Social influence within partnerships.

**Introduction**

Across western democracies there is evidence of increasing political polarization. Arguably, the culmination of this process (to this date) can be seen in the 2020 US presidential election, where political polarization was accompanied by widespread animosity between democrats and republicans and to some extent even political violence. But also in the European context we see a growing polarized climate when we look at individuals’ attitudes towards, for instance the climate debate, immigration policies, and more recently the covid-19 health crisis. There is a strong sense that the general population is becoming more divided on political issues and that social contexts and social networks are becoming more and more closed and politically homogeneous. One of the culprits that amplifies polarization is the process of social influence, people are said to seek for and are exposed to consonant views which strengthen their prior opinions. In this research paper we will focus on one of these social contexts, namely: partner dyads. People are likely to discuss important matters (such as politics) with their partner as well as share information with them (Kim & Stattin, 2019). This makes the partner relationship a highly likely place for social influence processes to occur. As such we aim to lay bare the social influence process within romantic partnership.

Previous research has indicated that the romantic partnership is important for political behavior of individuals (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Iyengar et al., 2018; Stoker & Jennings, 1995). In the political participation literature the effect of marital status is a key example: individuals that are married are likely to go out to vote, which is argue to be parly caused by partner mobilization (Stoker & Jennings, 1995). The same can be said for having a partner that is highly educated (Daenekindt et al., 2020; Frödin Gruneau, 2018). Moreover, the partner is the person whom an individual is most likely to discuss politics with, most close to, and exposed to on a daily basis. Also, political homophily within romantic partnerships is high (Alford et al., 2011; Iyengar et al., 2018). Partners tend to have similar political attitudes, even when they are just married and this becomes stronger during the relationship (Alford et al., 2011). To summarize, romantic relationships are thus far from apolitical. For the rest of this paper we will zoom in on political homophily in a romantic relationship and its possible antecedents.

Political homophily within romantic relationship is likely to be the result of: selection effects, common context, or social influence. Politics plays a role in mate selection in the form of opinion homophily (Huber & Malhotra, 2017). For instance, research on online dating behavior has shown that individuals are attracted to likeminded potential partners and they are also more likely to sustain communication than dissimilar pairs (REF). Political homophily could also arise from a similar exposure to external conditions. For instance, couples tend to operate in the same social contexts and foci and as such be exposed to similar sources of influence (media, family, and friends). As such, this shared exposure creates similarity in political views and political behavior. Social influence is a third possible mechanism. Partners are the most important discussion partner and they are also exposed to each other for a long period of time. As such it is likely that their political attitudes converge over time, either through persuasion or by adaption.

Even though we have information on these possible mechanisms that could cause political homophily, we do not know how the different processes play out in reality. It is likely that all three mechanisms operate at the same time, with some being more dominant than others. In this paper we will focus on the third mechanisms: social influence. A mechanism that has the ability to work as an amplifier for political divisions. By controlling for the selection and common contexts partners are exposed to, we hope to extract the size of political social influence (if any). As such we address the research question: “To what extent and how are individuals’ political attitudes influenced by the political attitudes of their partner?”

Besided assessing the degree of influence, we aim to delve deeper and examine the influence process in more detail in this paper, by looking how gender and educational differences condition the influence mechanism. Not all couples are the same and differences between couples are likely to affect the influence mechanism. For instance, research on partner effects on voting indicates that – assuming heterosexual couples – the male partner’s political position has more impact on the female partner’s position than vice versa (Häusermann et al., 2016). As such partner influence is – in the case of voting – a highly gendered effect. Similarly, educational differences within couples are likely to play a role in moderating the influence effects. Research on partner effects on voting shows that the partners education has a positive effect on turning out to vote (Daenekindt et al., 2020; Frödin Gruneau, 2018), and that this effect is greater when one partner has a higher level of education than the other (REF). As such, it is likely that such an effect is also present when we look at the influence effects on political attitudes. Nevertheless, to this date these effects are not tested yet empirically. As such we will address the following research question in this paper: “To what extent does a partner’s level of education and gender moderate social influence effects within romantic partnerships?”.

PARA over data and methods.

Theory

*Political attitudes and attitude change*

In this study we study attitude change, and as such we will need to clarify what an attitude is. An attitude represent an individual’s evaluation of a certain attitude object (Ajzen, 2005). This attitude becomes political when the attitude object is political. This of course can be a broad range of things, such as political institutions, politicians, but also political issues (Knutsen, 2018). As such, political opinions also fall underneath the moniker of political attitude. In line with this we will study attitudes of individuals towards political issues; their attitude towards income distribution, EU-integration, cultural inclusion, and euthanasia. Subsequently, an attitude change correspondents with an individual’s change in their position on these issues.

