Research

Impact of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election on Politically Divided Relationships

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Political identity represents a salient component of counselor and client identity tied to one's values and beliefs. The 2016 U.S. presidential election has been viewed as an especially divisive political environment that may have heightened emotion and elevated personal and collective political identities to new levels of awareness. We present findings from a consensual qualitative research study exploring personal and relational impacts of the election and discuss participants' (*N* = 16) strategies for relationship maintenance.

Keywords: politics, relationships, consensual qualitative research, counseling, political identity

Political identity, although not often explored in counselor education training and practice (LaMothe, 2010), represents an important aspect of counselor and client identity. Political preferences may influence relationships, both in terms of selective affiliation with like-minded others as well as potential conflict with those who fall on the opposite end of the political spectrum (Bennett, 2012). Political identity is not a new concept (LaMothe, 2010); however, the 2016 presidential election has been viewed as an especially divisive political environment that may have heightened emotion and elevated personal and collective political identities to new levels of awareness (Oliphant & Smith, 2016; Solomonov & Barber, 2018). In this study, we used consensual qualitative research (CQR) methodology (Hill, 2012) to explore how significant relationships between politically divided individuals were impacted by the 2016 election, with particular attention to relational strategies to manage political differences and conflicts.

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Traditional conceptualizations of political identity consist of party affiliation and the degree of importance that personal beliefs about political and social issues hold for each individual (Rekker et al., 2017). Political identities form largely through familial and cultural influences during adolescence and emerging adulthood, with most young adults continuing to align with the political party of their youth (Rekker et al., 2017). Once political beliefs and values are established, individuals may be resistant to counterarguments, with evidence showing that neural processes engage to preserve in-group identification and protect a person's initial belief system through elevated anxiety and decreased cognitive flexibility (Kaplan et al., 2016).

Political identity development may also be understood through the moral foundations theory developed by Haidt (2012). Drawing on the synthesis of interdisciplinary research, Haidt, a social psychologist, proposed that sub-conscious sensitivity to specific moral foundations (e.g., loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, liberty/oppression) influences individuals' political identities. The way a person intuitively prioritizes each moral foundation also influences allegiance with either liberal or conservative ideas (Haidt, 2012). Deeply embedded moral foundations make it challenging to accept ideological differences. Romig et al. (2018) suggested that Haidt's framework can be helpful to counselors as they seek to understand their clients' moral orientation, identity formation, and decision-making.

If political identity is salient for an individual, it can be difficult for that individual to engage with others who are different (Bennett, 2012; Vraga et al., 2015). In his seminal contact theory, Gordon Allport (1954) proposed that both casual and intimate contact reduce prejudice against individuals who are different from those in the cultural majority. Allport also suggested that adversarial attitudes toward those who are recognized as belonging to the out-group can be modified by the discovery of greater commonality. Little attention, however, has been paid to politically based differences, with the primary research focus being on differences related to nationality, ethnicity, and gender. The literature that does exist on political ideology and its influence upon relationships suggests people tend to surround themselves with like-minded others (Testa et al., 2014) and avoid disagreement by controlling their exposure to counterperspectives in social media and within their relationships (Yang et al., 2017). Even when political difference is present in a relationship, social norms tend to moderate discussion toward areas of agreement and to minimize discrepancies (Barnridge, 2017). Some researchers have also found links between personality traits and likelihood of engaging in political disagreement within significant relationships, with more extroverted and emotionally stable individuals demonstrating more openness to disagreement and debate, and more agreeable individuals electing to avoid political disputes (Gerber et al., 2012). Additionally, individuals who have a positive orientation to conflict in relationships tend to be more open to disagreement and better able to tolerate differences in opinion (Testa et al., 2014).

Research examining reactions to the 2016 presidential election highlight division and intensity of personal responses. Findings demonstrate significant event-related stress (Hagan et al., 2018; Solomonov & Barber, 2018), particularly among Democrats, women, and non-Christian college students, as well as impact on cortisol levels among young adults based on the election process and results (Hoyt et al., 2018; Solomonov & Barber, 2018). For those individuals engaged in politically divided relationships, the 2016 presidential election may therefore have further polarized and created tensions within these bipartisan relationships (Oliphant & Smith, 2016). However, little is known about how these relational tensions have manifested or whether or how individuals are working toward reconciliation. The purpose of this study was therefore to examine how relationships with significant others who are politically different have been impacted by the 2016 presidential election, as well as how, if at all, individuals have chosen to respond to changes or impacts on their relationship.

