



Issue alignment and partisanship in the American public: Revisiting the ‘partisans without constraint’ thesis

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ABSTRACT

Prior studies of American polarization suggest that the public gradually sorted themselves into partisan camps in the late 20th century while remaining largely non-ideological. Drawing on more recent data, we reassess these trends and discover a striking increase in the ideological organization of American public opinion in the beginning of the 21st century. Using a broad set of issues from the American National Election Studies, we identify rapid growth in the correlations between political attitudes from 2004 to 2016. This emergence of issue alignment is most pronounced within the economic and civil rights domains, challenging the notion that current “culture wars” are grounded in moral issues. While elite subpopulations show the greatest gains, we find that economic issues become more highly correlated across the electorate. We also find accelerated growth in the association between partisanship and issue attitudes during this period. These findings paint a new picture of the American electorate as not only highly partisan but increasingly ideological.

1. Introduction

It is common to hear pundits declare that America is a divided country, split into two diametrically opposed partisan factions. However, among scholars of public opinion, the nature of current polarization and the extent of these divisions remain open questions. Democratic and Republican party elites have indeed gravitated towards opposite ideological poles in recent decades (McCarty et al., 2006), but whether the public at large has followed similar trends remains unclear (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Layman et al. 2006; Hill, and Tausanovitch 2015; Lelkes 2016; Park 2017). A central unanswered question is whether the public has truly become more ideological or if contemporary mass polarization is better described as a change in the structure of partisan allegiances in a largely non-ideological electorate (Fiorina 2017).

One particularly influential line of research has argued that the distribution of political attitudes has changed little in recent decades. The apparently growing rift between Left and Right is in fact a result of heightened partisan sorting rather than attitudinal change. According to this explanation, as the two major parties more clearly differentiate themselves, members of the public are better able to identify and select the partisan label that best corresponds to their own stances on issues. By this account, contemporary polarization is something of an illusion; through partisan sorting, conservatives appear to become more conservative and liberals more liberal when in fact few political opinions have changed (Fiorina et al. 2008; Levendusky 2009).

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Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) provide some of the strongest evidence for the partisan sorting hypothesis. They distinguish between attitudinal polarization and partisan sorting by comparing trends in *issue alignment* — defined as the correlation between issue positions — and *partisan alignment* — the correlation between partisan self-identification and issue attitudes. Using data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) from 1972 to 2004, they show that issue alignment increased little in the late 20th century while partisan alignment rose precipitously. Taken together, these findings suggest that “the main change in people’s attitudes has more to do with a resorting of party labels among voters than with greater constraint in their issue attitudes” (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008:443).

There are growing reasons to believe that issue alignment may have heightened since 2004, and that the “partisans without constraint” model is no longer accurate. First, classic theories of public opinion posit a lag between elite and mass polarization (Zaller 1992). This suggests that the public’s reaction to elite polarization at the close of the 20th century may not have manifested until after 2004. The media landscape has also transformed since 2004, with online media rising to prominence and strongly partisan cable news taking viewers away from more centrist broadcast news (Prior 2013). Lastly, recent years have witnessed a number of momentous political developments that captured public attention. Social movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the Tea Party, and Black Lives Matter garnered widespread support and recentered economic and racial issues in political discourse. This same period also encompassed the rise of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, both galvanizing and divisive figures in national politics. Prior theory suggests that all these factors could have polarized the electorate and heightened both partisan and issue alignments. However, no study has yet systematically measured developments in alignments in the years since Baldassarri and Gelman’s influential statement.

In this study, we revisit the “partisans without constraint” thesis to test if it still serves as an adequate description of polarization in the contemporary American electorate, updating Baldassarri and Gelman’s analysis with more recent waves of the ANES. We use the same set of ANES questions and measures of alignment as Baldassarri and Gelman, but we apply a flexible modeling strategy that allows us to inductively identify changes in alignment in the electorate through 2016.

First, we find that partisan alignment continued to increase between 2004 and 2016 at an accelerated pace. Second, we identify a notable increase in issue alignment during recent years. We find particularly great increases in inter-issue correlations among economic and civil rights issues, and more modest gains among moral issues. This finding challenges academic and popular discourses that foreground morally-charged “culture wars” in contemporary politics and instead suggests that issues of race and class are key grounds of political division. We also identify increasing issue alignment *between* domains, particularly among the politically engaged. This increase in inter-issue correlation suggests that the political opinions of the public are, for the first time in at least 70 years, consolidating around a few clear axes of ideological opposition.² While it is beyond this study to directly specify the precise forces driving these shifts, we argue that the patterns in issue alignment we identify are most readily interpretable as responses to recent social movements and political campaigns rather than lagged reactions to elite polarization or responses to polarized media.

The emergence of issue alignment suggests that Baldassarri and Gelman’s characterization of the American public as “partisans without constraint” is a less accurate depiction now than in 2004. Our findings instead indicate that the public is not only becoming more partisan, but that their attitudes across a wide array of issues are becoming ideologically organized. These trends challenge Philip Converse’s (1964:47) longstanding dictum that the public is “innocent of ideology,” and motivate new thinking about how the contemporary public understands and responds to political information.

2. Background

2.1. Alignment and polarization

One reason for the persistent debate around the state of American mass polarization is that polarization itself is a multifaceted process and the specific phenomenon being measured often varies from study to study. Two key dimensions of polarization deserve particularly careful distinction: bimodality and alignment. Bimodality refers to the dissolution of the center and gravitation to the poles of a political spectrum (DiMaggio et al. 1996). In terms of partisan identity, bimodal polarization implies that a shrinking portion of the electorate identifies as “moderate” or “independent.” In terms of issue attitudes, bimodality manifests as a movement away from answers such as “neither agree nor disagree” or “neutral,” and a proliferation of extreme responses on both ends of the response set. Most existing evidence has stressed that bimodality has not substantially increased among partisan identification or attitude distributions, with the possible exception of a few key issues such as abortion (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Lelkes 2016; Mason 2015; Park 2017).

Alignment is defined not by the absence of centrists, but by the linear relation between multiple political distributions, or in other words, their correlation. It is possible for high alignment to manifest in a fairly centrist public if the disagreements that do exist are consolidated along relatively few dimensions. While high alignment does not necessarily imply extremism, it does imply widespread organization of public opinion around ideologically-opposed poles and a shrinking of the full range of observed opinion configurations (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Martin 2002).

Previous scholarship has distinguished between two distinct forms of political alignment: partisan alignment and issue alignment. Partisan alignment, defined as the correlation between issue attitudes and partisan identities (Democrat or Republican; liberal or conservative), captures the extent to which issue attitudes systematically differ across partisan lines. Partisan alignment is maximized when it is possible to perfectly predict an individual’s stance on an issue given their partisan affiliation and vice versa. Issue

² The ANES extends back as far as 1948, and although Baldassarri and Gelman focus their analysis on the period of 1972–2004, they report that a general pattern of low inter-issue correlation holds for the period of 1948–1972 as well.

alignment—the correlation between issue attitudes—indicates how often certain pairs of opinions co-occur in the population. Issue alignment is thus closely related to ideological consistency; it is highest when attitudes are predictably bundled together such that a given position on one issue always corresponds with a certain position on another.

The study of issue alignment stretches back to Philip Converse's (1964) seminal work on ideology in the mass public. Converse referred to inter-issue correlation not as issue alignment but as "constraint," emphasizing how, for an ideological individual, holding one opinion seemingly constrains the set of possible opinions on other issues. Converse found, however, that constraint was startlingly low in the mass public; most individuals reported a mixed bag of attitudes, freely mingling liberal and conservative opinions. Finding only minimal constraint, as well as low attitude stability and a widespread inability to articulate ideological reasoning, Converse famously proclaimed the American public to be "innocent of ideology." Although controversial at the time, the basic finding that most Americans' attitudes show little sign of ideological patterning has proven remarkably robust over decades of scrutiny (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017).

Baldassarri and Gelman's (2008) study provided powerful evidence that the second half of the 20th century was a period of heightening partisan alignment but consistently low inter-issue correlation. Encompassing a diverse range of political issues and spanning more than three decades, their analyses were able to identify general trends in partisan and issue alignment, as well as specific variations in these trends across issue domains and between socio-demographic subgroups. Baldassarri and Gelman were not the first to claim that belief systems of the mass public lacked ideological organization (Converse 1964) or that partisan sorting increased in the late 20th century (Fiorina et al. 2004), but their study's broad empirical scope paired with clear, powerful findings helped establish the "partisans without constraint" thesis as a dominant assessment of contemporary American polarization.

