

**Politics and Partnerships:
Navigating Political Conflict in Cross-Cutting Romantic Relationships**
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Abstract

Over the past few decades, political partisanship has increasingly become a social identity and political similarity in romantic partnerships increasingly common. Still, there exist many for whom their romantic partnership is ‘cross-cutting,’ or one in which partners hold dissimilar political beliefs. Drawing from literature on social sorting, discussion networks, and interpersonal communication, I consider the influence of cross-cutting romantic partnerships on if and how romantic partners discuss politics and manage external and internal political conflict. Through in-depth interviews with individuals in cross-cutting romantic partnerships (N = 45), I find patterns of demand/withdraw interactions and strategic topic avoidance in how partners address external political conflict, challenging research suggesting that individuals are more likely to express political disagreement to romantic partners. I also find unique tensions in cross-cutting relationships in how individuals handle internal political conflict. Specifically, I find tensions in how individuals negotiate intimacy with their partner with their own political identity as well as the cohesiveness in their relationship with their political individuality.

Keywords: cross-cutting, romantic relationships, in-depth interviews

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The 2016 election results spawned a new form of political exposé: the damaged relationship. In the months and years following Donald Trump's presidential victory, journalists across the United States recounted individuals' relational crises, the statistical increase in marital counseling, and the end of marriages altogether (Pappu, 2016; Sciponi, 2017; Stevens, 2018). Suddenly, couples across the country reported emotional strife at the thought of being married to someone from the other political side.

This surge comes during a time of intense political polarization. Today more than ever, those of the same party are likely to share the same race, the same religious affiliation, and the same geographic area (Bishop, 2009; Mason, 2018), making a threat to one's partisan identity a threat to one's other identities. In turn, partisans are now more likely to persecute, condemn, and even wish ill-will on those from the other side (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012).

This context matters when thinking about how politically mismatched or "cross-cutting" (Mutz, 2002) romantic relationships affect those in them. Despite evidence romantic partners often serve as key political discussion partners (Morey, Eveland, & Hutchens, 2012; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995), or evidence that encountering disagreement can hurt political engagement and expression (Campbell & Kwak, 2011; Mutz, 2002), any empirical focus on mismatched political relationships has been scant. Moreover, existing research related to politics and interpersonal relationships has tended to overlook theories and processes unique to interpersonal communication, keeping these two traditions mostly separate.

This study seeks to bridge this gap. I combine research from political communication—on discussion networks and social sorting—with research from interpersonal communication—on romantic relationships and interpersonal conflict—to investigate and theorize how politics has become increasingly divisive in romantic relationships. Through a series of in-depth interviews

with individuals in cross-cutting romantic partnerships, I explore if and how people discuss politics when they experience political difference with their romantic partner. Drawing on research related to interpersonal conflict, I determine the boundaries of cross-cutting romantic partnerships that lead people to engage or withdraw from political discussion and both external and internal political conflict with their romantic partners.

This study holds theoretical implications for how scholars think about political communication at the dyadic-level. These findings suggest that political differences between romantic partners can lead to external and internal political conflict, but how partners uniquely address this conflict depends on individual differences in the relationship. This study also raises the importance of looking at cross-cutting relationships, rather than just politically homogenous relationships (Huber & Malhotra, 2016), when thinking about how romantic relationships affect political communication. This is particularly important in an era of intense political polarization where political differences have come to represent not just differences in policy preferences, but also differences in social values and identity.

Political Identity and Geographic, Social, and Interpersonal Sorting

People now live in geographic places—cities, towns, and neighborhoods—that match their political partisanship (Bishop, 2009). With an expanding media environment, they now consume news that matches their political ideology (Stroud, 2011). Moreover, one's social identity has, over time, increasingly aligned with one's partisanship to form a “mega-identity” (Mason, 2018), encompassing race, religion, class, and partisanship all in one.

There is also evidence this political sorting happens at an interpersonal or dyadic-level. Social ties and relationships tend to be fairly homogenous, or exist among similar others (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). When communicating, people are likely to self-select

into a discussion with others on social media they believe are ideologically similar to them (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014) and to choose partners in a task they believe share their partisanship (Lelkes & Westwood, 2017). Studies of political homophily suggest that people prefer to associate with others who are similar to themselves in terms of political orientation (Huber & Malhotra, 2016). Romantic partnerships, in particular, tend to grow around shared interests and values like political orientation. For instance, spouses tend to share political positions and party affiliation (Iyengar, Konitzer, & Tedin, 2018) and conversely, party affiliation is a strong predictor of people's dating preferences (Huber & Malhotra, 2016).

Although neighborhoods, social identities, and interpersonal relationships have become increasingly well-sorted, there still exist many individuals whose political partisanship does not match the majority partisanship in the social groups of which they are a part. This is especially true for those in relationships that existed before social sorting became prominent—for example, marriages or familial relationships that were cross-cutting (Mason, 2018; Mutz, 2002) to begin with. For example, in a survey of over 18 million married couples in the United States, 30% were a “mis-matched partisan pair,” or a Democrat married to a Republican, a Republican married to a Democrat, or an Independent married to either (Hersh & Ghitza, 2016). Despite the relative prevalence of cross-cutting romantic relationships, there has been little empirical attention paid to the effects of these relationships on interaction and communication, particularly in an era of intense political polarization.

