliefs (Stroud, 2008). Then, of course, individual life experiences, such as work environment or family life growing up when one partner has experienced and the other has not can impact the formation of strongly-held beliefs long before partners even meet. While research has been thoroughly conducted on how individuals develop their beliefs and how couples with similar beliefs fit together, there is a gaping hole in the literature on how couples manage their relationship and maintain their opposing beliefs, especially on a topic that many people to be a deeply personal matter and not something to be discussed openly (Walsh & Cramer, 2004).

It is more crucial than ever to study how individuals with divided political stances can not only coexist, but work together in a functioning relationship. Since the 2016 election of president Donald J. Trump and the installation of his administration, American citizens have been feeling an intense divisiveness among members of opposing political parties, many even believing that this divisiveness is contributing to a present and ongoing "culture war" within America (Tamene, 2017). While many Americans have always laid witness to politicians of opposing parties and a divide among those who have a career in politics, citizens now believe that front lines of this division is made up of other citizens—average people of all professions and backgrounds unwilling to yield to opposing opinions and beliefs. Increased political sameness among couples and families are contributing to the divide by naturally creating an echo chamber (Iyengar et al., 2018). Members of the democratic party were reported to be divided on issues pertaining to American cultures (Bartels, 2018). Tensions among fundamentalists and secularists have also seen a rise under the watch of the Trump administration (West, 2019). While the majority of Americans do remain centrists, similar to how it has been over the past several decades, they still have seen two parties become more distinct and report that they care significantly more about who the president than they had in the past in recent years (Florina, 2004).

With this increasing divide comes increasing hostility (Iyengar et al., 2018). Since 2016, the United States has seen an increase in the amount of hate crime reported (Edwards & Rushin, 2018). This rise in Islamophobic hate crimes peaked in November of 2016, just after President Trump was elected, with many scholars believing that his election validated the divisive rhetoric used throughout his campaign (Olt, 2018). This is why now, more than ever, investigating how individuals with differing beliefs can come together is vital, and why couples who not only can work together but have lives together are excellent resources.

Members of inter-political couples, by nature, have discovered a way to share their lives with a person who holds different beliefs, a trait that is desperately needed in today's political climate. Thus, they are a rich yet under-studied population that can offer information that can inform on how couples overcome adversity and how individuals can form functioning relationships with others whom they may not agree with. As such, my research questions are as follows: (A) what strategies do couples with different political beliefs implement to reconcile with this difference in identity, and (B) are any of these strategies feasible to be used in situations outside of a romantic relationship. For both of these research questions I have developed the hypotheses that (a) avoidance, active listening skills, and ideology assimilation (in which a member of a couple convinces his or her partner to agree with his or her viewpoint on an issue) will be strategies used by these couples and that (b) yes, investigating these couples will produce advice that can be applicable in other contexts.

Methods

Participants in this experiment were required to be above 18 years of age and to be in a self-identified committed relationship with a partner who has differing political views, as to not exclude any person in a relationship who may have valuable insight on successfully sharing a life with a partner of conflicting viewpoints. Efforts to recruit participants to take part in a qualitative interview to discuss their experiences in a mixed-political relationship began in early November of 2019 (shortly after receiving IRB approval to begin) and continued through to the following March. Recruitment was done through posting in a wide variety of online forums and groups on Facebook, posting flyers in public places, and through word of mouth to personal connections and their networks. It is worth noting that the recruitment process for an experiment on this particular topic was incredibly difficult and was often met with laughs and commenting on my recruitment posts to "get real". Several online users even left hostile comments on recruitment posts. One online comment that was tame enough to mention in this particular academic setting, angrily requested that, among other things, I "keep [my] division for a better math problem".

These recruitment efforts yielded 13 participants who were interviewed for this explorative study. In the recruitment attempts, the criteria for this participant is made apparent, so all participants volunteered knowing that they fit the criterion of being above 18 years of age and to being in a self-identified committed relationship with a partner who has differing political views. Three of the participants were male, and ten were female. The ages of participants varied widely, scanning from 19 to 63, with a median age of 43 years old. All participants lived in the United States, residing in Massachusetts (9), New York (1), Mississippi (1), Utah (1), and Florida (1). All three of the male participants self-identified as conservative-leaning or a member of the Republican party, and all ten women identified as liberal-leaning or a member of the Democratic Party, with one of the ten specifying to identify as a democratic socialist.

Interview questions are used to investigate the research questions with the participant. A semi-structured interview was conducted with all participant. The interviews were semi-structured, with some questions meant to be used or discarded based on the answers to others, and many questions asking for deep personal accounts, in which more questions are able to spring from in conversation. Thematic analysis will be most effective in analyzing this interview, as it will identify the overarching themes and be able to attribute those themes to address the research questions.

Creating interview questions was the first step to conducting this research, followed by participant recruitment, as previously described. From there, a meeting time and place is selected with each participant. The interview, lasting approximately 30-70 minutes, is then conducted in a secure location either in person or over the phone if necessary, and recorded. From there, the recordings and transcripts of the recordings undergo a thematic analysis, extracting information to address the research questions.

