Partisans without constraint: Political polarization and trends in American public opinion*

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Abstract

Political polarization is commonly measured using the variation of responses on an individual issue in the population: more variation corresponds to more people on the extremes and fewer in the middle. By this measure, research has shown that—despite many commentators' concerns about increased polarization in recent decades—Americans' attitudes have become no more variable over the past two or three decades. What seems to have changed is the level of partisanship of the electorate.

We define a new measure of political polarization as increased correlations in issue attitudes and we distinguish between issue partisanship—the correlation of issue attitudes with party ID and liberal-conservative ideology—and issue alignment—the correlation between pairs of issues. Using the National Election Studies, we find issue alignment to have increased within and between issue domains, but by only a small amount (approximately 2 percentage points in correlation per decade). Issue partisanship has increased more than twice as fast, thus suggesting that increased partisanship is not due to higher ideological coherence. Rather, it is parties that are more polarized and therefore better at sorting individuals along ideological lines; the change in people's attitudes corresponds more to a re-sorting of party labels among voters than to greater constraint on issue attitudes.

We conclude suggesting that increased issue partisanship, in a context of persistently low issue constraint, might give greater voice to political extremists and single-issue advocates, and amplify dynamics of unequal representation.

1 Introduction

Political polarization constitutes a threat to the extent that it induces alignment along multiple lines of potential conflict and organizes individuals and groups around exclusive identities, thus crystallizing the public arena into opposite factions. In contrast, intra-social conflict is sustainable as long as there are multiple and non-overlapping lines of

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disagreement. Starting from these premises, we address the current debate on public opinion polarization by considering the multifaceted set of political identities and preferences that people have. We argue that polarization has to be conceived not only as a phenomenon of opinion radicalization, but also as a process of ideological division and preference alignment in which people line up along multiple dimensions.

Analytically, it can be shown that people's ideological distance and thus polarization depends not only on the level of radicalization of their opinions but also on the extent to which such opinions are correlated with each other—their "constraint" in the language of Converse (1964). Nonetheless, the study of public opinion polarization has been mostly oriented at capturing the radicalization of people's opinion on single issues (looking at the variation of responses on an individual issue in the population, where more variation corresponds to more people on the extremes and fewer in the middle), while aspects concerning with the coherence—"tightness"—of people's opinions were generally overlooked. In contrast, in this paper we focus on the level of constraint of people's partisanships and political preferences and how it has changed over time.

There is virtually full agreement among scholars on the fact that political parties and politicians, in recent decades, have become more ideological and likely to take extreme positions on certain political issues (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). While this seems to have occurred for reasons that have little to do with parties and candidates' constituency—consider the incumbency advantage, realignment of the south, and demographic changes in the party elite—many observers have concluded that a similar polarization process has extended to the public opinion at large. In contrast, scholarly research on mass opinion polarization offers a more complex view. Scholars have shown that, over the last forty years, American public opinion has remained stable or become even more moderate on a large set of political issues, while people have assumed more extreme positions only on some specific, hot issues, such as abortion, sexual morality and, lately, the war in Iraq (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Evans 2003; Fiorina et al. 2005; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2006). More systematic polarization appears in mass partisanship: those who are politically active, or identify themselves with a party or ideology, tend to have more extreme positions than the rest of the population. Moreover, the relation between party identification (or liberal-conservative ideology) and voting behavior has reached its highest level in the last fifty years, after the era of partisan dealignment of the 1960s and 1970s (Heterington 2001; Bartels 2000; Bafumi 2004).

For those scholars according to whom political polarization must imply a divergence of

public opinion on a broad set of issues (DiMaggio et al. 1996) and reflect a consistent set of alternative beliefs (Fiorina 2005), American public opinion is not polarized: there is evidence of attitude polarization only on a few issues, and because people are ambivalent in their preferences. Conversely, for those that think polarization is in place when broad ideological or partisan dividing lines exist, even though public opinion polarizes only on certain issues, the American public opinion is polarized (Kohut et al. 2000; Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002; Greenberg 2004; Mayer 2004; Abramowitz and Saunders 2005; Bafumi and Shapiro 2007).

In general, with respect to the polarization of the general public, two different explanations can be advanced: one hypothesis is that citizens are changing, becoming more coherent in their political preferences over time; the other is that it is parties that are becoming more extreme, not people. The substantive contribution of our analysis is to offer support for the latter hypothesis by showing that increased issue partisanship is not due to higher ideological coherence. Rather, as suggested by Fiorina et al. (2005), it is mostly due to the fact that parties are more polarized and therefore are doing a better job at sorting individuals along ideological lines. Individuals themselves have not moved; simply they now (correctly) perceive parties as being more radical, and they split accordingly.

We distinguish between issue partisanship and issue alignment, and we describe these two trends separately. We find that issue partisanship has increased, whereas there is little evidence of a similar growth in issue alignment. While Americans have become more coherent in matching their issue preferences with their party and ideology, the level of internal coherence between issues has remained essentially stable—and low. We cannot exclude that, by time elapses, people may also change their opinions in order to increase their internal coherence, although there is little evidence that this is occurring in the American public.

1.1 Outline

The paper unfolds as follows: first, we summarize the current debate on elite and public opinion polarization and outline our hypotheses about the trends in issue partisanship and issue alignment. Second, we claim that the coherence of people's beliefs systems is a relevant aspect when discussing ideological polarization and we support our argument by showing using a simple theoretical model that variation in the level of correlation of political preferences induce variations in the overall ideological distance between people.

We then present our method and data. We analyze data from the National Election

Studies cumulative dataset (1972–2004) modeling the trend of bivariate correlations of issues with party identification or ideology (as measures of issue partisanship), and correlations between pairs of issues (as measure of issue alignment). Results are reported in three sections: The first section focuses on issue partisanship and suggests that citizens' opinion on some issues—especially, but not exclusively, moral issues—have become substantially more correlated with party identity and the liberal-conservative ideology over time. In the second part we turn to issue alignment and we show that there is no comparable increase in the correlation between issues. Moreover, we do not observe increasing correlation between issue domains and therefore conclude that there is no evidence of issue alignment in the mass public. In the third part we look at trends in issue partisanship and issue alignment within population subgroups. This allows us to conclude that political activists, southerners or churchgoers have experienced patterns of issue partisanship and alignment similar to those observed in the rest of the population. Only the politically sophisticated, and, more interesting, the wealthier show a faster growth in trends of issue partisanship and alignment.

In the discussion we focus on the meaning of these opinion changes and on their consequences on the political process. We argue that increased issue partisanship, in a context of persistently low issue constraint, will give greater voice to political extremists and single-issue advocates, and amplify dynamics of unequal representation. We conclude inviting a reconsideration of the traditional liberal-pluralistic account of American politics.

2 The debate over political polarization

In the early 1970s, political scientists and journalists started writing books with titles such as "The Party's Over" (Broder 1972), worrying about the diminished importance of political organizations in American life, and expressing concern with a more shallow mass-media presentation of politics in books such as "The Selling of the President" (McGinniss 1970). Why was this such a bad thing? For one thing, political scientists and journalists were more likely to be Democrats than Republicans—as was true of Americans in general at that time. But these Americans persisted in voting Republican in presidential elections—most notably in 1972, but also recall that 1660, 1968, and 1974 were essentially ties, so that in fact 1964 was the only one of the ten presidential elections between 1950 and 1990 where the Democrats won a decisive victory. Theories of divided government and balancing aside, this would be disturbing to someone who saw the Democrats as the natural majority party, hence the concern about the decline of party influence.

Flash-forward to the late 1990s and beyond; political scientists and journalists are now

bemoaning the increase in political polarization. Why is polarization such a bad thing? Again, political scientists and journalists are more likely to be Democrats. They have noticed that Americans tend to agree with the Democrats more than Republicans on the most important issues (Stimson 2004) but still persist in voting for Republicans. What is going on? Political polarization is a possible culprit: with more Americans identifying with the "conservative" than the "liberal" label, perhaps they are voting for Republicans out of an ideological consistency that is not actually in accordance with their issue positions.

The above stories are not meant as a dismissal of the concerns of declining parties or of polarization but rather as an attempt to put them into some historical context. Moreover, it is not necessary to buy our explanation to agree with the observation that scholars have often been uneasy with the (real or apparent) incongruence of mass opinion on matters of partisanship and issue preferences. The ongoing debate on the recent trend of polarization is no exception.

Political polarization is not a novelty in American politics. According to Brady and Han's historical analysis (2006), polarization has been the historical norm. What is distinctive of the present pattern is a neat division between elite and mass polarization.[1] There is in fact ample evidence of polarization in the party-in-government and party-as-organizations—to use the classical categories of V.O. Key—but there remains a veil of ambiguity (despite a decade of research) with respect to the opinion in the electorate.

2.1 Polarization of party elites

The polarization of the political parties—documented by Poole and Rosenthal's extensive analysis of congressional roll call voting (2007; see also Rohde 1991; Aldrich 1996)—started in the 1970s, mostly as a consequence of the realignment of the south. Moderate Democrats retired or were defeated, and new Democratic congressmembers were more liberal, thus diminishing the divisions between northern and southern Democrats in congress. Similarly, exiting moderate Republicans started to be replaced by a new cohort of socially conservative Republicans, mostly from the south, and this process had speed up in the early 1990s (Wilcox 1995; Jacobson 2005). The declining bipartisanship of the national elite was well reflected in the political issues at stake in this period, from Ronald Reagan's economic and social program, to the socially conservative program and confrontational strategy that

[1] For Brady and Han (2006), such disconnect is due to a lag in the nationalization of congressional elections. Namely, polarization in presidential elections has increased starting from the mid-1960s while congressional elections have resisted such polarizing trend and cross-party vote has persisted till the beginning of the 1990s.

characterized the Republican Party in the early 1990s, to Bill Clinton's liberal policies on matters of homosexual rights, abortion, upper-class taxation, and public health insurance (Trubowitz and Mellow 2005).

The polarization of the party leadership has translated into the polarization of party activists (Stone and Rapoport 1994; Saunders and Abramowitz 2004) both through mechanisms of persuasion and mechanisms of selective recruitment/derecruitment. The more political leaders "emphasize ideological appeals, the more likely that party will be to attract ideologically motivated activists. The involvement of these ideologically motivated activists may, in turn, reinforce ideological extremism among party leaders" (Saunders and Abramowitz 2004:287).

In addition, the growth, starting from the 1970s, of single-issue-based interest groups and activists has had a radicalizing effect on party's primaries and legislative behavior in Congress (Brady and Han 2006). In sum, Democratic leaders and activists became more liberal and Republican members more conservative.

It does not come as a surprise therefore that, after a period of decline in the importance of party identification and ideology, partisan loyalties have started to count more, to the point that, in the middle of the 1990s, their impact on voting behavior reached its highest value in at least fifty years (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998, Bartels 2000; Hetherington 2001; Bafumi 2004). Nonetheless, the fact that self identified Republicans (or Conservatives) are more likely to vote for the Republican Party today than they were thirty years ago—and the same applies to Democrats—should not be interpreted per se as a sign of public opinion polarization. Simply, "elite polarization has clarified public perceptions of the parties' ideological differences" (Heterington 2001:619) and therefore "the public may increasingly come to develop and apply partisan predispositions" (Bartels 2000:44). To what extent increased mass partisanship has brought about (or is related to) public opinion polarization—and to what extent individuals' partisanship conforms with their issue preferences—is still object of discussion.