Because of the potentially divisive and polarizing nature of the topic, we selected CQR to systematically address researcher bias and capture both shared and varied meanings of participants (Hill, 2012). CQR is a method of qualitative analysis that uses an inductive approach to consider context and incorporate multiple viewpoints within interpretation and analysis. CQR provides a structured and dynamic process that informs data analysis, describes the consensus process, and adheres to robust methods of trustworthiness throughout the course of the study. CQR was chosen to help us explore the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How, if at all, have significant relationships between people who are politically divided been impacted by the 2016 presidential election?

Research Question 2: How have individuals experienced and responded to relational change as a result of the 2016 presidential election?

Method

Participants

Upon receiving institutional review board approval, we put out a call for participants using criterion and convenience sampling via personal email and announcements on the researchers' personal Facebook pages. Social media recruitment can lead to selection bias; therefore, we screened all potential participants to ensure they met selection criteria. The varied identities and geographic locations of research team members also increased the diversity of the respective social networks. Hill et al. (2005) recommended a sample size of eight to 15 participants, and because of the dual nature of political identity of our sample we aimed for the upper threshold of sample recommendations. Participants consisted of 16 individuals who responded affirmatively that they were 18 or older, self-identified as either politically liberal or politically conservative, and had a significant relationship with someone of an opposing political perspective. We screened potential participants

through answers to an online Qualtrics survey (https://www.qualtrics.com) consisting of demographic questions and a brief open-ended question about the nature of the significant relationship. We allowed participants to define for themselves what constituted a significant relationship, as well as what constituted liberal and conservative identities. Our final participant group was composed of five complete dyads and six individual participants ($N = 16$). The majority of participants identified as White ($n = 12$), Christian ($n = 15$), women ($n = 10$), and between 20 and 68 years of age ($M = 38$ years, $SD = 13$). The sample was evenly split between liberals ($n = 8$) and conservatives ($n = 8$).

Research Team

Because of the potential for polarized attitudes and experiences based on political affiliation, it was important to ensure the research team also represented a balance of political identities. To achieve this balance, the research team consisted of two liberal and two conservative counselor educators who worked as assistant or associate professors at different institutions within the Southeast, Northeast, and Midwest regions of the United States. The team included three White women and one White man in their 30s and 40s. Each team member had previous training and experience conducting and publishing qualitative research. The first author attended a CQR advanced research training seminar by Hill and Knox and read the Hill (2012) text. The first author also shared information about CQR with the other research team members, and they read and consulted books and articles about the approach prior to and throughout the duration of the study. All four research team members documented potential biases at the beginning of the study regarding their political identity and personal experiences with the 2016 election. All had experienced some form of interpersonal impact as a result of the election, including marital, family, and friend conflicts. These experiences influenced their expectations of finding mostly negative impacts on significant relationships; however, the team remained engaged in dialogue to ensure they were open to potential positive effects. An external auditor, who had attended the training in CQR and identified as politically moderate, was selected to join the team. The auditor, an assistant professor of psychology, is a White woman. In addition to working with the auditor, the research team consulted with other experienced CQR researchers when questions arose.

Trustworthiness

Our research team used a number of measures to enhance trustworthiness within this study. First, we followed the systematic CQR process in order to increase dependability (Patton, 2015) and consulted with two external experts when methodological questions arose. Additionally, our auditor provided us with substantial feedback at every stage of the data analysis process. To address representativeness, we were intentional in the selection of our sample; specified participant demographics; and reported findings as

general, typical, or variant. We engaged in member checking with participants to confirm the accuracy of interview transcripts. In following Hill et al.'s (2005) updated recommendation, we did not conduct stability checks.

Data Collection

Data consisted of semistructured interviews, conducted in person via videoconference or phone by the research team members. Interviews were 1 hour, on average, and consisted of open-ended questions exploring the participants' perceptions of the presidential election. Interview questions consisted of (a) "What has this latest presidential election been like for you?" (b) "Can you describe your relationship with the significant person in your life who differs from you politically?" (c) "Describe how this past election cycle has affected your relationship. Can you elaborate or provide examples?" (d) "Tell me about your interactions concerning politics with your significant person (current, during election, and in the past)" (e) "What seems to help when you are having interactions based on politics with the significant person? What has not been helpful?" (f) "What, if anything, has your significant person done to promote dialogue during these interactions?" (g) "What would you like this relationship to look like, and what do you think would be needed for this to happen?" and (h) "Is there anything else you would like to share about this topic?" All interviews were then transcribed verbatim. We decided as a group to end data collection when additional interviews did not contain any new themes and thus appeared to reach saturation.

