

# Polarization in America

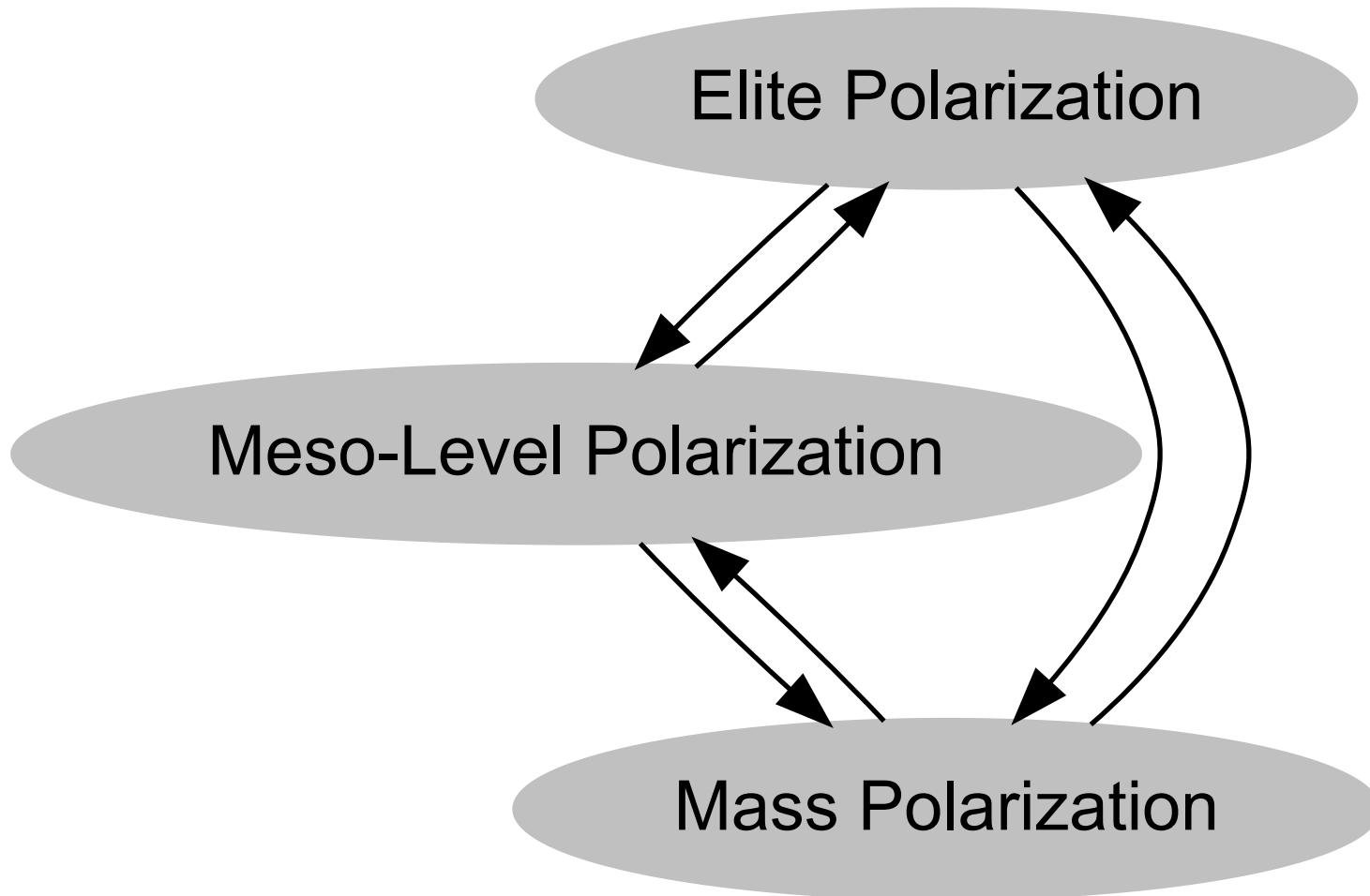
## The Landscape, Manifestations, and Measurements

Yphtach Lelkes

University of Pennsylvania

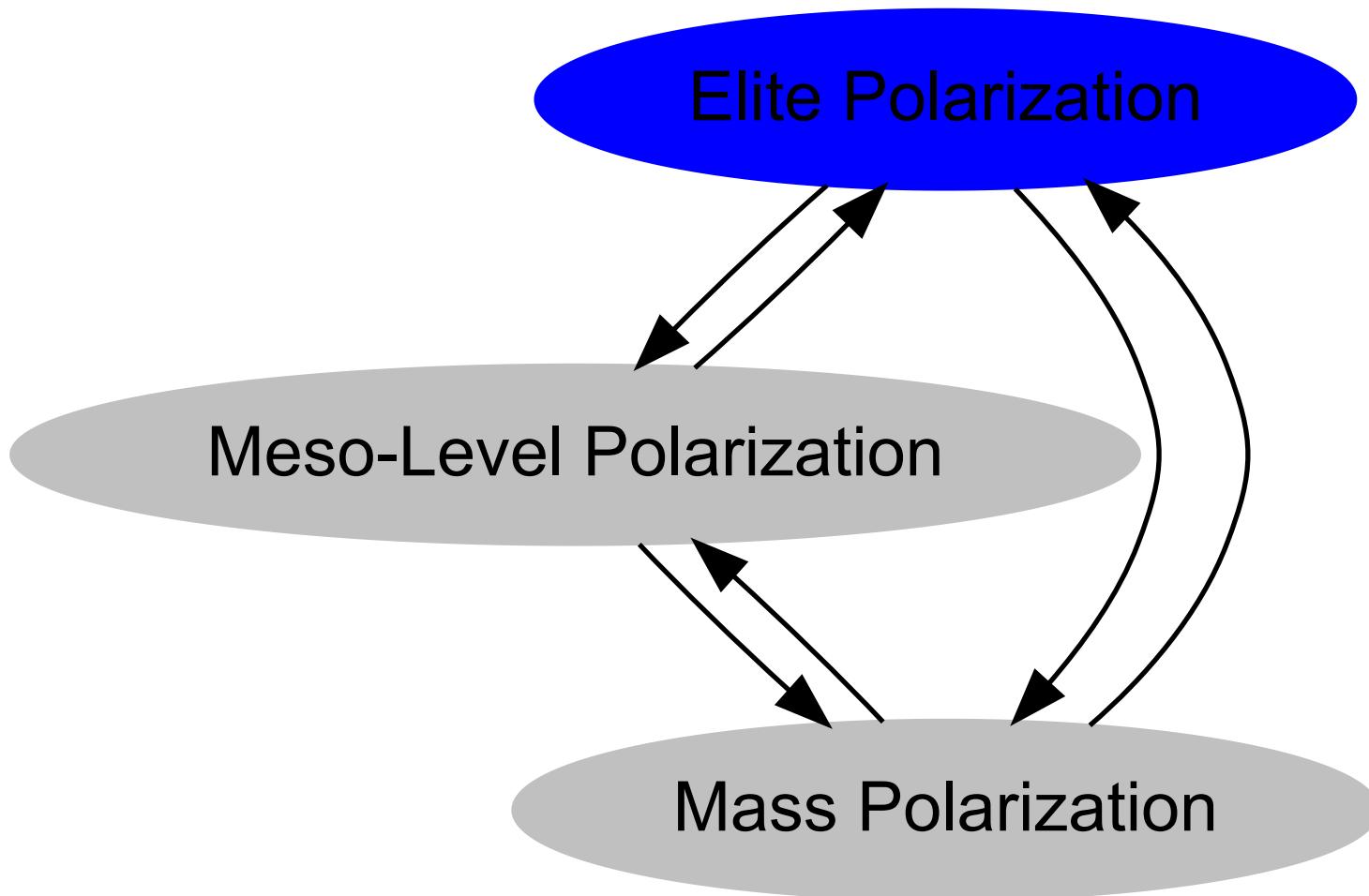
2022-03-25

# Three levels of polarization



# Outline of the talk

1. Introduce each level of polarization a. Elite polarization, Mass polarization, Meso-level polarization
2. Discuss ways in which they have been measured
3. Discuss trends
4. Leave with questions that might be interesting for people interested in complex systems