2.2 Public opinion polarization

The debate among scholars on the level of American public opinion polarization has grown along with a certain ambiguity on what does mass opinion polarization really mean and how should it be empirically defined.

One can simply look at the distribution of political attitudes across all Americans. If there is polarization, we then expect to observe a change in the shape of the opinion distri-

bution and possibly a change from a unimodal to a flat or bimodal distribution. DiMaggio and his collaborators (1996), looking at the population as a whole, have documented a general trend toward consensus on racial, gender and crime issues, stability on numerous others, and evidence of polarization only on abortion, attitudes toward the poor, and more recently, on sexual morality (Evans 2003).

But one might want to track changes between subgroups of the population, distinguishing people along sociodemographic lines. Accordingly, DiMaggio et al. (1996) looked at the level of opinion disagreement between subgroups by comparing different categories of respondents. Results suggest that evidence of inter-group polarization is scarce. With respect to age, gender, education, region, and religious affiliation, they observe stability or even instances of depolarization. Fiorina and his collaborators reach more or less the same conclusions. In contrast, Abramowitz and Saunders (2005) suggest that the mass public is deeply divided between red states and blue states, and between churchgoers and secular voters.

Alternatively, one can look for changes in the distance between partisans subgroups, distinguishing people along ideological lines. In this case, there is clear evidence of polarization between self-identified liberals and conservatives, party affiliated and political activists (Fiorina et al. 2005; Abramowitz and Saunders 2005). Bafumi and Shapiro (2007), analyzing the trend in the mean position of Democrats and Republicans and liberals and conservatives for a large set of political issues, have found that partisans and ideologues are increasingly more divided not only on issues like abortion, homosexuality and the role of religion, but also on issues of race and civil rights, thus concluding that the "new American voter" is an increasingly polarized one (2007). Similarly, Layman and Carsey (2002) have found that attitude constraint between social welfare and moral issues has increased among party identifiers.

In general, differences among scholars' analyses concern which social or partisan categories (class, ethnicity, religious affiliation, party identification etc.) are relevant to the hypothesis of increasing social division, and which dimension public opinion is expected to split around—polarization might be confined to people's attitudes on specific issues or instead spread across a broad set of issues or a comprehensive measure of ideology. It is the way in which these two aspects were combined, that has leaded to contrasting—if not alternative—conclusions.

When scholars focus on the population as a whole or on different social groups (thus slicing the population along socioeconomic lines), they find evidence of polarization only on

few political attitudes, which has led them to conclude that, in general, American citizens are uncertain and ambivalent, and therefore more likely to take central positions than extreme positions, and to combine conservative and liberal attitudes on different issues. The same scholars have tended also to look at polarization across multiple issue domains, thus emphasizing the overall stability of public opinion. In contrast, scholars who look primarily at partisan affiliations and thus slice the population along party or ideological lines have concluded that the nation is increasingly divided. They also tended to give disproportionate attention to currently salient issues such as abortion and then come up with an image of a polarized country.

These scenarios do not necessarily contradict (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007). Indeed, both are realistic—although not complete—descriptions of contemporary America. In this paper we provide a comprehensive account for both trends in *issue partisanship* (the relation between issues and ideology) and *issue alignment* (the level of constraint within and between diverse issue domains), thus disentangling the effect of party ideology from dynamics of alignment in attitude preferences. While increased issue partisanship can be thought as a reflection of parties differentiation and elite polarization, higher levels of issue alignment would suggest that individuals are increasingly lining up into opposite camps along multiple lines of potential conflict. While both dynamics might have consequences on political integration—an aspect that we will discuss in the conclusion—it is issue alignment, more than issue partisanship, that might amplify the ideological distance between citizens and thus public opinion polarization.

By separately investigating the extent to which the electorate has become more ideological from actual changes in the way in which people (or some population subgroups) combine their issue preferences, we can properly address the two most popular explanations of the changes in American public opinion: one argues that elite polarization have made it easier for ordinary citizens to see the differences between parties and therefore citizens are now better at sorting themselves between Republicans and Democrats or liberals and conservatives (Heterington 2001; Fiorina et al. 2004; Levendusky 2004). The other argues that citizens (or subgroups of them) have themselves changed, and that moral issues have lined up with economic and civil rights issues to substantially radicalized people's preferences and boost their partisanship (Layman and Carsey 2002; Abramowitz and Saunders 2005; Bafumi and Shapiro 2007). Two hypotheses follow:

Hypothesis 0: If it is parties that are moving, while people's opinions have not

changed, we expect to observe increasing issue partisanship, since parties are now better at sorting out their voters, but to do not observe increased constraint in people's political attitudes—thus no issue alignment.

Hypothesis 1: If a real movement has occurred within the population, we expect instances of issue alignment in public opinion, thus higher levels of constraint between issue domains.

By distinguishing between issue partisanships and issue alignment and by simultaneously modeling the correlation trends between a large set of issues that span across different issue domains, we will be able to assess between these two hypotheses. This will be the focus of the first two parts of our analysis. The third part tests two possible variants of Hypothesis 1, namely:

Hypothesis 1a: A real movement has occurred within the subset of the population that is politically more sophisticated or active.

In the literature on public opinion, the theme of issue consistency and constraint has been investigated for a long time, usually reaching the conclusion that only a minority of educated, politically interested and informed people show real opinion constraint, while the large majority of the public is "innocent of ideology" (Kinder and Sears 1985; Converse 1964). In the last two decades, the debate has been reframed in terms of population heterogeneity, and scholars have been studying the different cognitive heuristics people deploy in their political reasoning (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000; Baldassarri and Schadee 2006). In both cases, results suggest that there can be substantial differences across belief systems, and that there is a small group of citizens who fully deploy ideological categories. Since politically sophisticated and active citizens are more likely to be politically influential (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), it is relevant to see if the trend in issue partisanship and alignment in the subset of politically committed citizens differ from what we observe in the large population. In fact, an influential minority can affect, in the long term, the political attitudes or behavior of the rest of the electorate (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Layman and Carsey 2002).

Hypothesis 1b: A real movement has occurred within some population subgroups (such

as the more educated, wealthier, southerners, or churchgoers).

Within a broad set of social categories (gender, age, ethnicity, class, location, etc.) some social groups are, or have the potential to become, economically central or politically influential (through lobbying and interest groups) and thus have an impact on the policy making process, for instance, by setting the agenda. If instances of polarization occur within such groups, this might reverberate on the political elite, if not on the mass public. Present day lines of potential social division seems to revolve around economic status—often measured through education or income (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Frank 2004; Bartels 2006; Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2006a), and cultural values, among which region and religion (Abramowitz and Saunders 2005). We will therefore test whether trends in partisanship and issue alignment are different for different population subgroups.

2.3 Correlation as polarization

> The pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into red States and blue States: red States for Republicans, blue States for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the blue States, and we don't like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the red States. We coach little league in the blue States and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red States. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq, and patriots who supported the war in Iraq. (Barack Obama, Democratic National Convention, July 27, 2004)

The fans and the detractors of Barack Obama's celebrated keynote address interpreted his lines as a plea for bipartisan politics and national unity. Nonetheless, few observers took it at its face value, as an actual picture of the state of the country. This is unfortunate because, in this regard, he got it right.

For instance, in 2004, 40% of the respondents to the American National Election Study were self-declared Republicans (including leaners), but only 23% were self-declared Republicans and conservative (32% if we consider only the subsample of people who answered both questions). Almost half of Republicans do not perceive themselves as being ideologically conservative. If we also consider issue preferences, the constraint of people's political preferences looks even weaker. Only 12% of the respondents are Republicans, conservative and oppose abortion (in part or completely), while 16% are Republicans, conservative, and do not favor aid to blacks and 13% are Republicans, conservative, and think that government should not support health insurance programs. Taken together, in our 2004 sample, only

6% of respondents are Republicans who think of themselves as conservatives and oppose abortion, aid to blacks, and government support for health. Fully 85% of self-declared Republicans are nonconservative or take a non conservative stand on at least one of these three traditional issues.

A similar picture emerges if we look at Democrats. In this case, of the 49% self-declared Democrats in the sample, only 36% call themselves liberals. Overall, almost 90% of Democrats are nonliberal or have nonliberal views on abortion, aid to blacks or governmental intervention. These numbers should not be surprising, given that, in general, the correlation between party identification or ideology and opinion on political issues is low. Knowing somebody's political identification increases our chances to guess his or her issue preferences, but not by much.

The above analyses consider five positions (party, ideology, and three issues): if each were determined by a simple coin flip, there would be 1/32 of the population, or 3%, in each of the pure categories; instead, we see about 6% for each: more than would be expected by pure randomeness, but far less than if attitudes on the different positions were perfectly correlated.

The picture does not change if we look at correlations among issue preferences alone. To calibrate this for ourselves, consider the opinions on health insurance and abortion, a pair of issues that had a .10 correlation in 2004. Overall, 46% of respondents favored government support for health insurance. Among the respondents who supported abortion, 51% supported health insurance. Similarly, 55% of respondents support abortion. Among the respondents supporting health insurance, 62% were also in favor of abortion.

As we have noted above, empirical attempts at assessing polarization of mass opinion have mostly focused on the distribution of single issues; while they have rarely looked at the correlation of people's opinions on different political attitudes. From a substantive point of view, it is almost intuitive that, if people align along multiple, potentially divisive issues, even if they do not take extreme positions on single issues, the end result would be a polarized society. For instance, consider a population with opinions on two dimensions: color (50% of the people prefer green, 50% prefer yellow) and shape (50% prefer circle, 50% prefer triangle). If opinions are independent (thus, dimensions are orthogonal) 25% of people would prefer green circle, 25% green triangle, 25% yellow circle, 25% yellow triangle. At the other extreme, if the two dimensions are perfectly correlated, 50% of the people would have one preference (for example, green circle) and 50% would be in the opposite corner (yellow triangle); this without changing the opinion distribution on the single issues.