Data Analysis

We followed the steps outlined by Hill and colleagues (Hill, 2012; Hill et al., 2005) to conduct data analysis. To begin, each research team member read every transcript to become familiar with the data. As a group, we focused on developing domains for the first two transcripts, identifying large chunks of data that seemed to organize the content of the interviews, and further reached consensus on the initial domain list. Next, we each reviewed all remaining transcripts to see if the consensus domains fit the remaining data (Hill, 2012). We documented thoughts and reactions and met again for consensus to adjust domains based on the full data set.

After organizing larger domains, we engaged in the process of constructing core ideas (Hill, 2012; Hill et al., 2005). One liberal and one conservative research team member worked in tandem as a pair to develop core ideas for each transcript. As a group, we reviewed the core ideas for all transcripts, compared them with the original participant quotes, and debated word choice until we reached consensus on core idea phrasing. Upon finalizing our core ideas, each research team member took the lead on conducting cross analysis for one of the four consensus domains. The first author conducted cross analysis for all of the domains to ensure that each domain had two different perspectives. The auditor reviewed the data at each stage in the process, offering feedback on organization of data and wording. Through-

out the process, we observed the benefit of having a research team equally divided among liberal and conservative perspectives, and our own debates and reconciliations in many ways represented the kind of constructive dialogue our participants desired.

We elected to treat the data as representative of all participants, highlighting partisan differences only when there was a marked difference in experience or response. We chose to include frequency labels based on political affiliation, but we developed category labels based on shared experiences (see Table 1). To protect individual participants and ensure anonymity of their statement, we elected to de-identify participant quotes. Although it can be useful to view participant quotes through a demographic lens, we determined that linking participants with demographic data could negatively impact relationships, particularly among dyads we interviewed. We therefore ensured that each participant had at least one representative quote in this article, and we labeled the quotes with general participant labels to mask identities.

Results

Table 1 depicts the number of cases that fit into each category and subcategory within the domains. Following the recommendations of Hill and colleagues (Hill, 2012; Hill et al., 2005), we described a category as *general* if it applied to all 16 cases, *typical* if it applied to eight to 15 of the cases, and *variant* if it applied to three to seven cases. Overarching domains consisted of (a) personal experiences and reactions to the election cycle, (b) meaning making, (c) impact on the significant relationship, and (d) strategies and responses.

Personal Experiences and Reactions to the Election Cycle

This domain included participant expressions of both affective and cognitive reactions and personal experiences in relation to the election. Core ideas capturing emotional reactions to the election process and outcome differed for liberal and conservative participants both in intensity of experienced emotions and in content. For liberal participants, facing a defeating outcome resulted in expressed emotions of distress, anger, anxiety, fear, shock, disbelief, and hopelessness. In addition, there was a frequently expressed idea of how deeply personal the defeat felt. As one liberal participant noted,

> Every new time the President does something I find offensive and terrible, it's like the Band-Aid is ripped off yet again, and I think that . . . I don't say this to them—but I find myself seeing their faces in my mind, and thinking "They did this to me." Like I make it a very personal thing. They did this to our country, and they did this to me. Um . . . and it's a very . . . it's a very uncomfortable thing. It's created a deep fissure in my own . . . soul. [Laughs.] My own mind as I think about these people who I love, deeply, and who I have longstanding relationships with . . . I just, I . . . in my mind I hold them personally accountable.

Although it is important to note that some conservative participants also expressed how upsetting the election process was, especially regarding the changes in their significant relationship, their emotions included a sense of

TABLE 1

Frequency of Participants' (*N* = 16) Expressions
by Political Identity in Four Domains