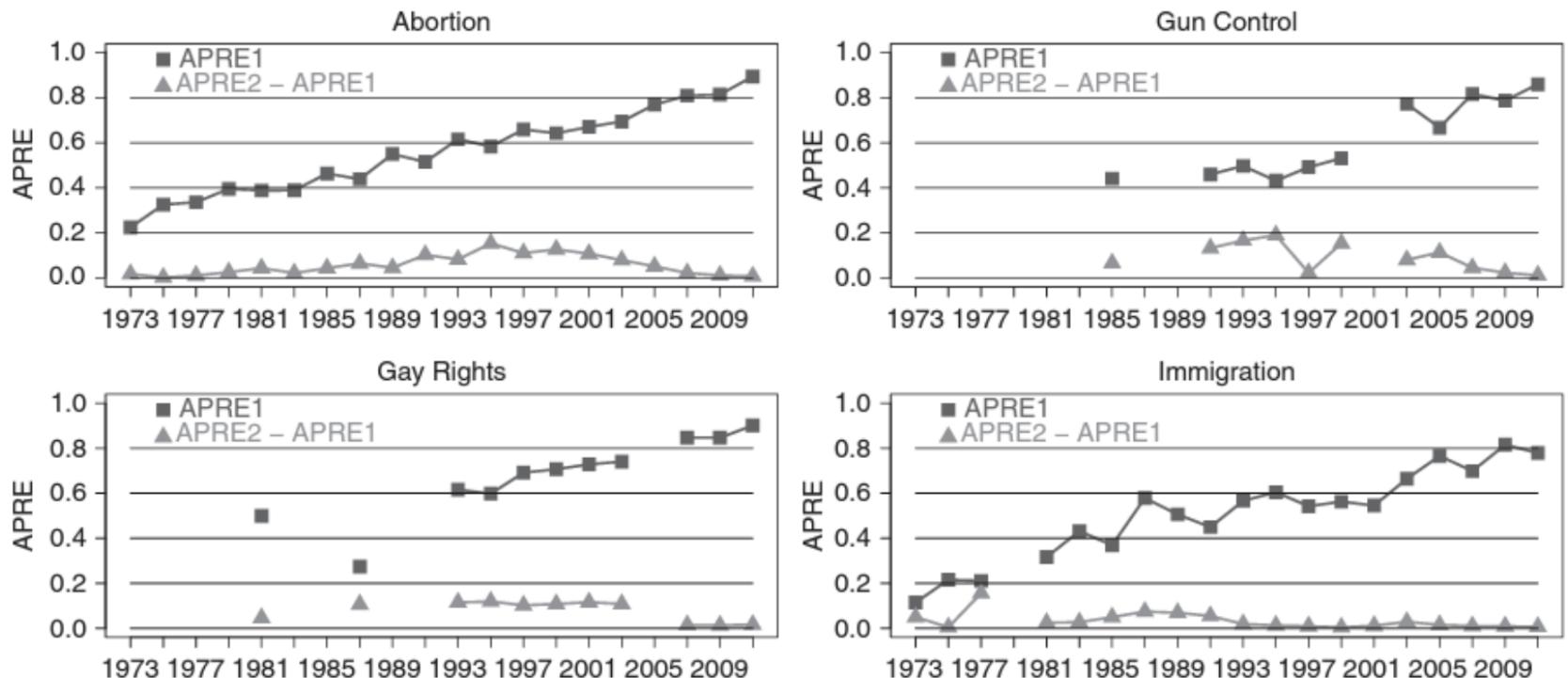
# Elite polarization

- We tend to think of it in terms of ideology: A candidate, a parties, position on one or more dimensions (generally left-right)
- Roll call votes: McCarty, N., Poole, K. T., & Rosenthal, H. (2016). *Polarized America: The dance of ideology and unequal riches.* mit Press.
- Campaign donation data: Bonica, A. (2014). Mapping the ideological marketplace. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(2), 367-386.
- Use some scaling procedure, like Item Response Theory, Singular value decomposition, or what not, to locate actors on a latent dimension
- Need to assume that votes, who you get money from, are indicators of ideology

# **Researchers tend to think ideology can fall on multiple dimensions:**

1. An economic/redistribution dimensions
2. Cultural distribution
3. Other dimensions have been suggested.
4. However, among political elites, a one-dimensional model can correctly classify ~84 percent of votes, a two-dimensional model correctly classifies ~86 percent or so (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal)

**Figure 2**  
*Spatial Fit of House Roll Call Votes on Selected Issues*



*Note:* Figure shows the spatial fit of selected issues to a one-dimensional model of ideology (APRE1) and the difference between their fit to a two-dimensional ideological model and a one-dimensional ideological model (APRE2 - APRE1).

