Political Assortive Mating: the Effects of Politics on Mating Choice and Relationships

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The current study investigates the theory of political assortative mating, which is the theory that people with similar political preferences are more likely to mate together. The current study broadens the research on political assortative mating by studying potential couples before they actually begin dating, rather than studying married couples as most previous research has done. Participants were asked to look at a fictitious dating profile in which political affiliation was manipulated and rate how likely they would be to contact, respond, and be a good match with the person represented. Results showed that politics do have a significant impact on young adults’ mating decisions, in that they are more likely to favor people who have the same political preference as themselves. Knowledge on this topic could make people more aware of their decision making processes. Some research suggests that political homophily in relationships leads to more stable, longer lasting relationships. However, political assortative mating could also lead to more politically homogenous households and decreased tolerance for differing political views.
Political Assortative Mating:

The Effects of Politics on Mating Choice and Relationships

Political assortative mating, although not common terminology among the general public, has been studied in the psychological community for decades, with the conversation growing even more in the past 15 years. Other terminology, such as political assortative matching, pairing, and selection have been used, but the basic premise is all the same: People are more attracted to – and more likely to date or marry – people who have the same political preferences. Another term used to describe this phenomenon is homophily, which, in general, is to like things that are similar. Homophily, in the context of this paper, is the tendency to form associations with people who are similar to yourself, whether that similarity is political preference, race, level of education, career, or gender. Among dozens of studies on this subject, however, a limited number of studies measure people’s tendencies to act according to their political preferences before a relationship even starts. The current study intends to do this, but in order to understand the basis for this step forward in research, one must also be familiar with other studies on political assortative mating.

Numerous studies show that assortative mating is prevalent in relationships, but they do not include politics as one of the factors in the way that this current study does. One such study included politics as a factor in their study on dating and attraction, but they did not use it to see if people in the same political party are more attracted to each other, but rather to see if people in certain political parties are more attracted to Caucasian or African American people (Eastwick, Richeson, Son & Finkel, 2009). Another study analysis, by Figueredo and Wolf (2009), also supports the theory of assortative mating, but in regard to similar life histories rather than similar politics. Houts, Robins, and Huston (1996, p. 7) even found that hobbies and leisure interests can be a factor in assortative mating. While not specifically including politics as a factor, Gaunt (2006, p. 1401) concluded that married couples with greater levels of similarity also have higher levels of marital satisfaction. This supports that homophily among married people exists, and that it can be beneficial to a relationship. Each of these studies shows the presence of assortative mating, but the current study will take this basis and take a step in another direction by researching the effects of politics on assortative mating.

Among some studies on assortative mating, personality is the main focus of choice rather than politics (Botwin, Buss & Shakelford, 1997; Humbad, Donnellan, Iacono, McGue & Burt, 2010), however, they may go hand in hand. Gerber, Huber, Doherty and Dowling (2012) found that a person’s personality can predict his or her political ideology, therefore reinforcing that important aspects of a relationship, such as personality, still come back to politics. Because a person’s Big Five personality traits are “highly stable” (Gerber et al., 2012, p. 654) throughout his or her life, their political ideology most likely will be also. This suggests that the traits that attracted two individuals to each other – in this case political ideology – will also stay relatively stable. If people who are attracted to each other have personality traits that
initially mesh well, they may be more likely to last in a relationship because their traits will stay relatively the same. Even though many studies research assortative mating and include personality but not politics, these studies do not inherently disprove the hypothesis that politics has a major effect on relationships, because personality and political preference are so closely linked.

In the more concrete relationships of marriages, political assortative matching is also shown to be present. One study in particular concluded that political attitudes are the one ideal that married couples have the most in common (Alford, Hatemi, Hibbing, Martin & Eaves, 2011, p. 362). Between spouses, personality similarity was found to have a mean correlation of only .128, whereas political ideology had a mean correlation of .413 (p. 366-367). In another test, Alford et al. found that newlyweds have a spousal political similarity correlation of .588, and couples married over 46 years have only a slightly higher spousal political similarity correlation of .665 (p. 371). The fact that couples have significant similarities in common from the start of their relationships, and that they do not change significantly over time, indicates that couples choose mates based on political ideologies, even if they are not aware of it. The lack of change in correlation over time indicates that these similarities were caused by initial selection, not convergence. The aspect lacking from the Alford et al. study is that they only tested individuals who were already married. The current study tests individual preferences toward potential mates before any dating to see if the assortative mating trend is present from the beginning of relationships. An additional study also found positive political preference correlations among married couples. Lou and Klohnen (2005) compared the rate of similarity among married couples and the rate of similarity of people randomly assigned for statistical purposes. The study found that married couples have a positive correlation of .48 in terms of their political attitudes, but that randomly matched pairs only had a political attitude correlation of .17 (p. 312). This shows that the political similarities among married couples do not just happen by chance.