Category and Subcategory	Liberal	Conservative	Type
Personal Experiences and Reactions			
Reacting to the election			
Emotional reactions	9	7	General
Reflecting on political identity			
Personal history and political values	6	3	Typical
Voting decision-making	0	4	Variant
Meaning Making			
Changing culture and politics			
Election uncovered ways America and politics is changing	8	3	Typical
The media as polarizing	2	4	Variant
Controversial candidates			
Divisive and varied views of Trump	7	6	Typical
Divisive and varied views of Clinton	3	2	Variant
Struggling to make sense of the other side			
Attempt to understand the other's decision-making	8	3	Typical
Disparaging others, elevating self	8	5	Typical
Impact on Significant Relationship			
Joining or maintaining			
No substantial relationship changes	5	5	Typical
Increased closeness or contact	2	3	Variant
Distancing and tension			
Communication breakdown	7	3	Typical
Decreased closeness or contact	7	3	Typical
Conflict around core values	5	2	Variant
Loss of respect for significant other	4	0	Variant
Strategies and Responses			
Turning away			
Relationship distancing and avoiding contact	5	5	Typical
Avoiding political discussion	9	7	General
Avoiding news, social media, and political content	2	3	Variant
Turning against			
Trying to change political opinions	7	4	Typical
Aggressive confrontation	5	1	Variant
Turning toward			
Self-monitoring and filtering responses	5	2	Variant
Prioritizing and repairing the relationship	7	6	Typical
Continued engagement in political dialogue	7	4	Typical
Respectful relating and acceptance of political difference	8	4	Typical
Sense of humor	2	1	Variant
Addressing relationship changes	3	0	Variant
Selecting non-face-to-face communication	3	0	Variant
Reappraising from a faith perspective	2	1	Variant
Struggling to implement aspirational strategies	6	3	Typical
Turning elsewhere			
Refocusing efforts	2	3	Variant
Seeking third-party support	4	2	Variant

Note. Type = frequency count category. General = 16 cases; Typical = 8–15 cases; Variant = 3–7 cases.

surprise, excitement, even joy, and interest in the unfolding events. For example, a male conservative participant noted differences from his wife's reactions:

> I just remember that she was really upset and I was just I guess elated. . . . And I didn't want to just like be excited around her and kind of show my excitement and my joy because I knew that would get me in trouble . . . it would be hard, a hard situation because I knew that she was feeling the exact opposite at that time.

Negative emotions for conservative participants were associated with lower arousal levels (annoyance or frustration, as opposed to anger or disgust). One conservative participant said it this way:

> When I say it's been emotional, it's been the fact, in my eyes, of how people are portrayed and how people are categorized, and generalized about. I find that, you know, really . . . insulting in some ways, but it can make you a little emotional.

Participants also shared how their personal history and values impacted their emotional responses or informed their decisions. They discussed concepts such as changing identity over time, complexities of intersecting personal and professional identities, and rationale for voting (for or against the candidates). It is notable that conservative participants explained their rationale for voting more frequently and in greater detail than did the liberal participants. From these narratives, we learned that voting decisions were made thoughtfully, reflected moral values, and often included an internal struggle because the conservative candidate did not consistently align with their political views and personal principles.

Meaning Making

As participants managed their own personal reactions many also engaged in meaning making, which involved a more cognitive process of considering various influences on the election cycle. Many participants, particularly those who identified as liberal, considered whether the election represented notable changes in American society, culture, and politics. Participants stated the election had opened their eyes to the state of affairs in the country, uncovering deep problems and creating division between people. One liberal participant stated the election was "just undoing years of work that our country has done, on things like race," and another stated that "this is not politics as usual. This is like, actual badness." One conservative participant noted:

> I think that that's probably where we got in trouble with this election . . . is that we lost our respect for our fellow mankind. And I think that once that that rock starts rolling down the road, how do you stop it?

Both liberal and conservative participants identified media as a contributing factor to the divisiveness of the election cycle. Conservative participants largely identified mainstream media as out of touch and misleading. Participants also discussed the impacts of social media, with liberal participants describing how individuals can now "go only to where we hear ourselves, we hear the echo

chamber" and can be "bullies collectively." A conservative participant stated, "That's been something that's been pretty frustrating, where I would see [opinions] through Facebook, Instagram, but we're not having a dialogue about it."

Both liberal and conservative participants discussed how the controversial nature of the presidential candidates contributed to the divisiveness of the election. Liberal participants had strong negative reactions to Donald Trump both as a person and a politician, stating he was "so obviously unfit to be the president of the United States." Some conservative participants also criticized him, whereas others felt reassured that with Trump "you knew what you were getting." A few participants also discussed Hillary Clinton as a divisive candidate. One conservative participant stated she lost the election because "her campaign message was 'If you vote for Donald Trump, you're a racist.'"

Participants also reported attempting to understand the motivations and worldviews of individuals who held differing political identities. Liberal participants seemed to wrestle with understanding why friends, family, and other Americans voted for Donald Trump, and this introduced some degree of doubt about the true nature of the people they had known prior to the election. One liberal participant shared the struggle to understand how one can excuse the amount of hurtful comments made by Trump: "Every racist comment, every time he, you know, made fun of someone or said something misogynist, or whatever, and like being able to excuse all of that and his actions and policies on top of that."