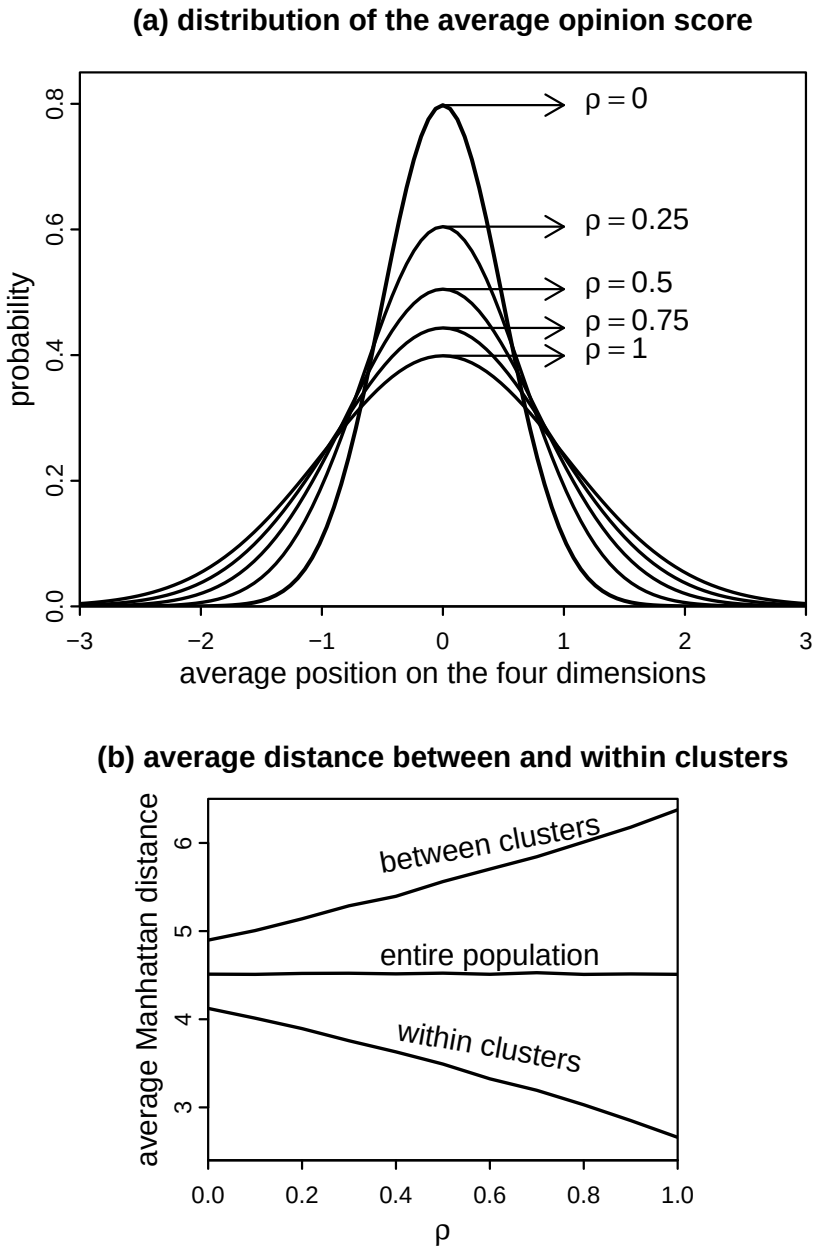

Figure 1: Ideological distance for different levels of correlation between dimensions, from a simple four-dimensional normal model. (a) Distribution of the average opinion score for different levels of correlation between dimensions. (b) Average Manhattan distance between pairs that belong to the same (within) or different (between) clusters. As correlations between issues increase, the average opinion score becomes more variable, and clusters move apart—even under this model where the marginal distribution for each issue is unchanged.

For another example, consider a population with opinions on four dimensions following a multivariate normal distribution with mean 0 and variance 1 on each opinion and correlation ρ between any pair of issues. In one limiting case, the correlation between dimensions is null and the four opinions are independent; in the other limiting case, the four dimensions have correlation 1, which means that individuals hold exactly the same opinion on all four issues. In between, there are situations in which the four dimensions are correlated, with correlations of different magnitude. As the correlation between issues increases, the opinion distribution on each issue remains the same but the "ideological distance" in the population increases.

To show this, we measure ideological distance in two ways. First, we computed a synthetic opinion score as the average position on the four dimensions. Figure 1a plots the distribution of the average positions for five different correlations: 0, .25, .5, .75, and 1. As the correlation increases, the variance of the average score distribution grows as well. When dimensions are positively correlated, there are more people with overall extreme views than in a context in which dimensions are not correlated, even though the opinion distribution on each single issue remains the same.

Second, we can measure polarization by returning to the concept at the beginning of the paper, of society dividing into two homogeneous parts that are far apart from each other, and therefore focusing on the distribution of distances between pairs of people. The more a population is polarized, the higher the variation of the distance between pairs of individuals, because they are either very close, or very distant. According to our argument, we would expect that, as the correlation between ideological dimensions increases, the distance between individuals that belong to the same cluster decreased, while the distance between people that belong to alternative clusters increases. Mathematically, we can divide a multivariate distribution into two pieces by finding the optimal separation that will minimize the average distances between people within each piece. (In statistics this is called k-means clustering, in this case with $k = 2$; in the special case of the multivariate normal distribution, the clusters will be determined by a plane slicing diagonally through the space of voters.) Here, the population is partitioned into clusters according to the sign of the opinion score previously computed. Figure 1b presents results using Manhattan distance (similar results were obtained using Euclidean distance). In our four-dimensional normal example, where the separate distributions on each issue remain unchanged, we find that, as correlations between issues increase,

- the average distance between pairs remains essentially stable;

- the average distance between pairs of people within clusters decreases;

- the average distance between pairs of people in different clusters increases.

For all these theoretical reasons, we see correlation as an important aspect of polarization which has not been captured in previous analyses of a single question at a time (or in previous analyses such as Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2006b) which combine questions in valuable ways to get more useful and precise summaries of issue positions, but do not consider the correlations as informative in themselves). We next turn to the analysis of the correlation between political attitudes in America.

3 Methodology and Data

High-quality national surveys have included, starting from the 1970s, a consistent number of attitude questions on political issues, ranging from state intervention and spending to civil rights, morality, and foreign politics. Unfortunately, few of these questions were asked consistently over time, thus making any attempt at tracing the temporal evolution of public opinion on political attitudes a difficult enterprise. For instance, in what is probably the most comprehensive study of trends in public opinion polarization, DiMaggio and his collaborators (1996) could rely only on seven attitude questions from the NES cumulative dataset (of which four were feeling thermometers) and nine attitude questions from the GSS cumulative dataset (see also Layman and Carsey 2002).

We overcome the problem of questions discontinuity and make virtually complete use of the information on respondents' political attitudes collected through sample surveys. In short, our strategy is to work with the correlations rather than modeling the data directly.[2] We focus on the evolution of the correlation between opinions rather than on the evolution of opinion distributions on single issues. In this way, even though each pair of questions has not been asked for the entire time period, their correlation remains informative to assess the trend in opinion correlations. Specifically, to study the evolution of issue partisanship we look at the correlation between single issues and party identification or the liberal-conservative ideology, while to study trends in issue alignment we focus on the correlation between pairs of issues. Our unit of analysis is issue $\times$ year (for partisan alignment) or issue pair $\times$ year (for issue alignment), and the basic idea is that every attitude question that

[2]We present results using Pearson correlations. Similar results are obtained using other correlation measures.

has been asked at least twice can be potentially informative in order to assess the overall trends in issue partisanship and issue alignment.

Our primary interest lies in time trends of correlation (see, for example, Figure 3). In any given year the data sample available is large but not huge and thus correlation estimates and their trends can be unstable, especially for questions that were asked only for few years. The simple way to handle this problem is to estimate a common time trend for all the correlations in the study. However, this would not allow us to differentiate between issues and tell if some are becoming more correlated while others remains stable or show patterns of decreasing correlation. Multilevel models—in this case varying-intercept, varying-slope models—allow us to estimate variation and trends in the presence of uncertainty in the correlation estimates (Snijders and Bosker 1999; Raudenbush and Bryk 2002; Gelman and Hill 2007).[3]

Here, we present results from the American National Election Study, Cumulative Data File 1948–2004.[4] Generally, in this dataset are merged questions coded in a comparable fashion across years and that have been asked in three or more Election Studies. Considering all the issues that were asked at least in three different surveys, we analyze 47 attitude questions. Since most of them were asked starting from 1972, we present results for the time period 1972–2004.[5] To facilitate the interpretation of the results, all questions were coded in order to have opinions going from liberal to conservative and thus correlations are generally positive.

We classified attitude questions according to four different issue domains: Economic; Civil Rights; Moral; and Security and Foreign Policy issues.[6] Examples of Economic issues are government's involvement in the provision of health insurance and jobs guarantee, or federal spending (labeled as FS in the tables) for the poor, welfare, food stamps etc. Civil Rights issues concern the treatment of Blacks and other minorities, affirmative action and equality of opportunities and chances, while Moral issues range from abortion to gay rights,

[3]We fit the models using the `lmer` function in R which estimates multilevel models using a point estimate for the group level variance parameters, which works well as long as the group level variances are separate from 0 and group level correlation are separate from ± 1 (see, for example, Gelman and Hill 2007).

[4]Data available from the National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan.

[5]All the analyses were also carried on the 1948–2004 time period and there are no substantive differences.

[6]To assess the robustness of the classification we relied on the principles of intercoder reliability. Four different people were asked to independently classify the issues. Differences were minor, only three issues were controversial. Moreover, their classification in one or the other of the four issue domains does not substantially change the results here reported. For instance, it may seem strange that urban unrest is included within Security and Foreign Policy. Another option would be to characterize urban unrest as a Civil Rights issue. Doing this does not change our results except for increasing the uncertainty in the estimates for Security and Foreign Policy because this domain has relatively few questions.

women role in society and traditional and new values and lifestyles. Finally, Security and Foreign Policy issues (hereafter simply referred at as Foreign Policy issues) comprise, among the others, international cooperation, federal spending for defense and to prevent crime, and how the authority should handle urban unrest.

In addition to these questions, we used the standard seven-point self-identification scale ranging from strong Democrat (1) to strong Republican (7), with Independents in the middle (4) to measure party identification, and the seven-point scale that goes from extremely liberal (1) to extremely conservative (7) to measure ideology. We also considered classic sociodemographic characteristics to study the trend in partisanship and alignment within population subgroups.

4 Results

4.1 Analysis I: issue partisanship

To what extent people's party identification or liberal-conservative ideology predict their opinion on specific issues? As previously anticipated, the constraint between partisanship and opinion on specific issues is generally weak. The correlations between party identification or ideology and issue opinions range between 0.0 and 0.3. Figure 2 reports the average correlation between each of the 47 issues and both party identification (left) and self-placement on the liberal-conservative scale (right). Issue are divided in the four issue domains and, within each issue domain, they are sorted according to the intensity of the correlation with party identification.

Economic issues show the highest average correlation with party identification, followed by Civil Rights issues. In contrast, Security and Foreign Policy issues are loosely related to party affiliation; a result that confirms their bipartisan nature. Results are similar if we look at the correlation between issues and self-placement on the liberal-conservative scale, with one, interesting exception: Moral issues are substantially more linked to ideology than to party identification. The magnitude of the correlation between Moral issues and the liberal-conservative scale is similar to that observer for Economic issues. Nonetheless, to our goal, more important than discussing the average strength of issue partisanship, is to assess the variation over time of such correlation.