Some psychologists would dispute the theory of political assortative mating, saying that people become more similar over time. Botwin, Buss and Schakelford (1997), which did have a relatively low sample size of only 16 couples, concluded that couples who were dating had a positive correlation of .15 for conservative and liberal views, but that married couples had a positive correlation of .49 (p<0.001) (p. 114). This study would suggest that as couples are together longer, they assimilate and become more similar. It could also suggest that the couples who share political ideology are the same couples who are able to make their relationship last until marriage. Additionally, this theory of convergence rather than selection has been disputed by various other studies which show that political similarity in couples does not change over time. The study by Alford et al. (2011), mentioned above, showed high, yet stable, positive political preference correlations between couples, whether they are newlyweds or have been together over 40 years. In a study focusing on personality similarity between married cou-
ples, the concept of selection rather than convergence is again supported, because the results showed that married couples do not grow significantly more similar over time (Humbad, Donnellan, Iacono, McGue & Burt, 2010). As mentioned earlier in reference to the study by Gerber et al. (2012), personality is linked with political ideology, so Humbad et al. (2010) is also indirectly supporting that political preferences would not converge over time. Rather, married couples are politically similar due to selection. Focusing specifically on dating couples, Bleske-Rechek, Remiker, and Baker (2009), in a study much more recent than the one by Botwin et al. (1997), revealed that actual dating couples have much more in common than would be expected by chance. This does extend to politics. Existing couples had a positive correlation of .47 (p<0.001), whereas participants in the study paired by random assignment only had a correlation of .01. Although this study alone does not directly disprove the claim of Botwin et al. that there is political convergence among couples, it does show that the similarity between married couples is not primarily due to change over time. Even from the start of relationships, before marriage, couples have a very high rate of similarity, supporting the theory of selection. This support for selection, paired with Alford’s findings showing that convergence is not significantly present during marriage, leads to the conclusion that people both select their partners based on political preferences and that their preferences do not change significantly over time due to their relationship.

This current study has a relatively unique setup. Few other studies have a comparable procedure. One study stands out as having a remarkably similar procedure to this current study (Byrne & Nelson, 1965), in which participants were asked to rate their opinions and attraction toward a fictitious person described to them in a list of characteristics. While this study does support the theory of increased attraction for those who are similar to yourself, it did not include politics. It is also rather outdated. A more modern study by Huber and Malhotra (2011) addresses extremely similar concepts as the current study. They conducted two experiments, the first of which asked participants to rate their impressions of 30 fake online dating profiles. The findings of this study corroborate the findings of the current study. However, the current study’s research team chose to have each participant view only one profile. This way, the researchers were able to keep every aspect of the profiles similar except for the participants’ gender and political preference. Otherwise, participants may be skewed by other things which vary from one profile to the next, such as the hobbies listed in the description paragraph, even though they are all fairly neutral.

The findings of this current study are not contradictory to previous studies on online dating. For example, Fiore (2005) found that in online dating, in the pre-relationship stage, there is a significant presence of homophilous attraction. This study is among the many that do not measure political preference; however, it is a useful reference to the current study because it studies online dating and shows that people are more likely to contact someone (intending to date in the future) if they are more similar to that person. Like this current study, it is not biased
by people's previous conversations or first impressions from meeting each other in person. Rather, it is based on a profile that allows someone to assess similarities and differences. A study that does include politics in the realm of online dating is Huber and Malhotra (2011). In their study with a similar set-up to this current study (participants viewing and rating fake dating profiles), the results showed that "shared ideology increases interest in responding by 12% of that amount, interest in long-term dating by 16%, and assessments of shared values by 20%" (p. 14). These significant increases show that people consider politics when looking at a potential partner, whether they realize it or not.