2.2. Contemporary mass polarization

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed renewed interest in the question of mass polarization. A number of recent studies have shown a widening rift in political attitudes between self-identified liberals and conservatives. However, these studies rely overwhelmingly on cross-sectional data and are unable to determine whether this widening gap is due to attitudinal change or partisan sorting (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; DellaPosta et al., 2015; Fiorina and Abrams 2008). Compelling findings have come out of studies using an individual-level measure of ideological consistency (Abramowitz 2010; Pew Research Center, 2014), which suggests that self-identified Democrats and Republicans became substantially more ideologically-consistent between the 1990s and the 2010s. Yet these scales too have been criticized for focusing on partisans and paying inadequate attention to the politically moderate and unaffiliated (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006, 96–97).

There are several reasons to expect that issue and partisan alignments may have grown in recent years. First, scholars have long hypothesized that the public responds to cues from political elites, but the general public has still not reached elite levels of polarization. It is possible that the general public is still responding to these elite cues, but effects are lagged due to a general inattention to politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). This effect would likely manifest as increasing alignment across issue domains, led by more politically sophisticated and followed by the politically disengaged (Zaller 1992).

Second, highly partisan media outlets on television and online have grown in popularity as alternatives to relatively centrist broadcast news, and some recent evidence suggests that consumption of these programs may play a role in fueling mass polarization (Levendusky, 2013; Prior 2013). Social media has also drawn recent scrutiny for fostering political echo chambers where opinions can crystallize and intensify without outside challenge (Boutyline and Willer 2017). If new media has strengthened political alignments, we would expect to find recent growth largely concentrated among the most avid consumers of social media and news.

Lastly, the 2004–2016 period witnessed a series of momentous developments in American politics. The 2008 financial crisis caused massive public reactions across the political spectrum. Both Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party emerged from this crisis, each demanding dramatic shifts in economic policy and garnering widespread public support. The same year also witnessed the election of the first black president, and prior evidence suggests that racial attitudes gained renewed prominence during the Obama administration (Tesler 2016). Lastly, many commentators have speculated that the rise of Donald Trump has spurred mass polarization since his 2016 presidential campaign, particularly around issues of race and immigration (Bartels 2018; Jacobson 2019). If these events shaped political alignments, we would expect to find growth in the corresponding issue domains following the respective events.

Recent work by Park (2017) has gauged contemporary trends in partisan sorting and political alignment using more current data than Baldassarri and Gelman (2008). Park's findings suggest that partisan sorting increased along multiple metrics between 1980 and 2012 and that issue constraint has remained low during this period. However, Park's measures of both partisan sorting and issue constraint differ from the measures used by Baldassarri and Gelman (2008), making it difficult to directly compare the studies' results. Furthermore, Park's study does not include 2016 ANES data and therefore misses very recent changes in alignment. Decisively adjudicating whether the "partisans without constraint" thesis continues to be an adequate description of contemporary polarization requires the application of the same methods and measures to more recent data, which is precisely the objective of this study.

3. Data and methods

Our analyses rely on the American National Election Studies' (ANES) cumulative dataset. The ANES was administered biennially from 1972 to 2004 (17 total waves). Since then, it has only been fielded during presidential election years (2008, 2012, and 2016). We include in our sample all waves of the ANES from 1972 to 2016 except the 2002 wave, which was fielded entirely by telephone. The ANES solicits a wide array of opinions on social and economic issues as well as respondents' ideological and party self-identifications. Many of the issue attitude questions are asked repeatedly, some for several decades. We analyze the same set of issues as Baldassarri

and Gelman, who included only questions that were asked in three or more waves of the time series. A full list of the issues included in our analyses is presented in [Appendix Table A1](#).

We examine trends in partisan alignment and issue alignment. We distinguish between two distinct forms of partisan alignment: *party alignment* and *ideological alignment*. Following Baldassarri and Gelman, we operationalize party alignment as the correlation of each attitudinal item with the respondent's party identification on a seven-point scale (strong Democrat to strong Republican) and operationalize ideological alignment as the correlation between each attitudinal item and the respondent's ideological identification on a seven-point scale (extremely liberal to extremely conservative). Lastly, to measure issue alignment, we use the correlation between pairs of issue attitudes in a given year.³ Issue responses are recoded such that, for all questions, higher values indicate more conservative responses.⁴

As some ANES waves oversample certain subpopulations, we apply survey weights in calculating correlation coefficients. Over its history, the ANES has complemented in-person interviews with other modes. Between 1984 and 2000, the ANES fielded a combination of telephone and in-person interviews, and in 2012 and 2016, the ANES sample included a mix of face-to-face and Internet respondents. To avoid potentially confounding mode effects, we limit our analyses exclusively to the face-to-face, in-person sample for all waves. This involved dropping all Internet respondents in 2012 and 2016 and dropping and telephone respondents in six earlier waves. Pooling face-to-face, Internet, and telephone respondents (including the 2002 wave comprised entirely of telephone interviews) does not substantively alter results.⁵

3.1. Modeling strategy

While the ANES is a uniquely powerful dataset for studying American public opinion over time, few attitudinal items are asked consistently in all waves. Baldassarri and Gelman's original study offers a creative solution to this methodological challenge. Rather than focusing on change in the opinion distribution of single items over time, they use a multilevel modeling framework to analyze pairwise-correlations between items within each year. Thus, even if a pair of items is not present in every year of the time series, those years where they do appear remain informative. We adopt a similar multilevel modeling strategy but adapt the approach to inductively identify changes in alignment trends over time.⁶

To account for the possibility of intricate nonlinearities in levels of alignment over time, we build on Baldassarri and Gelman's approach by using semi-parametric models that allow for nonlinear patterns to emerge from the data rather than imposing a functional form beforehand ([Andersen 2009; Keele 2008](#)). First, for baseline estimates of general trends across all issues, we adopt smoothing-splines mixed effects models (SMEs), analogous to the random coefficient models used by Baldassarri and Gelman. We then use generalized additive mixed models (GAMMs) to obtain separate trend estimates for each issue domain. Semi-parametric models are particularly useful for separating long-term trends from short-term responses to specific events, which parametric models may mask.

Smoothing-splines mixed effects (SME) models, like other smoothing-spline models, account for nonlinearities by modeling an outcome variable as a series of polynomial functions. There are a number of potential knots that define breakpoints between the polynomial functions. In our case, the interval between each ANES wave from 1984 to 2016 has a unique polynomial function fit to it. The pre-1984 waves have relatively few items asked per year; the sparsity of data during this period forced us to impose a single polynomial function from 1972 to 1984. The SME includes a penalty term that shrinks the spline coefficients towards linearity in order to prevent overfitting.

What distinguishes the *mixed effects* smoothing-spline model from normal smoothing-spline models is its multilevel structure. Following [Baldassarri and Gelman \(2008\)](#), correlations between items are nested within years in our models. The "level-2" unit is an item-pair (i,j). For models of partisan alignment, i corresponds to an issue attitude and j corresponds to either party or ideological self-identification. For models of inter-issue constraint, i and j both correspond to issue attitudes. At "level-1" each observation represents the correlation of i and j at wave t . The SME includes separate smoothing functions for (1) the mean trend across all subjects and (2) each item-pair, similar to a random coefficient multilevel model. We fit the SME model using the *sme* library for R ([Berk 2018](#)).

Generalized additive mixed models (GAMM) similarly model an outcome variable as a series of polynomial functions ([Wood 2017](#)).

³ We exclude "don't know" responses from analysis and use pairwise complete data to calculate correlations. For the great majority of issues, "don't knows" comprise less than 5% of responses, and for party self-identification, only approximately 2% of respondents select "don't know" each year. Ideological self-identification exhibits a much higher rate of "don't know" responses, roughly 20% each year. This is perhaps because the question explicitly provides "haven't thought about it much" as a response. We found no clear trend in "don't know" responses over the time series. The persistence of a sizable share of the electorate unable to place themselves on the liberal-conservative spectrum does suggest that tight ideological constraint is still not ubiquitous in the public.

⁴ We empirically determine which responses to an issue are more conservative by calculating the correlation between the issue and the seven-point ideological self-identification scale for a pooled sample of all survey waves. For all questions except one (federal spending on crime) basing coding on ideological self-identification produces identical results to basing coding on party self-identification. We decided to code use ideological self-identification because this coding produces positive associations between federal spending on crime other issues in the security domain, whereas basing coding on party identification would result in strong negative inter-issue correlations.