There is a long line of evidence suggesting cross-cutting relationships can affect the people in them. For example, being well-sorted, or belonging to social groups that share your political ideology tends to make one more politically engaged. Mason (2018), for instance, finds well-sorted individuals were around 30 percent more politically active (e.g. donating money to a

political candidate, working for a campaign) than those who had cross-cutting identities.

Research on discussion networks also finds heterogeneous discussion can lead to less political participation in both online and offline contexts (Campbell & Kwak, 2011; Mutz, 2002; Valenzuela, Kim, & Gil de Zuñiga, 2011).

Although empirical research has considered cross-cutting identities and discussion partners, it has not yet fully explored the experience of cross-cutting *romantic* relationships and the influence these relationships have on interpersonal discussion and political participation, despite evidence that romantic and familial relationships can influence politics and communication (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002).

Interpersonal Political Discussion and Relational Conflict

There is reason to suspect cross-cutting *romantic* relationships are notably different from other types of relationships. For one, romantic relationships generally involve unique processes and outcomes compared to other relationship forms. Romantic relationships, including individuals who are married, engaged, seriously dating, or casually dating (Stafford & Canary, 1991)—involve higher levels of intimacy and investment than other relationships (Perlman & Fehr, 1987), and people tend to have steeper criteria for romantic partners than they do for friends (Sprecher & Regan, 2002).

Given the importance and distinctiveness of romantic relationships, the interpersonal communication tradition offers a variety of theories for how people engage, avoid, or navigate interpersonal conflict (see Caughlin, Vangelisti, & Mikucki-Enyart, 2006). Three perspectives have been particularly important to the field's study of romantic conflict: demand/withdraw interactions, relational attributions, and topic avoidance. These theories offer complementary perspectives on how people in cross-cutting romantic relationships may participate in, respond

to, or avoid political discussions with their partner.

In romantic relationships, partners may engage in a communication pattern called demand/withdraw in which one partner “avoids conflict” while the other “approaches conflict” (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000, p. 524). There are a number of factors that will influence who demands and who withdraws in a conflict between romantic partners. First, demand/withdraw interactions may be driven by who finds the present issue most important, or who in the relationship expects a change in their partner’s behavior and/or perspective (Klinetob & Smith, 1996). This suggests who demands or withdraws from conflict will fluctuate between partners depending on the topic of discussion. Yet evidence for this perspective is limited. Consistently, women are significantly more likely to demand in their romantic relationships than are men, regardless of topic (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 1999; Holley, Haase, Chui, & Bloch, 2018).

Demand/withdraw interactions may also be driven by individual differences in and preferences for romantic relationships. For instance, a positive orientation towards argument, a desire for relational closeness, and ideological flexibility all predict demand/withdraw patterns in a relationship (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000; Schrodt, Witt, & Shimkowski, 2014).

Demand/withdraw interactions have been linked to a variety of relational outcomes including marital dissatisfaction, divorce and even spousal abuse (Feldman & Ridley, 2000; Schrodt et al., 2014). Still, it is unclear how demand/withdraw interactions play out with regard to politics—how partners may uniquely engage in demand/withdraw interactions around political conflict.

Beyond demanding or withdrawing from conflict with one’s partner, there is also the option to eschew conflict by avoiding a topic altogether. Strategic topic avoidance can help romantic partners evade conflict (Roloff & Ifert, 2000) mostly with the purpose of maintaining a relationship (Dailey & Palomares, 2004) or developing a relationship (Knobloch & Carpenter-

Theune, 2004). While there is evidence people strategically avoid political topics in their relationships, research has generally found this avoidance happens more so in early or uncertain relationships rather than in relationships where commitment has been established (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Morey et al., 2012). Specifically, Morey and colleagues (2012) identify the likelihood of topic avoidance with weaker rather than stronger ties because it is “unlikely that a political disagreement would cause a strong tie to sever this connection” (p. 90).

Taken together, there are a number of ways individuals may handle conflict with their romantic partner. What is less clear is how politics becomes a source of conflict within these relationships. While some research suggests committed and/or strong romantic partnerships are likely to tolerate political disagreement (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Morey et al., 2012), evidence from political communication research suggests that, in the face of rising political polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012) and cohesive social and political identities (Mason, 2018), political disagreement may now pose more conflict—both externally and internally—in romantic relationships where two partners politically differ. In this study I seek to understand how individuals in cross-cutting romantic relationships experience and respond to political differences with their partner. Specifically, I explore what characterizes political communication in these relationships and how partners navigate external and internal conflict in their political beliefs.

Method

To explore this topic, I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with individuals in cross-cutting romantic relationships (N=45). I made this methodological choice for a number of reasons. For one, this orientation allows data collection that is particularly sensitive to a time when politics is personal and complex. For instance, there is the potential for one’s cross-cutting

relationship to espouse a sense of shame for some participants, as it has in prior research (Van Duyn, 2018). It is also possible if one partner knew their partner would likewise be interviewed for the study or if the couple had been interviewed together this could have influenced the honesty of their responses, particularly for those who strategically avoid talking about politics for maintenance or development purposes. The in-depth interviews in this study allow me to assess the experiences and perceptions of political communication but not evaluate actual communication between partners.