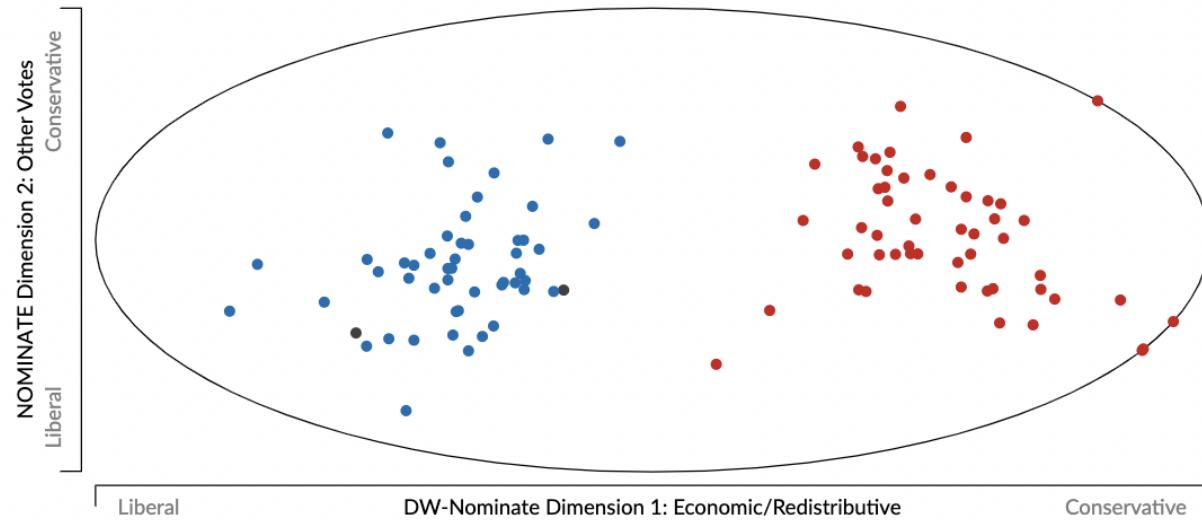
Hare & Poole, 2015

# Vote View

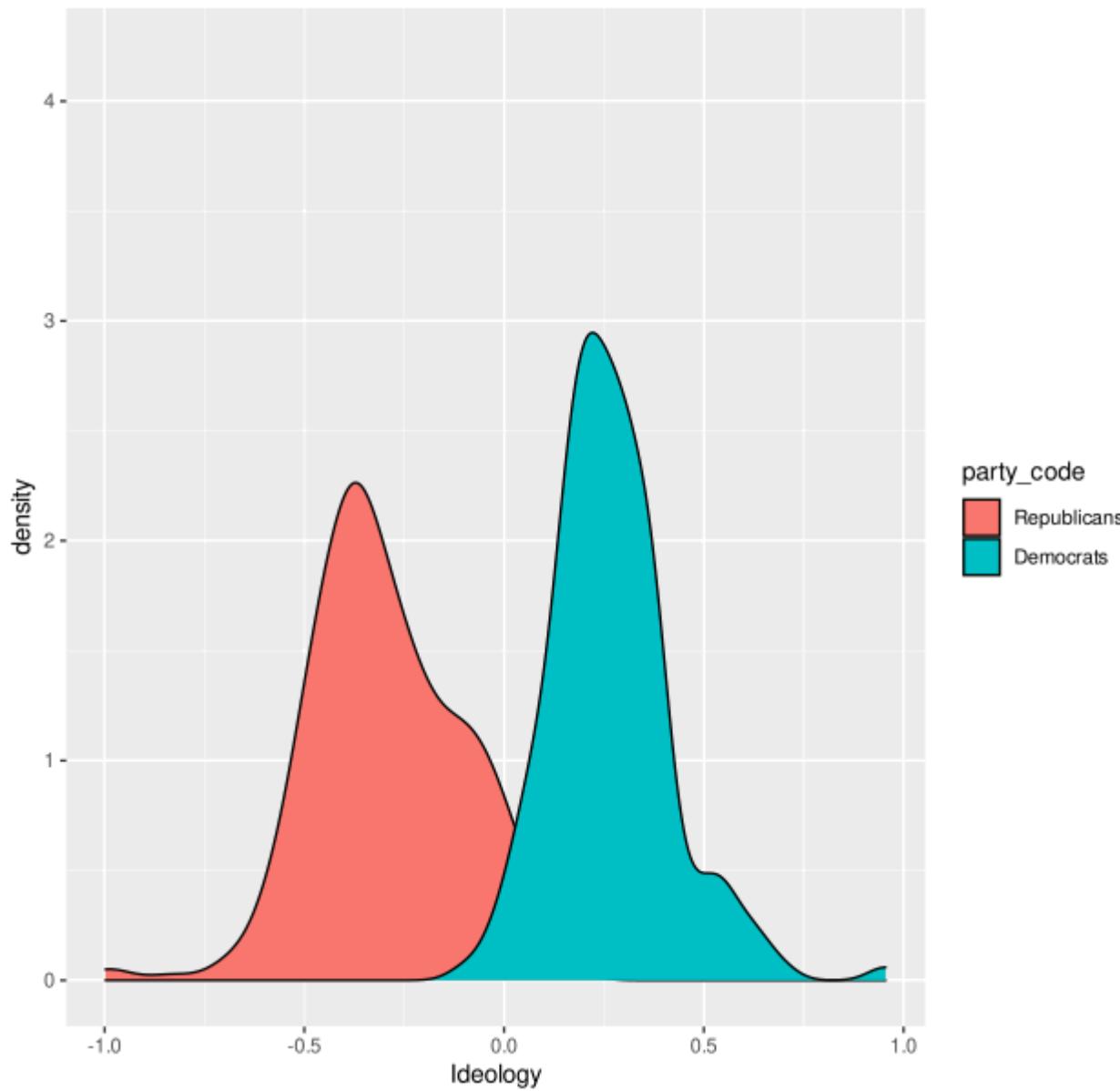
117th Congress (2021-2023) > Senators

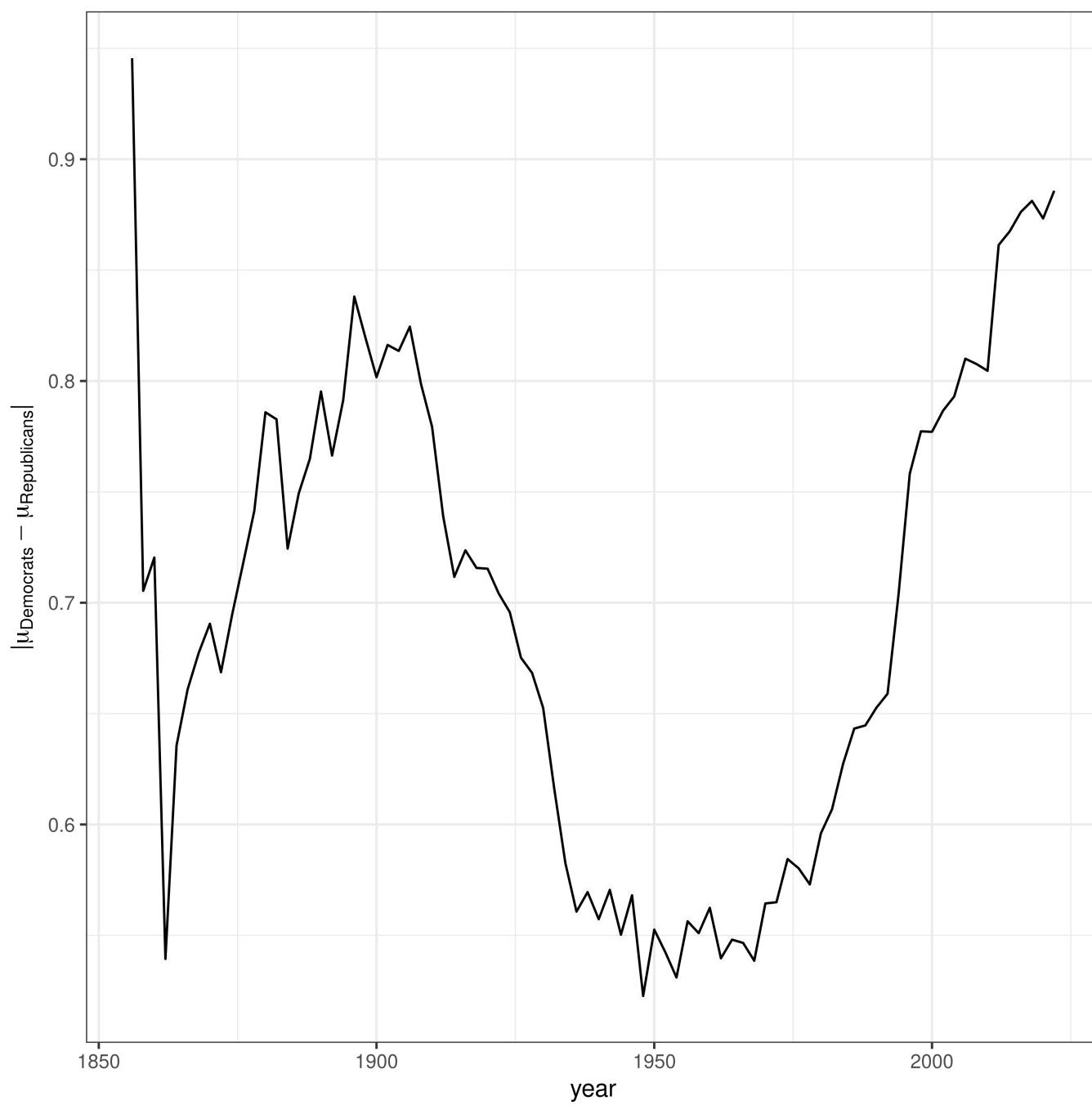


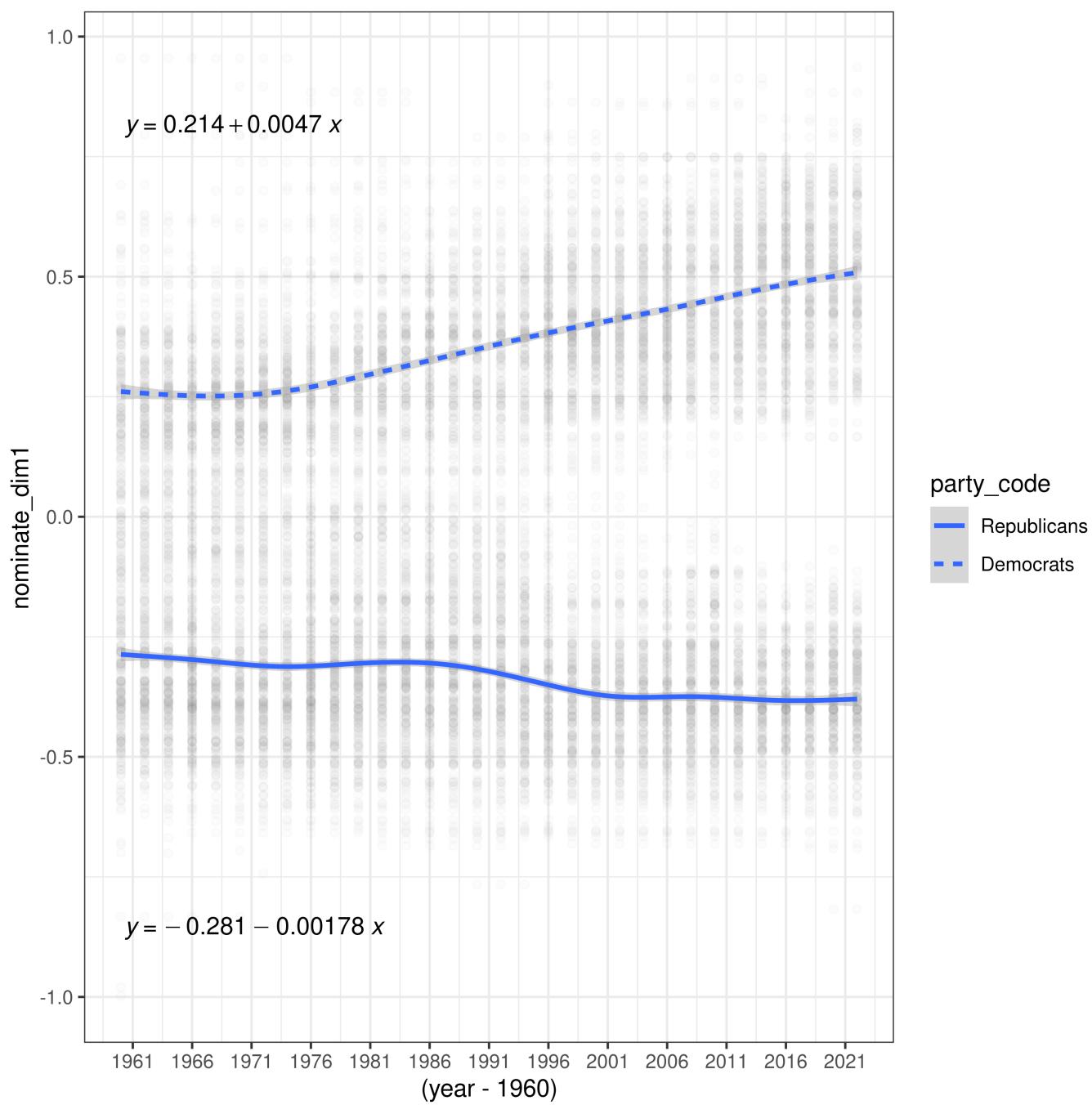
DW-Nominate Plot 



Year: 1960

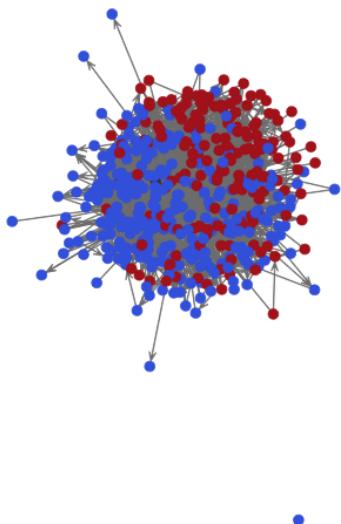




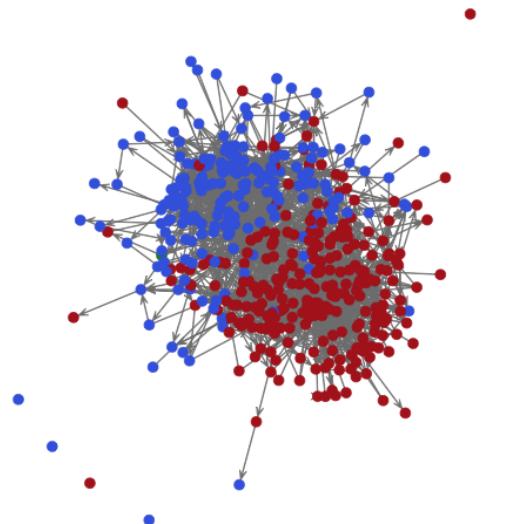


# Bill cosponsorship networks

House of Representatives 98 (1983–1984)  
