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Introduction

In 2012, the online dating app Tinder launched and quickly became one of the most popular relationship services of all time (Stampler 2014). Although online dating had already been around for nearly two decades, Tinder's fast-paced matching service was unparalleled to any previous platform and became a marked feature of pop culture. Today, Tinder boasts more than ten million matches a day and is available in over thirty languages worldwide (Dogtiev 2017). With a growing shift toward app dating services like Tinder, the question remains: What leads to getting more matches on dating sites like Tinder? One possible answer might be surprising—politics.

According to Pew Research, political polarization is at an all-time high in the U.S. and is influencing everyday life—from work and school to even dating (2016). This polarization encapsulates growing dislike for people of the out-party and has generally increased over the past several decades (Iyengar et al. 2012). It is, therefore, not difficult to stipulate how ideological hard-liners from both ends of the political spectrum may not be interested in interacting romantically with people of opposite views, particularly as romantic relationships involve much more interaction than everyday exchanges. However, the extent of how far this lack of interest extends into the dating preferences of U.S. citizens is largely unexplored. This research seeks to answer that very question: Specifically, how has politics in contemporary America impacted dating preferences among U.S. citizens? This paper uses data from a survey experiment in which mock dating profiles state brief personal bios that refer to either a liberal ideology, conservative ideology, or have no mention of political ideology. Survey respondents are asked to rank each profile as "attractive" or "unattractive." I then conduct a statistical analysis to determine if the ideological treatments influence level of attractiveness. Ultimately,

findings indicate that liberal dating profiles are significantly more attractive than conservative profiles but that leaving out ideology makes for the most attractive profile. Among male viewers, ideology has no serious impact on how they view female profile attractiveness, although female viewers exhibit much more sensitivity toward the treatments. This suggests that political beliefs may not be a two-way concern among men and women. Overall, the results indicate that dating is indeed political and that showing particular political preferences will influence attractiveness rates for online dating profiles.

Background and Literature Review

The following section expands on these main topics: The prevalence and importance of political ideology in relationships, the current research on political preferences and romantic relationships, the growing political divide among Americans, and the current social movements surrounding female empowerment. It then identifies the research gap among dating in a post-2016 election America and the importance of all three sections in establishing the theoretical framework of Section II.

Political ideology has always been a factor in romantic relationships. Statistics show that on average, men and women marry a person with a similar political ideology (Hersh 2016). This is particularly true among older generations, with the majority of couples aged sixty and above married to someone of their same party. However, couples who are middle-aged (as well as couples who marry later in life) are not as likely as their older counterparts to be married to same-party partners, with about 30 percent of these relationships being bipartisan commitments (Riley 2016). These findings indicate that over time, couples have become more open to the idea of marrying someone with differing political viewpoints. It is important to note, however, that the bipartisan couple percentage Riley mentions includes conservative-independent and liberal-independent relationships. As Keith (1992) stated, independent voters often lean toward a particular party and consistently vote for it, suggesting that Riley's bipartisan relationship percentages may be somewhat lower than she reported. Even still, conservative-liberal marriages are certainly on the rise and imply that not all couples are concerned about politics. For those couples that are concerned about the ideology of their spouse, the political beliefs of each partner could have further implications than simply their personal relationship.

Political ideology of both partners in a romantic relationship is likely to influence the next generation of citizens as well. According to Magleby et al. (2014), the political ideology of parents is the number one indicator of an individual's own political belief system. For those couples with matching ideologies, their children are highly likely to carry on the same political attitudes. Among the less common bi-partisan couples, children are more likely to be open to new ideas, listen to both sides of the political spectrum, and be willing to challenge echo-chamber thought processes (Jennings and Niemi 2014). Inter-ideological marriages appear to be beneficial to aiding civil political discourse among the next generation of politically engaged citizens. In direct contrast, same-party marriages may proliferate the differences of belief between the right and left, which could easily increase polarization between party members both now and in the near future. Overall, mixed-ideology relationships are prevalent though not particularly common among Americans. Dating and political thought, therefore, has important consequences for both the current and future political atmosphere in the U.S.

