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Age Differences Between U.S. Politicians and Their Spouses: Similar to the Super Rich or More Like Your Average Joe?

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Prior research has shown that a sample of super-wealthy men tended to marry (and remarry) younger women than the general U.S. population (Pollet, Pratt, Edwards, & Stulp, 2013). This relationship has been argued to fit with a notion of a mating market, whereby wealthy men offer access to resources in exchange for female youth. The present research examines whether or not a similar exchange relationship potentially also exists in a sample of U.S. politicians, as it is expected that male politicians might also offer resources in exchange for youth. Using data collected via Wikipedia and online news sources on ranking U.S. politicians, our data show that the difference in age between a male politician and his wife does not differ significantly from the current estimate of the general U.S. population. Male U.S. Politicians do show significantly smaller age gaps than the estimate for men from the Forbes 400, however. These results suggests that, at least in terms of the age-gap in marriage, U.S. politicians resemble the general population more than they do the economic elite, perhaps due to a pressure to conform to social norms.

Keywords
human mate choice, United States political leadership, evolutionary psychology

Introduction

Evolutionary psychologists have argued for the existence of sex differences in mate preferences (e.g., Buss, 1989; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992) and have documented differences in these preferences. With regards to age, evolutionary psychologists have specifically argued that youth is a cue to fertility in women, and therefore important to men; on the other hand, age may be a cue to status and access to resources for males, and therefore of importance to women (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Buss, 1989). Research tends to support the existence of age preferences in line with predictions derived from evolutionary psychology (e.g., Davis, 1998; Dunn, Brinton, & Clark, 2010; but also see Escasa, Gray, & Patton, 2010). Studies from evolutionary and social psychology have also suggested that heterosexual mate choice can be conceptualized as a "trade," whereby, for example, men offer wealth in exchange for female youth (e.g., Pawłowski & Dunbar, 1999; Pawłowski & Koziel, 2002; Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Following this reasoning, one would expect that men with access to status and wealth would have a greater value in the "mating market" and will prefer younger brides, and vice versa.

A recent study examining the Forbes 400 list is in line with this suggestion of a potential mating market operating (Pollet, Pratt, Edwards, & Stulp, 2013). Men from the Forbes 400 tended to (re)marry younger wives than the general U.S. population. In this paper, we examine whether a similar pattern exists among U.S. politicians: do those in power also (re)marry younger wives than the general public, like the Forbes 400? Or, are they actually more like the general public in this aspect?

The media play a large role in shaping a politician's public image, which in turn affects the degree to which citizens of a democracy will vote for and support said politician (see Teven, 2008). Politicians may therefore wish to avoid potential stereotypes and stigmas associated with large age gaps between them and their spouses, and to resemble the values of the "average" population (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004). There are, however, notable examples of U.S. Senators like John McCain, who is 18 years his wife's senior. Politicians in power form an elite, particularly in a world power such as the U.S., and may thus have larger age gaps in marriage than the general population. Given their elite status they might be better compared to the Forbes 400 (the economic elite). In summary, here we test whether large age gaps with their marriage partner, such as McCain's, are the exception or the rule for politicians.

Method

Data were collected on United States Governors, members of the Executive Branch (President, Vice President and officers with cabinet level access) and the Legislative Branch of the United States. Birthdates of politicians and spouses were collected via www.wikipedia.com, sources therein, searches conducted with www.google.com, and news media (e.g., Washington Post).

Data were available for 99 out of a total 605 individuals (16.4% of total), 70 men and 29 women (M_{age} = 62.18 years, SD = 11.18, range 33 to 90 years). Missing data were not influenced by sex ($\chi 2$ test; p = .335) or level of government (Federal vs. State, $\chi 2$ test; p = .660) suggesting that our sample is largely representative of the officials in the U.S. Government.

Following Pollet et al. (2013), year of birth of the spouse was subtracted from the year of birth of the politician. These age differences were then compared

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against the same estimates as Pollet et al., (2013): conservative estimates of published age difference for first marriages of 4.1 years (Tietze & Lauriat, 1955), current estimates of 2.7 years (Saardchom & Lemaire, 2005) and the mean found in the Forbes 400 study of 7.01 years (Pollet et al., 2013). For remarriage, an estimate of 9 years was used (England & McClintock, 2009), as well as the mean found in the Forbes 400 study of 22.32 years (Pollet et al., 2013). For only five out of twelve men were data on both the first and second spouse available, therefore we did not perform within-subject tests. Data on second spouses were only available for three women and therefore were also not further analyzed. Analyses consisted of a series of one sample t-tests with Bias-Corrected Accelerated bootstrapping (1,000 replicates in SPSS Bootstrap option) in SPSS 22.0.