⁵ Supplemental results with alternate samples and specifications are available from the authors upon request.

⁶ An additional advantage of the multilevel modeling strategy is that it provides a straightforward way of assessing potential biases due to the shifting battery of items over time. If earlier or later waves disproportionately fielded items that are highly correlated with each other or items whose correlations changed most over time, level-2 (item pair) random effects would be correlated with the survey year in which those items appear. Additional analyses available upon request show that this does not appear to be the case in our models.

GAMMs include a random-intercept to account for baseline differences between item-pairs. The advantage of GAMMs relative SMEs is that they allow us to include separate splines⁷ for each issue domain within a single model. We fit our GAMMs using the *gamm4* library for R (Wood and Scheipl 2017). To examine differences between issue domains, we add dummy variables at level-2 in our models designating the domain: economic, moral, civil rights, or security. For analyses of issue alignment, level-2 (issue-pair) also includes a dummy variable designating a “cross-domain” pair when the two issues are from different topical domains.

Our results are presented in three sections. First, we present general trends in partisan and issue alignments across all issues. Second, we investigate differences in trends between issue domains. Lastly, we compare trends in issue and partisan alignments between socio-demographic and political subgroups. We compare subgroups by separately running the GAMM model described above for each subgroup.

4. Results

We begin with the SME models for party, ideological, and issue alignments over time, depicted in Fig. 1. The shaded region around each trend line contains the 95-percent confidence interval for the trend. To clarify the contrast between the 1972–2004 period studied by Baldassarri and Gelman and the subsequent waves, we shade the background for the post-2004 period.

The two forms of partisan alignment — ideological alignment and party alignment — are represented with dashed and solid lines respectively. Pre-2004 trends in partisan alignment largely accord with Baldassarri and Gelman’s findings. Party alignment rises consistently, but ideological alignment displays a more complicated trajectory; it dips in the early 1980s, but experiences a pronounced spike in 2004. After 2004, both forms of partisan alignment continue their growth, reaching historic heights in 2016.

Issue alignment is represented with a dotted line in Fig. 1. Matching Baldassarri and Gelman’s results, we find inter-issue correlation to be relatively stable between the 1970s and early 2000s. However, between 2000 and 2016, issue alignment experiences notable growth. These findings suggest that issue stances were more highly correlated in 2016 than at any point in the prior four decades.

4.1. Differences across issue domains

To clarify and elaborate the general trends in alignment described above, we explore differences in alignment trajectories between four issue domains: economic, moral, civil rights, and security.⁸ The civil rights domain refers primarily to issues pertaining to race relations, while women’s rights and gay rights are included in the moral domain.

Fig. 2 displays results from GAMM estimates of trends in ideological and party alignments. In the left panel of Fig. 2, we see how the increase in ideological alignment is spread across issue domains. Economic, civil rights, and moral issues all show similar levels of correlation with ideological self-identification and all undergo similar trajectories over time. Ideological alignment grows gradually in each of these domains until 2004, then experiences accelerated growth through 2016. The security domain follows a similar pattern, but exhibits lower absolute levels of ideological alignment over full enture time period.

The right panel of Fig. 2 displays GAMM results for party alignment. As with ideological alignment, we see party alignment increasing in all issue domains, with growth accelerating in recent years. Interestingly, while economic, civil rights, and moral issues all correlate with ideological self-identification at similar levels, they correlate differentially with party identification. We see that economic attitudes are most closely correlated with party identification, followed by civil rights attitudes, then moral. As with ideological alignment, security issues are the least associated with party identification. This rank ordering of domains is generally conserved over the entire time period, although moral and security issues share similar levels of party alignment in the beginning of first decades of the time series.

We next examine trends in issue alignment by topical domain, with GAMM estimates presented in Fig. 3. Again, separate lines indicate economic, civil rights, moral, and security domains, but also “cross-domain” issue alignment — the correlation between pairs of attitudes from different issue domains. We see little consistent growth in issue alignment prior to 2004, but several domains begin to trend upward in recent years. Economic alignment grows steadily after 2004, and civil rights issues show a spike of alignment in 2016. Interestingly, we see relatively little growth in issue alignment within the moral domain. This finding contrasts with both academic and popular narratives that emphasize a “culture war” grounded in moral differences as the organizing principle of public opinion (Frank 2004; Hunter and Wolfe 2006), but corroborates recent findings by Park (2017).

We find that cross-domain alignment is consistently lower than alignment in economic, civil rights, or moral domains in Fig. 3, which is unsurprising given that issues within common domains are topically related whereas issues across domains are not. We see general stability in the level of cross-domain issue alignment prior to 2004, but the more recent waves of data indicate rather rapid growth. This increase is particularly important in light of dominant theories of public opinion which suggest that adherence to an ideology spanning very different issues should be rare in the general public (Converse, 1964; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017; Layman and Carsey, 2002). We note that the most prominent increase in cross-domain alignment occurs in 2016. Because more recent data is not

⁷ Specifically, we use thin plate regression splines and fit the models using a restricted marginal likelihood estimation procedure, which optimizes the degree of smoothness of the model terms (Wood, 2003, 2011).

⁸ The security domain has the fewest items and is something of a residual category, containing a motley selection of items such as attitudes regarding the U.S.S.R. and domestic urban unrest. Baldassarri and Gelman labeled this “foreign policy.” We have chosen to label it “security,” but the items are the same as in the original article.

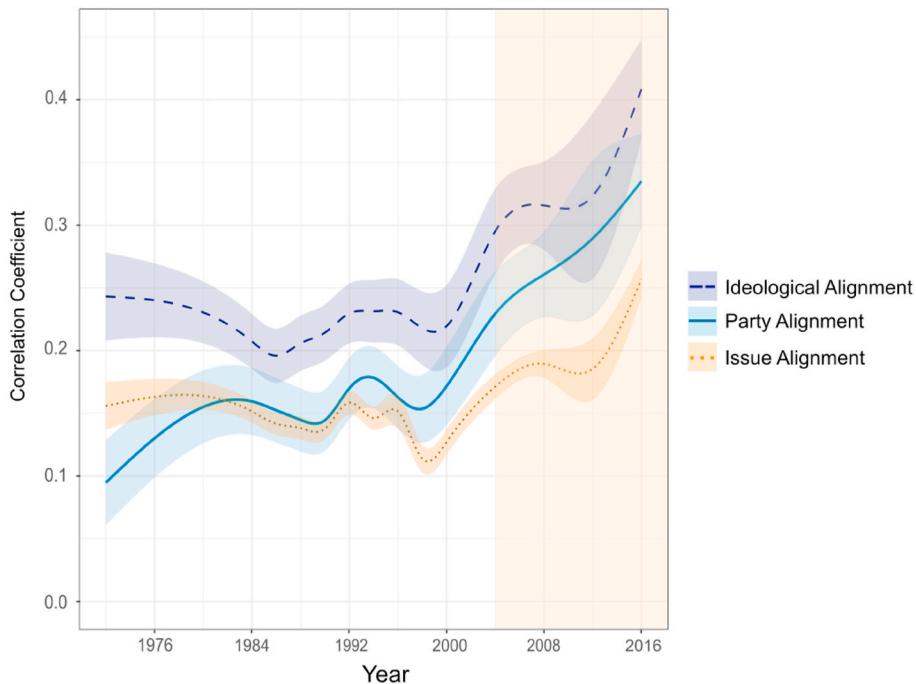


Fig. 1. Estimates from Smoothing-Spline Mixed-Effects (SME) models of ideological, party, and issue alignment, 1972–2016.

