

Political Disagreement and Emotional Closeness

Research Report: SPAS-009 | September 18, 2020

Background

In this report, we investigate some political aspects of peoples' social networks. First, we assess the extent to which people disagree on political matters with close friends and family and whether this disagreement relates to their emotional closeness to one another. We then check to see if the relationship between political disagreement and emotional closeness varies by political orientation. Lastly, we explore whether political commitment (e.g., activism) impacts political disagreement.

Methodology

Data Source

- Social and Political Attitudes Study (SPAS)
 - A nationally representative sample reflecting the U.S. adult population in terms of educational attainment, ethnicity, gender, and household income.

Participants

- 607 participants that reported feeling close to at least one friend or family member.
- Mean Age = 46.42 (range 18 to 85 years); 49% Male, 51% Female.

Measures

1. Respondents were asked to list up to four friends or family that they feel close to. They then rated each person with regard to:
 - a. How often they disagreed on political matters. Answers for all people listed were averaged for an overall Political Disagreement score that ranged from “never” to “always.”
 - b. How emotionally close they feel with them. Answers for all people listed were averaged for an overall Emotional Closeness score that ranged from “not at all close” to “very close.”
2. Political Engagement measured how often respondents engage in political activities (e.g., political demonstrations and campaigns). Higher scores indicated more frequent participation.
3. To measure Political Orientation, respondents were asked, “When thinking about the following issues, where would you place yourself on the political continuum?” Participants were asked about their (1) financial/economic, and (2) social/ cultural orientation. If they answered “liberal” *for both*, they were labeled “liberals.” If they answered “moderate” or “conservative” *for both*, they were labeled “moderates,” or “conservatives” respectively.

Summary of Findings

1. How emotionally close respondents felt towards their friends and family was not related to how often they disagreed with them about political matters (Figure 1).
2. Self-described liberals, moderates, and conservatives reported similar levels of closeness and political disagreement with friends and family (Figure 2).
3. People who reported greater engagement in *political activism* (e.g., writing letters, protesting) also reported more frequent *disagreement about politics* with friends and family (Figure 3).

Take-home messages for SPAS-009

1. *Relational closeness is not necessarily hindered by political disagreement.*
 - Though tensions can rise, *most* people may disagree with friends and family about certain political issues without suffering declines in relationship quality.
 2. *Politically active people disagree more often with friends and family about politics.*
 - High levels of political activism may motivate people to seek out political disagreement. Or, greater existing levels of political disagreement may motivate involvement in political activism.
 - Though politically active people disagreed more often with friends and family, disagreement was *not* associated with decreased emotional closeness.
- Have an interpretation of this you want to share? Email it to research@skeptic.com

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Suggested Citation

Saide, A., & McCaffree, K. (2020). Political Disagreement with Friends and Family. Skeptic Research Center, SPAS-009.

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Figure 1. The relationship between political disagreement and emotional closeness

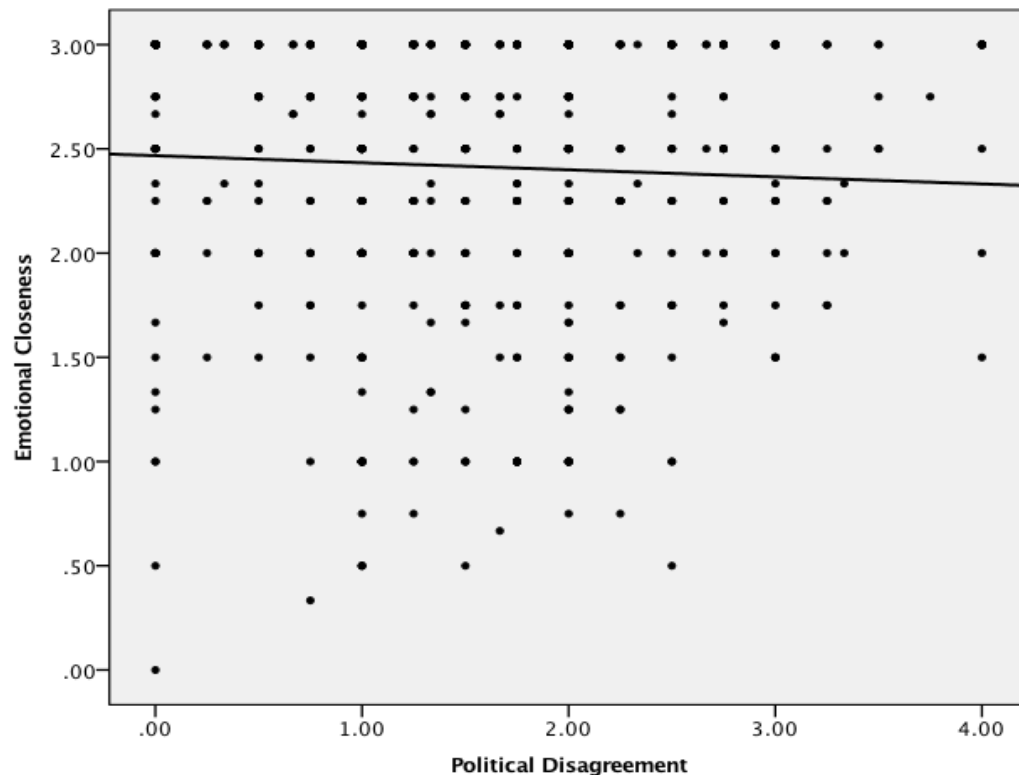


Figure 1 Note

A nearly-flat line indicates that there is no relationship between Emotional Closeness and Political Disagreement. In other words, how emotionally close someone feels towards their friends and family does not necessarily change based on how much disagreement they have with them about politics (and vice versa).