Participants were recruited through a series of Facebook advertisements targeting people in politically dissimilar romantic relationships (see Appendix A). The recruitment ads ran in two waves, one from February 18 to 19, 2020 and one from March 20 to 22, 2020. In response to the ad, participants first completed a screening questionnaire, which asked for basic information about whether or not they disagree with their partner about politics, their general location, current relationship status and length, general demographics, and an email address. I then contacted each participant who qualified to schedule an interview and then conducted the interview over the phone.

I received a total of 419 responses to the screener survey before pausing recruitment. From those 419 responses, a total of 45 interviews were successfully scheduled and conducted. Interviews were conducted from February 19 to April 5, 2020. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview guide, drawing from research on discussion networks (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Mutz, 2002; Wojcieszak, 2009), political participation (Valenzuela et al., 2011), and opinion expression (Van Duyn, 2018; see Appendix B). Participants received a \$10 Amazon gift card upon completion of the interview. To protect the identity of each participant, all originally identifying information including name and

email were deleted, the original recording transcribed and deleted, and a pseudonym assigned to each participant.

The participant sample was remarkably diverse. The participants came from all over the country, with seven from the Northeast region of the country, 11 from the West, 13 from the South, and 14 from the Midwest, with ages ranging from 20 to 60. Twenty-seven of the participants were women, sixteen were men, and two identified as non-binary. Twenty-six individuals were White/non-Hispanic, seven were Black/African-American, five were Hispanic, five were Asian-American, and one was American Indian.

Eight of the participants were cohabiting relationships with their partners, fourteen were dating, twenty-two were married, and one specified that they were engaged. By far, most participants (30) had been in their current relationship more than two years, with 15 others specifying they had spent 1-2 years together (8), 10-12 months together (2), 7-9 months together (1), 4-6 months together (1), or 3 months or less together (3). Most participants were in heterosexual relationships, either a male with a female (15) or a female with a male (27). One male was in a relationship with a male, and two participants who identified as non-binary were in relationships with men.

To analyze the data, I used Luker's (2009) method, merging grounded theory and extended case method, allowing researchers to build on existing theories. Specifically, I approached my analysis with attention to how the individual handled external political conflict with their partner, drawing from research on demand/withdraw and topic avoidance. With regard to how individuals dealt with internal conflict, I looked for dialectical tensions (Baxter, 1990), or conflicting beliefs in the participant's responses, given the use of this approach in other work related to conflict and abuse in interpersonal relationships (Malvini Redden, & Way, 2017).

Findings

Throughout the course of these interviews, I identified a number of themes with regard to how participants dealt with political conflict and communicated political differences with their partner. The political differences across these relationships ranged from entire disagreement to issue-specific or intra-party disagreement. Each theme highlights the ways in which these individuals dealt with two types of conflict: external or internal. *External* conflict involved direct political conflict with their part. This theme reflects the current literature surrounding interpersonal conflict and interaction patterns while also highlighting how political conflict uniquely shapes this communication and these interactions. *Internal* conflict reflects the strains present in cross-cutting romantic relationships around political and social identity (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2018; Van Duyn, 2018). Drawing from previous research on dialectical tensions in interpersonal relationships (Baxter, 1990), I pose two tensions in cross-cutting relationships: individuals who try to negotiate relational *intimacy* with political *identity* and relational *cohesion* with political *individuality*. I explore these findings in greater detail below.

Navigating External Conflict

Demanding/Withdrawing from Political Talk

For individuals in cross-cutting romantic relationships, political differences posed a challenge to if and how partners discussed politics. On one hand, cross-cutting relationships sometimes meant that one person would demand political conversation while another would withdraw in an effort to avoid an argument. In these circumstances, romantic partners engaged in a demand/withdraw pattern that circumvented a disparity in their *political beliefs*. In other cases, demand/withdraw patterns emerged amidst a disparity in partner's *political interest*. That is, even

if the topic was one on which the couple could agree, one partner demanded conversation out of an interest in talking about politics while the other withdrew out of a disinterest.

The first of these demand/withdraw interactions—a conflict between political beliefs—was typically evident between the most extreme cross-cutting relationships. For example, in cases where one partner supported Donald Trump and another opposed his presidency. This was the case for Terri, a woman from rural Tennessee who opposed Donald Trump but whose husband supported him. Terri mentioned she frequently tries to discuss politics with her husband who would either “shutdown” or “blowup.” When I asked her if they talked about politics together, she said it tended to be one sided.

E: Do you all tend to talk about politics much?

T: I do, but he doesn't, because I'm really passionate about it, and he tends to want to shut down and not really talk about it...I'll say, "I wanted to explain this to you, and get your thoughts on this," and he's like, "I don't want to talk about it." Like I said about climate change—climate control—and I could say something about that and then he just blows up...he walks away...It's frustrating. I want him to be on the same page as me. (Terri)

While some expressed concerns that their partners did not share their beliefs, there were also frustrations about partners who did not seem to care enough. In this interaction, it was less about one partner demanding conversation and the other withdrawing to avoid conflict, but one partner demanding conversation and the other partner withdrawing because they do not care about politics. For instance, Amanda, who is from a suburb in Missouri, was frustrated when her husband would not talk about politics with her. Although her husband was on the same side as she was at least with regards to Trump's presidency, he was less interested in politics overall.