The question that naturally follows is: when do political attitudes of individuals change? Within the political socialization literature, people are expected to form most of their political attitudes in their adolescence (Jennings & Niemi, 1974; Neundorf & Smets, 2017; Niemi & Sobieszek, 1977). Key socializing agents during this period are parents, friends and teachers. Nevertheless, political attitude change is still possible after this important developmental period (Wood, 2000). People can decide to update their political attitudes when they are confronted with new information, either provided by personal life experiences, media, or other socializing agents such as network members. All these sources may provide information or give incentives (to adhere to group norms for instance or to reduce friction in a relation) for people to change their political attitudes.

We turn to people’s partners as one of the most important sources of social influence. They are people that individuals are close to and interact with on a daily basis (Kim & Stattin, 2019; Stattin & Korol, 2021). Furthermore, they are also the persons with whom individuals are most likely to discuss important topics such as politics. Hence, the romantic partnership is important for people’s political behavior. We expect that two mechanisms drive social influence within romantic partnerships: information exchange and conformity.

The first mechanisms is focused on the information that partners exchange while discussing important matters or politics. In such discussions, partners are likely to give arguments or provide information that are politically relevant (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Partners are likely to influence each other’s political attitudes by information exchange. Also, one could persuade the other to change their political opinion (Wood, 2000). In both cases information or persuasion leads to reevaluation of a political attitude and possible a change in political attitude. A second mechanism that underlies influence effects within the romantic partnership is a conformity mechanism (REF). The main idea is that differences in opinion between two people in a relationship leads to increased friction and stress in this relationship. People naturally try to avoid such situations and try to reduce friction in their relationships. So, when a partner changes their political attitude, there is an increased chance of relationship friction. To reduce this friction the other partner can respond by choosing to change their attitude in a similar direction. These mechanisms lead to a simple positive influence model. With this we expect that a change in political attitude of one partner is associated by a shift in the same direction by the other partner, which is formalized in H1:

H1: When your partner's opinion is relatively high (compared to your partners average opinion over time) at time T, your own opinion will be relatively high (compared to your own average opinion over time) at time T+1.

*Not all partners are the same*

An important consideration for partner influence is that not all partners and couples are similar. We argue that the influence mechanisms will work differently for different kind of partners, and we hypothesize potential effects more particularly for partner’s gender and education.

*Gender* One major facet that we need to take into account is someone’s gender. Gender has a profound impact on someone’s political behavior and attitudes as research shows various gender gaps, for instance with men being more likely to participate in politics than women (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Hilde Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2011) and women being more left-wing (Norris & Inglehart rising tide) . Moreover, women also tend to have a lower level of political knowledge, efficacy and political interest than men (Verba et al., 1997). The root of these for this paper important differences is likely to be the social process of gender socialization, both in childhood and adolescence. Women are socialized into gender roles that are more passive, empathetic and rule-abiding, which may contribute to a lower political engagement and less political confidence. As a result, male partners are often seen as more knowledgeable on political matters than female partners (REF). This has as a consequences for partner influence, that male partners are less strongly influenced by their (female) partner, while female partners are more likely to be influenced by their (male) partners. Hence we formulate the following hypothesis:

H2: Women are more influenced by their (male) spouse than men are influenced by their (female) spouse.

*Education.* Another aspect that is likely to be of influence is a partner’s level of educational attainment. Previous research show a positive relation between a partner’s level of educational attainment and political participation of the other partner (Daenekindt et al., 2020; Frödin Gruneau, 2018; Stoker & Jennings, 1995). In this respect two mechanisms are often proposed. First, that the educational level of a partner is often strongly and positively correlated with political knowledge and political participation. As such, either through social conformity or information exchange, the partner exerts influence over the other. Second, a higher level of education is related to access to social networks with rich social ties that are more likely to provide political information (Rolfe, 2012). From these mechanisms we would expect a positive moderation effect of partner’s education. However, research shows it is not as simple as that with respect to political participation. The educational difference between partners seems to be highly relevant (Daenekindt et al., 2020; Frödin Gruneau, 2018). When both partners have a similar level of educational attainment, the effect of education of one partner on the other is likely to be smaller than we have a difference in educational attainment. In such circumstances we would expect that the partner with the higher level of educational attainment would be the most influential partner. Subsequently, we derive the following hypothesis:

H3 The spouse with the lowest education is more influenced by their partner than the spouse with the highest education.

*Political efficacy:*

H4:?

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