



# Online Dating in the U.S. During this Politically Divided Time: Association among Political Affiliation, Gender Role Beliefs, and Partner Preferences

## ABSTRACT

While there has been a surge in popularity of online dating, the current polarized political climate in the U.S. may influence how online daters select a desired partner. The present study examined the relation between political affiliation, partner preferences, and gender beliefs with a sample of 373 online dating users. Democrats ( $n = 196$ ) showed stronger preference for an intimate partner of the same party compared to Republicans ( $n = 90$ ). Democrats (particularly women) also identified that having a different political affiliation as a deal-breaker more so than Republicans. Regarding gender role beliefs, Republicans (particularly men) showed significantly higher traditional gender role beliefs than Democrats. However, gender-based differences were not observed among Democrats; both Democratic men and women showed equally less traditional gender role beliefs compared to Republican women and men. Implications for dating prospects, particularly for Republican men, are discussed.

**Keywords:** Online Dating, Political Affiliation, Gender Roles, Gender Differences.

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## I. Introduction

Online dating is increasingly popular, with 30% of U.S. adults in 2019 having used an online dating site or app (Vogels, 2020). Users can control partner selection through filtering characteristics (e.g., age, race, religion, smokers), but in today's politically polarized climate, political affiliation is an increasingly essential consideration (Luscombe, 2020). In fact, research has indicated that only 30% of married couples in the U.S. were mismatched in their political partisanship (Hersh & Ghitza, 2018). Before the 2016 presidential election, National Public Radio (NPR) featured some interviews in which individuals stated that Donald Trump or Hilary Clinton supporters would be automatically disqualified as a potential partner because of political mismatches (Smith, 2017). However, no empirical studies have assessed whether political mismatch is indeed a deal-breaker.

Many Democrats and Republicans believe that the opposing party does not share similar values on various social issues, including women's rights (Frankovic, 2018; Sanbonmatsu, 2002). Moreover, a study reported different rates between the parties for viewing sexism as a serious problem (12% of Republicans vs. 50% of Democrats; Scott, 2018). Such divided perceptions align with research, albeit inconclusive, on gender role beliefs. For example, a study among college students found that women hold more progressive gender role beliefs than men (Brown & Gladstone, 2012). However, traditional gender stereotypes, until around a decade ago, appear to be unchanged as indicated in a study that compared two surveys about gender role beliefs among U.S. adults in 2014 and 1980 (Haines et al., 2016). Therefore, it seems important to explore possible gender effects on gender role beliefs and perceptions on political mismatches.

The present study examined how online daters' political affiliations would relate to their gender role beliefs and their search for an intimate partner. We hypothesized that those with strong political leaning towards the Democratic or Republican Party would show greater preference toward the same political affiliation and that political mismatch would be a "deal-breaker." We also

hypothesized that Republicans would score higher on traditional gender role beliefs than Democrats and within a political party; men would endorse more traditional gender roles compared to women.

## II. Method

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited through an online recruitment platform, Prolific Academic, in mid-August through mid-November of 2019. A total of 373 participants met the following recruitment criteria, cleared attention checks, and completed the survey within the estimated time of 40 minutes: (a) living in the United States, (b) at least 18 years old, (c) heterosexual, and (d) having used an online dating website (e.g., eHarmony, Match.com, SilverSingles.com) to search for a long-term partner. Participants received \$2.80 compensation. The study was approved by the authors' institutional review board. The mean age was 39.60 (SD = 13.0), ranging from 19 to 77 years. The majority identified as non-Hispanic White (79.8%). About half were men (50.9%), the majority (55.0%) had a bachelor's degree or higher and 40.1% was single or widowed.

### Measures

Participants completed demographic questions (age, gender, race, marital status, and education), three questions related to political affiliations, and a gender role scale. One of the three political affiliation questions asked participants how much (%) they endorse Democrat, Republican, and other political parties (net total across all groups cannot exceed 100%). A "60% or greater" response was deemed as one's self-identified political affiliation. Participants were also asked about their preferences for political affiliation in a desired partner and to identify if different political affiliation was a possible deal-breaker.