I'm always wanting to learn more and bounce ideas off of him, and he never wants to talk about it. I think it gets him frustrated and angry. And I don't know if he doesn't want to debate about it or get into it, or if he's worried about having four more years of Trump, or—I don't know what his feel is...He doesn't like to banter much about it. Kind of drives me nuts. (Amanda)

She found herself repeatedly bringing up politics only to have her husband deflect the conversation. When I asked her how these conversations typically go, she described a situation in which he used sports as a distraction. In turn, she grew frustrated that his reaction was not equal in intensity to her reaction.

I'll say 'did you see what happened today? Or, "did you see Trump isn't going to commute Stone, but he commuted Blagojevich?" And he's like "uh-huh. Yeah, I'm reading the sports page." And I'm like 'can you believe it?' and he's like, 'Yeah.' I'm like, "Really? That's all you have to say?" (Amanda)

While women did seem more likely to demand in these interactions, as previous research suggests (Holley et al., 2018), this was not exclusively the case. Several men demanded political conversation while their wives, partners, or girlfriends withdrew. For example, William, a UK immigrant who supports Donald Trump and lives in Washington state, said that his wife would "shutdown" conversations when it came to Trump.

W: But my wife, whenever the subject of Trump comes up, she just sort of shuts down the discussion...

E: And she thinks if you two talk about it-- what does she think will happen?

W: It sort of gets down into where you get—not an argument, but you get into a heated discussion where there's no easy end to it...It's like you know you 're on different viewpoints and it just—it's not "Okay, well we can stop and we can discuss if for 20 minutes and then move on to another [topic]." It would just be going around in circles ...it's easier just to not go there. So that's why if she shuts it down then we don't get into that sort of circle of disagreement. (William)

Despite her resistance, William persisted, frequently bringing up politics when he saw something on the news and wanted to discuss it. The only instance he found where his wife would discuss politics with him was when filling out their vote by mail ballot because there was more guidance—specific propositions to debate, specific campaign materials from candidates to reference—rather than an "open-ended discussion" and without being "distracted by all the attacks" between candidates.

Samantha, a teacher in Iowa who supports Donald Trump, told me she withdraws from political conversations with her partner of over two years who strongly opposed Donald Trump. Her partner, who is upset by surrounding Trump supporters at work, would often come home looking to debate with her. Samantha found that the frequency and intensity with which he looked to discuss politics had become more prominent amidst the Coronavirus pandemic during which politics had become more central to their daily lives.

S: He'll just make a comment about something someone said at work, he'll make a comment about something that was said on Reddit, and I'm just kind of, "Oh, yeah, okay," and then he'd just kind of try and move along. But it's getting to the point where I almost feel like I have to say something. I feel like he's turned it into more of a political thing when I more so want to focus on like, "How can we help? How can we solve this? How can we not place the blame on everyone?"

E: Yeah, yeah. So, he is the one who's bringing it up and wants to talk about it?

S: Yeah, yeah. One of his bosses at work is really for Trump and everything going on, so I think he just hears what is said all day and comes home and vents. I don't know...I normally just try and avoid the conversation...I change the subject or change it to a different viewpoint. (Samantha)

In this case, Samantha's partner wanted to discuss politics. He approached her looking to engage in a discussion about Trump, about his handling of the Coronavirus pandemic, but she was unwilling to engage. Samantha withdrew by changing the topic or sometimes leaving the conversation altogether.

Sandy, a woman from a small city in New Mexico, told me she left the house in an effort to avoid talking with her husband about current events or politics. In the past, when the news was on, their interactions would result in yelling, during which Sandy often felt like her husband's target. As a result, when she found that he was watching the news she would leave the house so she did not yell at him or so he did not yell at her.

I have a visceral reaction to some of his comments. This morning, Elizabeth Warren, they were showing part of the debate, and she started saying, "We can't beat Trump." And

[her husband] was like, "That's right. You can't." And I just like—I go to work early because I just can't. (Sandy)

These experiences echo previous research on demand/withdraw interactions in romantic relationships. When facing conflict, partners can fall into patterns where one individual approaches conflict—looking to discuss, debate, or argue about politics—while the other retreats from political conflict by changing the topic or strategically leaving the conversation (Klinetob & Smith, 1996). Like previous research on individual differences as an explanation for demand/withdraw interactions (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000), these findings show that demand/withdraw patterns can happen in cases not just where people differ in their beliefs, but differ in their interests and intensity. Partners who had different levels of political interest were also likely to engage in demand/withdraw patterns. In turn, these patterns put a strain on cross-cutting relationships by leaving each partner dissatisfied—either that their partner did not share their beliefs, that their partner would not discuss their beliefs, or both.