According to the hypothesis of increasing issue partisanship, we expect that, in general, the correlations have increased over time. To test this hypothesis we run a multilevel model with varying-intercept and varying-slope in which the unit of analysis are issue pair $\times$ year

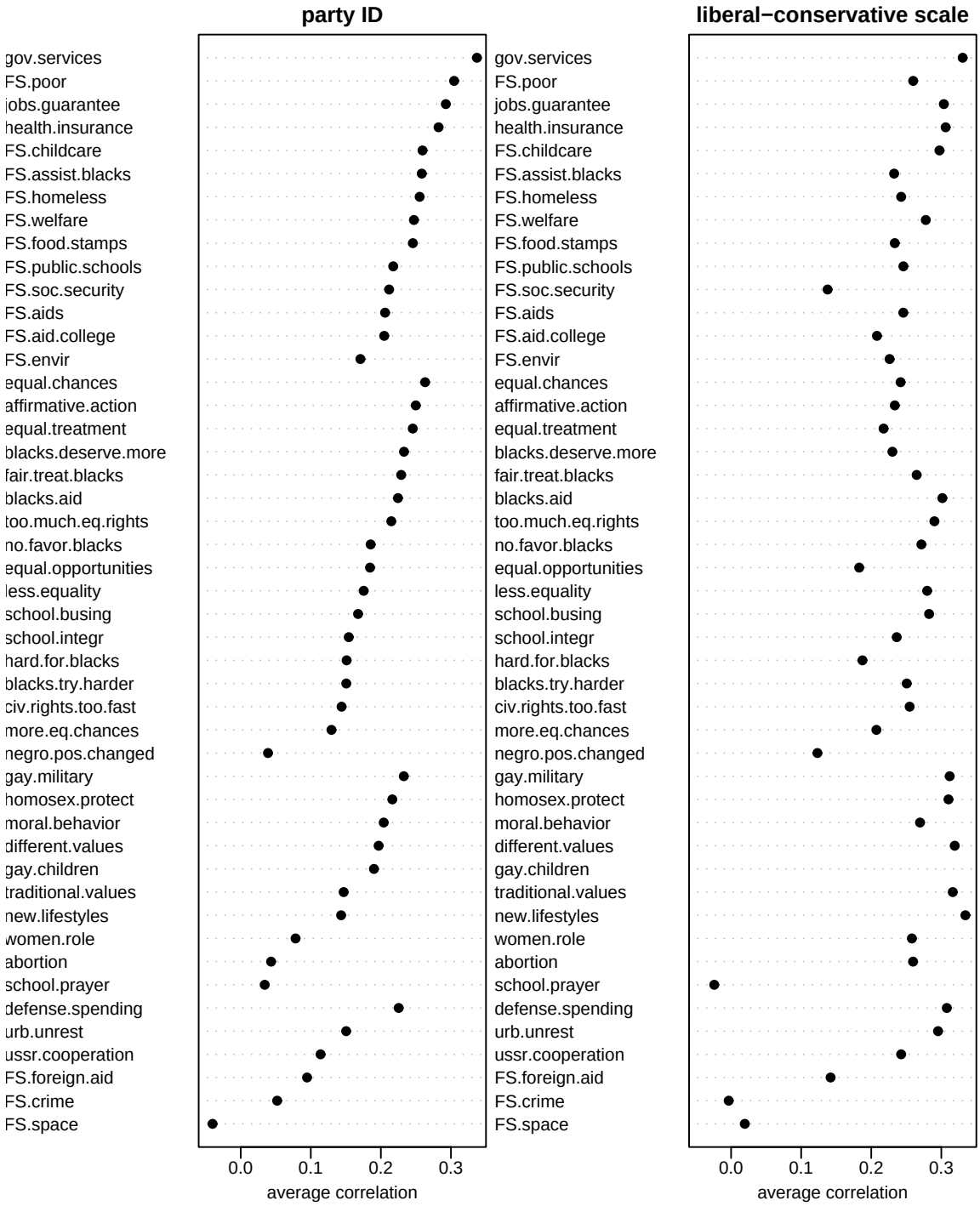

Figure 2: Average correlations of issue attitudes with partisanship and ideology. The left panel shows results for party identification; the right panel for liberal-conservative ideology. From the top: Economic, Civil Rights, Moral, Security, and Foreign Policy issue domains. For each domain, issues are listed in decreasing order of correlation with party identification. Questions have been coded in order to have opinions going from liberal to conservative so that expected correlations are all positive.

(a) $\rho \equiv$ Issue $\times$ Party ID	(b) $\rho \equiv$ Issue $\times$ Liberal-Conservative
coef.est coef.se (Intercept) 0.17 0.01 t 0.05 0.01 Error terms: Groups Name Std.Dev. Corr pair (Intercept) 0.08 t 0.03 -0.44 Residual 0.04	coef.est coef.se (Intercept) 0.22 0.01 t 0.04 0.01 Error terms: Groups Name Std.Dev. Corr pair (Intercept) 0.08 t 0.03 -0.02 Residual 0.04

Table 1: Fits from multilevel models for issue partisanship. Results for the correlation between issues and (a) party identification and (b) liberal-conservative ideology. Varying intercept and varying slope models; 47 pairs, 383 observations. Correlations have been increasing steadily over time (by an estimated 5% or 4% per decade, as indicated by the coefficients for t of 0.05 and 0.04 in the top parts of the displays. The variation in the trends (the estimated standard deviations of 0.03 near the bottom of each of the two displays) is about the same magnitude as their average level. See text for further discussion, and see Figure 2 for the individual issues and their average correlations.

and the second level are issue pairs. Formally,

$$\rho_{it} = a_i + b_i t + \epsilon_{it} \tag{1}$$

where ρ_{it} is the correlation between issue i and the measure of partisanship in the year t (i goes from 1 to 47 while t is time in decades).[7] Table 1 displays the results for this model, both looking at the correlation with party identification and the liberal-conservative ideology.

Consider in detail the model for party identification (first column). The average correlation between issues and party identification is .17, with an estimated standard deviation among issues of .08, which means that about two-thirds of the correlations are in the interval between .09 and .25. This confirms that the level of constraint of opinions and partisanship is low: party identification predicts, in average, only the 17% of people's opinions on political issues. Central to our analysis is the coefficient estimate for the time parameter t: in average, correlations have increased of .05 per decade (s.e. .01). With a standard deviation of .03, most of the trends are positive, with an estimated 95% between $-.01$ and .11. This suggests that for almost all issues, trends are either positive or close to zero. To support this result graphically, Figure 3 plots the trend of the correlations for all the issues

[7]The variable t is expressed in decades and centered in 1988 so that the intercepts and slopes can be more directly interpreted. Formally, $t = (\text{year} - 1988)/10$.

along with the regression line from the multilevel model. Issues are sorted according the intensity of the change over time, starting from those that show the deepest increase, such as (perhaps surprisingly) federal spending for the environment, and (less surprisingly) new lifestyles, traditional values, abortion, favor of Blacks and moral behavior, to those that are overall stable, such as federal spending for welfare, poor, food stamps and social security.

Considering the relation between issues and self-placement on the liberal-conservative scale we obtain similar results. With respect to the model (second column in Table 1), the mean correlation is .22, and the correlations increase, on average, by .04 every ten years. Again, most of the change is in the direction of a strengthened relation between issues and partisanship, as the plots in Figure 4 demonstrate. Here, we report the trend over time of the correlation between each issue and self-placement on the liberal-conservative scale. With only few exceptions, the slopes are positive or close to zero.

In sum, results suggest that issue partisanship has increased over time. Nonetheless, as a careful inspection of Figures 3 and 4 might have already suggested, it is possible that the rise in the correlations has occurred mostly (only) in some issue domains and less (not) in others. To test this hypothesis we specify a model that distinguishes issue types according to the four issue domains. Results are reported in Table 2. Both with respect to the correlation with party identification and liberal-conservative ideology, we notice that Economic issues have the highest average correlation (.24 in both cases), followed by Civil Rights issues (.18 and .22 respectively), Moral issues (.11 and .20) and Foreign Policy issues (.10 and .16). More interesting is the fact that, as expected, the intensity of change substantially varies across issue domains. Namely, while for Economic issues the increase is, in average, .04 in the case of party identification and .03 if we consider the liberal-conservative ideology, it jumps respectively at .08 and .07 when considering Moral issues.

Figure 5 summarizes these trends and allows a direct comparison of the four issue domains. Both measures of partisanship show similar patterns: Since the beginning of the time period here considered, Economic issues have been the most partisan theme (they have the highest correlations), followed by Civil Rights and then Foreign Policy and Moral issues. While the increment in the first three issue domains has proceeded more or less at the same pace, thus maintaining stable the distance between the three issue domains, the partisanship of Moral issues has grown faster, to the point that Moral issues have substantially reduced the gap with the other issues with respect to their correlation with party identification (starting from a situation, in the 1970s, in which there was virtually no relation). Even more striking, with respect to the liberal-conservative ideology, the domain of Moral issues

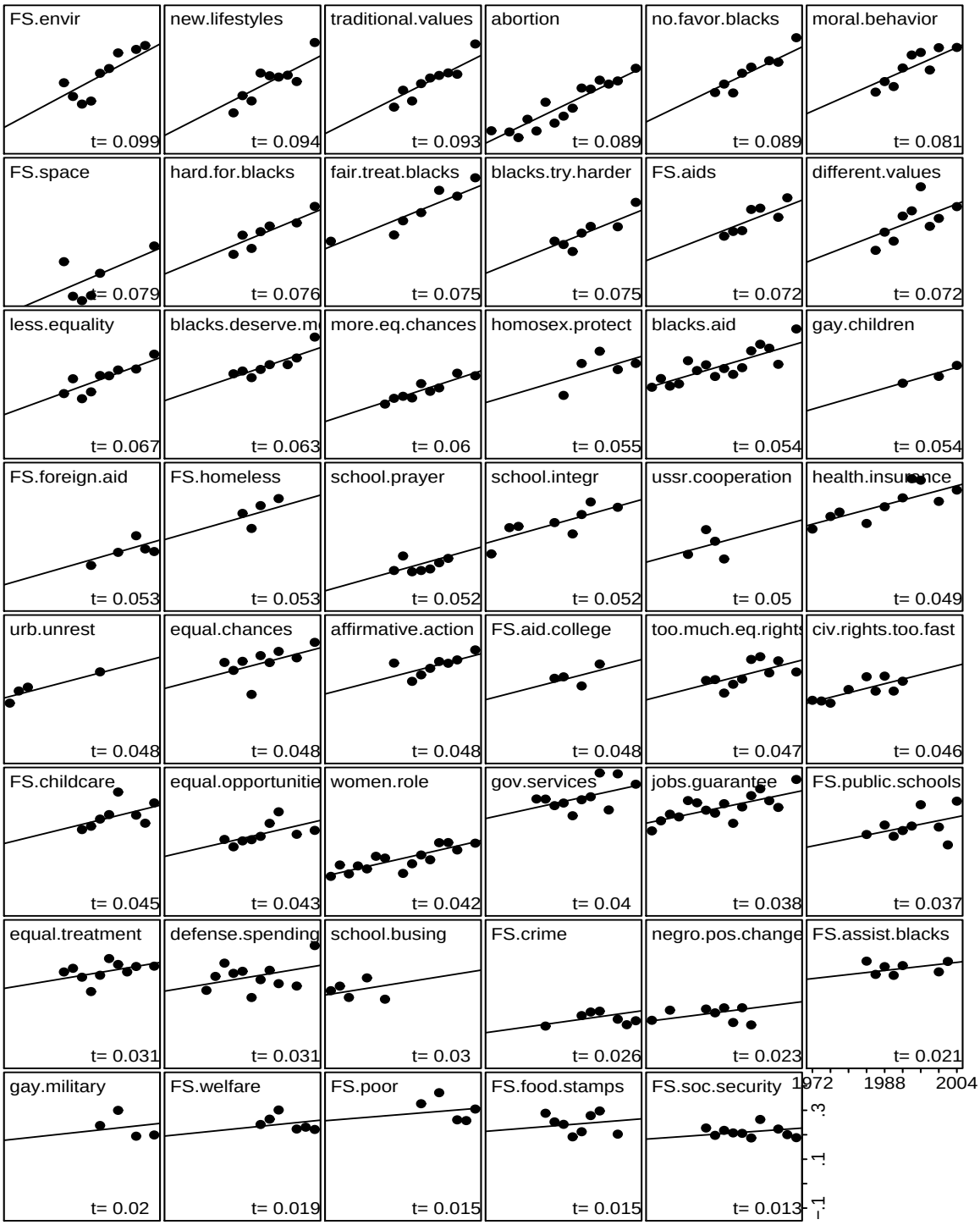

Figure 3: Trends in the correlation between individual issues and party identification. Regression lines as estimated in Model (1); at the bottom of each plot is reported the coefficient t_i. x-axis: time (1972–2004). y-axis: correlation ρ ($-.1$ to .4).