WPC  $\geq 0.45$

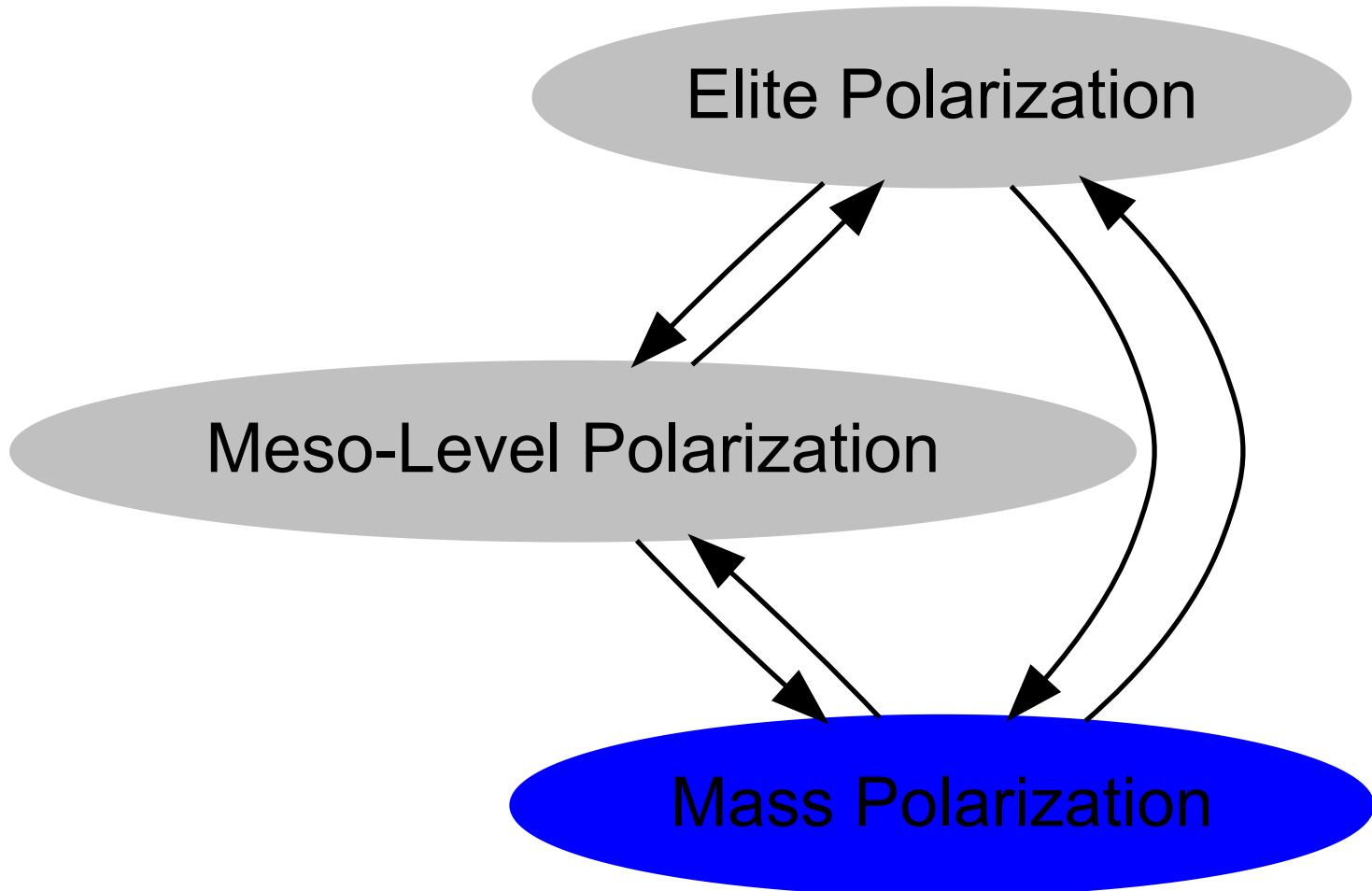


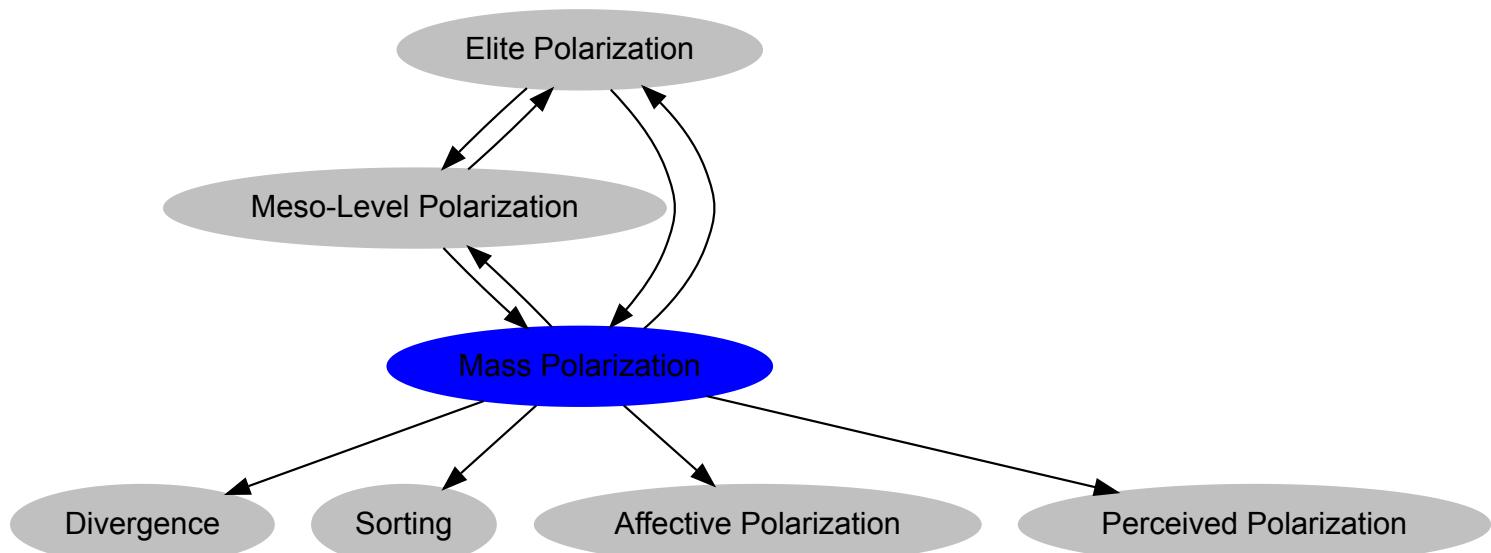
House of Representatives 114 (2015–2016)  
WPC  $\geq 0.45$

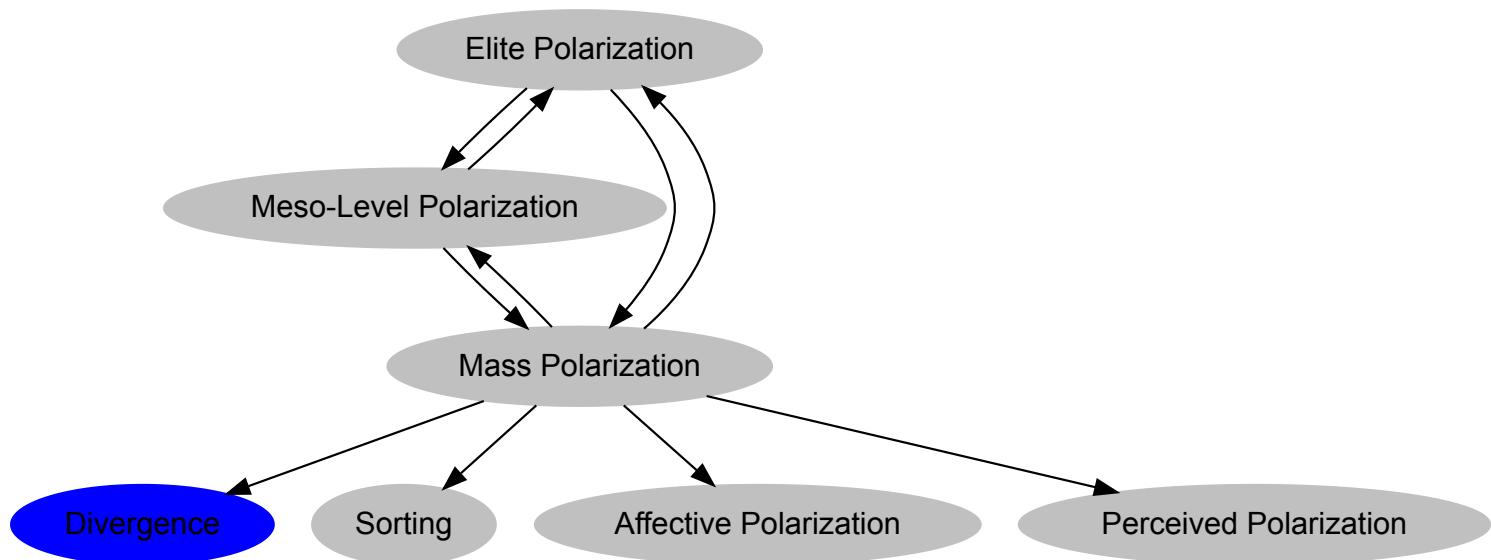


# **Elite polarization in the United States is:**

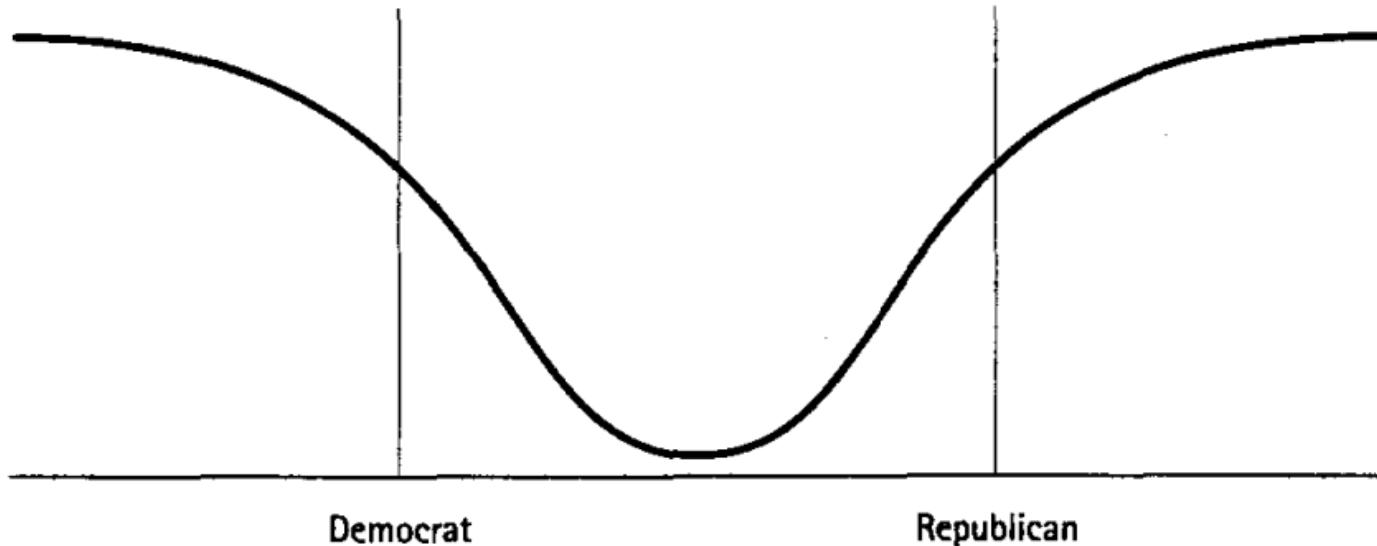
1. Increasingly unidimensional
2. Increasingly polarized
3. Asymmetric (Republicans have polarized at an increasing rate)