Avoiding Political Talk

For the most part, the people I spoke to were stuck between wanting to talk about politics with their partners and wanting to avoid conflict with their partners. In some cases, as in the ones described above, one partner chose discussion and one chose avoidance. In other cases, both partners chose to avoid politics altogether. Chris, a self-identified libertarian in Texas, told me that he and his girlfriend, who he described as an “extreme liberal” had to side-step the topic of politics altogether because of their disagreement, even making an intentional effort to not watch the news together.

E: This seems like a very important part of your life and something you're really invested in. How do you work through this difference with her?

C: We just don't talk about it. I have to avoid it...honestly, it's not that easy to talk about politics, especially if you don't even understand how it works. (Chris)

What was striking is how much Chris cares about politics and how easily he is able to disregard political conversations with his girlfriend. When I asked him how he could negotiate being so politically active and keeping this side from his girlfriend, he mentioned that when he had tried to discuss it with her in the past “it was like talking to somebody on drugs” and that “it’s just pointless.”

Tyler, who lives with his girlfriend of over 8 years in California, said they had learned to avoid politics altogether. While he sees himself as an Independent with fiscally conservative views, his girlfriend sees herself as a liberal Democrat. The two decided, after a few heated arguments, they would not broach political topics in the future.

I'd say when we were first dating, which was almost 8 years ago now, sometimes political things would come up, and we realized quickly that some of our opinions were different, and they did result in some arguments where...definitely we both left it feeling a little bit upset. So, avoiding confrontation is usually what I try to do. I don't have like arguing for arguing's sake, and I don't think my girlfriend does either. So yeah, we just kind of decided that we weren't going to go into those type of topics anymore. (Tyler)

Suraj and his girlfriend had come to a similar conclusion. While Suraj supports Donald Trump, his girlfriend does not. After a few arguments they decided they should “play it safe” and not “stretch” their conversations about current events into politics.

S: So, we tend to play it safe there and we don't stretch the conversation way too much. We move towards another topic, something which happened at workplace, stuff like that.

E: Yeah. And are you both likely to do that?

S: Yeah. I mean, there's a pretty good understanding between us that I think we need to move on, because then this might turn into a debate and then go fight. And you know how it starts. It starts with a comment and goes south in no time. We want to avoid all that. (Suraj)

Angela, a woman in Florida, told me she and her fiancé disagreed about politics when it came to Donald Trump. While she was strongly against him, even to the point of severing friendships with people she knows supported him, Angela’s fiancé found that he agreed with

Trump on several issues. When I asked Angela if she was able to talk about politics with her fiancé, she told me they now “communicate better” by simply not communicating about politics.

I think, because the amount of years that we have been together, we just communicate better now because, a few years ago, yeah, I could definitely see us having big arguments about certain things, but now we're like okay, you know what? That's the end of that...we're just going to leave this [topic] alone. (Angela)

Still, while some partners chose to avoid discussing politics, they did not disengage altogether. Several individuals simply channeled their political interest into other relationships—leaning on these connections for political discussion instead of their romantic partner. For example, this was the case Noah, a libertarian missionary who, at the time I spoke to him, was scheduled to get married the following day. When I asked him if he turned to someone else to discuss politics with since his soon-to-be wife would not discuss it with him, he told me that a few Facebook friends were able to fulfill this role for him and that was enough.

N: I have some friends that I chat with on Facebook...I have some friends where, yeah, definitely I'm like, "Okay, now it's time to sit down and pick a bone about whatever's going on."

E: And does that kind of fulfill that part for you?

N: Yeah, and you know, the way I see it, while I do make politics a really big part of some of the things I'm interested in, it's not so much of a value that I look for in a romantic relationship...I'm able to fulfill that, I guess need or desire to talk about politics, to fulfill that sort of interest in a way that's not necessarily the same way that I fulfill my romantic needs and obligations. (Noah)

Steven and Noah did not need their romantic partners to discuss politics with them. They found other outlets in which to have political conversations so that they could strategically avoid political conversation in their relationships. They were able to compartmentalize politics from romance by sequestering the topic in their lives at home.

Previous research suggests that strategic topic avoidance is more common in earlier relationships or relationships with more uncertainty than in more committed or established

relationships (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Yet the association between intimacy and topic avoidance is more complex. In some cases, close or intimate individuals are more likely to discuss topics on which they disagree (Morey et al., 2012) and in others they are more likely to avoid them (Mutz, 2006). This complexity is present in the findings presented here as well.

While some individuals were previously willing to broach politics with their partners, conversations that got too heated, out of control, or were damaging to the relationship led many to establish an understanding that politics was a topic to be avoided. Others found that the topic itself did not need to be a part of their romantic relationship for them to be happy or for their interests or needs to be met.

Navigating Internal Conflict

Intimacy vs. Identity

The cross-cutting relationships at the heart of this study were more than two individuals navigating political conflict with their partner. They also involved substantial cognitive and emotional work on part of each individual. For instance, individuals in cross-cutting relationships have to traverse conflicting goals for their relationship and for themselves. One of these tensions was how romantic partners could maintain intimacy with their partner while also maintaining their political identity, which for many, was an important part of their overall sense of self.

Jean, an accountant in New Jersey, is strongly against Donald Trump while her husband, who had voted for Obama in 2012, is strongly in favor of Trump. After telling me she felt like it was hard to even be in the house with him, I asked her if she ever considered ending the relationship over their difference in politics. She told me she had, but that she tried to stay together because she has young children.

