Predictors of Maintenance vs. Dissolution of Cross-Political Party Close Relationships

Cassandra McKenna & Courtney Gosnell, PhD
Pace University

Introduction

- Political differences are increasingly cited as a primary reason for divorce and almost 1/3 of American couples report that political clashes over the presidency of Donald Trump have created significant issues within their relationship (Bedard, 2017).
- People seem to be reading more into political differences, which may account for relationship fractures. A recent Pew research report found that the majority of those that polled thought that someone who had different views on President Trump's performance also likely had different goals and values than themselves (Tyson, 2018).
- Despite frequent news stories and anecdotal evidence on how politics are fracturing relationships, there has not been an extensive amount of academic research on the topic. There is ample research on how party members perceive opposing party members—but these dynamics have been rarely examined in the context of close relationships.
- Past work clearly shows that having a close other from the "outgroup" and having greater interpersonal contact with an outgroup member can reduce prejudice and discrimination towards the outgroup and promote greater understanding (e.g., Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 1997).
- What allows us to maintain a close relationship with an opposing political party member? In this study, we explored how different factors (personality, family background, & political views) might predict maintenance vs. dissolution of cross-party close relationships.

Method

Participants:
- Participants (n=293) were recruited from MTurk, an online participant pool
- 129 females (44.0%),159 males (54.3%), 2 prefer not to say (0.68%).
- 261 Caucasian/White (73.7%), 39 Black/African-American (13.3%), 4 American Indian/Alaskan Native (1.4%), 15 Asian (5.1%), 1 Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander (0.3%), 11 from multiple races (3.8%), 4 other (1.4%)
- 142 Democratic Party (48.5%), 72 Republican Party (24.6%), 1 other (.37%), 4 none (1.74%), Prefer not to specify (0.3%)

Materials & Procedures:
- Participants were asked to asked to complete a series of online questionnaires about politics, well-being, and close relationships. Here we focus on those relevant to our focal findings.
- **Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI)**: This measures the Big Five personality traits of Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability and Open to Experiences. Participants rated their agreement from a range 1 being "Disagree" to be 5 being "Agree" (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003).
- **Brief Self Control Scale (BSCS):** The BSCS measures self-regulatory behaviors. Participants rated statements like "I have a bard time breaking bad habits" and "People would say that I have an iron self-discipline" using a 5-point scale using ranges from 1 being "Not at all like me" to 5 being "Very much much like me" (Tangney, Baumeister & Boone, 2004).
- **Views of the political party:** Participants rated their agreement to the following item "I view individuals of the opposite political party as immoral" (1=Strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1994).
- **Family Background:** Participants rated their agreement to the following item "In my family, everyone adopted the same political beliefs" (1=Strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990).

Results

- We used a series of independent samples t-tests examining comparisons between those who had vs. didn't have dissolved cross-party relationships and between those who had vs. didn't have current cross-party relationships.

Personality Factors:
- Participants that had one or more dissolved relationship reported lower levels of conscientiousness, $t(259)=2.74$, $p=.007$, 95% CI of difference [.15, .95], agreeableness, $t(259)=2.20$, $p=.029$, 95% CI [.04, .79] and self control, $t(258)=3.19$, $p=.002$, 95% CI [.14, .58], than individuals who did not have a dissolved cross-party relationship (See Figure 1).
- Participants that maintained one or more cross-party close relationship reported higher levels of openness to experience, $t(259)= -2.63$, $p=.018$, 95% CI [-.84, -.08], and extraversion, $t(259)= -3.11$, $p=.002$, 95% CI [-1.15, -.26] than individuals who did not have a cross-party close relationship.