Through the studies referenced above, it is evident that the conversation about political assortative mating is abundant. However, the statistics on correlations between couples do not inherently tell readers why political assortative mating is so important. Political assortative mating is a central, although overlooked, aspect of human behavior. For example, understanding political assortative mating in the early stages of a relationship can have strong effects on social connections in the long run. Studies show that people who are matched politically are likely to have more satisfying, stable relationships (Bleske-Rechek, Remiker & Baker, 2009; Gaunt, 2006; Kandel, 1978). However, with political homophily in relationships, marriages, and therefore households, people may become more polarized in their ideologies because they are not presented with differing views (Huber & Malhotra, 2011, p. 29). There are both benefits and consequences to the pattern of picking mates based on politics even when those decisions are made without realizing it.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were college-aged adults at Augsburg College. Participants were not compensated. Although the selection of participants was arbitrary, the researchers attempted to ask a variety of people so that the gender (Male/Female) and the political (Democrat/Republican) demographics would have a balanced representation. In total, data from 383 people were collected, consisting of 189 men and 194 women. In all, 192 people saw profiles of the same political preference as themselves and 192 people saw profiles that contrasted with their own political preference.

Procedure

Researchers were students in a college Psychology class. They asked friends and classmates to be participants. If potential participants indicated that they would be willing to take a five minute survey for a research methods class project, they were then given a consent form and told to read over it. Once participants verbally indicated that they understood and agreed to everything in the consent form, they were then handed a 13 question demographics survey. Upon
receiving the completed demographic survey, the researcher looked at the potential mate gender response and the political preference response, and handed the participant a fictitious dating profile of a person who matched the preferred gender and either matched or did not match the political preference. Each participant viewed only one fictitious dating profile. The researchers attempted to have participants view an even number of politically similar profiles and politically dissimilar profiles. Along with the profile page, participants received a page with four questions, asking them to rate their impressions of the potential partner in the profile. After this page was completed, researchers thanked participants and debriefed them, explaining that the study examines the effects of political preferences on dating preferences.

**Materials**

The consent form given to participants explains that there are no risks or benefits of participating, that they are not required to participate, that they may choose to stop participating at any time, and gives the contact number for the supervisor if they have further questions. Then participants received a demographics survey, which included generic distractor demographic questions, as well as the target questions: “What gender do you identify as? (Male, Female, Other),” “What gender do you prefer in a potential mate? (Male, Female),” and “With which political party do you most identify? (Democrat, Republican).” Participants were asked to circle one of the options given. The research team chose to limit the political party options available so that participants would be divided distinctly into two groups instead of comparing moderates to each other. Thus, any detailed political preference questions would not hint that politics were the main variable in the study. The fake dating profiles given to participants all had a picture, a list of characteristics, and a short paragraph description. The pictures were found on the Internet and were purposely not of anyone that participants might know. Potential pictures were narrowed down to ensure that they did not have a dark or distracting background. The person pictured was wearing neutral clothing and looked as average as possible. The demographic characteristics listed were the same for every profile except for indicated political preference. For example, every profile person was a 26 year old named Jordan who worked in the field of education. The description paragraph was gender neutral and the same in every profile as well. After receiving the profile, participants were asked to rate the potential dating partner seen in the fake dating profile. Participants were asked to respond to the first three questions on a five point interval scale (“1” being not likely at all and “5” being very likely). The following questions were asked:

- “Assuming you were single, would you contact this person to learn more about them?”
- “Based on their characteristics, would the two of you be a good match?”
• “Assuming you were single, would you respond to this person if they contacted you?”

The responses from these three questions were then used to calculate the contact rates, match rates, and responding rates of people in each experimental group. The fourth question was open-ended and asked participants to briefly explain what characteristics in the profile prompted them to choose the answers they did.

Results

The data indicated that there was a significant difference in contact ratings, match ratings, and responding ratings between pairs who held the same political preference and pairs who differed in political preference. These conclusions were drawn through independent t-tests (see Table 1). The contact ratings showed that people who had the same political preference (M=3.38, SD=1.21) were much more likely to contact the person in the profile than pairs who did not share a common political preference (M=3.11, SD=1.26), t(382)=2.127, p<0.034. Pairs who had a similar political preference (M=3.65, SD=0.95) were also significantly more likely to rate their profile person as a good match to themselves, whereas people who did not share political preference (M=3.14, SD=1.14) indicated significantly lower match ratings, t(382)=4.784, p=0. Responding ratings significantly differed between the groups as well. Same-party pairs (M=3.93, SD=1.07) indicated that they were much more likely to respond to their profile person than pairs who did not have political preferences in common (M=3.61, SD=1.25), t(382)=382, p<0.008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Independent t-tests of same/different political groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rating type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results also showed that although same/different groups differed significantly, sub-political groups did not present this same degree of difference (see Table 2 and Graph 1). These sub-political groups refer to the specific matching of Democrat and Republican. The first letter indicates the political affiliation of the participant and the second letter indicates the political affiliation of the profile. For example, the label DR indicates that the participant completing the survey was a Democrat and the profile they were viewing was a Republican. Because the sub-political groups did not vary significantly, t-test results were not reported here. As is evident in the graph, all people are fairly likely to respond to any profile, whereas the means for contacting and match ratings were noticeably affected
by political preference.