Results

First spouses' dates of birth were available for 63 out of 70 men. These men are on average 2.79 years older than their first spouse (*SD* = 8 years). This average does not differ significantly from either the conservative estimate of the general U.S. population (4.1 years; $t(62) = -1.285$; $p = .204$; $r = .16$), or the current estimate of the general U.S. population (2.7 years; $t(62) = 0.092$; $p = .927$; $r = .01$). However, male U.S. Politicians show significantly smaller age gaps than the estimate for men from the Forbes 400 (7.01 years; $t(62) = -4.147$; $p < .001$; $r = .47$).

For 26 out of 29 women in the U.S. Federal Government data on the year of birth of their first spouses were available, and these women were on average 3.8 years younger than their spouses (SD = 5.3 years). This average was not significantly different from the conservative estimate of the general U.S. population (4.1 years; t(25) = -0.207; p = .838; r = .04), the current estimate of the general U.S. population (2.7 years; t(25) = 1.136; p = .267; r = .22), or the Forbes 400 estimate (4.05 years; t(25) = -0.159; p = .875; r = .03).

Data on second spouses were available for twelve men in the U.S Federal Government. These men are on average 10.4 years older than their second wives (*SD* = 10.9; range: 28 older to 5 years younger). This average did not significantly differ from our population estimate of 9 years ($t(11) = 0.447$; $p = .663$; $r = .134$), but was significantly different from the Forbes 400 estimate[1] (22.3 years: $t(11) = -3.754$; $p = .003$; $r = .74$).

Discussion

Our results suggest that the age gaps between U.S. politicians and their spouses do not significantly differ