J: Sometimes it just gets too much. I actually have a neighbor who lived in a nearby house. Shortly after the presidential election of 2016, she popped up and left because she

just couldn't deal with it. She couldn't deal with her spouse. And back then, I thought, "You know what? Maybe I should do the same because this is just too much of a constant difference of opinion."...But here we are. We have such a difference in politics. And we have to live together. We have to file our taxes together. We'll raise our children together. And it's a constant almost battle.

E: How do you get through that?

J: Back then, my neighbor was in a different situation compared to me—she didn't have young children. I feel like I have to make an effort. We're not going to touch politics. (Jean)

Jean sacrificed her political identity with her husband in order to keep their family close, to maintain a sense, or perhaps an appearance, of intimacy for her children's sake. The reality was, however, that their difference in political identity did harm their intimacy, enough so to make her consider divorce.

Sandy had also struggled identifying with a political party different from her husband. This became particularly challenging when he made accusations towards members of her party that by default included her.

He told me, he goes, "Oh, I hate all Democrats. They shouldn't be able to vote." And I said, "Then you hate me." "Well, I don't hate you. I don't mean you." And I go, "But I'm a Democrat..." And it just—it does make me kind of question his morality or his intelligence, but you know, I do love the guy. (Sandy)

Sandy's identification as a Democrat implicated her in her husband's accusations. This meant that his condemnation of Democrats was, in essence, a condemnation of her. She struggled to see both of these things. That he hated Democrats but that he loved her. That she felt attacked but loved the man who attacked her.

The conflict between intimacy and identity was not only related to partisan identity, but racial identity as well. Maya, a biracial woman in Indiana who has been married to her husband for over 25 years, told me she and her husband struggled when it came to their understanding of

politics around race. When I asked her what their political differences were, she mentioned their different backgrounds as a reason they had different views.

I am biracial and have had maybe a different perspective. He was raised in a very rural white tiny community, he is like I wouldn't say ultra-conservative but...he definitely leans conservative...Being a person of color, that's important to me. So, I have a lot of that. And he—that perspective has not entered his world. (Maya)

Her husband had grown up in an area of the state that was not racially or ethnically diverse, which she told me had influenced his perspective on affirmative action even though his own wife and children were people of color. But Maya felt it was not up to her to dictate his beliefs or his identity on this issue.

M: If we were the exact same, our marriage would be boring. I mean I love him for him and I also think that he's a fully functioning American that should have every right to believe as his conscious dictates. But he definitely has been in a certain way, so, yeah. There are some things that have not changed for him, so...

E: And can you give me a picture of what those things are? Are there still things you guys disagree on?

M: Yes. I would say probably he doesn't think there is a place for affirmative action...he gives me the same respect of being able to figure out what to believe too, but he doesn't think that it should be based on skin color. (Maya)

Maya frequently referenced her own race and the race of her children in our conversation. It was important to her identity as a person and to the formation of her political beliefs. Yet her racial identity and the race of his and her children were less important to her husband. Maya put this aside when it came to her intimacy with her husband. She loved “him for him” and did not expect him to take on this identity when forming his political beliefs. Although race was an important factor in her beliefs, she said, it was not important in her connection with her husband.

While Maya distinguished her racial identity from her intimacy with her husband, others just buried their political identity altogether in order to maintain intimacy in their relationship. Amir, a self-proclaimed Trump supporter from Texas, told me that during and after the 2016 election he would hide his views from his wife in an effort to keep their relationship intact. “In

the beginning, when he [Trump] first was in office,” he told me “I would hide it [his opinion about Trump] a lot because she knew how much I like Trump, and I knew how much she hated Trump.” Amir maintained that his helped them continue their relationship, although his wife would sometimes still make the joke “Man, I wish I knew you were a Trump supporter.”

It makes sense that individuals in cross-cutting relationships would struggle to manage their political identity with their relational intimacy. As politics has increasingly become a social identity (Mason, 2018) and as the affective divide between parties has widened (Iyengar et al., 2012), the ability to compartmentalize political beliefs from emotion becomes harder. That is not to say that some individuals were not able to do this in their relationships, many had found a way to separate the two, but that the process to doing that was perhaps growing harder.

Cohesion vs. Individuality

Beyond emotional intimacy between romantic partners, there was also a struggle in how to keep a family cohesive while still allowing individual partners to hold and/or express their own beliefs. This was especially true for those who had children and who struggled with how to pass on their political beliefs to their children while also respecting their partner’s difference of opinion. This was true for Olivia a mother and a recent Democrat who had switched from an evangelical Republican several years prior. I asked her how she maintained a relationship with her husband, a strong Republican, after her party switch.

I think there are things that could make it [a deal breaker] if he was actively out campaigning for somebody who was really damaging to so many people...But I have a hard time saying all of this that we've built together, this relationship, the damage - not damage it could do to our daughter - but the challenges it would lead to our daughter because you see things in the world differently than I do. I couldn't imagine going through all of that... (Olivia)

When I asked her how her four-year-old daughter was factored into their political differences—how they both dealt with wanting to pass along their own perspectives to her

without getting in the way of the other person—she told me they both found different ways of influencing her. Olivia focused more on teaching her daughter about electoral processes and important political figures, like Ruth Bader Ginsburg, while her husband focused on teaching his daughter aspects of his culture and lifestyle that were important to him.