Both conservative and liberal participants engaged in perspective taking, attempting to understand others by considering contexts such as the person's political background, geographic location, and personality. A conservative participant reflected on the differences between himself and his significant person, stating, "when it comes to political decisions she tends to go more emotional . . . and I tend to go more logical and I guess bigger picture." Despite these attempts, however, some participants ultimately could not understand the perspective of the other side. A liberal participant expressed, "I cannot reconcile things that this president and this administration is doing, with the types of people I love and care about. There's just no way to reconcile it."

As part of the process of meaning making, some participants adopted a perspective that they themselves were more informed, involved, and aware than the other side. This contributed to both a disparagement of the other side and an elevation of one's own perspective or position. One liberal participant criticized Trump voters by saying:

> I haven't said this to them, but my most comfortable explanation is pity. Which I know is terribly arrogant [laughs], but I think that they were duped. I don't believe it's consistent with what I know of them. And I feel that they were so angry and so disappointed and disaffected with the current state of politics, and dysfunction of politics, that they were attracted to some dramatic, shake-up-the-system kind of protest vote.

Impact on the Significant Relationship

The election results and voting decisions of significant others also resulted in notable impacts on significant relationships, positively by "joining with or

maintaining" or negatively by "distancing and tension." A few participants noted increased engagement within the relationship, such as one conservative participant who reflected that for him and his wife of 20 years "it's kind of the first time in forever that we actually discussed the politics of today." Another conservative participant stated, "I like that we have open dialogue and are able to voice our true feelings."

The majority of participants, however, discussed how the election caused distancing and tension within their significant relationship. A liberal participant shared how communication changed with her conservative friend after the election: "It was obvious to me that I didn't want to call her. It was obvious to her that she didn't want to call me." A conservative participant described a growing tension and distance with his liberal wife:

> There was some news about these different things that Donald Trump had said, and my wife turned to me and she said, "If you vote for him, I will leave you" and she is like "I need you to promise me that you will not vote for Donald Trump" and I was like "OK, I think that I can hold up to that promise," but it turned out differently whenever I actually got to the ballot box.

As a result of the election process, some participants also began to view their significant person in a different light. A liberal participant explained how she lost respect for her conservative family member,

> I started to look at [family member] with a new set of eyes and I thought, "I don't want to be like her." As much as I love her, but she's not informed, she's really ignorant about a lot of stuff when it comes to politics and social issues and things, and I can't really trust her judgment on this issue. I used to be able to talk with her about everything, and I still can, I just know that these are things I can't learn from her anymore, that she can't teach me how to be an informed citizen, and how to use your vote wisely and things that matter in society.

Strategies and Responses

In response to the various impacts of the election on their significant relationships, participants articulated how they interpersonally navigated political differences. Four distinct categories emerged from the data concerning relationship strategies and responses: turning away, turning against, turning toward, and turning elsewhere.

Turning away. In turning away responses, participants were either seeking respite or stepping back from their relationship in response to political difference or conflict. In some instances, this movement away was temporary, and in other cases, it represented a relationship shift that was more long-standing. One liberal participant stated that she stopped calling her family member "because I was afraid that politics would come up." For those participants who did maintain relational contact, political conversations were often avoided. In fact, of all the relationship strategies, avoiding political discussion was the only subcategory that all 16 participants endorsed in one way or another. One liberal participant pronounced to her family member, "Let's just not mention [Trump's] name again in our house, and not talk about politics again and forgive each other." Similarly, a conservative participant summarized his dilemma this way:

> You just kind of keep your mouth shut . . . about things. And that's how my relationship with my friend [has been]. We both have a good sense of humor, but we don't talk about this stuff, so we sort of tread on eggshells.

Avoiding news, social media, and political content was also mentioned as an attempt to move away from any kind of political contact in general.

Turning against. Turning against strategies incorporated the participant responses viewed as unhelpful or in some way injurious to the relationship. Some participants reported attempts at relational and political persuasion, ranging from efforts to modify the other's political perspective to making ultimatums about the relationship, rather than understanding their significant other's political position. Becoming interpersonally aggressive was another turning against strategy. A liberal participant found himself feeling "absolutely blindsided" by his friend's voting decision, stating "I wanted to shake him and say 'Wake up! Look what's going on. You're part of this. You can't be content with this. You can't just wind up this toy and let it run across the room and not worry about what it's going to bang into.'" For another liberal participant, the relational escalation was related to how "political ideals are very closely tied to [their identities]" resulting in "stress and anxiety." Although this subcategory of aggressive or intense communication was only represented by six participants, it was particularly salient for those who encountered it and had significant implications for their relationships.