Figure 1. No Dissolved Cross-Party Close Relationships vs. Dissolved Cross-Party Close Relationships
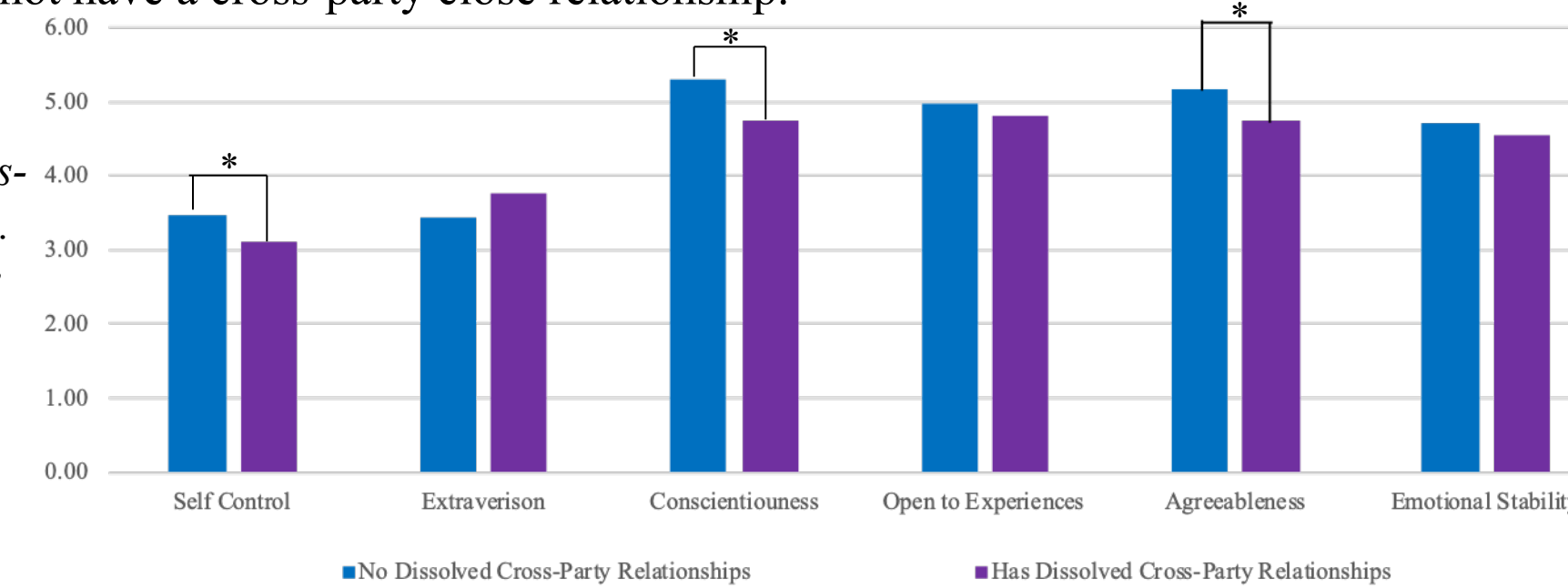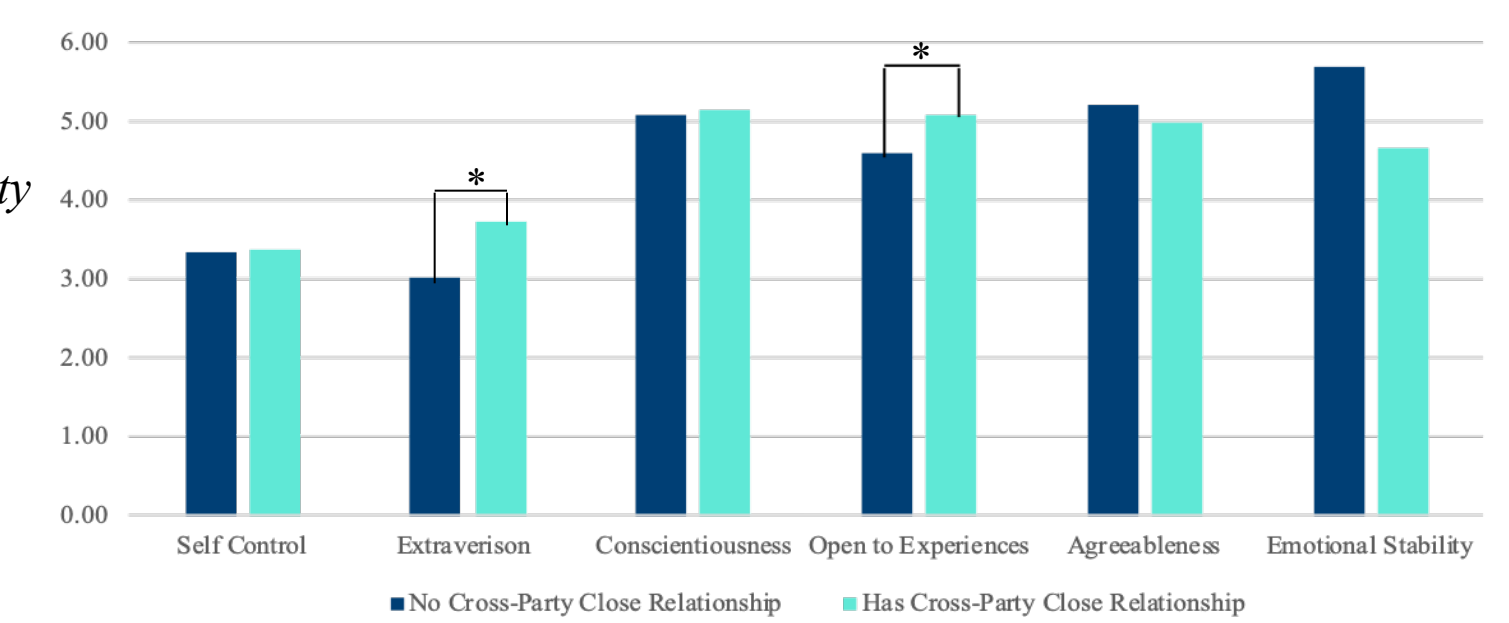

