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

The political divide between the two primary political parties in America has been intensifying. The majority of people (81% from both parties) have negative views of those on the “other side” and many report that the majority of their friendships are now with those who share their political views (67% of Democrats, 57% of Republicans; Foran, 2017). Political differences are increasingly cited as a primary reason for divorce and almost 1/3 American couples report that political clashes over the presidency of Donald Trump have created significant issues within their relationship (Bedard, 2017). So, what is causing relationships to fracture over politics? A large part of it is likely that people are reading more into political differences. A recent Pew research report found that the majority of those polled thought that someone who had different views on President Trump’s performance also likely had different goals and values than themselves (Tyson, 2018). Instead of seeing that a friend, romantic partner, or family member simply has “different views on President Trump”, individuals are instead seeing these close others as suddenly alien—without the shared values that were likely previously assumed to be a key foundation of the relationship. Despite the 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. However, this type of work is extremely important to understanding how individuals can maintain important close relationships in a politically divided world. In addition, we know from extensive research into group dynamics, that having a close friend or family member 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, 2003).  
 In the present study, we utilized an online participant pool (MTurk) to get diverse participants across the United States that represent both political parties. Participants (n=293) were asked to complete an online survey where they indicated if they had a cross-political party close relationship that they were able to maintain as well as if they had a cross-political party close relationship that had dissolved or grown distanced due to politics. Participants also completed a variety of questions assessing their personality, family background, and political views.   
 Using a series of t-tests examining comparisons between those who had a close cross-party relationship and those that didn’t, we found that those who were able to maintain these 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.