Turning toward. Turning toward strategies reflected all those responses that helped to maintain the integrity of the relationship. Participants described their efforts to prepare for politically oriented discussions by internally editing their emotional and verbal responses or by considering the impact of their words on the other person. A liberal participant shared how she kept herself in check: "I am pretty good at reigning myself in, because we could really get into some knock-down, drag out arguments; and I think she would engage if I did, but I am not gonna let myself do that." Another liberal participant also expressed her need "to temper, I think, my most um, intense emotional reactions" when interacting within her significant relationship.

The majority of participants (n = 9) disclosed how difficult it was to engage their significant relationship in a productive way. A liberal participant lamented his inability to bite his tongue, wishing that he and his friend could "have discussions that don't so quickly fall off the cliff. . . . I'd like to get back to where dialogue and discussion is really about the dialogue and discussion, and not about winning or losing a debate."

Thirteen participants spoke at length about their efforts to repair the relationship following a rupture. A liberal participant elaborated on his efforts to make things right after verbally pushing his conservative friend too hard, stating,

> I probably carried it too far. And for that, you know, I feel badly that I did that to our relationship. And that's why I think it's important for me to find, again, some ways to kind of get that relationship back on course.

A conservative participant also talked about sensitivity in his relationship with his wife, stating they

make sure that if an opinion crosses a line, or we feel like it does . . . I think we both try to say, "Well, what do you mean by that?" or "I don't agree with that, so let's talk about it."

In addition to relationship repair, participants noted ways in which they prioritized their relationship over politics. Sharing her sentiment on this topic, a conservative participant concluded that "relationships are more important than whatever human being ends up being elected into office. Relationships, in my opinion, with family and friends is much more important than that."

A dominant turning toward strategy ($n = 11$) involved finding ways to maintain a dialogue around political perspectives and differences. Whether by carving out specific time to talk or establishing parameters in order to preserve constructive dialogue, these participants found ways to connect around politics. These talks occasionally resulted in greater understanding of the other person and even, at times, accepting influence from the other person regarding political positions. For example, a liberal participant reflected on how dialogue impacted her relationship with her husband:

> Early in our relationship, he kind of just didn't care as much about social policies, like supported the same ones that I did and was generally socially liberal, just like didn't prioritize it that much. And he's come to prioritize some of those things a little more now, such as reproductive rights, stuff like that. It just wasn't something he thought about a lot before, and now [he] does because I talk about it all the time.

Respectful relating and acceptance of political differences is part of what appeared to enable continued political dialogue. After much dialogue, one couple arrived at a place where they said,

> [We] were able to say "I respect your opinion, I understand where you came from, you thought with your head, you thought with your heart . . . and neither of it is wrong, it's just different. And so we'll agree to be different."

Several participants included sense of humor as an important turning toward coping strategy. One liberal participant, recognizing how the political climate made it difficult to productively talk about politics with his friend, communicated that "all we can do in the interim is try to rely on at least our good humor and our friendship."

Some participants also shared examples of attempts to directly acknowledge relational impacts, whereas other participants managed their relational intensity by communicating indirectly. Whether it was sending a link to the other person via email, writing a letter, or talking on the phone, the distance helped to curtail impulsive responses. Three participants explicitly referenced drawing from their faith as a source of comfort or means of coping with relationship conflict. A conservative participant talked about an eternal perspective, stating,

> As a Christian, I truly believe I will be in heaven one day, and then none of that is going to matter at all. Who gives a rip if you are a Republication or a Democrat or an Independent? . . . It's not going to matter. So I'm trying not to make it matter down here.

Turning elsewhere. Two different dimensions emerged regarding participant efforts to reinvest their time and energy or to seek out additional support in other contexts and relationships. This subcategory is different from turning away because some participants turned elsewhere even as they turned toward their significant other. For example, one liberal participant stated that after her candidate lost the election, she "really threw [her]self into state politics to, um . . . because I felt like I could actually make a difference there."

Other participants dealt with their relationship tension by seeking out support with a third party. Two conservative participants discussed how they reached out to a spouse or friend after a difficult conversation with their significant other about politics. Similarly, another conservative participant wished he could discuss these issues with his spouse, but because she

> would not engage [laughs] . . . I would communicate with other friends . . . if I needed to talk about politics . . . and have that conversation outside of the room from where my wife was. . . . . And so I found that that was very effective for me.