Figure 2. No Cross-Party Close Relationships vs. Cross-Party Close Relationships

Family Backgrounds
- Participants that had one or more dissolved cross-party relationship reported greater agreement with the statement "In my family, everyone adopted the same political beliefs", $t(276)=-2.20$, $p=.028$, 95% CI [-.90, -.05], than those that did not have a dissolved cross-party relationship (See Figure 3).
- Participants that maintained one or more cross-party close relationship reported less agreement with the statement "In my family, everyone adopted the same political beliefs", $t(276)=2.11$, $p=.036$, 95% CI [.03, .86], than those that do not have a cross-party close relationship (See Figure 4).

Figure 3. No Dissolved Cross-Party Close Relationships vs. Dissolved Cross-Party Close Relationships
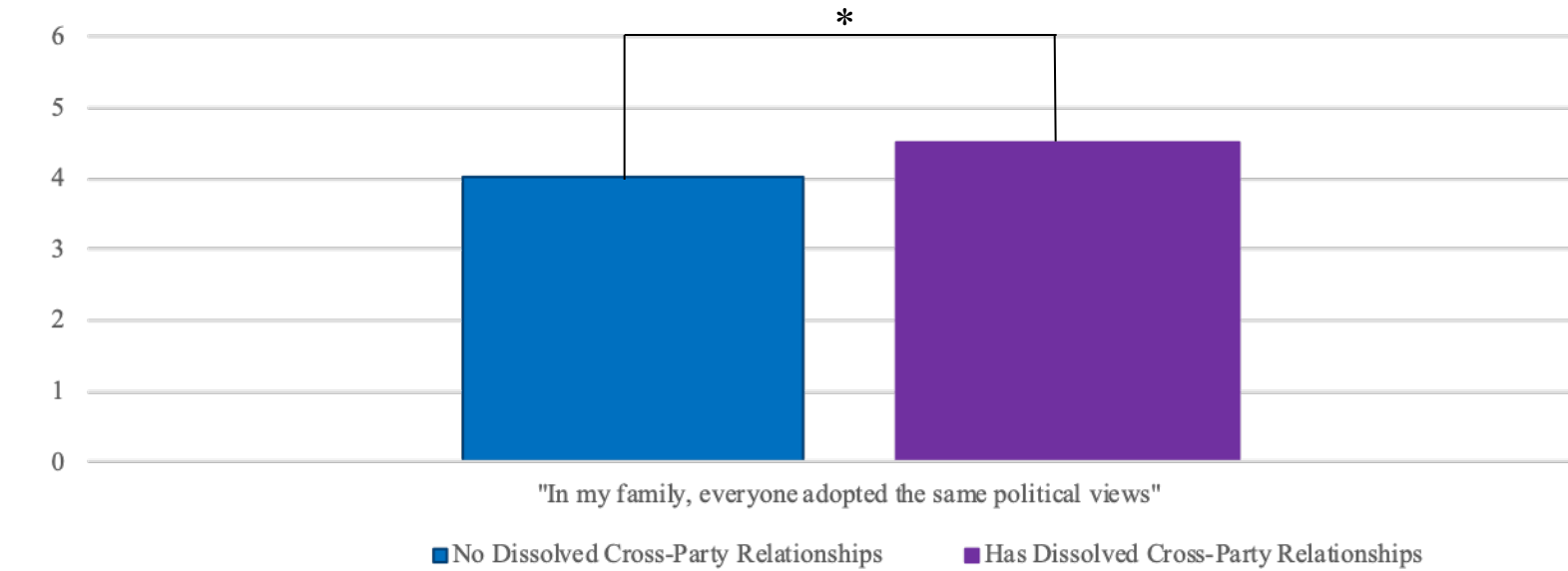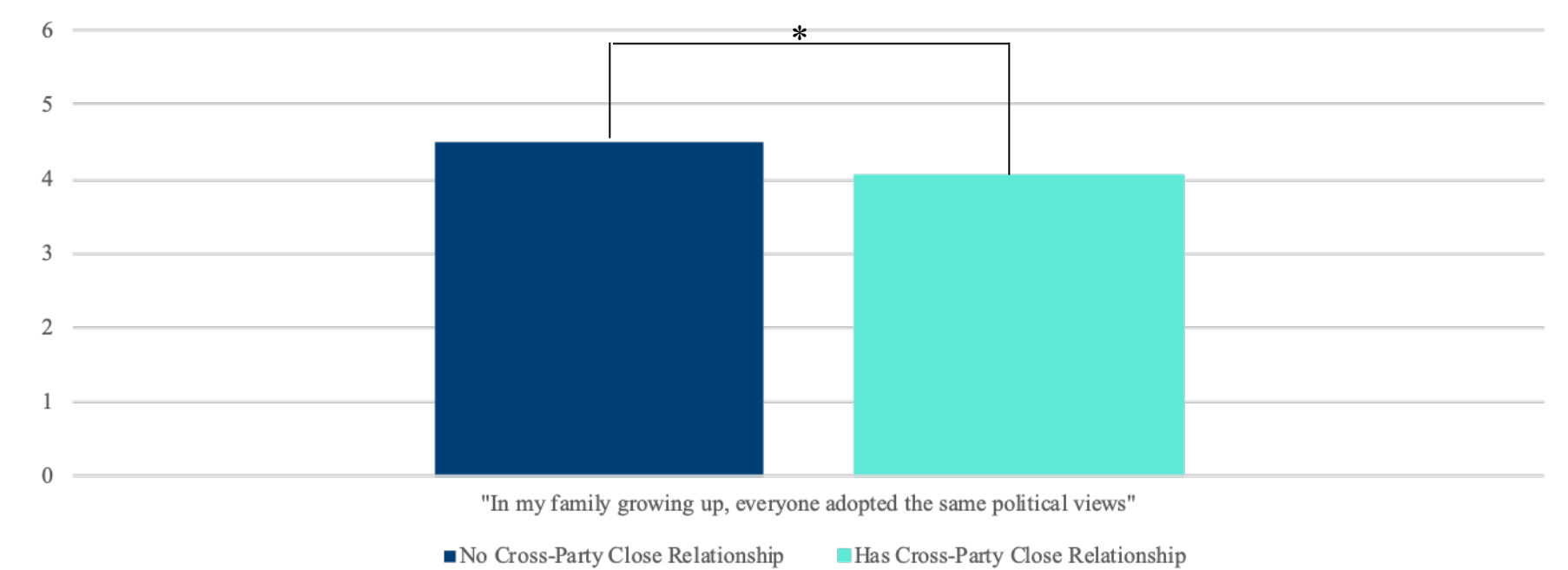

Figure 4. No Cross-Party Close Relationships vs. Cross-Party Close Relationships

Views of the Other Political Party
- Participants that have one or more dissolved cross-party relationship reported more agreement with the statement "I view individuals of the opposite political party as immoral", $t(276)= -4.37$, $p<.001$, 95% CI [-1.45, -.55], than participants who did not have a dissolved relationship (See Figure 5). There was no significant differences on viewing the other party as immoral when comparing those who did vs. did not have cross-party close relationships (See Figure 6).