Table 2: Means of Sub-political groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democrat/Republican</th>
<th>Contact Average</th>
<th>Contact Std Dev</th>
<th>Match Average</th>
<th>Match Std Dev</th>
<th>Response Average</th>
<th>Response Std Dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DD</td>
<td>3.250</td>
<td>1.317</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>1.028</td>
<td>3.758</td>
<td>1.209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DR</td>
<td>3.141</td>
<td>1.183</td>
<td>3.167</td>
<td>1.118</td>
<td>3.667</td>
<td>1.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RD</td>
<td>3.405</td>
<td>1.231</td>
<td>3.421</td>
<td>1.093</td>
<td>3.921</td>
<td>1.122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RR</td>
<td>3.242</td>
<td>1.265</td>
<td>3.447</td>
<td>1.023</td>
<td>3.833</td>
<td>1.223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same</td>
<td>3.380</td>
<td>1.213</td>
<td>3.654</td>
<td>0.947</td>
<td>3.935</td>
<td>1.074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different</td>
<td>3.112</td>
<td>1.257</td>
<td>3.143</td>
<td>1.136</td>
<td>3.617</td>
<td>1.249</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Correlations between same and different political groups were also compared (see Table 3a and Table 3b). Pearson r correlation tests were calculated as two-tailed tests (N=192). Higher correlation rates within each group show more consistency in the answers. The different group has higher correlations than the same group. This could imply that people viewing a different political preference generally made broader, wider sweeping assumptions about that person. Therefore, they answered more similarly to other people also viewing profiles with the opposite political preference. More research would be needed in order to confirm that hypothesis.

Table 3a: Pearson r correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Saw same politics</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Match</th>
<th>Respond</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.448**</td>
<td>.609**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match</td>
<td>.448**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.426**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respond</td>
<td>.609**</td>
<td>.426**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at the p<0.01 level (2-tailed).
Table ba: Pearson r correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Saw different politics</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>Match</td>
<td>Respond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.613**</td>
<td>707**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match</td>
<td>.613**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.558**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respond</td>
<td>.707**</td>
<td>.558**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at the p<0.01 level (2-tailed).**

In this study, there were 189 male participants and 194 female participants. Independent t-tests were conducted to measure differences between genders regardless of their political preferences. There was not a significant difference between males’ (M=3.39, SD=1.09) and females’ (M=3.41, SD=1.07) match ratings, t(381)=-.19, p=0.85. However, males did give significantly higher ratings for contacting and responding. Males (M=3.51, SD=1.17) were significantly more likely to contact the person they saw in the profile than females (M=2.98, SD=1.26), t(381)=4.23, p=0. Males (M=4.07, SD=1.07) were also significantly more likely to respond than females (M=4.07, SD=1.20) if the person in their profile contacted them, t(381)=5.06, p=0.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results found in this study support the theory of political assortative mating, as have many prior studies. Previous research showed that assortative mating is present in relationships, even when it is not political (Eastwick, Richardson, Son & Finkel, 2009; Figueredo & Wolf, 2009; Houts, Robins & Huston, 1996). Studies also have shown that political assortative mating is present in marriage (Alford, Hatemi, Hibbing, Martin & Eaves, 2011), and that political similarity among couples is due to selection, not assimilation (Alford, Hatemi, Hibbing, Martin & Eaves, 2011; Bleske-Rechek, Remiker, & Baker 2009). The current study also agrees with and adds to the findings of Huber and Malhotra (2011), in that couples were similar politically before marriage. What is added to this area of research, is the finding that people favor those who are politically homogenous to themselves, before even meeting them or interacting with them. The current study was able to control for the confounding variables of personality and “chemistry” that biased, already-formed couples have.