Though not extensive, there is currently some research on the influence of political ideology on romantic relationships. Hersh (2016) gathered data from New York and found that among the majority of married couples, conservatives are more likely to marry conservatives whereas liberals and independents are less likely to stay within their own ideology for marriage. One possible reason for this may be that conservatives and liberals have very differing views on sexual morality (Haidt and Hersh 2001). Conservatives tend to value traditional ideals of sexual intimacy and abstinence whereas liberals (and to some extent, independents) are less strict in their interpretations of sexual expression and intimacy. Such stark differences on a topic that is at the forefront of dating may keep conservatives and liberals away from each other. Huber and Malhotra (2016) explored this very relationship in a field experiment on traditional online dating. Creating large dating profiles similar to Match.com or eHarmony.com, they tested the influence of political ideology among a randomly assorted mixture of dating profiles. They found that liberals are perceived as more attractive among liberals and vice versa for conservatives, suggesting that individuals prefer to date among politically homogeneous crowds. Klosfatd, McDermott, and Hatemi (2013) further support these findings, suggesting that political polarization also dictates American's dating preferences more than ever before. While this literature provides correlation toward the idea that politically similar people are more likely to date, it leaves a severe gap in current understanding, because all research was conducted before the 2016 presidential election.

President Trump's 2016 election isn't the only force that may be changing dating habits. Modern movements against sexual assault have brought romantic behaviors to the forefront of political and civil discussion. Beginning in 2017, people around the globe gathered for a succession of Women's Marches, expressing solidarity with women who face discrimination in both the work force and their personal lives because of their gender (Wright 2018). This social movement has directly impacted global discussion on consent and sexual harassment, issues that have long plagued courtship and romantic relationships. Evolving from these Women's Marches, the #MeToo movement developed to publicly hold men accountable for sexual misconduct, harassment, and assault, resulting in a series of high-profile criminal cases (Hawbaker 2018). As a typically Democrat-supported movement, #MeToo has drawn both praise and criticism from the left and right. With these and other social movements aimed at empowering women, particularly in romantic and sexual contexts, the question of how these events have impacted consensual dating and romantic perception between women and men remains unanswered. As this specific topic has drawn not only a gendered but divisively political response, it is essential to explore how political and dating preferences interact with gender, something currently lacking among published literature.

In all, politics has always been a part of romantic relationships, and although research has been conducted on how political ideology influences attractiveness and romantic interest on online dating profiles, little has been explored on the impact of Donald Trump's election and current women's rights movements on dating preferences. As the dating of today leads to the families of tomorrow, it is imperative to better understand how post-Trump dating preferences will affect the next generation of U.S. citizens.

Theory, Hypothesis, and Experimental Design

Theory

As the previous literature review mentions, polarization between parties has been on the rise, consistent throughout the election of Donald Trump and female social movements. Therefore, individuals who feel strongly about the presidency of Trump and campaigns like #MeToo will likewise experience an increased animosity toward those that feel opposite to their views. This hostility will permeate dating preferences to the point of reflecting a stronger polarization than ever before between conservatives and liberals. Essentially, liberals will be more inclined to match with liberals and less inclined to match with conservatives and vice versa.

Hypothesis

Respondents will rank profiles attractive that align closer to their own ideology. This will be particularly prominent among liberal women, many of whom are active in current female empowerment movements.

Experimental Design

To research this question, I created a mock female and male dating profile (see Figures 1 and 2). The profiles were designed to reflect dating sites like Tinder; three photos, a name, a brief bio, and a location tag were included in the profile. Both profiles then received one of five treatments in the bio, as stated below:

1. Democrat (Hillary)
   I love traveling the world and meeting new people. Progressive thinker, creative dreamer, and proud to have been a part of a historic presidential campaign. #StillWithHer.
2. Liberal
   Love to travel, explore, and engage in the world around me. Passionate about equality and proudly progressive. Let's get to know each other!
3. Republican (Trump)
   Hiking, biking, and the great outdoors. Proud to be an American and proud to have been part of a historic presidential campaign . . . let's #MAGA together!
4. Conservative
   Hiking, shooting, and the great outdoors. Proud conservative and passionate about freedom. Let's get to know each other!

5. Control
   I love to travel, explore, and engage in the world around me. Let's get to know each other!

Note: In order to maintain parallelism, a Hillary Clinton treatment was included to compare against a Donald Trump treatment. Instead of using direct claims to ideology (such as "I am a Donald Trump supporter!"), the survey included more subtle mentions of political ideology such as "traditional," "progressive," "#MAGA," and "#ImStillWithHer."

Figure 1.   **Figure 2.**

Each mock profile was placed within a survey on Qualtrics Survey Platform, a professional online survey system. The survey included brief demographical questions such as age, gender, income, and personal political ideology. The respondent was then asked his or her preference when dating between men and women and shown a profile according to that preference (randomly distributed between the five treatment groups). The four outcome measures were:

1. Would you rate this profile as attractive or unattractive?
2. Would you ask this profile on a date?
3. Would you accept an offer from this profile to go on a date?
4. Would you respond to a message from this profile?