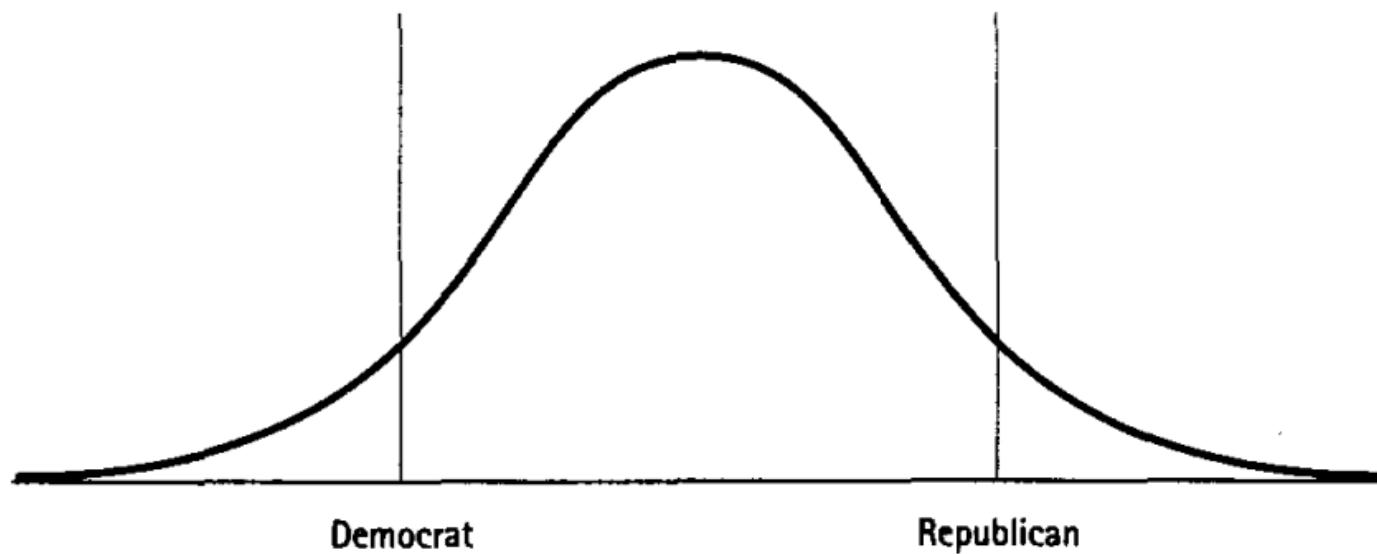




Closely and Deeply Divided



Closely but not Deeply Divided



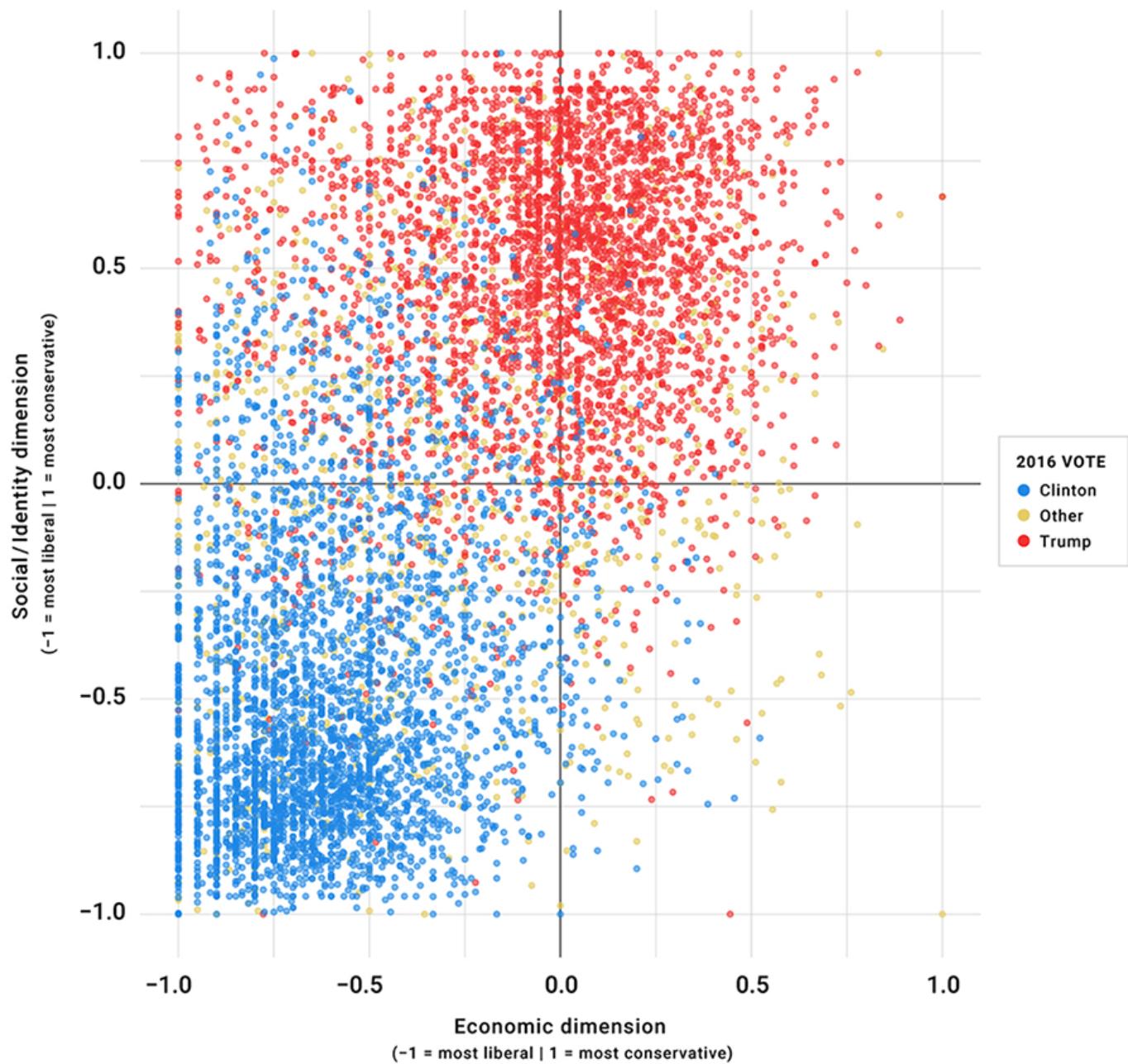
**While elite ideology seems to be unidimensional, political scientists tend to think that it is at least two dimensions in the mass public.**

Treier, S., & Hillygus, D. S. (2009). The nature of political ideology in the contemporary electorate. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 73(4), 679-703.

**Table 1.** Discrimination Parameters for One and Two-Dimensional Models

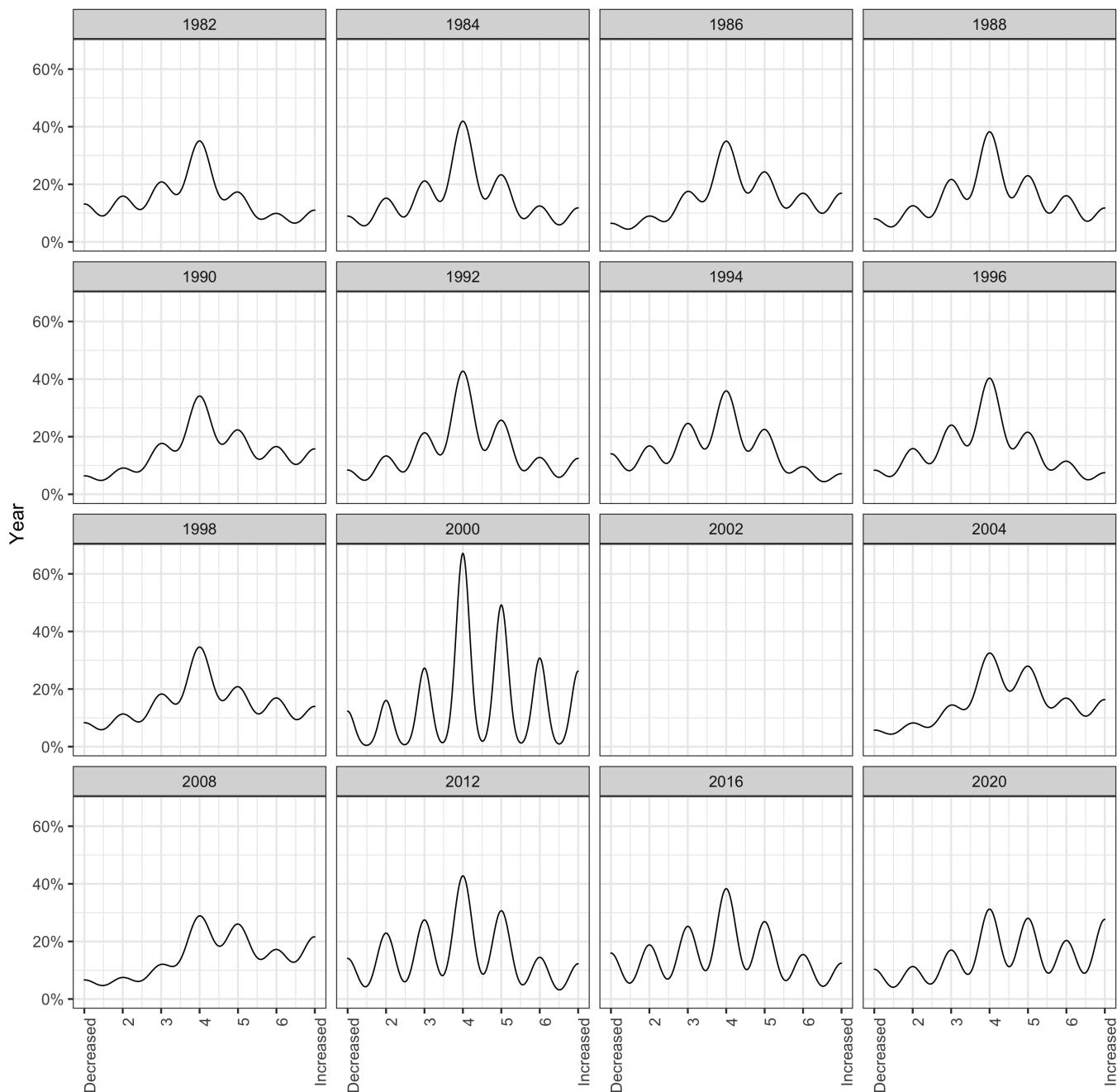
	1D	Independent		Correlated	
		Economic	Social	Economic	Social
Aid to poor spending	1.49	1.89	-0.24	1.80	0.00
Government services (branching)	1.59	1.67	0.00	1.70	0.00
Guaranteed jobs (branching)	1.33	1.60	-0.18	1.53	0.00
Health insurance (branching)	1.23	1.37	-0.10	1.36	0.00
Public school spending	1.28	1.24	0.26	1.27	0.00
Welfare spending	1.06	1.15	0.01	1.17	0.00
Guaranteed jobs (scale)	0.99	1.13	-0.09	1.12	0.00
Social security spending	0.88	1.10	-0.31	1.03	0.00
Government services (scale)	1.49	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
Health insurance (scale)	0.93	0.91	0.08	0.92	0.00
Tax cut from surplus	0.40	0.25	0.50	0.29	0.00
Affirmative action	0.92	0.94	0.12	0.91	0.11
Environment (scale)	1.13	0.99	0.44	0.87	0.41
Gun control	0.97	0.85	0.44	0.73	0.41
Environment (branching)	0.92	0.81	0.37	0.72	0.35
Death penalty	0.46	0.42	0.19	0.38	0.15
Abortion, partial-birth	0.44	0.21	0.76	0.00	0.72
Abortion, parental consent	0.39	0.09	1.12	0.00	0.96
Abortion	0.45	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00
Women's role (scale)	0.65	0.41	1.06	0.00	1.09
Women's role (branching)	0.43	0.11	1.29	0.00	1.14
Gays in military	0.69	0.45	1.58	0.00	1.52
Gay adoption	0.85	0.77	2.43	0.00	2.51
DIC	65,842.6	63,839.2		64,010.7	
Correlation				0.30	