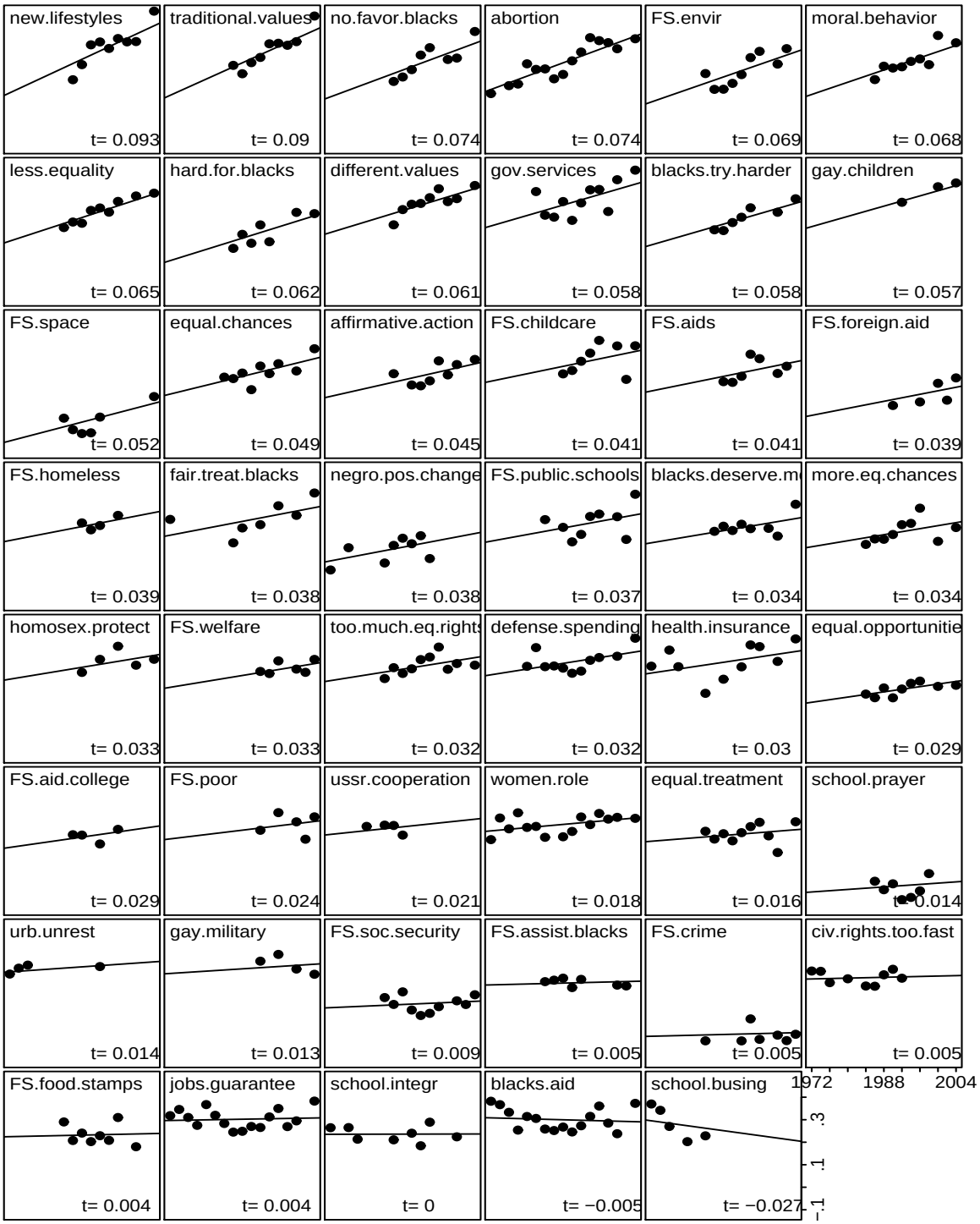

Figure 4: Trends in the correlation between individual issues and liberal-conservative ideology. Regression lines as estimated in Model (1); at the bottom of each plot is reported the coefficient t_i. x-axis: time (1972–2004). y-axis: correlation ρ ($-.1$ to $.5$).

(a) $\rho \equiv$ Issue $\times$ Party ID

	coef.est	coef.se
(Intercept)	0.24	0.02
t	0.04	0.01
iss(2) Civil Rights	-0.06	0.02
iss(3) Moral	-0.13	0.03
iss(4) Foreign Pol.	-0.14	0.03
t * Civil Rights (2)	0.02	0.01
t * Moral (3)	0.04	0.02
t * Foreign Pol (4)	0.00	0.02

Error terms:

Groups	Name	Std.Dev.	Corr
pair	(Intercept)	0.06	
	t	0.03	-0.38
Residual		0.04	

(b) $\rho \equiv$ Issue $\times$ Liberal-Conservative

	coef.est	coef.se
(Intercept)	0.24	0.02
t	0.03	0.01
iss(2) Civil Rights	-0.02	0.03
iss(3) Moral	-0.01	0.03
iss(4) Foreign Pol.	-0.08	0.04
t * Civil Rights (2)	0.01	0.01
t * Moral (3)	0.04	0.02
t * Foreign Pol (4)	0.00	0.02

Error terms:

Groups	Name	Std.Dev.	Corr
pair	(Intercept)	0.08	
	t	0.03	-0.13
Residual		0.04	

Table 2: Multilevel models for issue partisanship with pairs grouped by issue domains. Results for the correlation between issues and (a) party identification; and (b) liberal-conservative ideology. Varying intercept and varying slope models; 47 pairs, 383 observations.

has recently become the more partisan among the four.

We conclude that issue partisanship has increased in all issue domains, although at a different speed and that citizens now divide along ideological lines not only on Economic and Civil Rights issues, but also on matters of morality. This tendency in issue partisanship was somehow expected, as an additional manifestation of the renewed salience of partisanship in the American public. Our goal is now to assess if the increased coherence between issue preferences and declared ideology or party affiliation is simply the byproduct of the strengthened partisanship and polarization of parties and political elite or, instead, if it is the case that rising issue partisanship goes along with increasing issue alignment. In other words, that people now are not only better at combining their opinions with their partisanship than they were two or three decades ago, but also that individuals show greater coherence in combining their preferences on multiple issues.

4.2 Analysis II: issue alignment

One can have a first, suggestive idea of the trend in issue alignment by looking at the correlation between pairs of issues over time. Unfortunately, since 47 issues generate 1081 potential pairs, we cannot reasonably plot all pairs. Logically, we might expect the cor-

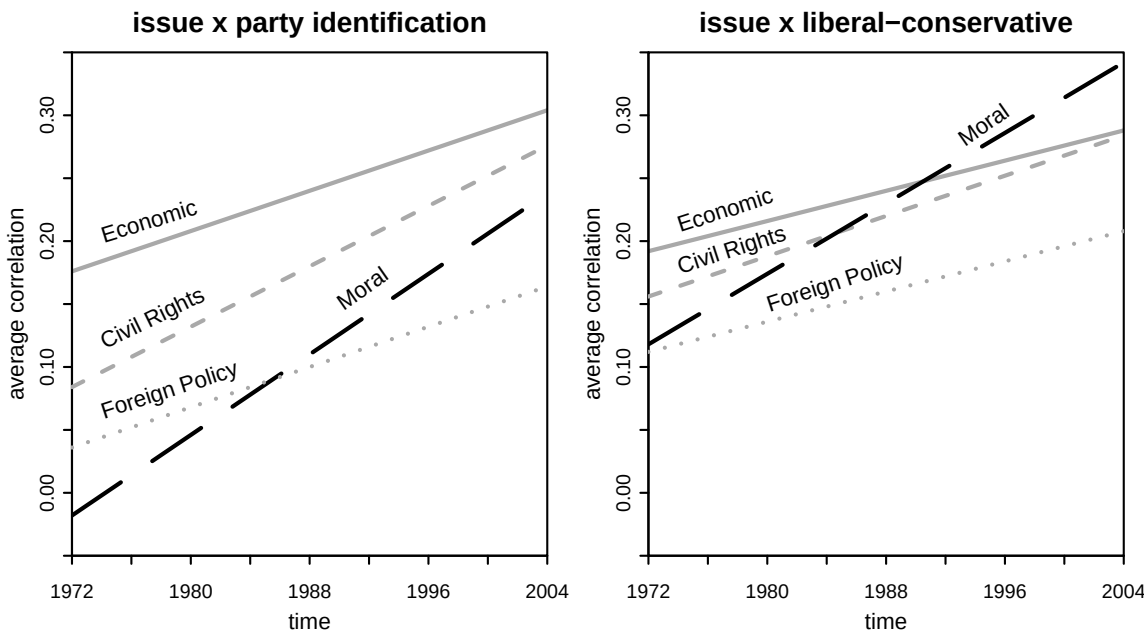

Figure 5: Trend in issue partisanship for different issue domains. Correlations between issues and party identification and ideology have steadily increased, most notably for Moral issues.

relations to increase more for issues that have shown the highest growth in partisanship. Accordingly, we selected the seven issues with highest correlations with party identification and ideology (cfr. Figures 3 and 4: the top issues are almost the same). They are opinions on new lifestyles, traditional values, abortion, favor blacks, federal spending for the environment, moral behavior and equality. Figure 6 plots the correlation between these pairs of issues over time. Despite their increase in partisanship over the past few decades, the correlation between these issues seems to have remained stable or, in a few cases, increased only modestly. This offers scarce support to the hypothesis of issue alignment.[8]

To test this hypothesis more formally, we deploy a model which is similar to that described previously. Namely, we run a multilevel model with varying-intercept and varying-slope in which the unit of analysis are issue pairs × year. Formally,

$$\rho_{pt} = a_p + b_p t + \epsilon_{pt} \tag{2}$$

[8]Alternatively, one can aggregate survey items on the same issue domain. Following this strategy, we confirm the findings of Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2006b): when we look at averages and when the number of items increases, we observe higher constraint between issue domains.