For the actual statistics, please see the supplemental document that accompanies this report.

Figure 2. Political disagreement and emotional closeness by political orientation

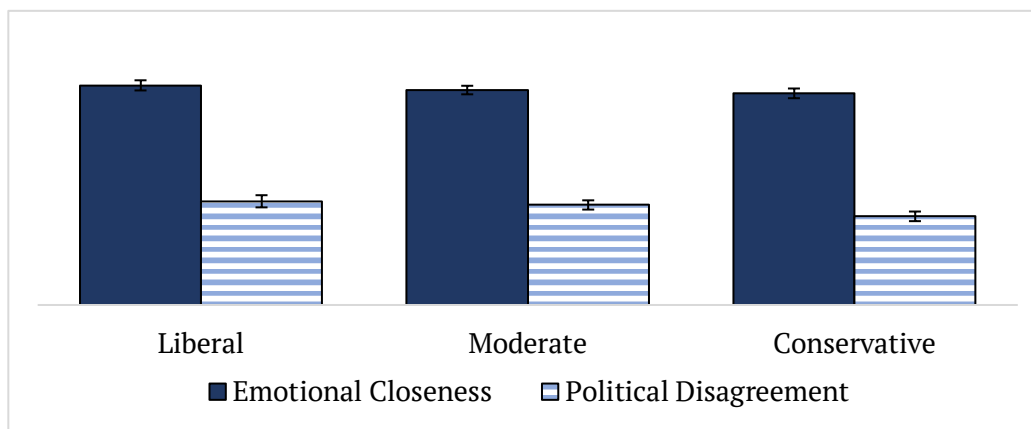


Figure 2 Note

Emotional closeness and political disagreement are similarly high for all three groups. This indicates that liberals, moderates, and conservatives do not differ from each other.

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Figure 3. Relationship between political disagreement and political engagement

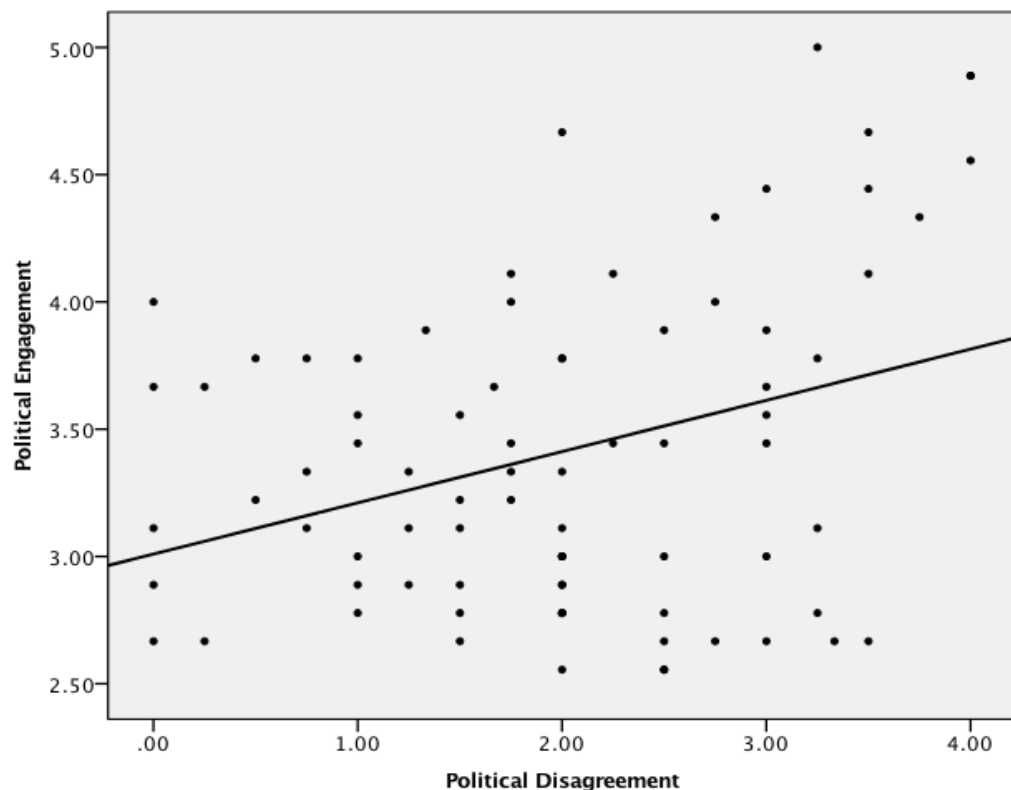


Figure 3 Note

A diagonal line rising from left to right indicates a positive relationship between Political Engagement and Political Disagreement. In other words, people that are reporting more frequent engagement with political activities, are also reporting greater disagreement with their friends and family about political matters (and vice versa).

For the actual statistics, please see the supplemental document that accompanies this report.

Note: For additional information (e.g., statistical output, full citations) not included in this document, view the supplemental page for this report located at skeptical.com/research-center/social-political-attitudes-study/