The first question "Would you rank this profile as attractive or unattractive?" is the main outcome measure. This question is designed to identify not only if someone would desire to match with the profile but also if attractiveness is independent of dating preference. The next two outcome measures are included to account for potential cultural differences between men and women concerning who typically asks or is asked on a date. The final outcome measure is included to give more understanding in terms of typical online dating actions.

I administered this survey on Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online platform that allows random U.S. citizens across the U.S. to participate in the study. Each respondent received $0.75 for participation in the survey. Due to funding restrictions, I
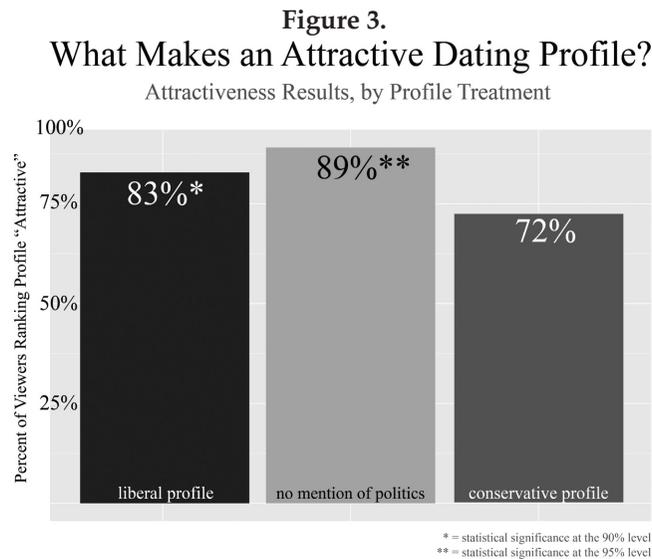
collected a sample size of 150 respondents for a total of $150 (including the fee to use Amazon Mechanical Turk). A complete copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A.

Results

Due to a small sample size (n: 150), I lacked sufficient numerical power to run statistical tests on all five of the treatment groups. As such, for the purpose of this analysis I collapsed both "Conservative" and "Trump" treatments together into a single "Conservative" treatment. Additionally, I also collapsed "Liberal" and "Hillary" treatments together. This is still a valid analytic method because the treatments that were collapsed are similar enough to compare together.

When comparing the overall level of attractiveness between liberal, conservative, and control profiles, liberal profiles received statistically higher attractiveness ratings than conservatives. While the liberal profile had an 83 percent chance of being rated attractive, the conservative profile had only a 72 percent chance of being ranked attractive. The 11 percent point difference between the two is significant at the 10 percent significance level (i.e., *p-value* < 0.1), suggesting that it is in fact the liberal nature of the profile bio that is leading to the substantial increase in attractiveness.

Somewhat unexpectedly, the results also indicate that the control profile was more attractive than both the liberal and conservative profile. At a base attractiveness rate of 89 percent, the control profile was 6 percent more attractive than the liberal and 17 percent more attractive than the conservative profile. This result is significant at the 5 percent significance level (i.e., *p-value* < 0.05). A visual representation of the main findings is below in Figure 3.

Figure 3.

What Makes an Attractive Dating Profile?

Attractiveness Results, by Profile Treatment

* = statistical significance at the 90% level
** = statistical significance at the 95% level

Gender Differences

To better understand the difference between the male and female profiles, I compared the level of attractiveness among those that preferred men and those that preferred women. Although there were homosexuals who took this survey, the total number of gay men and women was too low to be influential in the analysis. Therefore, for the purpose of this analysis I will consider those that viewed the female profile as heterosexual men and male profile viewers as heterosexual women.

Heterosexual men exhibited no statistically or substantively significant difference in viewing profile attractiveness between each treatment. Each profile received a rate within 0.6 percentage points of 86 percent, indicating that the liberal and conservative treatments had virtually no effect on male dating preferences. However, the results among heterosexual women were starkly different. For females, the attractiveness of the male profile fluctuated depending on which treatment arm they received. These women ranked the conservative profile attractive only 61.9 percent of the time, a 33.1 percentage point drop from the attractiveness rating for the control profile. This low ranking was significant at the 95 percent level. Women also ranked the liberal profile less attractive than the control profile, although this profile's 76.9 percent attractiveness rate was not statistically significant and can therefore be attributed to sampling variance. These results are visualized in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4.