# THE 2016 ELECTORATE



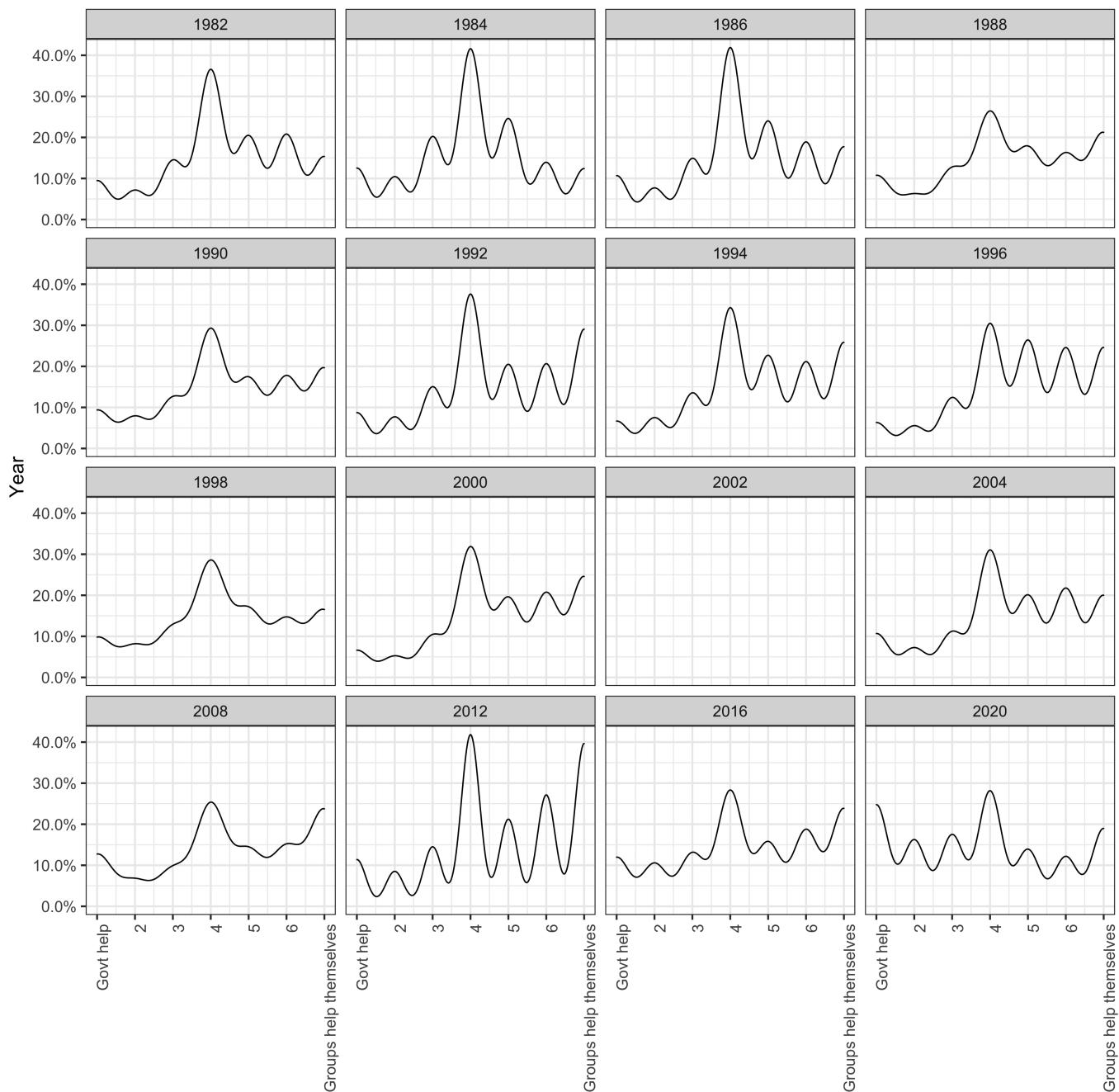
# Has there been an increase in ideological divergence?

1. Data from the American National Election Study, 1982-2020
2. Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Other people feel that it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. And of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2,3,4,5, or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale?



# Another example

Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every possible effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks and other minority groups. Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help minorities because they should help themselves. Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves. Where would you place yourself on this scale? (1=Government should help minority groups/blacks; 7=Minority groups/ blacks should help themselves)



# A Disconnect in Representation? Comparison of Trends in Congressional and Public Polarization

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**Seth J. Hill**, University of California, San Diego

**Chris Tausanovitch**, University of California, Los Angeles

While it is widely agreed that Congress has polarized over the past 40 years, there is considerable disagreement about the extent of public polarization and its connection to congressional polarization. We present the first estimation of time series of polarization using the same method on the most comprehensive data for both the public and the Senate. With statistics of various definitions of polarization, we find little increase in the dispersion of views in the public from 1956 to 2012 but do find an increase in ideological sorting starting around 1980. The two time series bear little resemblance to one another with respect to divergence. Further, while congressional sorting exceeds that in the public today, we find that Congress has always been unrepresentative of the public. These results suggest that it is unlikely that changes in public preferences alone explain the widening gulf between the two parties in Congress.

- Create a measure of ideology created from 67 policy questions in the American National Election Study (1956 - 2012)
- Compare standard deviations within years for the mass public compared to US senators