Gender role beliefs were assessed with the 10-item Gender Role Belief Scale (GRBS; Brown & Gladstone, 2012). Items include, "The husband should be regarded as the legal representative of the family group in all matters of law" and "Women should have as much sexual freedom as men." A 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Agree and 7 = Strongly Disagree) was used. A higher total score represents more traditional gender role beliefs (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ).

## Results

### Political Affiliation, Partner Preference, and A Deal Breaker

We identified 90 Republicans and 196 Democrats by applying the 60% identification cutoff; more than half fell into the 90-100% range for each of the political parties (See Figure 1).

### Political Affiliation Distribution

For a potential partner, 75% of Democrats expressed preference for another Democrat whereas 57% of Republicans endorsed preferring another Republican. After re-coding partner's preferred political party into a dichotomous variable (1 = match, 2 = other), a Fisher's Exact test of independence uncovered a significant relation with party and partner preference,  $p = .002$ . A Fisher's Exact test also indicated a significant relation between political affiliation and endorsement of a partner having a different political affiliation as a deal-breaker,  $p = .007$ . Nearly twice as many Democrats (33.7%) identified different political affiliation as a dealbreaker compared to Republicans (17.8%). Omitting one participant who identified as neither a man nor a woman, same party preference was strongest among Democrat women (85%), followed by Democrat men (64%), Republican men (63%) and Republican women (50%). About a quarter (23.7%) of participants indicated "different political affiliation from mine" as a deal-breaker.

A multinomial logistic regression assessed the relation between gender and political affiliation and the endorsement of different political affiliation as a deal breaker (yes or no). Results indicated that there was a significant effect of gender and political affiliation on endorsement of different political affiliations as a deal breaker [ $X^2(2) = 10.283$ , Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .051$ ,  $p = .006$ ]. Individual predictors were examined further and indicated that political affiliation [ $X^2(1) = 8.149$ ,  $p = .004$ ] was a significant predictor in the model, whereas gender [ $X^2(1) = 1.772$ ,  $p = .183$ ] was not.

### Political Affiliation and Traditional Gender Role Beliefs

Table 1 presents the mean scores of the 10-item GRBS for political affiliation, gender, and the combination of these two variables. Figure 2 is the visual presentation of the mean scores across the four categories: Republican Men, Republican Women, Democrat Men, and Democrat Women.

Variable	N	Mean	SD
<b>Political Affiliation</b>			
Republican	90	37.53	11.13
Democrat	196	26.87	11.32
<b>Gender</b>			
Men	190	31.54	12.19
Women	182	29.33	11.50
<b>Political Affiliation and Gender</b>			
Republican Men	48	41.10	10.87
Republican Women	42	33.45	10.10
Democrat Men	94	26.91	10.68
Democrat Women	101	26.90	11.98
Overall	286	30.23	12.29

Table 1 10-Item GRBS Mean Scores by Political Affiliation and Gender

To estimate how gender role beliefs varied with dominant political affiliation and gender, a 2x2 ANOVA was conducted. Republicans had significantly higher traditional gender role beliefs than Democrats,  $F(1,281) = 53.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .160$ , and men had significantly higher traditional gender role beliefs than women,  $F(1,281) = 7.30$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $\eta^2 = .025$ . A significant interaction,  $F(1,281) = 7.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .025$ , was decomposed with Least Significant Difference pairwise comparisons. Republican men scored higher than Republican women,  $F(1,281) = 10.62$ ,  $p = .001$ , 95% CI [3.03, 12.27],  $\eta^2 = .036$ , whereas Democrats did not significantly differ by gender,  $F(1,281) = 0.0$ ,  $p = .99$ , 95% CI [-3.12, 3.15],  $\eta^2 = .00$ . Examining the comparisons in the other direction, Republicans scored significantly higher than Democrats among both men,  $F(1,281) = 51.82$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [10.31, 18.07],  $\eta^2 = .156$  and among women,  $F(1,281) < .001$ ,  $p = 10.31$ , 95% CI [2.56, 10.75],  $\eta^2 = .035$ .

### III. Discussion

The present study found that most online daters endorsed one political party, and online daters' political affiliation influences choosing potential intimate partners. In fact, about a quarter of participants indicated that a different political affiliation from theirs was a deal-breaker. Even though app-based services were excluded in the current study, this rate is consistent with the results of a study of Tinder users, where reported different political affiliation was the number one deal-breaker (Spira, 2017). For the current study, mismatch of political affiliation was second only to being "a smoker", which had an endorsement automatic rejection rate of 53.5%.