** = statistical significance at the 95% level
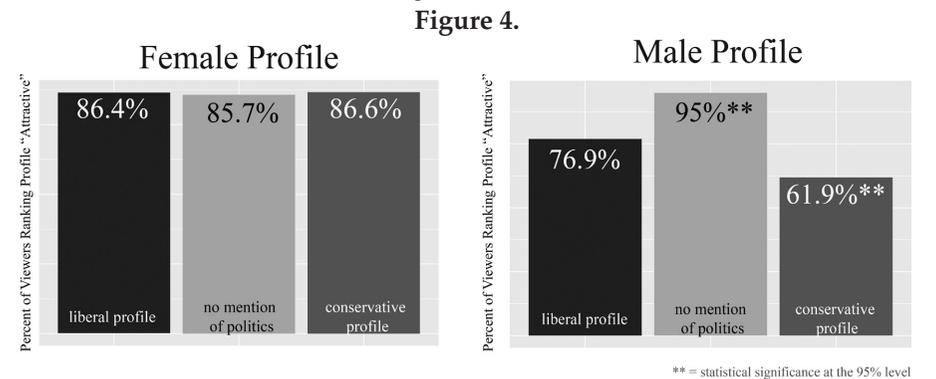
Political Ideology of Viewer

Next, I divided the profile attractiveness of each treatment arm between liberal and conservative viewers. Liberal viewers ranked the liberal profile attractive 80 percent of the time, whereas they only viewed the conservative profile as attractive 70 percent of the time. Although the 10 percent difference between the two appears substantial, the data does not support any statistical significance, which means the results may not hold if I had a larger sample size. Nonetheless, it is consistent with my theoretical expectations. Among conservative viewers, however, the results are even less telling. Conservative viewers ranked both the liberal and conservative profile attractive 75 percent of the time, signifying no variation whatsoever among the two treatments.

In both viewer subsets, the control profile was more attractive than either ideological treatment. It is possible that the lack of difference for conservative viewers and obsolete statistical significance for liberal viewers is due to the small sample size; nonetheless, these results show that matching ideology may not be as important for attractiveness as other variables. See Figure 6 below.

Figure 6
Does Political Preference of the Viewer Matter?
Level of Attractiveness, by Viewer Ideology
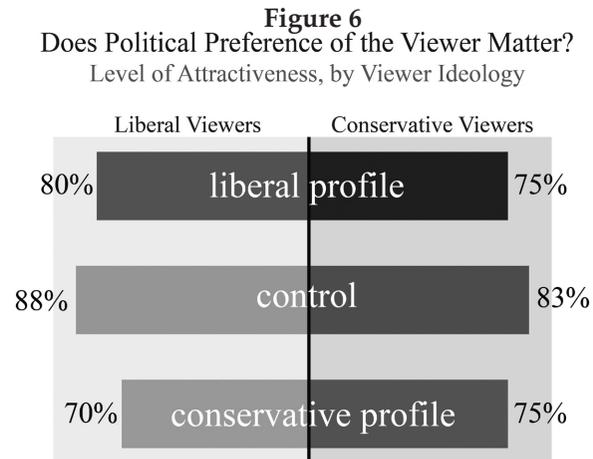
Analysis

The overall results find that no mention of politics (control) reaped from respondents the highest level of attractiveness. This holds constant among the main findings, gender bias results, and viewer ideology subsets. Clearly, people prefer to leave politics out of the conversation while dating, particularly men. As mentioned in the literature review, the political sphere is extremely polarizing (Walsh 2017). While men and women may be moderate in their beliefs, bringing up ideology may quickly polarize these otherwise open-minded individuals, as topics like Donald Trump and the #MeToo movement are heavily partisan issues. This is not to say that political ideology is not a good measure of compatibility. Trump supporters may still want to connect with fellow Trump supporters and find strong liberals to be incongruent as romantic partners. Likewise, Democrats may naturally desire other Democrats and find traditional conservatives to be out-of-date and romantically incompatible. However, people may prefer to explore political differences later in the dating process instead of during first impressions. When profiles mention political behavior in the first encounter (in the case of this survey, on the main dating profile page), then it may signal to the viewer that the individual on the profile may be more extreme in political views than he or she really is. Nevertheless, it is clear that to increase dating profile attractiveness, leaving political ideology out is much more effective than mentioning either liberal or conservative views.