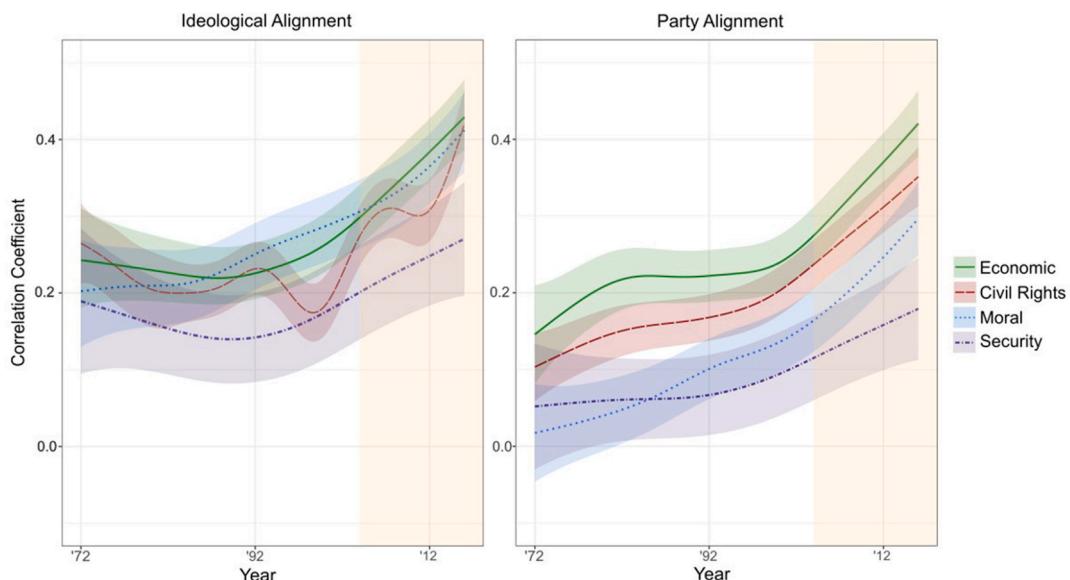


Fig. 2. Estimates from Generalized Additive Mixed Models (GAMMs) of ideological and party alignment by issue domain, 1972–2016.

available we cannot yet assess if this heightened alignment will persist beyond 2016 or whether this single year is a “blip.” However, 2008 and 2012 also display noticeably higher levels of cross-domain alignment than the historic average, suggesting that cross-domain issue alignment is indeed on the rise, even if 2016 was a uniquely polarized year.

Finally, we see noticeable growth in issue alignment in the security domain as well. However, we caution that the security domain contains the fewest questions and that these estimates are therefore less robust than other domains. In the 2016 wave, only three questions are asked from the security domain: federal spending on crime, spending on the space program, and spending on defense. Much of the final rise in the security domain’s issue alignment reflects a spike in the association between supporting defense spending and supporting crime spending.

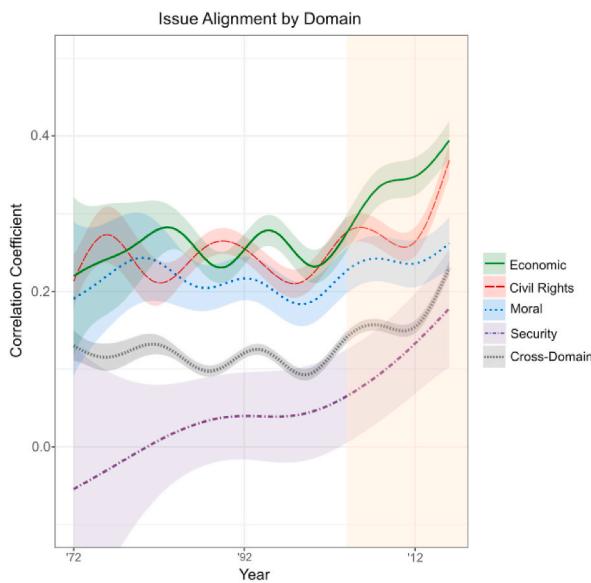


Fig. 3. Estimates from Generalized Additive Mixed Models (GAMMs) of issue alignment by issue domain, 1972–2016.

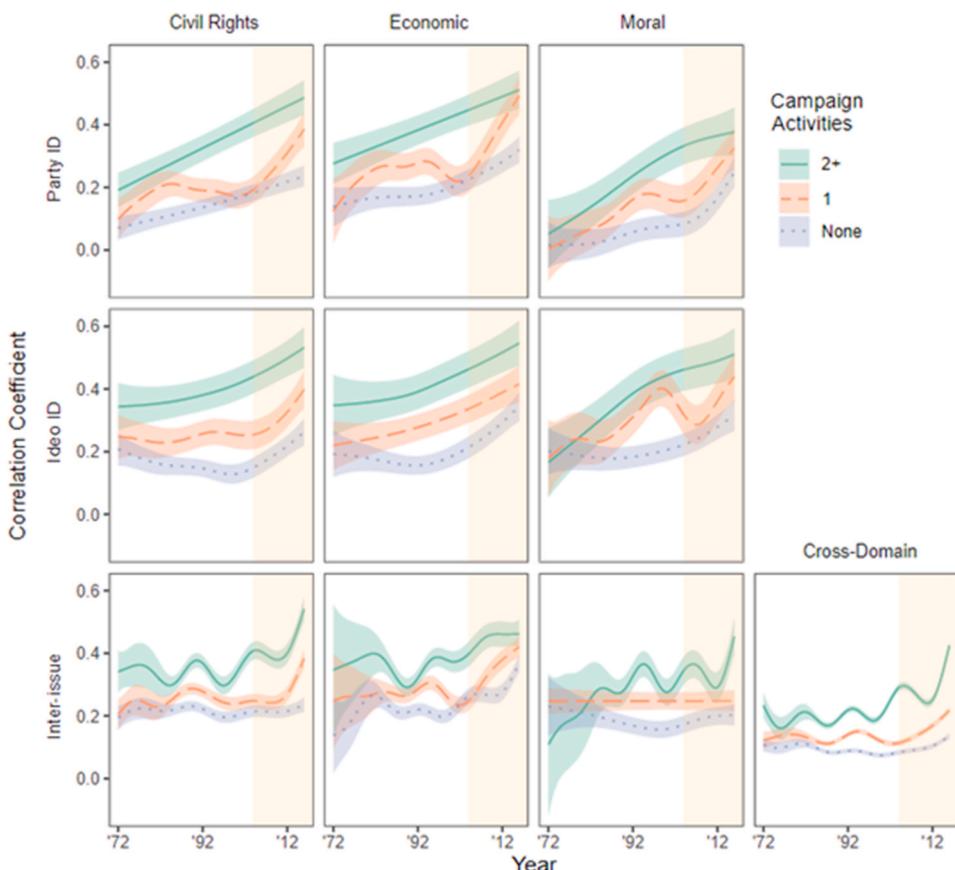


Fig. 4. Estimates from Generalized Additive Mixed Models (GAMMs) of party, ideological, and issue alignments by issue domain, stratified by level of political activity, 1972–2016.

4.2. Patterns across population subgroups

We have so far observed that the American public as a whole experienced growth in both partisan and issue alignments in recent years. However, engagement with politics varies widely within the electorate, and it is likely that gains in political alignments are not evenly distributed across the population. Moreover, as we mention above, alignment can still be high in a population with a large share of respondents giving middling or centrist responses. Aggregate statistics can therefore obscure the segments of the population that remain non-partisan and non-ideological. Lastly, from aggregate statistics it is difficult to discern within-group changes from population-level compositional changes. From population-level estimates alone, we cannot determine whether social groups are increasing alignment or if high alignment groups (such as the highly educated) are simply comprising a larger share of the overall population.

We next empirically examine how trends in alignments differ across socio-demographic divides that commonly structure the political landscape. To discern these differences, we re-run the models from the previous section separately on different subgroups in the population. The figures based on these results are equivalent to Figs. 2 and 3 above but a separate panel is devoted to each issue domain for clearer visualization.

Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) found that the politically engaged were more likely to display both issue alignment and partisan alignment than the less involved. These findings accord with a long stream of research arguing that the majority of the electorate lacks the knowledge or political sophistication required to assemble an ideologically aligned set of attitudes and identities (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Jacoby 1991; Jennings, 1992). In Fig. 4, we explore the relationship of political engagement with political alignments in recent years by comparing trends across levels of political activity and knowledge.