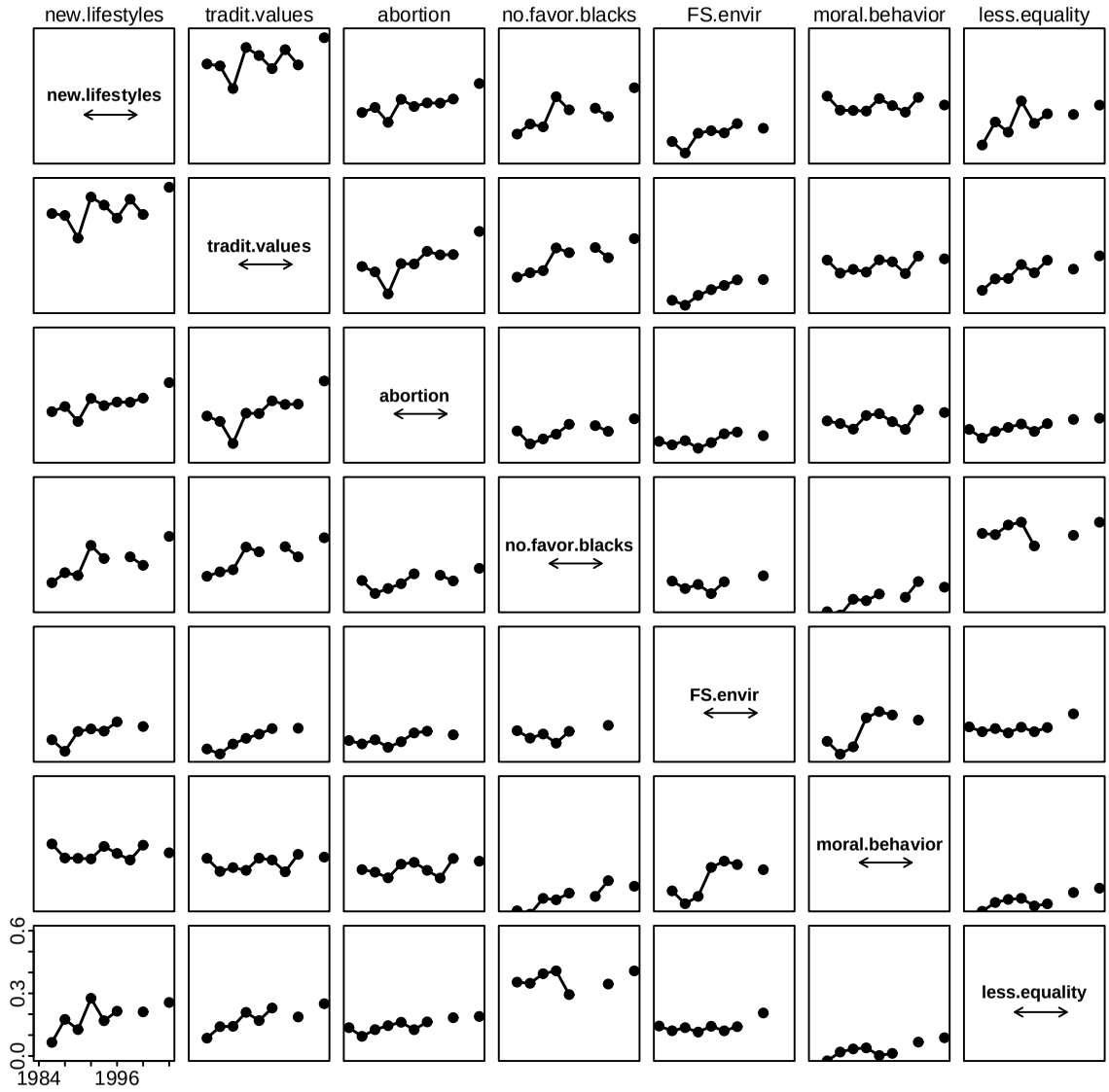

Figure 6: Trend in the correlations between pairs of hot issues. x-axis: time (1984–2004). y-axis: correlation ρ (0 to .6). The plots are redundant: each pair of issues is plotted twice so that the reader can see on the same row (or column) the correlation between one issue and all the others. Correlations have increased only slightly during these twenty years. Compare to Figures 3 and 4, which show much more dramatic increases in issue partisanship.

	$\rho \equiv$ Pairs of issues	
(a) no grouping of pairs	(b) within and between issue domains	(c) types of issue domains

(a) no grouping of pairs

	coef.est	coef.se
(Intercept)	0.15	0.00
t	0.02	0.00

Error terms:

Groups	Name	Std.Dev.	Corr
pair	(Intercept)	0.11	
	t	0.02	-0.25
Residual		0.04	

(b) within and between issue domains

	coef.est	coef.se
(Intercept)	0.12	0.00
t	0.02	0.00
within.iss.dom	0.11	0.01
t * within.iss.dom	0.00	0.00

Error terms:

Groups	Name	Std.Dev.	Corr
pair	(Intercept)	0.09	
	t	0.02	-0.30
Residual		0.04	

(c) types of issue domains

		coef.est	coef.se
(Intercept)		0.25	0.01
t		0.02	0.00
Civil.Rights.pairs	(2)	0.00	0.01
Moral.pairs	(3)	-0.07	0.02
Foreign.Pol.pairs	(4)	-0.23	0.03
Mixed pairs	(5)	-0.14	0.01
t * Civil.Rights.pairs	(2)	0.00	0.01
t * Moral.pairs	(3)	0.00	0.01
t * Foreign.Pol.pairs	(4)	0.00	0.02
t * Mixed pairs	(5)	0.00	0.00

Error terms:

Groups	Name	Std.Dev.	Corr
pair	(Intercept)	0.09	
	t	0.02	-0.31
Residual		0.04	

Table 3: Fitted multilevel models for issue alignment. Results for the correlation between pairs of issues (a) Model with no pairs grouping. (b) Model with pairs grouped as within and between domain correlations. (c) Model with pairs distinguished according to issue domains. Varying intercept and varying slope models; 1054 pairs, 5635 observations.

where ρ_{pt} is the correlation between the pair of issues p in year t. Results are shown in the first column of Table 3.

The average correlation between issues is .15, with a standard deviation of .11, which means that about two-thirds of the pairs' correlations range between .04 and .26. With respect to the trend in issue alignment, we observe that, in average, the coefficients have increased of .02 per decade. Although statistically significant (s.e. .00), this trend is substantially lower than the one observed for issue partisanship. Moreover, the estimate coefficient is close to zero or even negative for most of the pairs: 95% issue pairs show trends between $-.02$ and .06. Figure 7 plots the trend estimate t for each pair of issues. We highlight the intensity of the change using different shades of gray. Correlation between issues have substantially increased in only a few cases; moreover, there are no discernible patterns within or between issue domains.

According to our Hypothesis 1, issue alignment is expected to induce increased correlation between issue domains, as a consequence of the increased coherence in people's belief system. We test this hypothesis, first, by distinguishing pairs between those that belong to the same domain and those that belong to two different domains. In the second column of Table 3 we report the relating model. At any time, we expect higher correlation between issues that belong to the same domain, and in fact the average correlation is .23 for within-domain pairs and .12 for between-domain pairs. In the case of issue alignment, we would expect to observe coefficients for between-domain pairs to growth more substantially that the coefficients of pair correlations within domains. Instead, this is not what we find: the modest growth of .02 per decade affects both within and between-domains pairs alike.

It might be the case, nonetheless, that issue alignment is occurring only in some domains. In particular, since we have observed a substantial rise of partisanship with respect to Moral issues, we might expect opinion on Moral issues to have become more tightened. The last column of Table 3 induces us to reject this latter hypothesis. In this model we distinguish pairs according to their issue type. The correlation within types of issue varies. It is in average .25 for Economic and Civil Rights issues, lower for Moral issues (.18) and generally null for Security and Foreign Policy issues. While the average correlation for between-domains pairs (Mixed pairs) is .11. Once again, we find that the intensity of change over time is the same within and between issue domains.

In sum, evidence in favor of the hypothesis of issue alignment is limited to a modest trend of increasing correlation between pairs of issues. A trend, moreover, that is undifferentiated (since it manifests within each issue domains and between issue domains in similar ways)

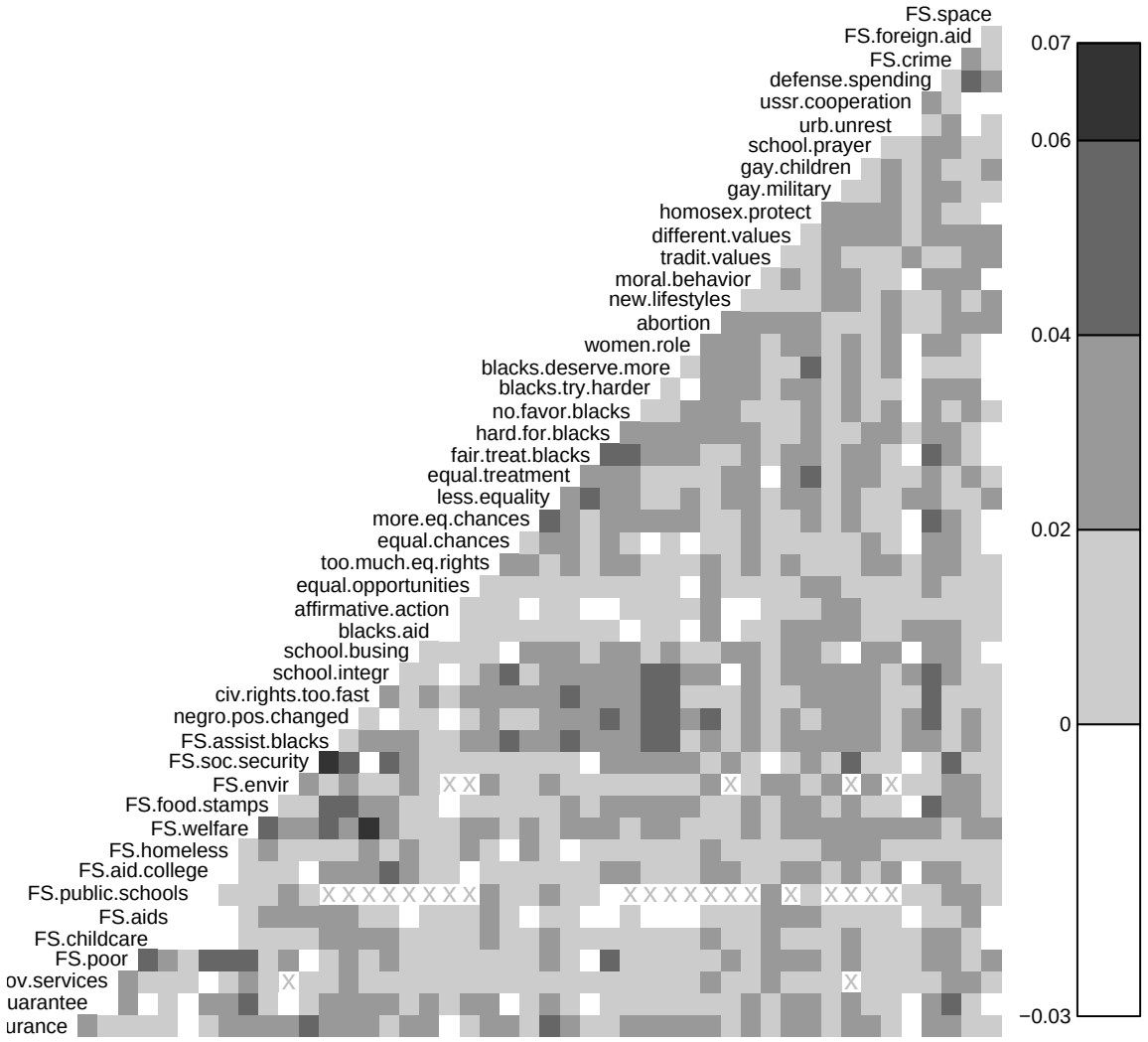

Figure 7: Time trends in correlations for all pairs of issues. The plot shows the trend estimates for each pair of issues from the multilevel for issue alignment (a summary of the model is presented in Table 3a). X's indicate pairs for which no observation were available. (To compute the estimate, the two issues needed to be both asked in at least two different years.)

and not generalized (since several issues show no tendency toward alignment and some are even moving toward dealignment). Too little, we conclude, to talk about a real tendency toward issue alignment.

Nonetheless, it is possible that different patterns in issue partisanship and alignment are occurring within subsets of the population or subgroups of people. This is the subject of our last set of analysis.

4.3 Analysis III: partisanship and alignment in subgroups

Patterns observed in the population as a whole might hide trends in population subgroups or even cancel contrasting trends. We therefore looked at trends in certain population subgroups. Specifically, Hypothesis 1a requires to look at the subset of the population who is politically more sophisticated or active. Some citizens are more interested in politics than others, and thus, in average, they have a more structured political belief system. Their opinions show higher constraint and are more consistent over time. The question for us is whether patterns in partisanship and issue alignment are different among the politically sophisticated. Indeed, they are.