He went on say that he and his wife would really benefit from working with a professional counselor who could help facilitate their political discussions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the 2016 presidential election on politically divided significant relationships. Participant experiences corresponded with previous research suggesting the 2016 election was emotionally triggering (Solomonov & Barber, 2018), particularly for liberal individuals (Hagan et al., 2018; Solomonov & Barber, 2018). Additionally, our results reveal a potentially novel finding regarding how conservative individuals were impacted by receiving hurtful labels and judgments throughout the election cycle. Furthermore, participants alluded to the enduring and deeply personal nature of political identity (Rekker et al., 2017), which likewise impacted their emotional reactions and responses (Oliphant & Smith, 2016).

The fact that significant and personal emotional reactions arose for each side sheds some light on why the election took a toll on these interpersonal relationships. Both liberal and conservative participants struggled to accept the positions and values of those who differed politically, particularly in regard to significant relationships. It could be that participants felt protective of their own political belief systems (Romig et al., 2018) or sought to limit exposure to alternate perspectives to avoid disagreements and to preserve their social identity (Kaplan et al., 2016). However, because they were in a significant relationship with someone who differed politically, many of our participants may have been unable or unwilling to fully escape these opposing viewpoints. A number of participants in this situation attempted to gain the higher ground and elevate their own moral and intellectual standing by viewing themselves as superior or more informed, which has been found to be toxic in intimate adult relationships (Gottman, 1999).

Participants on both sides also acknowledged how media/social media divided people along partisan lines, echoing previous research noting the difficulty of engaging in meaningful relationships and discussions with those who differ politically (Bennett, 2012). Many participants reported it was difficult to communicate, maintain respect, and sustain contact with their politically different significant person, especially as differing values became more apparent. This finding is congruent with Haidt's (2012) assertion that it is challenging to remain open and nondefensive while interacting with people who possess different moral and political values.

As our participants navigated relational changes and their own internal reactions to the election, they engaged in several strategies for relationship maintenance. The variations in relational strategy and responses within our results fit with previous research indicating that individuals can vary in their ability to engage in political disagreement (Gerber et al., 2012). Our findings also align with research suggesting intimate relationships have a tendency to persist despite political conflict (Morey et al., 2012), and we extend this research by detailing participant strategies for relationship maintenance.

In considering our results for the fourth domain (i.e., strategies and responses) we noticed considerable overlap between the dominant relationship strategies endorsed by participants and existing literature on couple relationships. For example, Gottman and Gottman (2015) found that the "masters" of couple relationships more frequently turned toward their spouse rather than turning away or turning against. We therefore used this language post hoc to conceptualize participant strategies within the fourth domain while adding the novel fourth relational strategy of turning elsewhere, in which participants met their need to process and attend to their own political identity while preserving their significant relationship.

Implications for Counseling

Although the primary intent in this investigation was to explore relational impacts of the 2016 election and strategies used by participants for relationship maintenance, we present additional insights concerning the place of politics within the counseling process. These implications are based on our own interpretations of our data and are not directly grounded in participants' narratives. However, the scarcity of research on politics and political identity in the counseling process warrants consideration of how to apply our findings in clinical and educational settings.

Limited research on the general impact of politics within the counseling process suggests clients want to engage in political conversations with their counselors, and that many counselor/client dyads are already engaging in some form of political discussion (Solomonov & Barber, 2018). Just as participants in this study experienced emotional upheaval and relationship disruption, clients may also experience profound personal and interpersonal impacts within each election cycle that hold relevance for their mental health as well as the health of their relationships. Clients may

therefore need space to explore their own marked responses to election outcomes and continued political developments but may be unsure of how and when to initiate these discussions. It is incumbent on the counselor to invite unspoken aspects of client identity into the room with cultural responsiveness when it is therapeutically relevant, and to do so without imposition of the counselor's own political values (American Counseling Association, 2014). In this case, counselors can offer opportunities to broach political identity and reactions throughout the counseling process, asking questions about political identity in intake forms or within session. Furthermore, counselors can be aware of the potential power of politics and thus follow up on client expressions of emotionally charged reactions to political content impacting them inter- and intrapersonally.

In considering how to incorporate political discussion in counseling, our first three domains can be used as a structure for exploring a client's experience with the current political environment and how their well-being and key relationships have been affected. For example, clients who express a desire to discuss political identity, current events, or politically impacted relationships could be asked questions such as "In what way(s) have you been impacted by politics or current events?" "Which political issues matter most to you?" "How have you been making sense of the current political climate?" "What are some of your reactions when you interact with someone who differs from you politically?" and "How, if at all, has your relationship changed due to politics?" These questions could be fruitful areas to explore for individuals who hold strong personal political values, as well as for individuals who have experienced relational strain or growth due to political difference.