We first disaggregate the sample by level of political activity. The activities considered by the ANES include trying to influence the votes of others, attending a rally, wearing a sticker or button for a campaign, donating money to a campaign, writing a letter to a public official, or working for a campaign. Alignment estimates for high, medium, and low activity populations are represented by solid, dashed, and dotted lines, respectively. The first two rows of panels represent party alignment and ideological alignment. The pre-2004 trends accord with conventional accounts: partisan alignments are higher among more politically active respondents, and most growth over time is confined to these groups as well. We find that both party and ideological alignments continue to rise after 2004, and often at an accelerated rate. We see consistent growth across levels of political activity and across topical domains.⁹

Looking next at issue alignment, displayed in the third row of panels, we see more varied trends. As with partisan alignments, we find that issue alignment is consistently highest among the most politically active and lowest among the inactive. We see modest growth in issue alignments before 2004 which is largely confined to the highest activity group. Moral issue alignment appears to grow substantially at the beginning of the time series, but few questions are fielded in those years, producing relatively uncertain estimates. Yet we find much clearer patterns of growth across domains after 2004. In the civil rights domain, issue alignment rises for the medium and high activity groups but stays relatively stable in the lowest activity group. Economic issue alignment shows surprising growth across all levels of political activity, including the least active. By contrast, moral issue alignment shows inconsistent growth among the most active, and no discernible growth in the other groups. Lastly, cross-domain issue correlation grows considerably among the high activity subpopulation but only slightly in the medium and low activity groups.

We find comparable patterns when the sample is broken down by level of political knowledge. Results are displayed in Fig. 5. The measure we use is a single score based on the interviewers' holistic assessments of the respondent's knowledge. Prior analyses found this score to be an excellent measure of political knowledge, with this single question closely corresponding to an elaborate 27-question scale (Bartels 1996; Zaller 1986).¹⁰ First, we examine partisan alignments. Both party and ideological alignment grow across all domains for the most politically knowledgeable respondents, in some cases accelerating after 2004. Partisan alignments similarly grow across domains among average knowledge respondents. Some areas show little growth prior to 2004 (party alignment around economic issues, ideological alignment around both economic and civil rights issues), but these areas all trend upward in recent years. The least politically knowledgeable show relatively little growth in partisan alignments over the entire time series. In total, this evidence suggests that partisan alignment is not confined to the most politically savvy members of the population; it has recently extended to individuals with only average knowledge of politics. However, the most inattentive members of the public still show little partisan alignment.

We next examine trends in issue alignment across levels of political knowledge. Prior to 2004, there is no clear increase in issue alignment for any group. Yet recent survey waves have shown clear differentiations in issue alignment by level of knowledge. The high knowledge group increases its inter-issue correlations in the civil rights and economic domains, as well as across different domains. The average knowledge group exhibits a spike in issue alignment in the economic domain, and a small bump in cross-domain issue alignment after 2004. The least knowledgeable respondents show no gains in issue alignment, and even appear to decline in cross-

⁹ It is important to note that seemingly "parallel" growth in alignment between subgroups may reflect different degrees of attitude change. If a subgroup has more middling responses, this group's alignment could increase with fewer attitude changes than a group with more extreme opinions. However, supplemental analyses suggest that middling responses rarely dominate the response set, and for the majority of questions the middle response is not the modal response. It therefore does not appear that these trends are being driven by only a few respondents.

¹⁰ Scholars have raised the concern that interviewer-rated knowledge may suffer from systematic bias or interviewers' subjectivity (Ryan 2011). We are unable to assess potential bias in these assessments, but the results we obtain when stratifying by interviewer-assessed knowledge are corroborated by similar patterns of alignment growth when the sample is stratified by self-reported political activity and by self-reported political interest (analysis of alignments stratified by self-reported interest is included in the appendix).

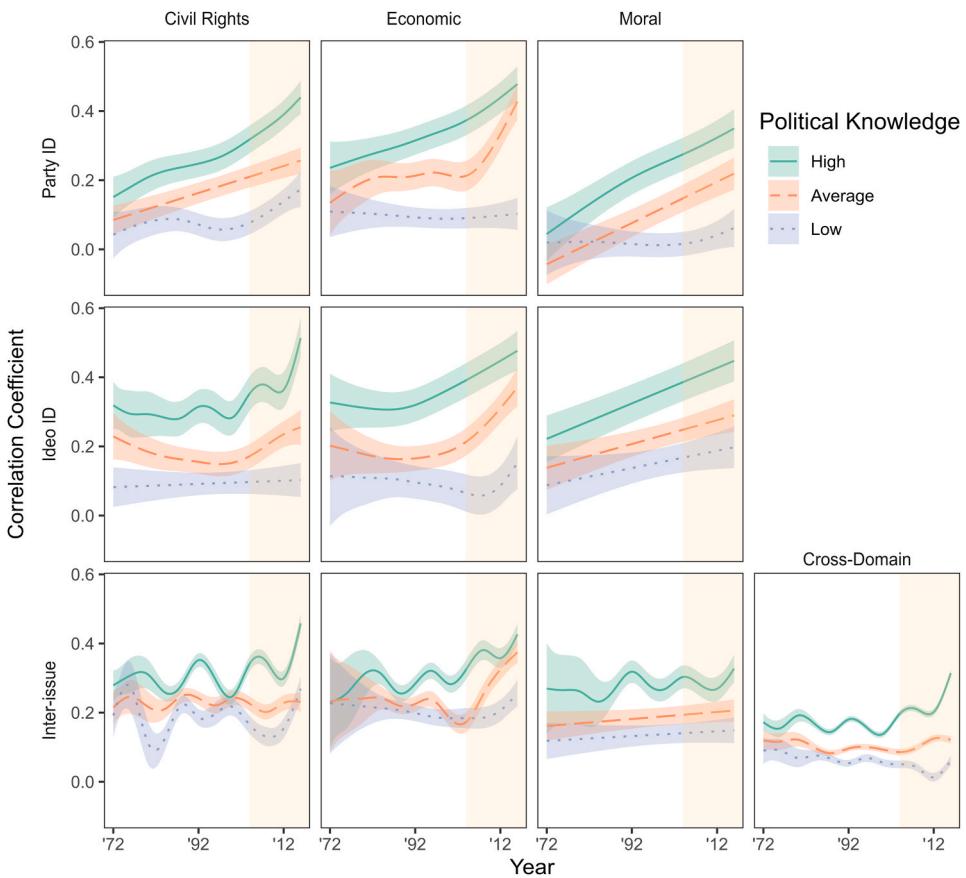


Fig. 5. Estimates from Generalized Additive Mixed Models (GAMMs) of party, ideological, and issue alignments by issue domain, stratified by level of political knowledge, 1972–2016.

domain alignment. In sum, these findings again suggest that the most growth is taking place among more politically knowledgeable respondents, yet even average respondents show occasional signs of increased issue alignment.

We next focus on four social divisions widely theorized to shape the contemporary political field: education, income, religiosity, and race. More socioeconomically advantaged individuals tend to have greater political knowledge, and evidence suggests that education can improve the ability to make ideological connections between issues (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Jacoby 1991). Wealthy populations often have greater potential to influence politics, and therefore may have greater interest in aligning with parties and ideological groups (Gilens and Page 2014). Recent scholarship also suggests that religion is playing a growing role in mass polarization, particularly with reference to moral-political issues (Frank 2004; Hunter and Wolfe 2006; Wuthnow 2011). Race historically and currently plays a profound role in structuring American political attitudes and identifications (Brooks and Manza 1997; Dawson, 1995; Tesler 2016), and because of this, trends in public opinion often differ markedly between whites and African Americans. To determine the relation of these major social cleavages to recent increases in political alignments, we disaggregate our sample by each of these categories.

First, in Fig. 6 we compare those with any college education to those with none. We examine partisan alignment across issue domains in the first two rows. In line with previous research, we find that the more highly educated do exhibit higher levels of partisan alignments over the full range of years. Yet, we also find that both the college-educated and non-college-educated subgroups show similar boosts in both party and ideological alignments after 2004. Inter-issue correlation similarly rises among those with and without a college education in the civil rights and economic domains. The moral domain, by contrast, sees relative stability. Both groups increase in their cross-domain issue alignment, although at a slower rate compared to the civil rights and economic domains.

It is notable that the non-college-educated subgroup displays meaningful growth in partisan and issue alignments, while the subpopulation with lowest political knowledge in the previous figure shows little comparable growth. Education is often considered to be closely akin to political sophistication, but our evidence suggests that these attributes are not interchangeable. Rather, political knowledge is great enough within the subpopulation without college degrees for distinct growth of alignment to occur.