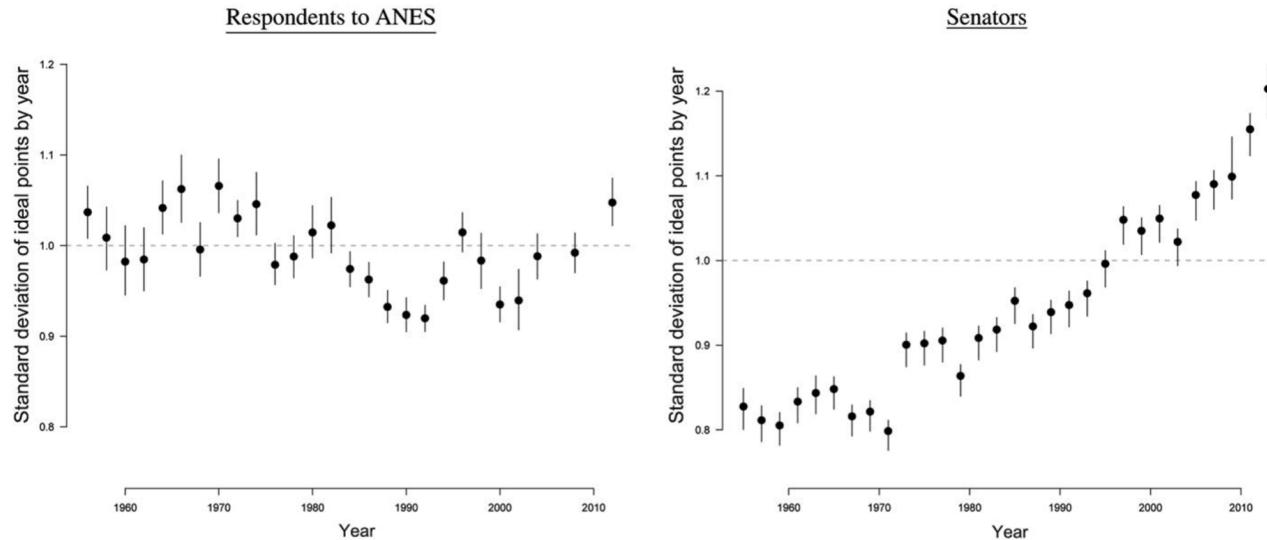
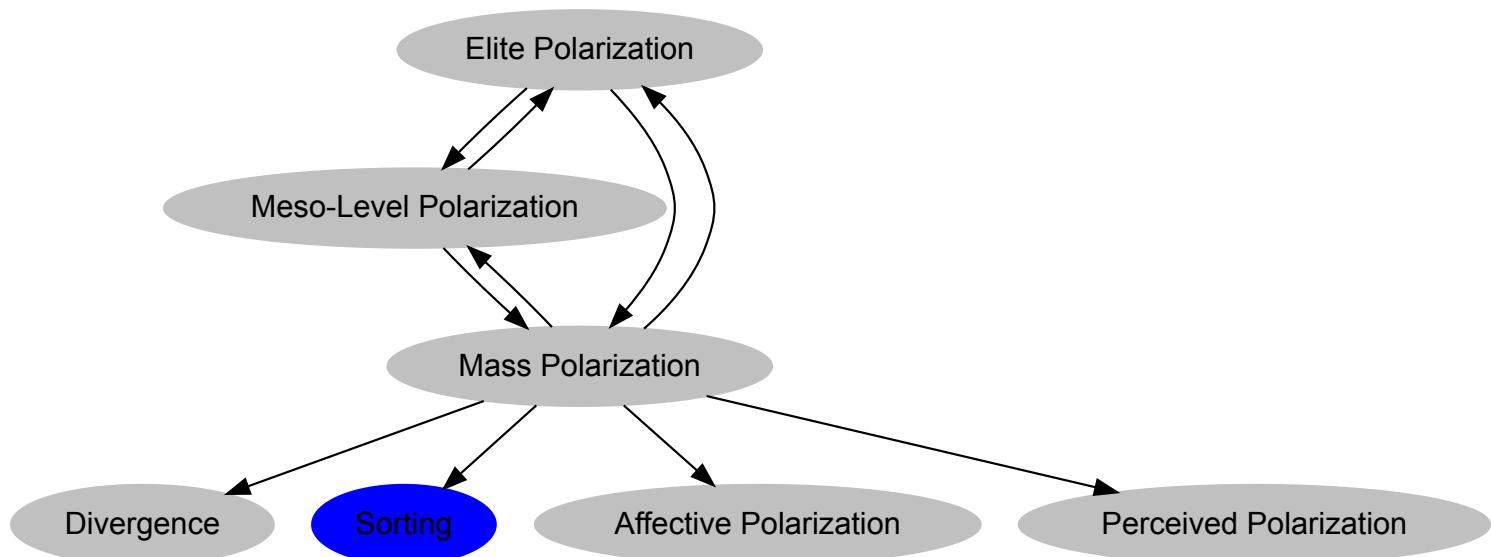


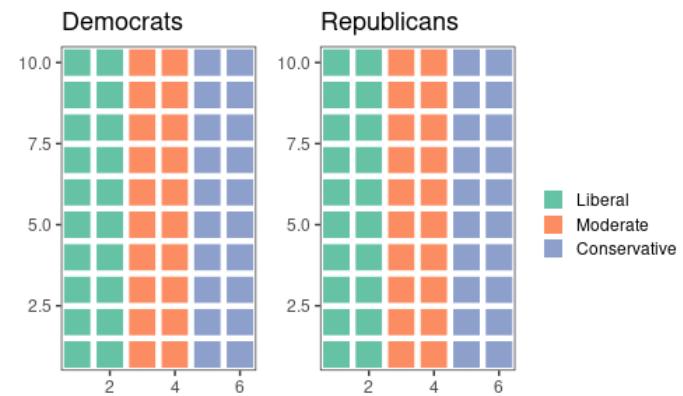
Figure 4. Standard deviation of ideal points, 1956–2012. Each line represents the 95% posterior credible interval for the standard deviation of voter or member policy positions in each year. The left frame is the same series as presented in figure 3.

**In sum: Very little evidence that  
Americans have diverged**



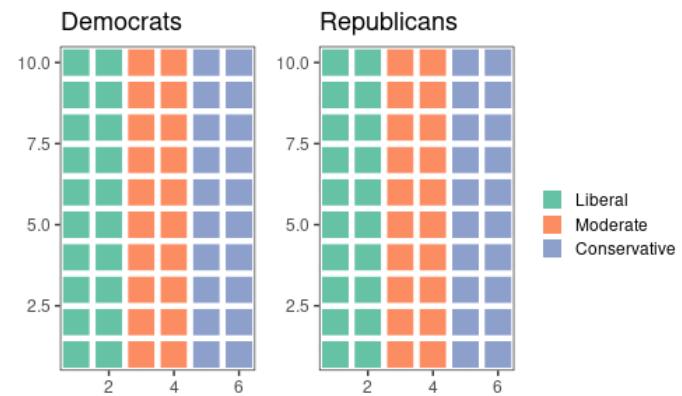
# Ideological Sorting

1. Partisanship is not ideology
2. In the United States, until recently, lots of Democrats held conservative positions, and lots of Republicans held liberal positions.



# Ideological Sorting

1. Partisanship is not ideology
2. In the United States, until recently, lots of Democrats held conservative positions, and lots of Republicans held liberal positions.
3. Through a process of conversion (Democrats becoming liberal/Republicans become conservative) or switching (liberals switching to the Democratic party/conservatives switching to the Republican party) the parties have sorted



# Pew Partisan Consistency Study

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## Items in the Ideological Consistency Scale

Question #	Conservative Position	[OR]	Liberal Position
Q25a	Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient		Government often does a better job than people give it credit for
Q25b	Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good		Government regulation of business is necessary to protect the public interest
Q25c	Poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return		Poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently
Q25d	The government today can't afford to do much more to help the needy		The government should do more to help needy Americans, even if it means going deeper into debt
Q25f	Blacks who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition		Racial discrimination is the main reason why many black people can't get ahead these days
Q25g	Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care		Immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents
Q25i	The best way to ensure peace is through military strength		Good diplomacy is the best way to ensure peace
Q25n	Most corporations make a fair and reasonable amount of profit		Business corporations make too much profit
Q50r	Stricter environmental laws and regulations cost too many jobs and hurt the economy		Stricter environmental laws and regulations are worth the cost
Q50u	Homosexuality should be discouraged by society		Homosexuality should be accepted by society

Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public.

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Pew Study

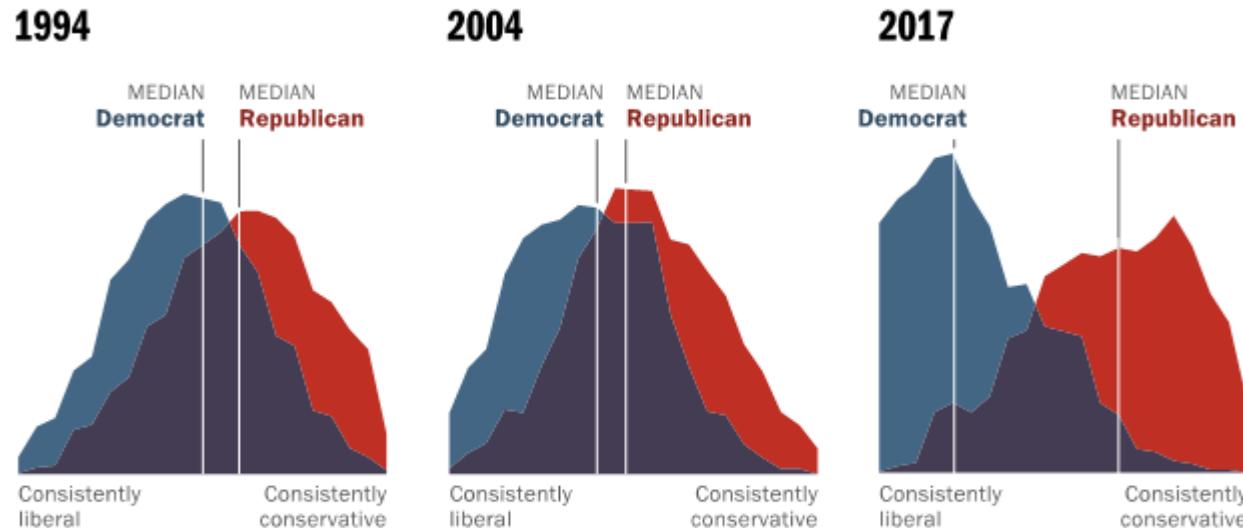
# Pew Partisan Consistency Study

1. Coded responses as -1 for a liberal response, 1 for a conservative response, 0 for don't know/refused/other
2. Summed up to create an ideological consistency scale:
  - Consistently conservative (+7 to +10)
  - Mostly conservative (+3 to +6)
  - Mixed (-2 to +2)
  - Mostly liberal (-6 to -3)
  - Consistently liberal (-10 to -7)

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## Democrats and Republicans more ideologically divided than in the past

*Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values*



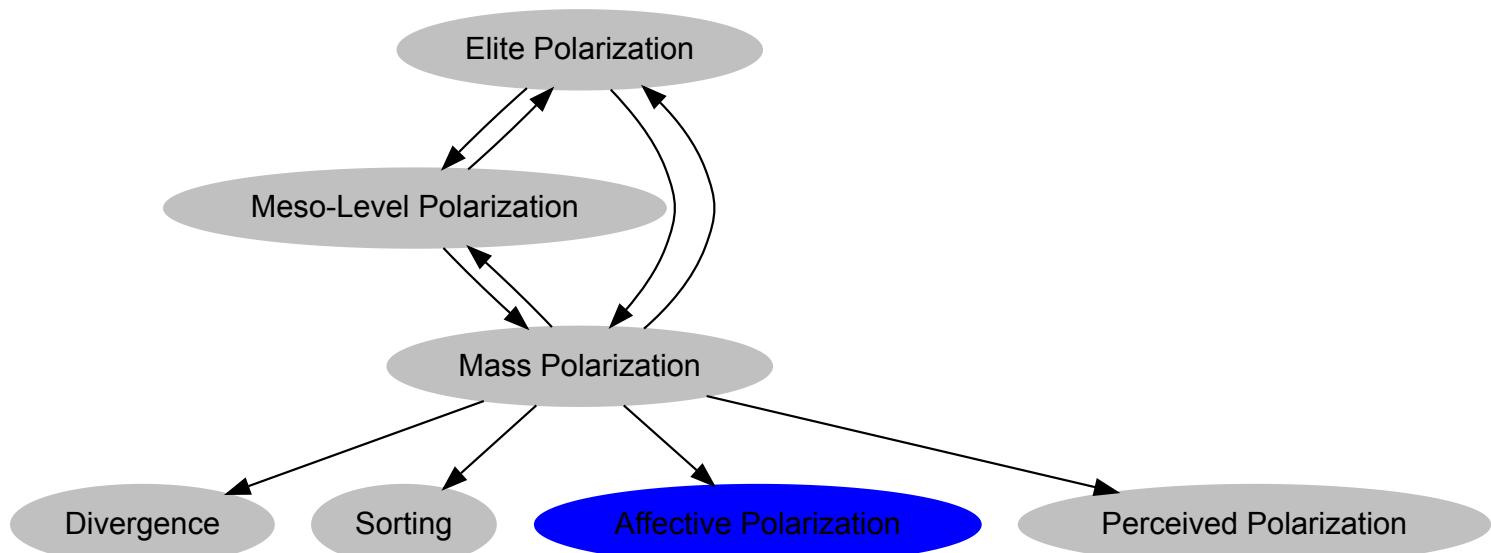
Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see methodology). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents; the red area of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple.

