

Brief Report

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Polarizing Politics and How They Affect Relationships Amongst College Students

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INTRODUCTION

Political polarization is increasingly shaping how young people form and maintain relationships. Among Generation Z (born 1997–2012), 60% report that it is important to date or marry someone who shares their political views, compared to only 35% of Baby Boomers (Moore, 2025). This preference is reflected in broader trends, as only 6% of American marriages in 2020 crossed party lines (Fisk & Fraga, 2020), aligning with research showing that perceived similarity influences attraction (Montoya et al., 2008). At the same time, partisan animosity has risen significantly, with more Americans expressing consistently partisan views and increasingly negative perceptions of opposing parties (Pew, 2014). Despite these divisions, Democrats and Republicans share similar core values, such as prioritizing family, friends, and career (Silver & Kessel, 2021). Additionally, research suggests that political differences have only a minimal impact on relationship satisfaction (Peacock & Pederson, 2022; Gordon et al., 2025), raising questions about why politically dissimilar relationships remain difficult to form and sustain. Existing literature highlights the decline of politically diverse relationships but does not fully explain the underlying causes.

This gap is especially important given rising loneliness among Generation Z, who report feeling lonely “often or always” at higher rates than older adults (Esteban, 2019). As loneliness is linked to negative mental and physical health outcomes (Caroline et al., 2020), understanding barriers to forming relationships across political differences is critical (Bowler, 2020). This study aims to examine whether factors such as entitlement and attachment styles contribute to polarization in relationships. Specifically, it investigates how political affiliation relates to relationship satisfaction, entitlement, and attachment, to better understand why political differences create interpersonal strain.

Empirical Question

Is politically extremity associated with relationship satisfaction among college students and entitlement in relationships? Does having secure attachment boost relationship satisfaction among two people with differing views, and what variables make the most satisfying and unsatisfying relationships.

PILOT METHOD

Participants

Convenience sampling occurred on the Pacific University campus from among the students of Research Methods & Statistics 301 course using email solicitation and word-of-mouth. The anticipated average age of the sample was 20 years, with a greater proportion of females to males given the course has three males and 14 females. 12 students participated in total, two being male, 10 being female.

Materials

The materials for this study included a standard demographic measure as well as the following published, cited measures:

Ideological Values and Attitudes Scale (IVAS) is a 30-item measure of political values. Each political value group has five questions and uses a five-point Likert scale (1 being Strongly Disagree, 5 being Strongly Agree) to measure how much an individual agrees with each group (Hard left or Democratic Socialism, Moderate Left or Democratic Party, Independent or Centrist, Moderate Right or Traditional Republican, Hard right or Modern Conservative Nationalism, and MAGA or Make America Great Again movement). Moderate Right, Hard Right, and MAGA are reverse keyed.

All centrist questions the value for each response is 0. Scores are then added together and the higher the score, the more conservative the individual. (Van Fleet & Tsuye, 2026).

Romantic Assessment Scale (RAS) is a 7-item self-report measure using a five-point Likert scale assessing relationship satisfaction. (Hendrick, S. S., Dicke, A., & Hendrick, C., 1998).

The Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised (ECR-R) is a 36-item measure of adult attachment styles. It measures individuals on avoidance and anxiety. The following questions are reverse keyed: 9, 11, 20, 22, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 33, 34, 35, and 36. A high average score on either measure indicates high anxiety or avoidance, whereas a low average score is low anxiety or avoidance. (Fraleigh, R. C., Waller, N. G., & Brennan, K. A., 2000).

Sense of Relational Entitlement – Revised (SRE-R) is a 15-item scale that assesses the expectations one has toward their partner. Inflated sense of entitlement and Restricted sense of entitlement are measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Higher scores show a higher sense of relational entitlement.

Participants were asked questions about their demographic and to choose a relationship to think about when answering these questions. The beginning of the survey asks for them to give their informed consent and makes them aware that their data will be used for a correlational study on relationships amongst college students.

PILOT RESULTS

The results were interpreted using Pearson’s r and multiple linear regressions to examine the relationships amongst entitlement, relationship satisfaction, attachment, and political alignment. The only significant correlation came from political conservatism (IVAS) and entitlement (SRE-R), but with a small population, this cannot be used to generalize to other college students. No significant correlations were found showing that: individuals with greater political alignment have higher relationship satisfaction, attachment moderates the relationship between political extremity and distance and relationship satisfaction, that individuals with high entitlement and insecure attachment will be the most unsatisfied in politically different relationships. A Cronbach’s Alpha test showed all scales to be reliable.

DISCUSSION

We did not find any correlations except for conservatism and entitlement in relationships, but with such a small sample size and very few conservative students, this gives little information. It would be necessary to have a much larger population to sample from. This data does not give any further insight into how politically extremity may correlate with insecure attachment or high entitlement. It is unclear if the IVAS’s structure led to less students agreeing with conservative values as they were ordered in a way that a student could tell which statement aligned with which political group. More research should be done with a larger sample size to increase statistical power, and questions should be edited to ensure that a student’s bias does not inhibit their answering. Although we did not garner much information from this study, it can be used as a baseline for further studies to better understand why politically dissimilar relationships are unwanted by Generation Z.

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