Fig. 7 stratifies trends by income tercile. The first two rows show general upward trends in party and ideological alignments within all income groups. We see a particularly strong uptick in partisan alignments among economic issues in recent years, even in the low-income group. Issue alignment shows more varied trends by income group. In the civil rights and moral domains, we see that the recent increase of constraint is confined to the most affluent population. Cross-domain issue alignment similarly increases the most among the

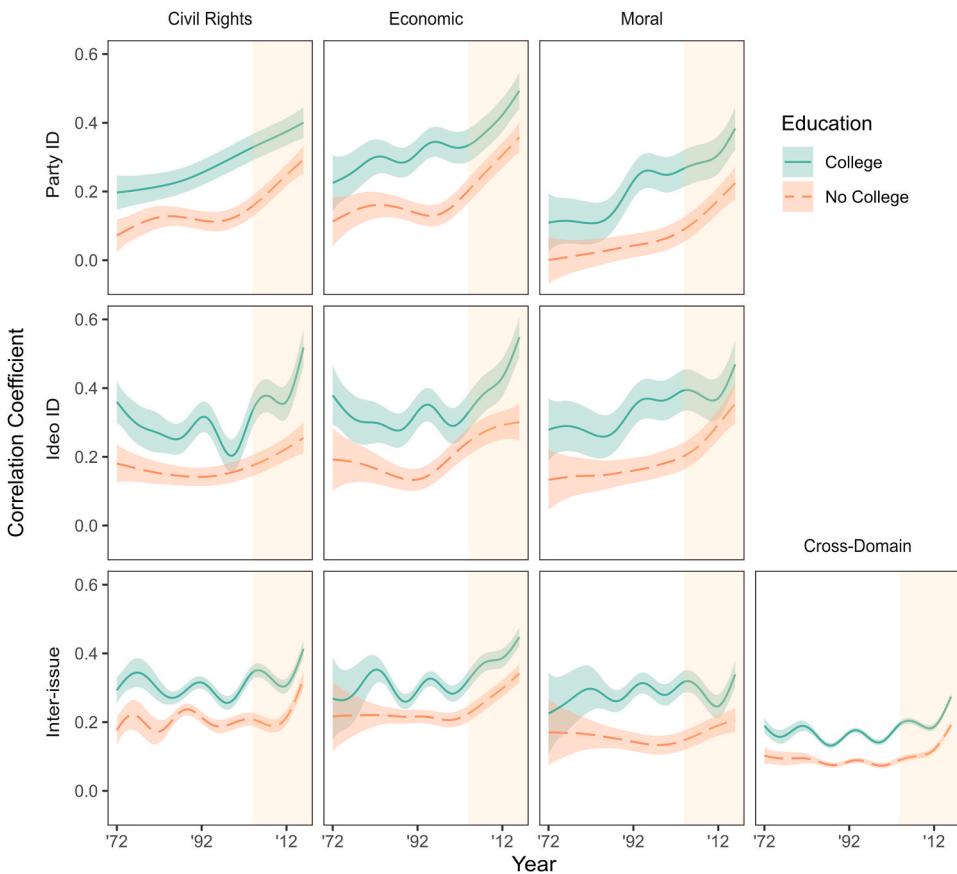


Fig. 6. Estimates from Generalized Additive Mixed Models (GAMMs) of party, ideological, and issue alignments by issue domain, stratified by education, 1972–2016.

wealthy while only exhibiting modest growth among the less affluent. Interestingly, economic inter-issue correlation spikes after 2004 in all income groups. Indeed, by 2016 the estimated correlation between economic issues is approximately 0.4 within the lowest income tercile, suggesting a recent emergence of ideological organization of economic attitudes that cuts across social classes.

We next compare alignments by level of religious attendance, comparing those who attend religious services “almost every week” or more to those who attend either less than weekly or never. The first two rows of Fig. 8 show general increases in partisan alignment among both religious and non-religious subgroups. Trends are quite similar across groups; we see little difference in either growth rates or absolute levels of alignments by frequency of religious attendance. Interestingly, even the domain of moral issues shows little difference between the more and less devout.

The third row of Fig. 8 shows patterns in issue alignment by religious attendance. None of the groups exhibit considerable growth in the moral domain, yet inter-issue correlation heightens for all groups in the economic domain. Issue alignment in the civil rights domain and across domains appears to grow most among the less religious, but these differences are mostly confined to 2016.

In Fig. 9, we disaggregate patterns in alignment by race, specifically comparing white and black populations. We see sharper differences by race than by any of the previous social cleavages. Party, ideological, and issue alignments all show relatively little or no growth among African Americans, whereas growth is striking, especially after 2004, in the white population. This evidence suggests that increases in both partisan and issue alignments, especially post-2004, were largely confined to whites.

Additional subgroup analyses that divide the population by gender, region, age, and political interest are depicted in the Appendix. We find relatively little variation in political alignments across any of these socio-demographic lines other than political interest, which exhibits similar patterns to political activity.

Lastly, we compare trends in issue alignment by party identification. Dominant theories anticipate party identifiers to display greater issue alignment because they follow a single party’s ideologically consistent political cues (Layman and Carsey 2002; Zaller 1992). We investigate this empirically in Fig. 10, examining differences in issue alignment trends between self-identified Democrats, Republicans, and Independents.

The trajectories we identify fluctuate but display general tendencies. Alignments among Democrats generally decrease between 1972 and 2004 but stabilize or climb in each of the three domains and across domain after 2004. Republicans showed greater growth than Democrats prior to 2004, but they show no consistent growth in issue alignment after 2004.

Independents exhibit a general decline in issue alignment across all areas except the economic. The downward trends we see in civil

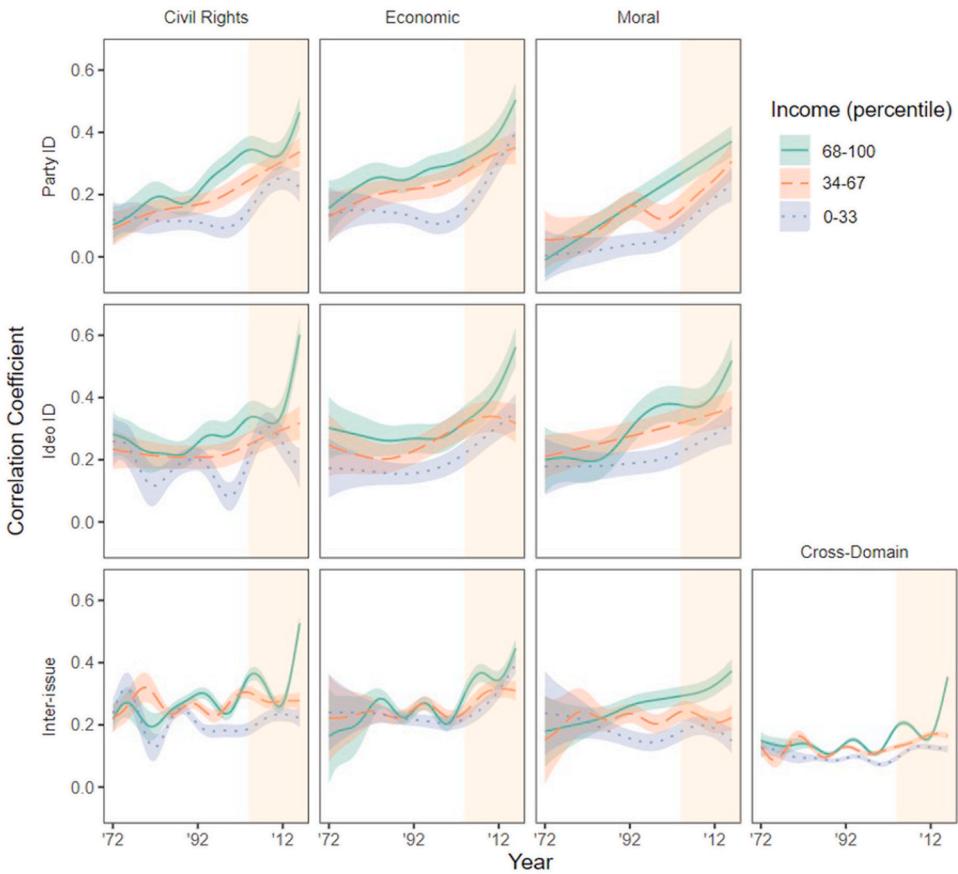


Fig. 7. Estimates from Generalized Additive Mixed Models (GAMMs) of party, ideological, and issue alignments by issue domain, stratified by income terciles, 1972–2016.

rights, moral, and cross-domain alignments are likely results of improved partisan sorting; respondents holding relatively consistent liberal or conservative attitudes are less likely to identify as “Independent” in the 2010s than in the 1970s (Levendusky 2009). Yet the boost in economic issue alignment we observe mirrors what we find across other social groupings – the correlation between economic issues grew after 2004 even among groups that typically display minimal alignments. In sum, disaggregating by political party reveals that increases in issue alignment were not restricted to a single side of the political spectrum, but also that growth did not follow a unified trend across party lines.