Figure 8a shows the trends in partisanship and issue alignment distinguishing highly interested people (black line) from people that follow politics only sporadically (gray line). Each row reports the results from a multilevel regression model with varying-intercept, varying-slope and correlations grouped by issue domain. The first and second row report models of issue partisanship, issue $\times$ party ID and issue $\times$ liberal-conservative ideology respectively; the third row reports estimates for the model of issue alignment (issue pairs correlations). As expected, in general, those that are interested in politics show higher levels of issue constraint. Interesting to our analysis, is the fact that issue partisanship on civil rights and moral issues has increased at a faster pace among the interested in politics. And a similar, although less pronounced trend is visible for issue alignment. Figure 8b compares the trend for political activists to the rest of the population. As for the subset of interested citizens, politically active people have higher issue constraint. But interestingly enough, their change over time is parallel to that of the other citizens. A result suggesting that dynamics of issue partisanship and alignment are more due to cognitive capabilities than partisan political involvement (although the two often go together).

We use the same analytical strategy to test Hypothesis 1b, according to which we might expect to observe different trends in some population subgroups. Figure 9 considers education and income. While people who attended college differ from those that did not

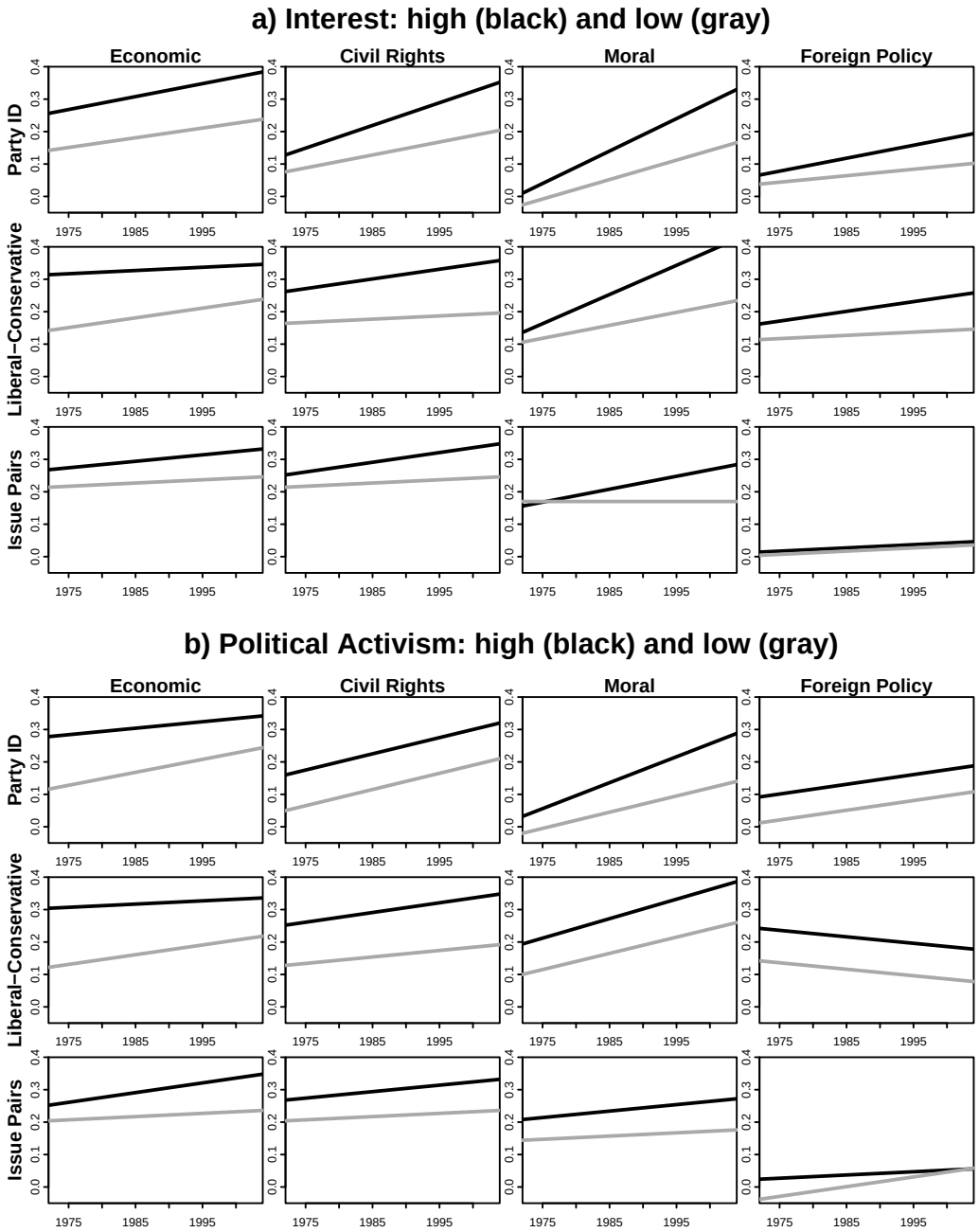

Figure 8: Trends in issue partisanship and alignment for different levels of (a) interest and (b) political activism. Estimates from the multilevel regression models with varying-intercept, varying-slope and correlations grouped by issue domain. Each box compares the correlation trends in an issue domain for two mutually exclusive subgroups. In each panel, the first row reports the model of issues interacted with party ID, the second of issues interacted with liberal-conservative ideology and the third is the model for issue pairs. x-axis: time (1972–2004); y-axis: correlation ($-.05$ to .4). (a) Interest: high interest (black line), low interest (gray line). Panel (b) Political activism: politically active (black line), non-politically-active (gray line).

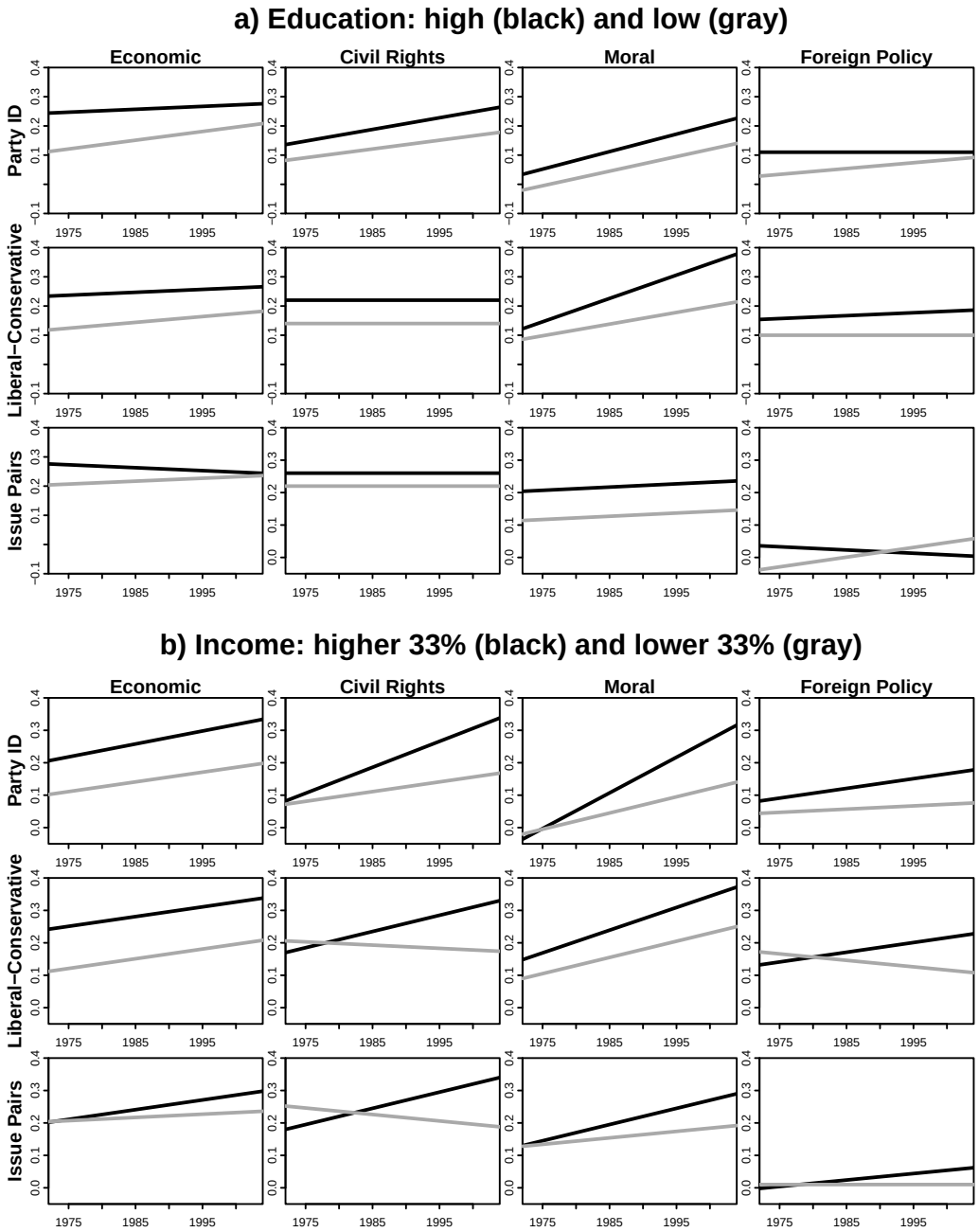

Figure 9: Trends in issue partisanship and alignment for different levels of (a) education and (b) income. Estimates from the multilevel regression models with varying-intercept, varying-slope and correlations grouped by issue domain. Each box compares the correlation trends in an issue domain for two mutually exclusive subgroups. In each panel, the first row reports the model issues interacted with party ID, the second issues interacted with liberal-conservative ideology, and the third is the model for issue pairs. x-axis: time (1972–2004); y-axis: correlation ($-.05$ to .4). (a) Education: college or higher (black line), no college (gray line). (b) Income: higher 33% (black line), lower 33% (gray line).