We talk a lot about voting. Every time I go to the polls, she comes with me even if it's for a small local election. And we talk a lot about we vote to make sure we take care of our communities and we take care of our people...He doesn't talk as much about politics with her. He talks more about the things that are important to him. So, he bought her a lifetime hunting and fishing license for Christmas last year...that's such a political thing for him. That's how he expresses his political views to her through that as opposed to through people. (Olivia)

Political differences were also at play when considering how the political beliefs of in-laws could affect the entire family. For instance, Amanda who lives in a suburb of Missouri, fought with her husband over her fathers-in-law's "ridiculously wrong" columns in the local newspaper. When I asked Amanda what had been challenging about the political differences between her and her husband, she mentioned that the "big issue" was conflict around her in-laws' beliefs.

I think a big issue that has come up is just even more immediate family like when we go over to my in-laws, it's very problematic sometimes—my father-in-law is so different...And my father-in-law writes articles too for the paper. And I'm like [to her husband], "If he even writes that article, you better tell him not to say that or to write that article" because that's created marital issues for us...because he'll say things that are just so ridiculously wrong, so not politically correct. And - oh my God - I have the same last name as him...And I'm like, "Please tell your dad not to write anything on this, please." And he's like, "I'm not telling my dad that. I can't tell my dad that." So - I don't know - there's more to it than just my husband and I having disagreements, there's immediate family issues too. (Amanda)

Amanda mentioned that she had to share the "same last name as him," as if there was some embarrassment in being associated with the family or with her father-in-law's very public and vocal perspective. I asked her if she ever felt ashamed of this, and she told me "absolutely."

E: And you mentioned the last name thing—do you feel like it's embarrassing or shaming for you to be associated with that?

A: Yes, absolutely.

E: Do people ever connect you to him when they read that?

A: Oh, yeah. They're like, "Oh, you're his [son's] wife," and I'm like, "Yeah," and I leave it at that. I married him. I mean he's [her father-in-law] a great man. He's a wonderful man, but I don't have the same views as him, so it's hard to—what can I do? (Amanda)

There were also ways that political differences in the family helped individuals in cross-cutting relationships see a way to overcome their own difference of opinion and political identity. Isaiah, a black man from California who self-identifies as a Democrat and whose black wife supports Trump, told me the fact that his parents had political differences helped him see how romantic partners did not have to be “100% mirrors of each other.”

I just remember like, okay, my parents did have those difference and they were just fine... I think the love outweighs. But there are things that do make me like—that may make me raise my eyebrows and say, "Oh," but I don't think it was that passionate or that emphasized, you know? (Isaiah)

Isaiah saw cohesiveness in the family along lines of love not lines of politics, something that had been evident in his own home growing up. Although on occasion he questioned his wife's beliefs, he did not see them as divisive or passionate enough to interrupt their emotional connection. How a family interacts with or models political conflict, then, can influence how individuals in cross-cutting relationships in turn responded to political conflict in their own lives. For Isaiah, this was a positive influence for his relationship. For Amanda, political conflict with the broader family hurt her relationship with her husband. This finding only reaffirms research showing not only how romantic relationship can influence political conflict (Morey et al., 2012), but how the broader family structure (McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002) can influence communication.

Discussion

Although politics has increasingly aligned with one's social groups and even

interpersonal relationships, there are many who remain in romantic relationships with partners who do not share their political identity. This study explores the unique experiences of individuals in cross-cutting romantic relationships. Specifically, I attended to if and how partners in cross-cutting romantic relationships talk about and deal with political conflict.

Previous research suggests that political differences between romantic partners can cause both external conflict in communication interaction (Morey et al., 2012) as well as internal conflict in identity and affect (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2018). I find that individuals in cross-cutting romantic relationships tend to interact with external political conflict in ways similar to other relational conflicts—either by demanding/withdrawing from conflict (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000; Klinetob & Smith, 1996) or avoiding a conflictual topic altogether (Roloff & Ifert, 2000; Morey et al., 2012). I find that these patterns tend to follow lines of individual difference in political interest. When one partner holds a different level of political interest than the other they engage in these types of interactions. I also find two distinct tensions with regard to internal political conflict in these relationships. That partners try to negotiate relational intimacy with their political identity and family cohesiveness with their political individuality. On the first tension, cross-cutting relationships severely struggle. Out-party hostility, which grows more intense as polarization increases (Iyengar et al., 2012) can threaten intimacy and understanding in cross-cutting relationships. On the second tension, partners can struggle to maintain familial cohesiveness when their politics differ, particularly when they have children or when the extended family presents its own form of political conflict. This points to the continuing importance of family relationships (McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002) in political communication processes.