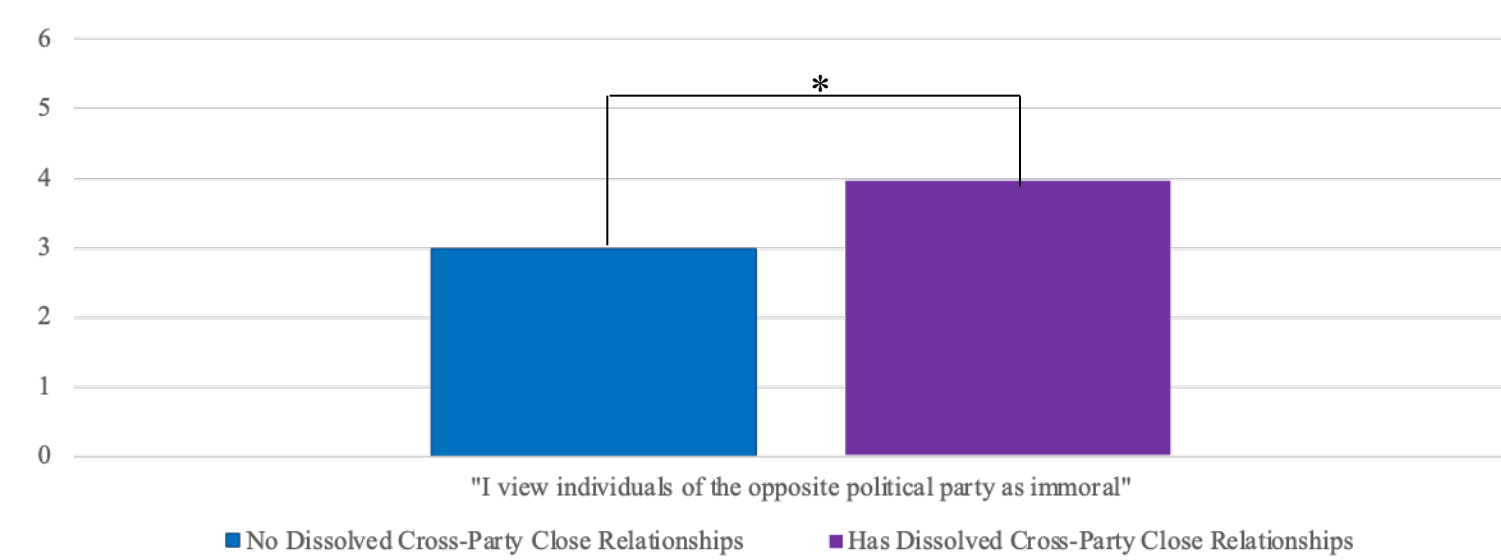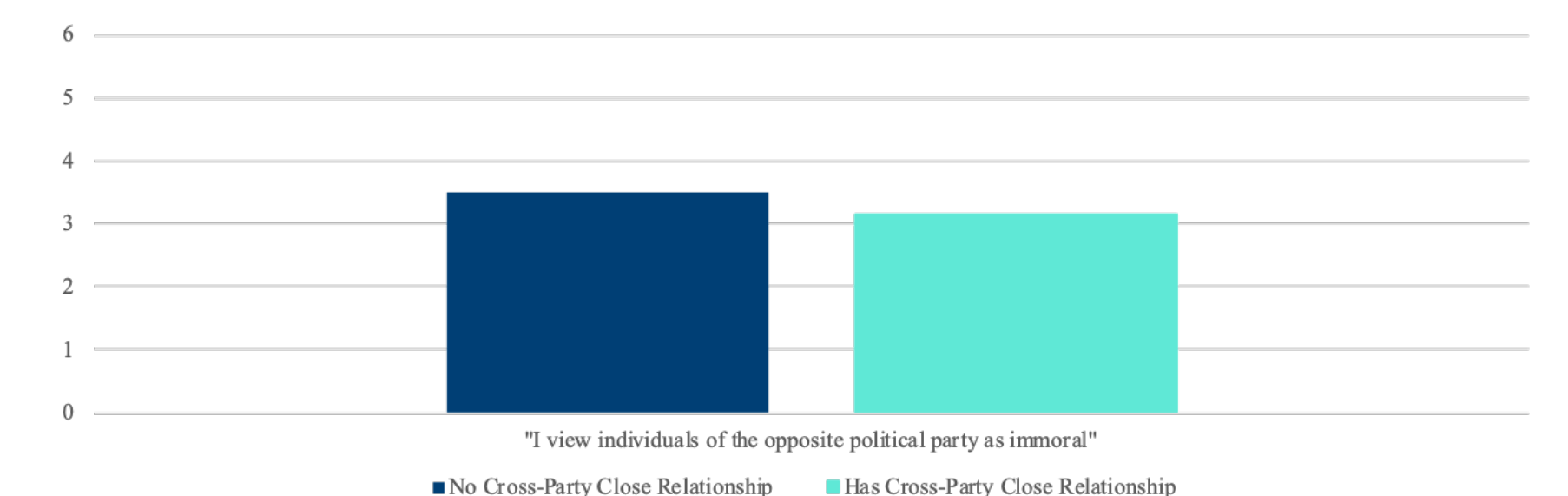Figure 5. No Dissolved Cross-Party Close Relationships vs. Dissolved Cross-Party Close Relationships