Counselors can use the findings from our fourth domain to assess current relational strategies and to present clients with additional relational responses for engaging with significant others. For example, clients could be encouraged to write down what they want to convey in order to offset heated conflict with a significant other. It may also be helpful to normalize the avoidance strategies used by participants in this study. In many cases, participants simply did not engage in political discussion, or they intentionally focused time and attention on other topics or dialogues. These strategies may feel distancing or inauthentic to clients and yet may be viable short-term options during the height of political disagreement.

Furthermore, the personal nature of political identity, as espoused by our participants, also holds implications for counselors and counselors-in-training. It is important to acknowledge that there is a disproportionate representation of liberal political identities among mental health professionals as compared with the general public (Jones, 2019) with one study finding a 14:1 liberal-to-conservative ratio among social and personality psychologists (Inbar & Lammers, 2012). However, the majority of Americans do not identify as politically liberal, with 42% identifying as politically independent and 26% identifying as politically conservative (Jones, 2019). Thus, it is possible that counselor-client dyads may not be matched when it comes to political identity. Counselors must therefore consider how their own beliefs inform their practice, and they may

need to bracket political values and/or determine the appropriateness of political self-disclosure when working with clients of different political identities or facilitating counseling between individuals in politically divided relationships.

Counselors-in-training would benefit from the opportunity to explore their own political identity and value systems in the context of training and supervision in order to cultivate self-awareness of personal biases and enhance stress tolerance through exposure to diverse political perspectives in the classroom. Targeted case vignettes that explore discretionary therapeutic options with the aid of an ethical decision-making model can prepare students for cultural responsiveness as it relates to politics. In addition, counselors and counselors-in-training should seek out supervision or consultation if they feel impaired by political differences in session. Some knowledge of Haidt's (2012) moral foundations theory may be useful in helping counselors conceptualize political values of both themselves and their clients in the context of familial and cultural influences, encouraging an empathic understanding of underlying value systems rather than focusing on polarized political issues.

Limitations and Future Research

The scope of these findings is limited by the characteristics of our sample. First, we recruited individuals who identified as either liberal or conservative and therefore did not address experiences of politically independent individuals. We also did not provide a definition of liberal or conservative, and participants were thus able to indicate political identity based on their own frameworks. Some participants described themselves as politically moderate during the interview, even if they aligned more with one side than another. This resulted in a sample categorized by polarized political identities that may not fully represent true variations in political affiliation. We also focused exclusively on American voters, and so our results may not be applicable in other countries or contexts outside of a two-party system. The majority of our participants identified as White and Christian, which also likely impacted their experiences. Additionally, our participants were engaged in a significant relationship with someone who differed politically, but it is possible that politically similar relationships were also impacted by this election cycle.

With regard to sampling, we deliberately allowed participants to define what a significant relationship meant to them. We as the research team wanted to access relevant stories without making assumptions of what types of relationships were most important. We considered CQR best practices regarding homogeneous samples (Hill, 2012) and initially intended to view data in terms of subsample categories; yet, during analysis we realized that political identity and type of relationship had minimal impact on domains and categories. We therefore decided to report on the shared phenomena among participants regardless of relationship type. Future research can explore relational type and political identity using quantitative procedures to view differences on a larger scale.

Additionally, although our findings are grounded in the data, our own frameworks as researchers likely impacted each phase of analysis, and different researchers may have emphasized other findings (Hill, 2012). Replication of the study could provide further information about the representativeness, comprehensiveness, and stability of these findings. Finally, we have considered how our findings may be applied to counselor education, supervision, and clinical practice. These suggestions offer potential applications of our findings and are informed by our experiences as educators and professional counselors. However, all recommendations should be subject to continued testing and rigorous research to confirm or expand upon these findings.

Conclusion

Political identity can be a significant component of personal identity, thus impacting both individuals and their relationships. The 2016 U.S. presidential election was particularly influential, and our findings illustrate its personal and interpersonal effects among our participants. Participants in our study responded to interpersonal shifts and conflicts by using self-reflection and drawing larger meanings. Participants also demonstrated a variety of strategies, ranging from increasing attention to the relationship to increasing distance in the relationship or redirecting relational energies. Our findings confirm previous research suggesting that the 2016 election impacted individuals on a personal level, and we expand upon existing research by examining how individuals are working to restore or strengthen relationships with a politically different significant other in the wake of political events. Participant strategies may provide an initial framework of both facilitative and restrictive relational responses, thus assisting counselors in identifying and responding to client concerns.

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