Discussion

Through these interviews, much can be learned about overcoming differences, loving fiercely, and politics in the home. This explorative study investigated the research questions of (A) what strategies do couples with different political beliefs implement to reconcile with this difference in identity, and (B) are any of these strategies feasible to be used in situations outside of a romantic relationship. (a) avoidance, active listening skills, and ideology assimilation (in which a member of a couple convinces his or her partner to agree with his or her viewpoint on an issue) will be strategies used by these couples and that (b) yes, investigating these couples will produce advice that can be applicable in other contexts. The thematic analysis of these interviews provided only partial support for both of my hypothesis.

The thematic analysis produced the three primary themes of Political Inactivity (with subthemes of Discomfort, Political Apathy, and Lack of Knowledge), Acceptance (with subthemes of Acceptance of Differences, Incomplete Acceptance, and Compromise and Common Ground), and Avoidance (with subthemes of Peace-Keeping, Outbanded, and Not Worth It) in correspondence with my first research question. Avoidance, which I had hypothesized, was fully present and the most common among the participants as a strategy for reconciling with differing political identities. Perhaps because of the high volume of avoidance, none of the participants had mentioned utilizing active listening skills with their partner. Lastly, there was partial support for the hypothesis of ideology assimilation being a key strategy through the subtheme of incomplete acceptance, however it was not a particularly common strategy, with a majority of the participants claiming that they had not experienced any ideology assimilation.

In correspondence with the second research question, the themes of Applicable Advice (with subthemes of Open-Mindedness, Reaching Out, and Life Experiences) and Non-Applicable Advice (with subthemes of Don't Know, Personality and Upbringing, and People Don't Change) arose. My hypothesis that members of inter-political couples would have advice about strategies that would be useful in other contexts where political divides occur was partially supported, as a majority of participants did believe that some of the strategies they used were applicable in other contexts. However, not all participants believed this, and instead believed that the strategies they used were specific to themselves or their relationships.

Results

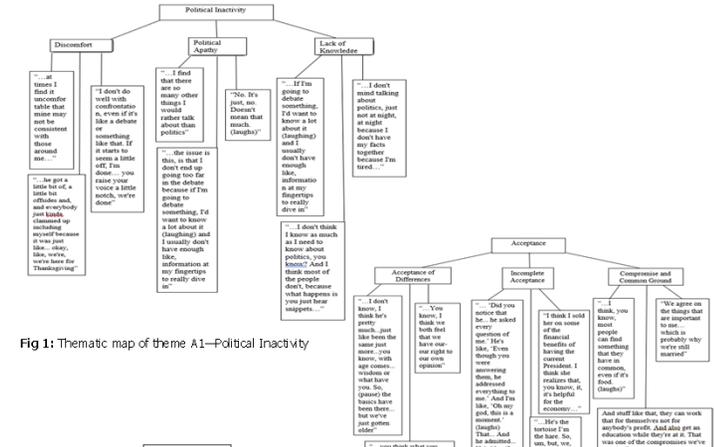


Fig 1: Thematic map of theme A1—Political Inactivity

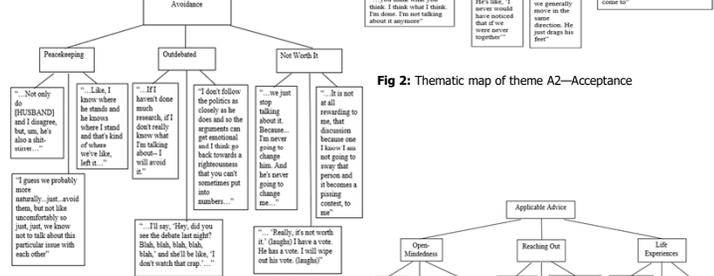


Fig 2: Thematic map of theme A2—Acceptance

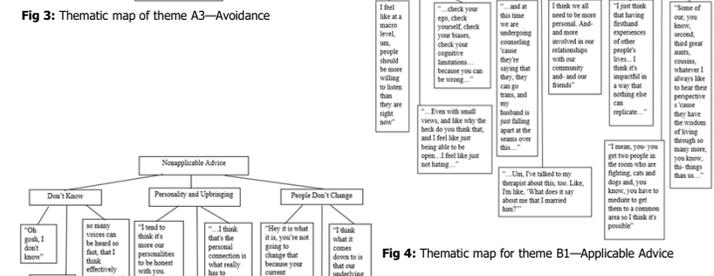


Fig 3: Thematic map of theme A3—Avoidance

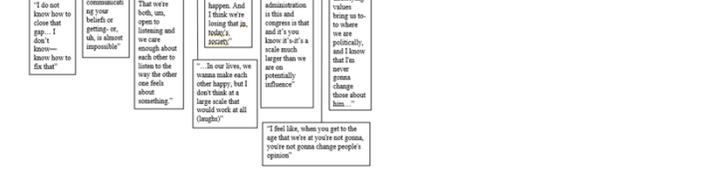


Fig 4: Thematic map for theme B1—Applicable Advice

Fig 5: Thematic map for theme B2—Nonapplicable Advice