Figure 6. No Cross-Party Close Relationships vs. Cross-Party Close Relationships

Discussion

- We found that those who were able to maintain cross-party close relationships tended to be significantly higher in extraversion and openness to experience and they were more likely to have grown up in families where not everyone shared the same political beliefs.
- In contrast, when comparing those who had a cross-party relationship that had dissolved or grown distant with those who didn't, those with the dissolved relationships reported lower self-control, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. In addition, they were significantly more likely to report growing up in an environment where everyone had the same political views and were significantly more likely to view the opposing political party as immoral.
- Overall, these results suggest that early exposure to diverse views as well as personality traits that promote openness and connection to others may set the stage for greater tolerance within close relationships.
- Future work in this area can explore interventions that might be able to help restore connections between relationships fractured over politics as well as aspects of close relationships that may make them more resilient to political differences.

References

Bedard, Paul. "Fights over Trump Drive Couples, Especially Millennials, to Split Up." *Washington Examiner*, 9 May 2017, www.washingtonexaminer.com/fights-over-trump-drive-couples-especially-millennials-to-split-up.
Dovidio, J. F., Gaertner, S. L., & Kawakami, K. (2003). Intergroup contact: The past, present, and the future. *Group Processes & Intergroup relations*, 6(1), 5-21.
Gosling, S. D., Rentfrow, P. J., & Swann, W. B. (2003). A very brief measure of the Big-Five personality domains. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 37(6), 504-528. doi:10.1016/s0092-6566(03)00046-1
Pratto, F., Sidanius, J., Stallworth, L. M., & Malle, B. F. (1994). Social dominance orientation: A personality variable predicting social and political attitudes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(4), 741.
Ritchie, L. D., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (1990). Family Communication Patterns. *Communication Research*, 17(4), 523-544. doi:10.1177/009365090017004007
Tangney, J. P., Baumeister, R. F., & Boone, A. L. (2004). High self-control predicts good adjustment, less pathology, better grades, and interpersonal success. *Journal of Personality*, 72(2), 271-324.
Tyson, Alec. "Trump Supporters, Disapprovers Say There's Little Common Ground on Values." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 15 Mar. 2018, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/15/disagreements-about-trump-widely-seen-as-reflecting-divides-over-other-values-and-goals/.
Wright, S. C., Aron, A., McLaughlin-Volpe, T., & Ropp, S. A. (1997). The extended contact effect: Knowledge of cross-group friendships and prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(1), 73.