While the hypothesis that liberal profiles would garner higher attractiveness scores than conservative profiles remains true among the main findings, the results between gender and viewer ideology are neither substantially nor statistically significant. The difference may be due to Hersh's claims that bipartisan relationships are indeed on the rise (2016). However, there is an important distinction to make between male and female viewers. While men seem completely unfazed by differing ideology of the female profile, women were extremely sensitive to ideology and did not find the conservative treatment attractive. One explanation for this phenomenon may be that men are less concerned about ideology, because they either feel confident in holding their own ideology or that their future partner will simply adhere to their beliefs. This concept is not far-fetched, especially when considering the rhetoric of Donald Trump, a man known for perpetuating such convictions within both his personal relationships and interactions with female reporters, politicians, and public figures. Women may feel that they do not have the luxury of seeing past ideology and must be more proactive in dating someone who will support their beliefs. Again, the recent sociopolitical climate supports this stipulation, as female empowerment movements and marches are calling attention to the lack of support from men who do not agree with liberal policies toward harassment, abuse, or gender equality. Another possible explanation is that men may be more concerned simply with the looks of the person, whereas women take into account the value of the bio the profile presents. Several studies support this, indicating that men may have a biological predisposition to superficially focus on physical appearance, particularly during courtship (Fisher 1915). In either case, gender differences between ideological influences in dating are prevalent in this experiment, and a more thorough study on these influences needs to be explored.

It is crucial to note the limitations of this analysis. As previously mentioned, the data's sample size is an extreme restriction in identifying patterns and statistical relationships. Having more observations (such as 500 or even 1,000) would help in identifying significance with much more confidence. Additionally, there are notable choices in survey phrasing that may limit responses. Outcome measures used the term "profile" instead of "person" and this may impact someone's response, as they may look at aesthetic or organizational qualities of the overall profile instead of the individual person. This can be remedied in future studies by changing the phrasing to "person in this profile." Notwithstanding these limitations, I am still confident in the analysis mentioned above. These results offer strong evidence that no mention of politics will bring the highest attractiveness rating for dating profiles, that women are more sensitive to political beliefs than men, and that congruent political beliefs are not significantly important to modern day U.S. citizens.

Implications

The results of this experiment have important implications for not only the current social atmosphere but for the next generation of U.S. citizens as well. For individuals solely interested in garnering more matches on online dating platforms like Tinder or Match.com, they should consider leaving politics out of their bio. However, those who find political agreement among the most important characteristics of their romantic

relationships may consider placing ideology into their bios as a method of filtration, as politics does remain one of the most important factors of a happy, long-term partnership. The political polarization in the U.S. is indeed bleeding into life beyond the debate stage, demonstrating that committing to a party or ideology is likely to ostracize people from meaningful interactions with others. That being said, the data suggests that more and more Americans are trending toward an apathetic view of politics. For dating sites interested in growing business, they should avoid political statements and instead opt for a middle-of-the-road approach to current events and polarizing topics. As these dating trends continue to unfold, they will likely manifest themselves in the next generation. Rather than raising concern for one-party households and ideological polarized children, a greater problem may be family apathy toward politics altogether. Citizen participation is a key component to democracy (Magleby et al. 2014), and losing such constituent contribution is likely to be unfavorable for political institutions, campaign efforts, and policy implementation. Notwithstanding, political advisors and future candidates should still use the results of this study to focus on implementing strategies that will improve current political engagement of everyday citizens, as well as work on raising the interest of youth and young adults in politics. Such institutions can do so through community events, school programs, and scholarship incentives. These prescriptive solutions can act as incentives to encourage greater political involvement from the community.

In addition to political apathy, gender and politics stand central to the implications of this study. Considering the background of female empowerment movements and the upward trend predicted to continue in the coming years, these findings suggest that the divergence between male and female dating expectations will likely continue. As women become more outspoken about sexual harassment, misconduct, abuse, and other political issues, more women will likely feel empowered to stand up against such inappropriate behaviors. As such, these changes will likely evidence not only on the national and local scale but also personally in individual lives and relationships. While women may become more attuned to their partners' and potential partners' political relationships, the question remains: Will men? Although these findings show that men are apathetic and even ignorant of the female profile's political preferences, the current trend of #MeToo and the Women's March may indicate that they may not soon have the privilege of looking past ideology. With deepening political divides and more men being held accountable for their actions in the romantic sphere, it is possible that men will become more cognizant of party and gender differences in dating.

There is much left to be explored on how political factors affect people's dating preferences and what other characteristics, besides gender or ideology, affect whether individuals take into account political factors or not. For example, ethnic dating preferences may yield different results. It is likely that the interaction between minority profiles and conservative ideology will have a unique impact on other minorities. Additionally, sexual preferences may also play a role. Research in this area will add

more knowledge to the sphere of dating and help us redefine what it means to be in a romantic partnership during an unfounded time of political polarization. Regardless of where future studies go, one thing is for certain: romance is indeed political.

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