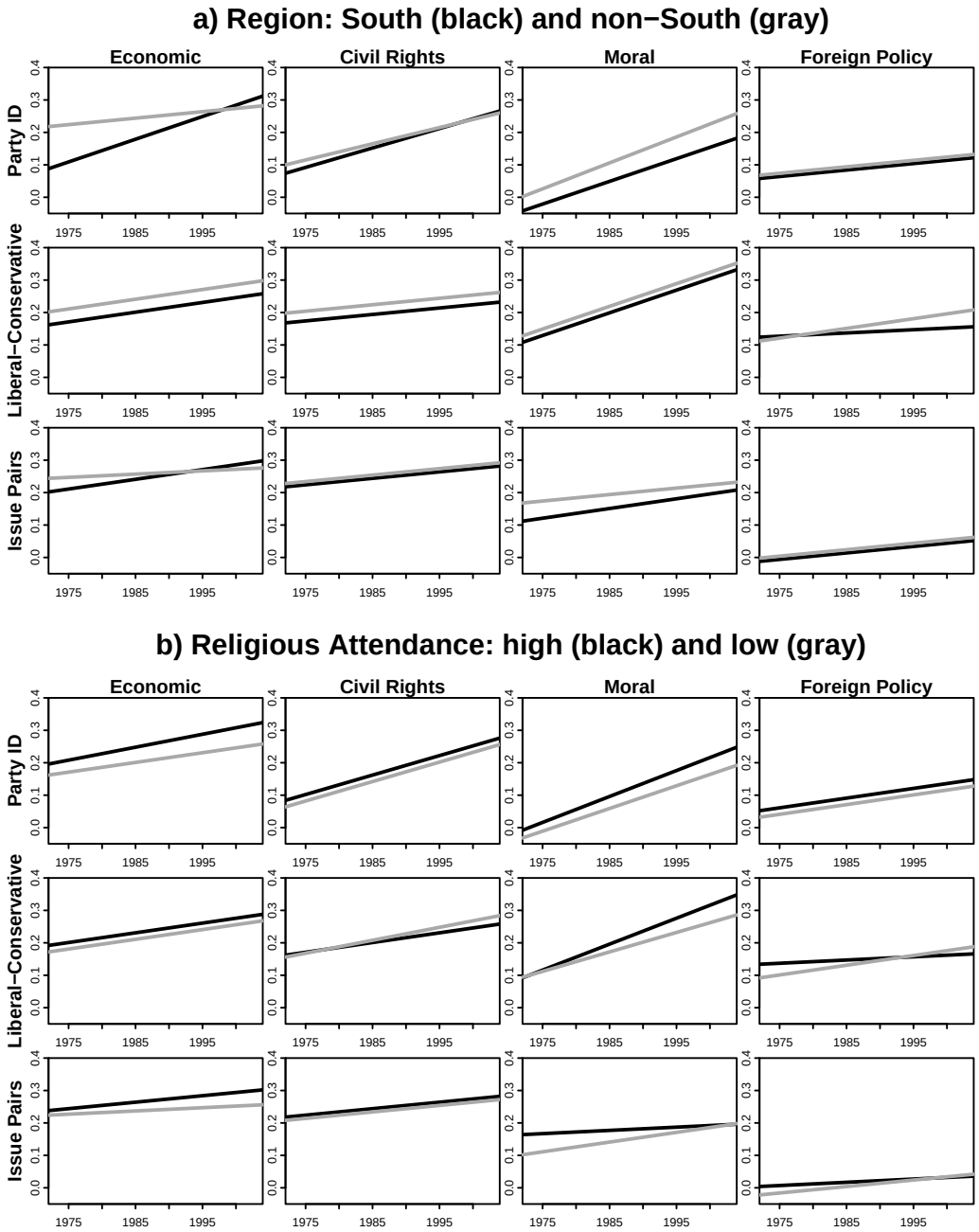

Figure 10: Trends in issue partisanship and alignment by (a) region and (b) church attendance. Estimates from the multilevel regression models with varying-intercept, varying-slope and correlations grouped by issue domain. Each box compares the correlation trends in an issue domain for two mutually exclusive subgroups. In each panel, the first row reports the model issues interacted with party ID, the second issues interacted with liberal-conservative ideology, and the third is the model for issue pairs. x-axis: time (1972–2004); y-axis: correlation ($-.05$ to .4). (a) Region: south (black line), non-south (gray line). (b) Church attendance: twice a month or more (black line), less than twice a month (gray line).

only with respect to their overall level of constraint, there are profound differences between the wealthiest (top 33% of the income distribution) and the poorest (bottom 33% of the income distribution). Over time, the wealthiest part of the population has become more ideological and internally more consistent on civil rights and moral issues, while the poorest third of the citizens shows minimal (or even decreasing) partisanship on civil rights issues and decline on issue alignment on the same topic. And the growth in partisanship and alignment on moral issues is moderate. While the richest part of the nation has resorted itself according to partisans lines, the poorest part did not (or not to the same extent). In line with recent studies on the relation between inequality and politics (McCarty et al. 2006), this result seems to suggest that the economically marginal part of the population is growing increasingly more detached from the political discourse.

Figure 10 considers two factors that have been often associated with the current wave of polarization: region and religious attendance. Maybe surprisingly to some, the process of partisan realignment along moral issues has taken place in the same way among southerners and non-southerners, and among churchgoers and non-churchgoers. The only remarkable difference is the strong party realignment of southerners on Economic issues. This does not mean that people in these different subgroups think alike—indeed they do not (Ansolabehere et al. 2006)—but it means that patterns of increasing polarization on moral issues are not disproportionally driven by some population subgroups. They involve the entire population.

5 Discussion

According to the theorists of political pluralism (Truman 1951; Dahl 1961; Olson 1965; Lowi 1969; Walker 1991; Galston 2002) as well as many scholars that have studied the structural characteristics of contemporary societies (Simmel 1908[1950]; Blau 1974), an integrated society is not a society in which conflict is absent, rather one in which conflict expresses itself through non-encompassing interests and identities. In the attempt to propose a pragmatic alternative to both the ideal of direct, popular democracy and the idea that American politics is governed by a small, unitary power elite (Wright Mills 1956), theorists of political pluralism recognized that in practice representative democracies do not support the ideal of equal representation. Nonetheless, they maintained that a multitude of interest groups, not a close circle, have access to power. Intergroup competition, as well as institutional differentiation (Madison 1787), limit the influence of single actors, thus securing the openness of the democratic process. At the same time, crosscutting interests and overlapping memberships inhibit the emergence of encompassing identities because members' allegiance

is often spread among many groups, and thus diminishes the possibility of overt conflict.

Why are we so worried about political polarization? And should we? Scholars and pundits seem to be concerned with political polarization processes for the consequences they might have on interest representation, political integration and social stability. By distinguishing between trends in issue partisanship and issue alignment we were able to disentangle dynamics of party realignment from actual opinion alignment. While both dynamics might have consequences on the political process, these consequences are different. In discussing our findings, we relate trends in issue partisanship to the possibility that political extremists and single issue advocates might gain disproportionate voice in the political process, and trends in issue alignment with issues of unequal representation and political integration.

In general, people's preferences are loosely connected and even the relation between attitude preferences and partisanship is low. Nonetheless, this cannot be regarded as a decisive proof of the crosscutting nature of people's political interests, since such low level of constraint is only partially interpretable as an indicator of the composite, multifaceted nature of people's political views. The scarce coherence in people's attitudes can be partially explained by their low level of political sophistication: in fact, much of the population is not interested in politics, does not follow the political debate, and thus is minimally capable of organizing its preferences according to classical ideological categories (Kinder and Sears 1985; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). That said, it is nonetheless informative to look at differences in the level of issue constraint for different types of issues and at their trend over time.

We first considered the trend of issue partisanship over time and concluded that the relation between people's political attitudes and their party identification or liberal-conservative ideology has tightened. A substantial growth in the correlation between issues and partisanship is observable for all issue domains, but the change is significantly more intense in the case of Moral issues. At the beginning of the 1990s the partisan divide was visible only for Economic and, to a lesser extent, Civil Rights issues. Thirty years later, Democrats and Republicans (or liberals and conservatives) separate also for their opinion on Moral issues. The Economic domain remains the more tightly related to party identification followed by Civil Rights and Moral issues, while, with respect to the liberal-conservative ideology, Moral issues are now the more distinct dividing line.

In general, our analysis adds to other scholars' findings on the increasing importance of partisanship: we show that partisanship not only has an impact on voting behavior (Bartels

2000; Heterington 2001; Bafumi 2006), but plays a more important role in partitioning voters according to their issue preferences. We confirm the fact that Moral issues have become a stable component of partisan identities, but we argue that it is by no means the only (or the most important) one. Manza and Brooks (1999) have convincingly supported the persistent importance of traditional social cleavages of class, race, and religiosity in determining voting behavior. Accordingly, our study shows that individuals have become more partisan not only on Moral, but also on Economic and Civil Rights issues.

Second, we turned to the study of issue alignment, modeling the correlation between pairs of issues, and found only feeble evidence of issue alignment. We observe a minimal increase in the correlations and, moreover, the trend does not differentiate pairs of issues within and across issue domains and it does not involve a large group of issues, or a meaningful subset of them.

Taken together, these two results support our first hypothesis, suggesting that changes in the electorate should be interpreted as an illusory adjustment of the citizens to the renovated partisanship of the political elite. In other words, since the parties are now more clearly divided—and on a broader set of issues—it is easier for people to split accordingly, without changing their own views (for this reason we use the term "illusory"). There has been some discussion regarding the directionality of the change, with most of the scholars suggesting public opinion polarization being a consequence of elite polarization (cfr. Shapiro and Bafumi 2006). Our results confirm this interpretation, since, despite partisan alignment, there were no real instances of issue alignment. If it was that changes in voters' preferences had affected the party elite, we would instead have found evidence of issue alignment in the electorate, since issue alignment has certainly occurred among the political elite (Poole and Rosenthal 2007)).

It is possible that extreme positions have gained prominence within the two parties: given the partisan realignment, the average opinion within partisan subgroups is now more extreme—as documented, for instance, by Shapiro and Bafumi (2006). In addition, given the modest trend in issue alignment, we infer that voters are splitting along party lines according to the issue that is most salient to them, while they do not bother to adjust their (weak) preferences on the remaining issues (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007). This in turn gives more leverage to the action of single-issue advocates at the level of interest representation. Again, single-issue-based interest groups are more likely to hold extreme positions (McCarty et al. 2006; Brady and Han 2006).

So far, we have considered changes in the entire population. Turning to trends in issue

partisanship and alignment within population subgroups allowed us to reveal potential mechanisms of unequal representation. Population subgroups differ in their overall levels of constraint: people who are wealthier, more educated, and interested in politics show, at any moment in time, higher correlations in issue attitudes. More interesting to us, in some cases, also trends in issue partisanship and alignment differ. Specifically, we noticed that those who are more interested in politics have grown more coherent in their beliefs on morality and civil rights at a faster pace than the remaining part of the population, thus broadening the gap between their respective levels of constraint on these issues. A similar and more striking pattern was observed among the richest third of the population, who have become more coherent in their political preferences, and in the relation between these preferences and partisanship, while the poorest have remained essentially inconsistent. We do not observe any striking patterns, however, when dividing the population by region or by church attendance.

Our work reinforces the findings of McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) on the relation between elite polarization and inequality, by suggesting that substantial partisan and issue alignment has occurred within the resourceful and powerful group of rich Americans. The wealthier part of the political constituency knows well what it wants and it is likely, now more than in the past, to affect the political process, thus potentially increasing inequality in interest representation, not only through lobbying activity and campaign financing, but also in the ballot (Bartels 2005).[9]

To conclude, we have found that the main change in people's attitudes had to do with a re-sorting of party labels among voters than to greater constraint in their issue attitudes. This has occurred mostly because parties are more polarized and therefore better at sorting individuals along ideological lines. Such partisan realignment, although has not induced realignment in issue preferences, does not come without consequences for the political process. We have reason to believe that increased issue partisanship, in a context of persistently low issue constraint, has the effect of handing over greater voice to political extremists and single-issue advocates, and amplifying dynamics of unequal representation.

In more general terms, our analysis, along with the scholarly contribution of the last decade (notably Fiorina et al. 2005), suggests that members of the political elite have taken increasingly divergent paths on their own, whereas the large public has maintained

[9]We are not suggesting that rich people think the same; in fact they show great variation in their partisanship, when considered geographically or based on social characteristics (Manza and Brooks 1999; Gelman et al. 2006; Bafumi and Shapiro 2007). We are saying that, either they are Republican or Democrat, rich people are better off at sustaining and pushing through the system whatever issue they care about.

a moderate stand. This constitutes a serious challenge to those liberal-pluralistic theories that take for granted the capacity of mediation and conciliation of the political elite and assume that threats to social and political stability come exclusively from the mass public (see Sartori 1976; cfr. Bermeo 2003 for a critical view).

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