5. Conclusion

The center has not disappeared from the American political spectrum (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Fiorina 2017; Lelkes 2016; Park 2017), but those who diverge from the center are increasingly organized around a few consolidated dimensions of ideological opposition. For decades, mass polarization progressed primarily through the mechanism of partisan sorting (Baldassari and Gelman 2008). This created an apparently growing gulf between liberals and conservatives when, in fact, most of the electorate remained non-ideological (Fiorina et al. 2008). But partisan sorting alone cannot account for the findings presented above. The attitudinal configurations that comprise the contemporary political landscape importantly differ from those observed at the close of the 20th century. Namely, we find that issue alignment, measured as the correlation between political attitudes, is tighter now than at any period in at least 70 years. In the terms of Layman and Carsey (2002), the American public is undergoing a period of “conflict extension” as a growing number of issues are folded into the existing pattern of partisan opposition.

We find that the growth of issue alignment after 2004 differs by topical domain. The greatest gains occur among civil rights and economic issues, whereas moral issues exhibit little growth. We also find rising correlation between issues across domains, suggesting an increasing organization of very different issues along a single ideological axis.

Examining trends in issue alignment by population subgroups revealed key differences in how alignment has changed across social cleavages. As anticipated by prior theorizing, the greatest gains in cross-domain correlation are found among the socioeconomically advantaged and politically sophisticated (Converse 1964; Layman and Carsey 2002). However, we find consistent growth in the intercorrelation of economic attitudes within populations without college education, with low income, and with low levels of political

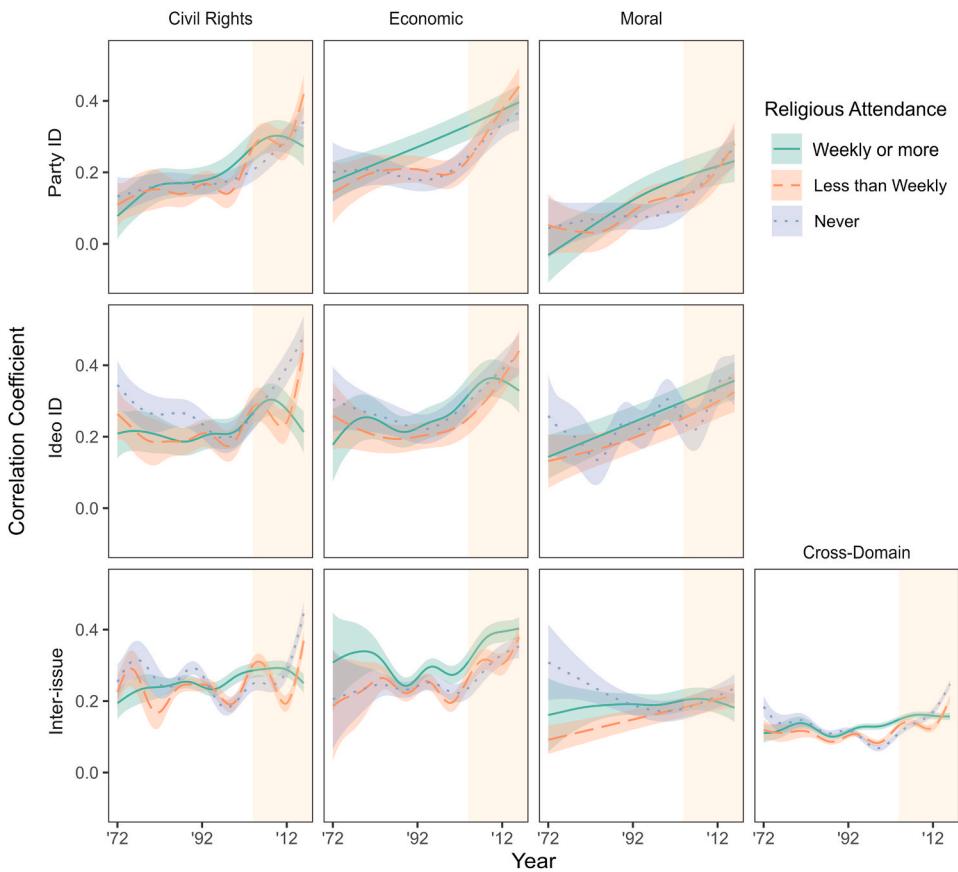


Fig. 8. Estimates from Generalized Additive Mixed Models (GAMMs) of party, ideological, and issue alignments by issue domain, stratified by religious attendance, 1972–2016.

activity. African Americans comprise the only population without an observable uptick in economic inter-issue correlation. This finding challenges the common narrative that cultural issues are at the heart of political polarization but corroborates recent accounts that describe the spread of economic ideologies across socioeconomic lines (Hochschild, 2016; Skocpol and Williamson, 2012).

The growth of political alignments within subpopulations further suggests that population-level increases in alignment are not purely attributable to compositional changes in the electorate. For instance, because we see increases in alignments within levels of education, the growth of alignment does not appear to be solely a consequence of higher rates of formal education in the public. Within-group change also grants reassurance that our findings are not merely artifacts of declining response rates. Like many surveys, ANES response rates fell greatly in the past two decades (see [Appendix Table A2](#)), and some evidence suggests that those who still respond to surveys tend to be more politically sophisticated (Keeter et al., 2017). However, the growing alignments among the politically sophisticated (and occasionally among the politically disengaged) that we find are unlikely to result solely from declining response rates.

We also show that partisan alignment has increased at an accelerated pace in recent years, meaning that the labels of “Democrat” and “Republican,” as well as “liberal” and “conservative” now correspond to more ideologically distinct groups than at any point since at least the 1940s. The precise mechanism driving this shift remains difficult to identify. Partisan alignment can increase either through partisan sorting or by existing partisans improving the ideological consistency of their attitudes. Baldassari and Gelman (2008) concluded that the increase in partisan alignment between 1972 and 2004 was the result of sorting because partisan alignment produced by attitudinal change would have engendered a concurrent increase in issue alignment, which they did not observe. However, because issue alignment does increase after 2004, it is possible that some of the rising partisan alignment is the result of attitude change rather than sorting alone. Effectively adjudicating these two plausible mechanisms would require panel data and remains important grounds for future investigation.

It is also beyond the scope of this paper to conclusively specify the macro-level forces underpinning the increase in issue alignment, but the evidence we provide, along with findings from previous literature, point to several likely factors. First, it is unlikely that the trends in issue alignment we observe are simply lagged responses to cues from political elites. Politicians and political spokespersons are highly divided across all issue domains, and have been since the close of the 20th century (McCarty et al. 2006). Yet the trends we observe in issue alignment are not equivalent across domains; economic issue alignment begins its growth in 2008, yet civil rights