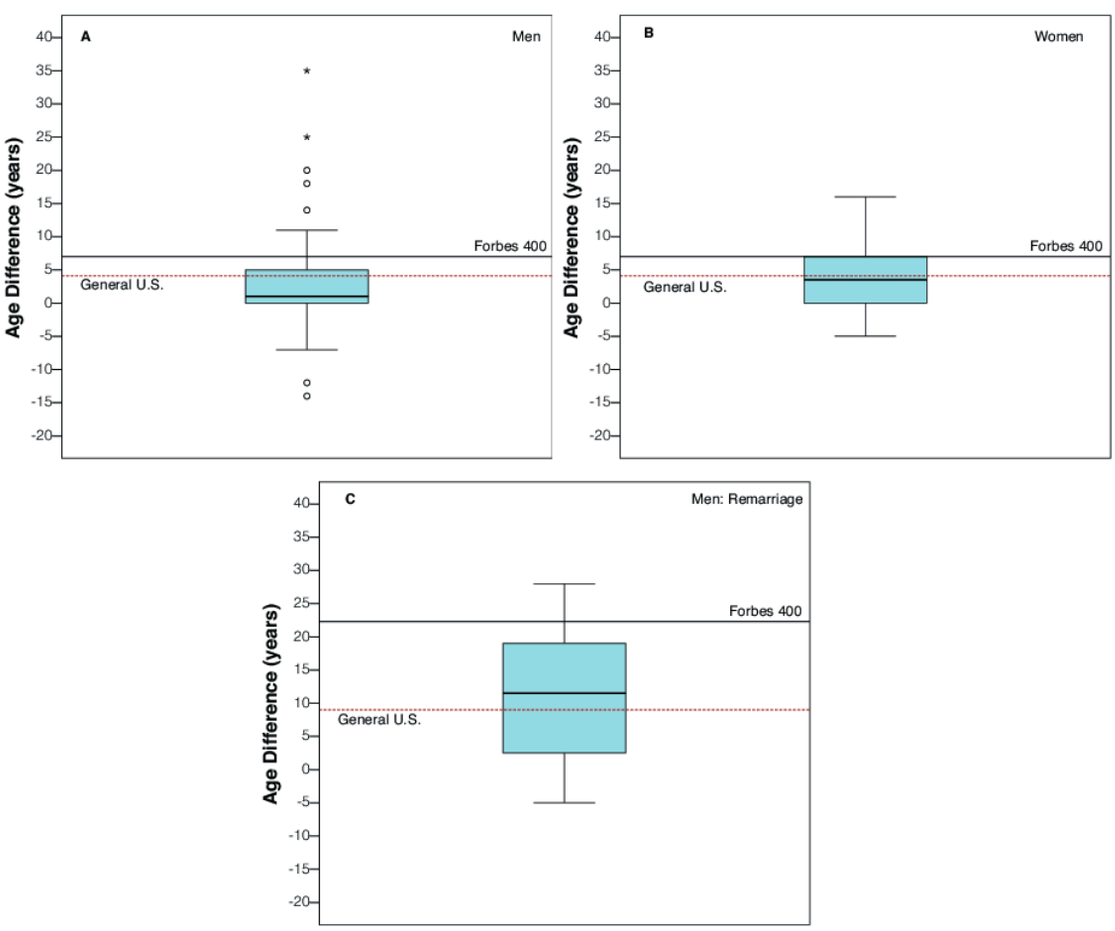

Figure 1. Figure caption: Box plots for age difference in marriage (age husband – age wife) with reference lines for a conservative estimate for the general U.S. Population and the estimate for the Forbes 400 for male politicians' first marriages (A), female politicians' first marriages (B) and male politicians' remarriages (C).

from estimates of the U.S. population means for both first and second marriages, but do significantly differ from estimates found for the wealthy in the Forbes 400 study (Pollet et al., 2013). This suggests that, at least in terms of marriage patterns with regards to age, the political elite in the U.S. can be described more like the general population than the "economic elite."

A potential reason for the discrepancy of this sample with the Forbes 400 sample could be that the pressures to conform to expectations are larger for the political elite than for the economic elite. Specifically, candidate image has been posited to be a determinate in voting behavior (Teven, 2008); as such, U.S. politicians may be responding to pressures to resemble their constituents in order to be re-elected and thus stay in power.

As with the original study, there are many limitations. Most importantly is the reliance on the cross-sectional data that were available to us. The sample is relatively small and might be affected by reporting bias and errors in the sources we relied on. There could, for example, be a reporting bias whereby smaller age differences are more easily publicized/accessible than larger age differences. Though, one could also expect the reverse whereby larger age differences receive substantially more publicity than smaller ones. At present, it is difficult to assess how much bias there would be in the availability of age gaps in marriage and in what direction, and we therefore suggest that our results should be treated with some caution. Nevertheless, as it is unclear whether political power could play any role for a decision to marry at all we could envisage this as a true marriage market. Next, the timing of marriage is unclear. The year of marriage for many of the politicians examined in this study was not available, preventing us from further examining whether there is a noticeable difference in age gap between politicians who marry after they were elected or before, for example. With regards to second marriages data are similarly lacking. It should also be noted that a substantial amount of second marriages may occur after leaving politics, which our cross-sectional sampling method does not capture.

Another explanation for our current findings may be that politicians are engaging in marriages of convenience for the purposes of using the political and monetary capital of their wives and wives' families in order win elections. There might be norms and/or other pressures to avoid large age gaps in such marriages. Data from appointed members of the executive branch were available, and although they do not need to win elections to be in power, these data conform to the pattern demonstrated above. Nonetheless it is possible that the members of executive branch strategically married, which helped them to obtain these posts. Thus, even for non-elected politicians we cannot rule out the possibility that marriages have benefits in terms of economic, social or political capital, and that age preferences may thus only play a minor role. However, in some cases, politicians began their careers in the private sector or come from families with great political and monetary capital, as is the case with Dick Cheney, and these individuals likely do not have to rely on marriage to ensure their political career (though it obviously might help). It is clear, however, that strategic marriages among the political elite have been practiced throughout history (e.g., by the Medici family, see Padgett & Ansell, 1993). The degree to which strategic marriages occur in U.S. politics and could account for the age patterns we observed here deserves further investigation.

Finally, our data come from a small and (very) particular sample of a Western Educated Industrialized Rich Democratic ("WEIRD") population (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Nonetheless, studying the behavior of specific groups, such as politicians, may inform evolutionary psychology. We therefore call for more research, not just testing hypotheses in WEIRD and non-WEIRD samples, but in extremes of WEIRD samples as well. For now, we conclude that our particular sample of politicians does, on average, not differ all that much from the general U.S. population in at least this one aspect: the average age gap with their spouses.

[1] Based on <1,000 bootstrapped samples as due to small sample size some bootstrapped estimates do not converge.

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