Of note, and possibly reflecting the current political climate, Democrats expressed nearly twice as strong of a preference for an intimate partner of the same party compared to Republicans. This preference was most prominent in Democratic women (85%) and least prominent in Republican women (50%). These results coincide with the noted significant differences on the GRBS, in which Republicans held more traditional gender roles compared to Democrats. These findings support the notable partisan gap identified in a 2017 Pew Research survey (Horowitz et al., 2017) in which about 70% of Democrats agreed that "the country hasn't gone far enough when it comes to achieving gender equality" compared to less than a third of Republicans who shared this view. Of note, the current data revealed that political affiliation accounted for more variance in gender role belief scores than did gender.

Within the Republican party, the data supported past findings that men hold more traditional gender roles than women (Brown & Henriquez, 2008; Kerr & Holden, 1996). Conversely, the current data showed that Democratic men and women had almost identical gender role beliefs scores (in fact, men scored lower), and both were significantly less traditional than Republican men and women. Furthermore, and as alluded to previously, Democratic women, however, were more likely to consider different political affiliation as a deal-breaker than Democratic men. These data suggest that Democrats in general endorse moving away from traditional gender ideology (Eastwick et al., 2006), and this was particularly evinced by Democratic women reporting romantic disinterest in Republican men, who endorsed the strongest traditional views. Moreover, given that data collection for this study occurred in 2019, this more adamant response of Democrat women reasonably coincides with the

2017 burgeoning of the “#MeToo” movement in which long-standing power structures were broken down, certain behaviors of men no longer tolerated, and those accused of improprieties, including sexual misconduct, were now being held accountable (Leung & Williams, 2019).

The current findings have implications for heterosexual online dating in the U.S. for Republicans and Democrats. For starters, there are less identified Republicans than Democrats in the U.S., (Kennedy & Keeter, 2020) and women are more likely to identify as Democrats (Hersh & Ghitza, 2018). Therefore, when considering information presented in one’s online dating profile, it seems prudent for online daters, particularly Republican men, to consider the political affiliation of a potential partner when proceeding because Democratic women may be likely to ignore or reject them once information about political affiliation is disclosed. To address these potential concerns or obstacles, some Republican men who join online dating might intentionally lessen the importance of similar political affiliation or curtail expressing their gender beliefs to expand potential matches.

This decision might not, however, be efficacious over time as data from a U.S. study revealed that women in heterosexual marriages often initiate divorce, with one of the common reasons being a gender role belief gap (Rosenfeld, 2018). Therefore, individuals who hold strong Republican affiliation might consider using specialized online dating sites such as ConservativesOnly.com or RepublicanPeopleMeet.com (Cain, 2018). In contrast, the current data suggest that a mismatch in political affiliation between Republican women and Democratic men appears less unsettling because of the smaller differences in their gender-role beliefs, compared to Democratic women and Republican men.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Although these results are compelling, there are limitations. First, the use of Prolific Academic does not guarantee representativeness of heterosexual online daters, even though this online platform has been noted to produce diverse and candid data (Palan & Schitter, 2018; Peer et al., 2017). Second, since data were collected during the Trump presidency (end of 2019 and beginning of 2020), Democrats and Republicans may currently perceive one another differently. A CNN analyst reported that political divide was at its highest at the end of the Trump presidency (Brownstein, 2021), and the split might have been more intensified after our data collection because of recent political upheavals (e.g., January 6 U.S. Capitol riots, June 2022 Supreme Court decision regarding women’s reproductive rights). Third, since respondents answered survey questions based on their present, recent past, or further past online dating use, their memories about online dating may be less accurate.

Future research should reexamine the effects of political affiliation in online dating by recruiting online daters who are actively using sites from more racially and ethnically diverse populations. For younger online daters, researchers may investigate age and gender effects on gender role beliefs between two political parties with apps-based online dating sites. Moreover, given the current political climate and abortion laws, heterosexual online dating experience may greatly vary across identified red and blue states.

An inherent challenge in locating a compatible online romantic partner knows oneself while searching the unknown. These current data offer suggestions on how knowing the contributions of political affiliation and gender-role beliefs may guide or redirect this search.

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