This study extends the research on political identity and political communication in

several ways. For one, it expands the literature on social sorting (Bishop, 2009; Mason, 2018) to consider this phenomenon at the interpersonal level. Second, unlike previous research on political homophily and communication in romantic partnerships (Hersh & Ghitza, 2018; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Morey et al., 2012), this study considers *cross-cutting* romantic relationships and their influence on if and how people communicate and navigate political conflict. These findings may also help explain previous survey results showing that partisans may be more affected when in a relationship with an Independent than someone from an opposing party (Hersh & Ghitza, 2018). It could be that those who identify as Independents are also less interested in politics altogether (Klar, 2014). In turn, the intensity with which one partner comes to a political conversation may not be met by the other partner, creating conditions for the demand/withdraw interactions and topic avoidance between intense and weak partisans found in this study.

Methodologically, this study offers evidence that measuring political differences is more nuanced than cross-categorical approaches might allow (Iyengar et al., 2018). For instance, participants in this study experienced disagreement that would have gone undetected when considering partisan differences as a matching between a Democrat and a Republican or vice versa. In fact, intra-party differences proved to be just as troubling for some partners.

Practically, this study encourages practitioners interested in engaging members of the public to consider not just the individual's experience of politics, but their experience of politics alongside their spouse or partner. The individuals in this study were influenced by and/or influenced their partners. Some withdrew from politics altogether in the face of their political differences and some saw it as a challenge to overcome. Either way, to imagine the individual citizen as independent from their romantic partners, partners who are connected in some way to

each other's political action and beliefs, is to miss how people traverse and are influenced by multiplex identities. Most of these individuals did not read or watch news in isolation, but alongside their partner. Some tried to make sense of political events and even the 2020 campaign by talking with their partner. In turn, practitioners would do well to consider how people interact with information and ideas alongside and in coordination with others whose beliefs matter to them (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1966).

This study has several limitations to note. For one, I use qualitative inquiry to explore cross-cutting romantic relationships, a method that offers a deeper understanding of if and how individuals deal with political conflict in their relationships. Still, this approach cannot offer generalizable results, at least not statistically so. Second, I speak to only one partner in the relationship, which tells me only one side of the story. Nevertheless, the perspective of one partner can tell a great deal about the relationship and its effects.

Despite these limitations, this study points to an important and understudied area of political and interpersonal communication research: the cross-cutting romantic relationship. Politics may have always been personal, but it has not always been paramount. As political identity increasingly aligns with other identities, the stakes of political differences get higher, particularly in romantic relationships where trust, compatibility, and understanding are cornerstones to intimacy. It will then be important to attend to political disagreement at the dyadic-level and to consider the ramifications of this intimate disagreement for communication.

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Appendix A

The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook sponsored advertisement. At the top left is a circular profile picture of a globe. To its right, the text reads "Politics & Partnerships Study at [redacted]". Below this, it says "Sponsored · [lock icon]". The main text of the ad asks, "Do you hold different political beliefs from those of your romantic partner/spouse? Researchers at [redacted] are interested in speaking with you!". Below the text is a photograph of two groups of plastic pawns, one blue and one red, arranged in rows. At the bottom of the ad is a grey call-to-action box with the text "Complete an interview & get a \$10 Amazon gift card!" and a "LEARN MORE" button. Below the ad, there are 8 likes (represented by thumbs-up and hearts) and 2 shares. At the very bottom are icons and labels for "Like", "Comment", and "Share".

Figure A1. Study advertisement on Facebook News Feed

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide**Personal and Political Background**

Do you work outside the home? What kind of work do you do?
Do you have children? How old are they?
Did you attend any type of school after high school?
Would you consider yourself a Democrat? A Republican? An Independent?
How involved would you say you typically are in politics?
Did you vote in the 2016 election? If so, who did you vote for?
How involved would you say you were in the 2016 election?
How did you feel and react after hearing the 2016 election results?
Do you feel that your neighborhood or general community shares your political beliefs?
Do you feel that your family and friends share your political beliefs?

Romantic Relationship and Political Conflict

What are your partner's/spouse's political beliefs?
Has he/she always had these political beliefs?
Have his/her or your political beliefs changed over time?
Are there political issues on which you and your partner/spouse disagree?
Are there political issues on which you and your partner/spouse agree?
Do you talk about politics with your partner/spouse?
Do you ever get in arguments about politics with your partner/spouse? If yes, what typically happens or is said in those arguments?
Who typically starts the conversation?
Are both partners equally intense or interested in the conversation?
How do these conversations/arguments get resolved?
Do you ever feel the need to hide your political beliefs from your partner/spouse?
Has it been challenging to disagree with your partner/spouse about politics? If so, what has been challenging?
Has political disagreement with your partner/spouse affected you in any way?
Do you feel that you are less, more, about the same amount of politically involved since you started your relationship with your partner/spouse?
Have you or your partner donated to a political campaign?

Political Expression, Participation, and Activism

Are you a member of any political group online or offline?
In the past year, how have you participated in politics at all? If so, what have you participated in?
In the past year, has your partner/spouse participated in politics at all?
Do you think your partner/spouse would be upset that you participated in politics?

News Use

How do you typically learn about politics?

What news sources do you typically use, if any?

Do you typically listen/watch/read the news with your partner/spouse?

What news do you typically listen to/watch/read together?

Who gets to choose what news you listen to/watch/read?