The current study attempted to make the survey-taking experience as close to filling out an online dating profile as possible. In this way, the research team tried to increase the mundane realism of the study. However, because many of the participants made comments about not having prior experience with online dating, the research team knows that the attempts of creating mundane realism may not have been as effective on this population. Even so, participants’ responses cannot be disregarded, because they still took the time to complete the surveys.
and did not simply reject the survey on the basis of it being about online dating. The current study was also limited by restricted range. Participants were only given the options of 1-5 for their ratings, so there was not as much variance in the mean answers as there could have been with a larger scale.

The findings of this study can be expanded into the real world to say that political selection in relationships happens frequently in actual relationships, not only within this sample. Participants answered based on their gut reactions, often taking less than five minutes to complete the survey and not thinking too much about why they rated the person the way that they did. This may also show that people are not aware of the phenomenon of political assortative matching and its influence on their decisions. Although there is not a wide base of research on politics’ effects on the pre-formation phase of relationships, the current study expands scientific knowledge about partner selection.

The long-term effects of politically homogenous relationships and households, can be both positive and negative. Studies show that people who are matched politically are likely to have more satisfying, stable relationships (Bleske-Rechek, Remiker & Baker, 2009; Gaunt, 2006; Kandel, 1978). Bleske-Rechek et al. did an 11 month study on the dating relationships of young adults. They found that at the end of the study, people who had been dating at the start of the study and who remained dating 11 months later had indicated higher levels of attitude similarity at the start of the study in regards to politics and religion. Couples who had broken up by the end of the study had had lower levels of political and religious similarities. This would suggest that people who are more politically similar are more likely to have stable, longer lasting relationships. Gaunt (2006) had concurring results, indicating that higher levels of similarity between spouses cause increased marital satisfaction. Kandel (1978) found similar patterns of similarity and relationship stability in teenage friendships.

However, with political homophily in relationships, marriages, and households, people may become more polarized in their ideologies because they are not presented with differing views (Huber & Malhotra, 2011). Huber and Malhotra present the problem as people purposely picking partners based on agreeing political ideology, thus politically homogenous marriages and households will form. They concluded that, “political disagreement within the household” will greatly diminish because children and spouses are exposed primarily to only one set of political views. Over generations, this may “increase polarization and decrease political tolerance” (p. 28). The effects of this, if as widespread as Huber and Malhotra hypothesize they could be, would be harmful. If people understand that their gut decisions about a person before they even meet them can have long term effects, they may be more deliberate about how they choose who to date and marry. Politics may be a part of a forming relationship, even if they do not appear to be present.

Research should be continued on this topic, especially in dating relation-
ships, because the conversation on assortative mating is currently dominated by studies on married couples. One way to further the research would be to study a wider population. Firstly, participants should be contacted in a more randomized manner, rather than only asking classmates, friends, and other acquaintances. College-aged young adults at a midwestern liberal arts private college were asked to participate, so the results were limited by convenience sampling, which limits the generalizability of the results. The population of said college is predominantly liberal and has a reputation of being very open minded to diversity. If a more widespread study was done including participants from around America, findings that support political assortative mating in the pre-formation phase would add to the understanding of how most Americans choose partners. Another way to enhance a similar future study would be to include more dependent variables such as “How attractive do you find this person?” or “How much do you agree with this statement: This person has good morals.” People may be including these separate areas into their considerations about the profile person. Some dependent variables may be more affected by political preference than others.

Another possible way would be to take the potential mates off of the page and study real relationships forming. One way to do this may be in a speed-dating atmosphere. Researchers would not interfere at all with participant interactions, and voluntary participants would meet each other in a standard speed-dating set-up without any experimental manipulations or confederates present. Before the participants meet at all, researchers would record demographic information for each participant, including their political affiliation. At the end of the session, researchers would record which interactions were successful (i.e. phone number given, agreed to go on a date, etc.) and see if there are any political preference correlations between the people who chose to interact further. In this sort of a set-up, participants would be influenced by things such as personality and looks, but the mundane realism would be much higher and results may speak more accurately to the patterns of the real world.

The current study has shown that political preference affects how young adults perceive and favor relationships with people who have the same political preference as themselves. The psychological knowledge about political assortative mating has been added to with this study through the focus on the pre-formation phase of relationships rather than pre-existing dating or marital relationships. People may not realize that they are making decisions based on another person’s political views, but this study supports the idea that political assortative mating is a common occurrence.

References