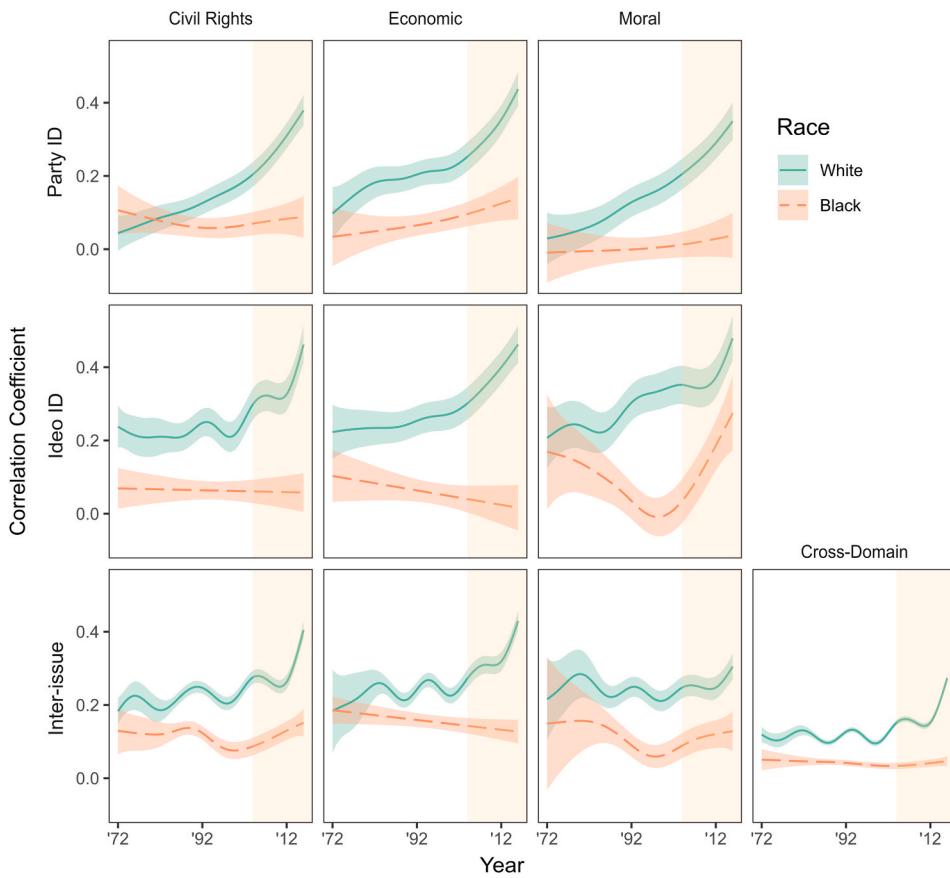


Fig. 9. Estimates from Generalized Additive Mixed Models (GAMMs) of party, ideological, and issue alignments by issue domain, stratified by race, 1972–2016.

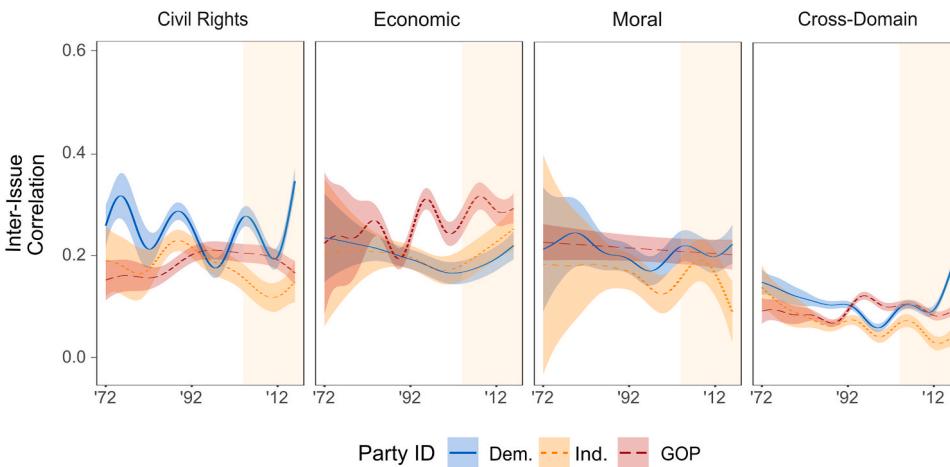


Fig. 10. Estimates from Generalized Additive Mixed Models (GAMMs) of issue alignment by issue domain, stratified by party identification, 1972–2016.

alignment does not spike until 2016 and moral alignment shows little growth at all in recent years. Moreover, in several cases groups that are highly engaged in politics and those who are only moderately engaged show upticks in issue alignment at the same time, while the “lag” model would suggest that more engaged respondents would respond more rapidly to elite cues (Zaller 1992).

A second hypothesis is that the growing consumption of hyper-partisan news is driving the polarization of the electorate (Levendusky, 2013; Prior 2013). We do indeed find that the increase in issue alignment is most pronounced among the politically

knowledgeable and engaged. Because the ANES does not ask consistent questions about media consumption over the full time series, and because the very nature and forms of media consumption have evolved so greatly since the 1970s, we cannot systematically test how alignments differ by level of media consumption. To provide preliminary evidence to this point, we show cross-sectional differences in alignments by media consumption for the year 2016 in the Appendix (Figures A5 and A6). We find surprisingly little difference in partisan or issue alignments by frequency of news consumption or by frequency of social media use. Moreover, polarized media alone does not explain the different timings and magnitudes of issue alignment's growth across economic, civil rights, and moral domains. We do not doubt that news consumption plays a role in polarization processes (Prior 2013) but this factor does not sufficiently explain the patterns of alignment we observe.

The varying trends in issue alignment we observe are most easily interpretable as responses to key political events. The rise of economic issue alignment begins around 2008, coinciding with the financial crisis. Immediately following the financial crisis, the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street articulated opposing ideological responses. The rhetoric and the goals of each of these movements have durably fixed themselves in national politics and continue to be voiced by political leaders such as Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders (Milkman 2017; Skocpol and Williamson, 2012). Given its timing, the growth of economic issue alignment cannot be explained solely by the economic populist ideology promoted by Donald Trump. It is, however, illuminating to recognize that economic alignment had been growing among whites and the working class since 2004. Thus, while Trump did not cause the wave of working-class economic ideology we observe, his campaign may have responded to it and effectively capitalized upon it.

On the other hand, civil rights issue alignment shows relatively little growth until its surge in 2016. The lateness and abruptness of this growth seems to suggest a reaction to political events between 2012 and 2016. Indeed, racial issues gained renewed prominence in American politics with the emergence of Black Lives Matter in 2013 and were again brought to the fore in the 2016 election by Trump's racially charged rhetoric, particularly surrounding the issue of immigration (Sides et al. 2019). However, lacking panel data directly measuring knowledge, interest, and sympathy for these movements, we leave direct testing of this hypothesis to future research.

Although the growth of alignment does not imply the emergence of extremism nor the dissolution of the center, it carries its own distinct set of consequences for democratic society. Classic theories of public opinion posit that a more aligned public benefits from improved understanding and communication with political elites (Converse 1964; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). Political elites typically display high consistency with a liberal or conservative ideology across issues and tend to speak about issues in ideological terms. Ordinary citizens, on the other hand, are more likely to mix liberal and conservative stances, with evidence suggesting that this inconsistency reflects an inability to think through politics in the terms of liberal/conservative ideology (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Jacoby 1995). Scholars have long worried that the democratic process is compromised if members of the public are unable to conceptualize issues in the same terms as their representatives (Converse 1964; Jennings, 1992; Somin 1998). But as issue and partisan alignment increase, citizens' views more closely resemble those of their representatives, potentially improving political responsiveness (Luskin 1990; Zaller 1992). Indeed, recent analyses of the verbatim responses of ANES respondents has identified growing usage of ideological, politically sophisticated reasoning in the public over time (Wattenberg 2019). Taken with our findings above, this suggests that individuals with at least moderate political knowledge are beginning to understand politics through the same liberal/conservative lens used by political elites.

Yet more recently, scholars have begun to emphasize the more troubling consequences of political alignment and polarization. Mounting evidence shows that "affective polarization" is on the rise, with each party's affiliates reporting heightened animosity towards the opposing party (Iyengar et al., 2019). Recent studies suggest that affective polarization is greatest when there are strong attitudinal differences between the parties. Webster and Abramowitz (2017) find that dislike towards the opposing party is mediated by the degree of difference in issue attitudes, and Bouger (2017) finds issue alignment to be associated with greater political hostility, independent of partisan self-identification. Scholars have thus argued that partisan sorting can fuel cross-party antipathy by heightening the differences between the two parties' supporters (Mason 2015; but see Lelkes, 2018). Our findings suggest that not only partisan sorting but also issue alignment is intensifying attitudinal differences between the two parties' affiliates. The growing political alignments that we observe are therefore likely to produce yet firmer grounds for political hostility and continued affective polarization.

These theories together suggest that heightened partisan and issue alignments may enhance understanding and responsiveness between political leaders and their constituents, but at the same time erode understanding and goodwill between opposing partisans in the public. Moreover, as individuals organize their opinions around relatively few, well-defined political spectra, large swaths of the full "belief space" become sparse. This means that varied political conflicts are consolidating around the same major ideological axes and that novel and creative configurations of political ideas are increasingly rare. Prior to this point, the unidimensional liberal/conservative division of political elites has been counterbalanced by more diffuse and cross-pressured divisions within the electorate. Although the public remains largely moderate in their political views, the evidence we present suggests that they are beginning to follow political elites in organizing their opinions around a few select axes of opposition. Theorists have historically puzzled over the problems posed by an ideologically disorganized electorate. If the trends we identify persist, theorists will have to begin to reckon with the implications of an organized one.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2020.102498>.

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