Source: Survey conducted June 8-18, 2017.

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**In sum: Pretty clear evidence that  
Americans have sorted**



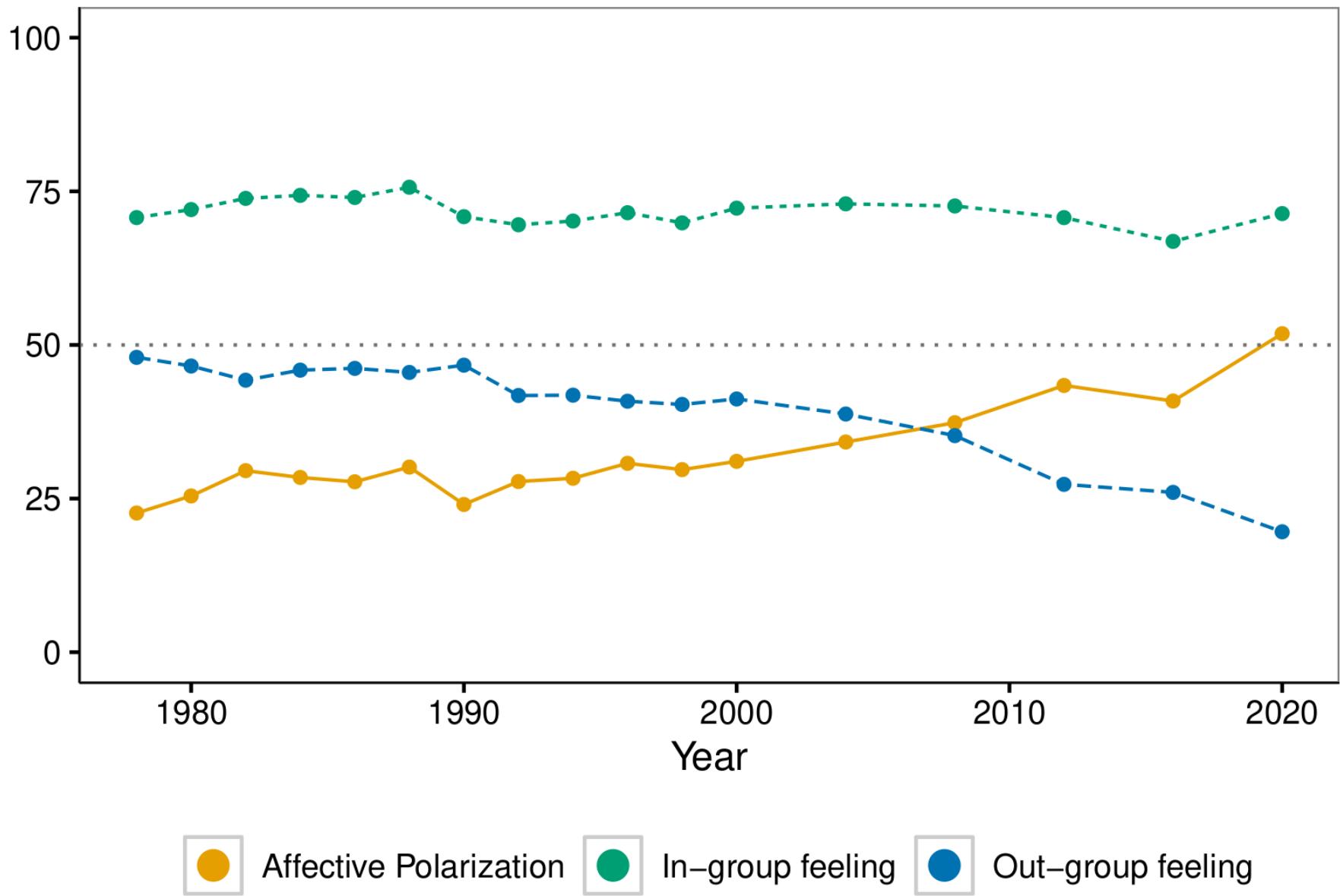
# Affective Polarization

1. Americans increasingly dislike one another
2. At the aggregate level, affective polarization.
3. At the individual level, partisan prejudice/animosity
4. Operationalized in lots of ways.
5. Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129-146.

# Feeling thermometers.

100°	Very warm or favorable feeling
85°	Quite warm or favorable feeling
70°	Fairly warm or favorable feeling
60°	A bit more warm or favorable than cold feeling
50°	No feeling at all
40°	A bit more cold or unfavorable feeling
30°	Fairly cold or unfavorable feeling
15°	Quite cold or unfavorable feeling
0°	Very cold or unfavorable feeling

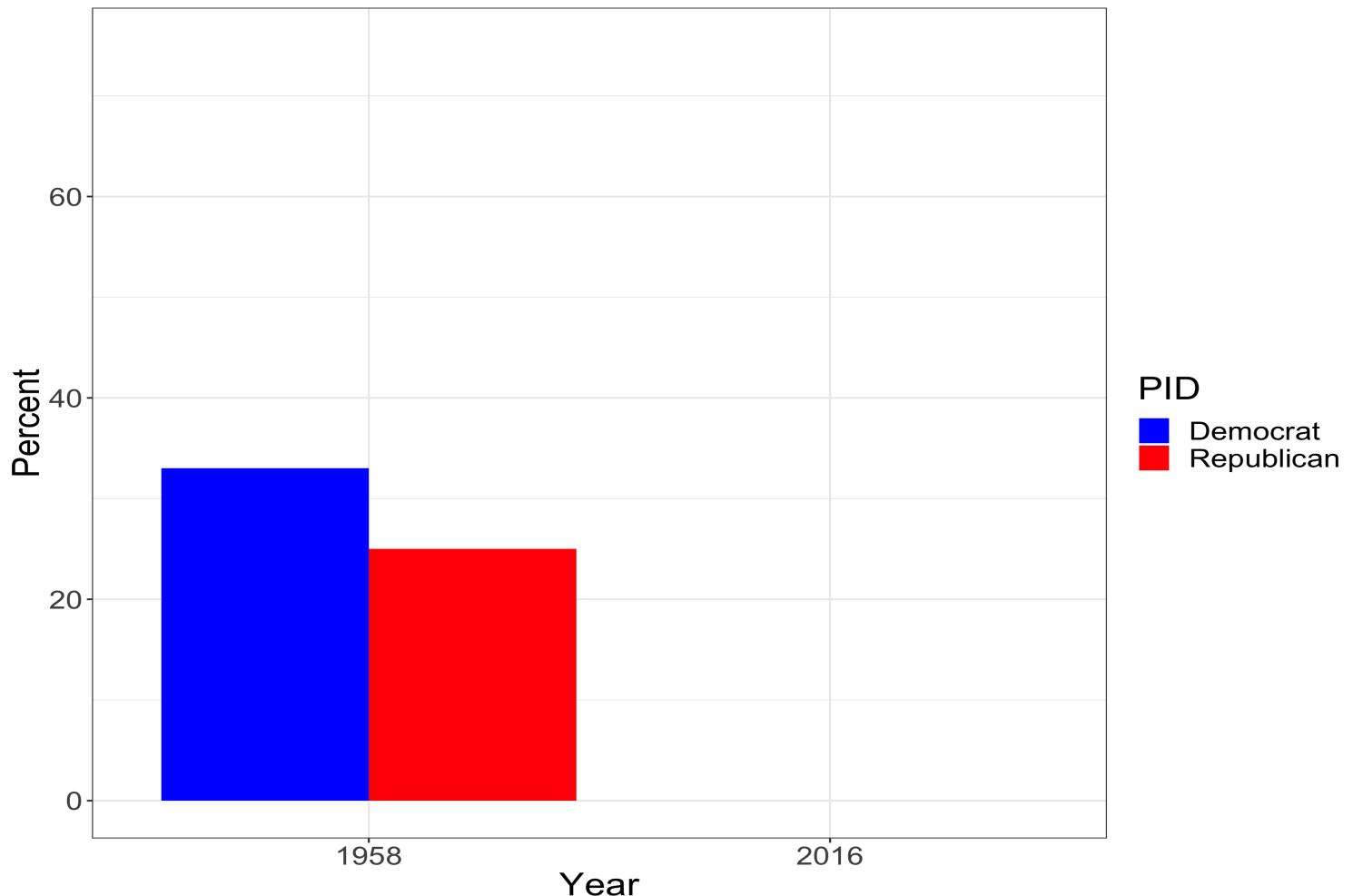
- Asked about how people feel about democrats and republicans
- We calculate feelings towards the in-party, feelings towards the out-party and the difference



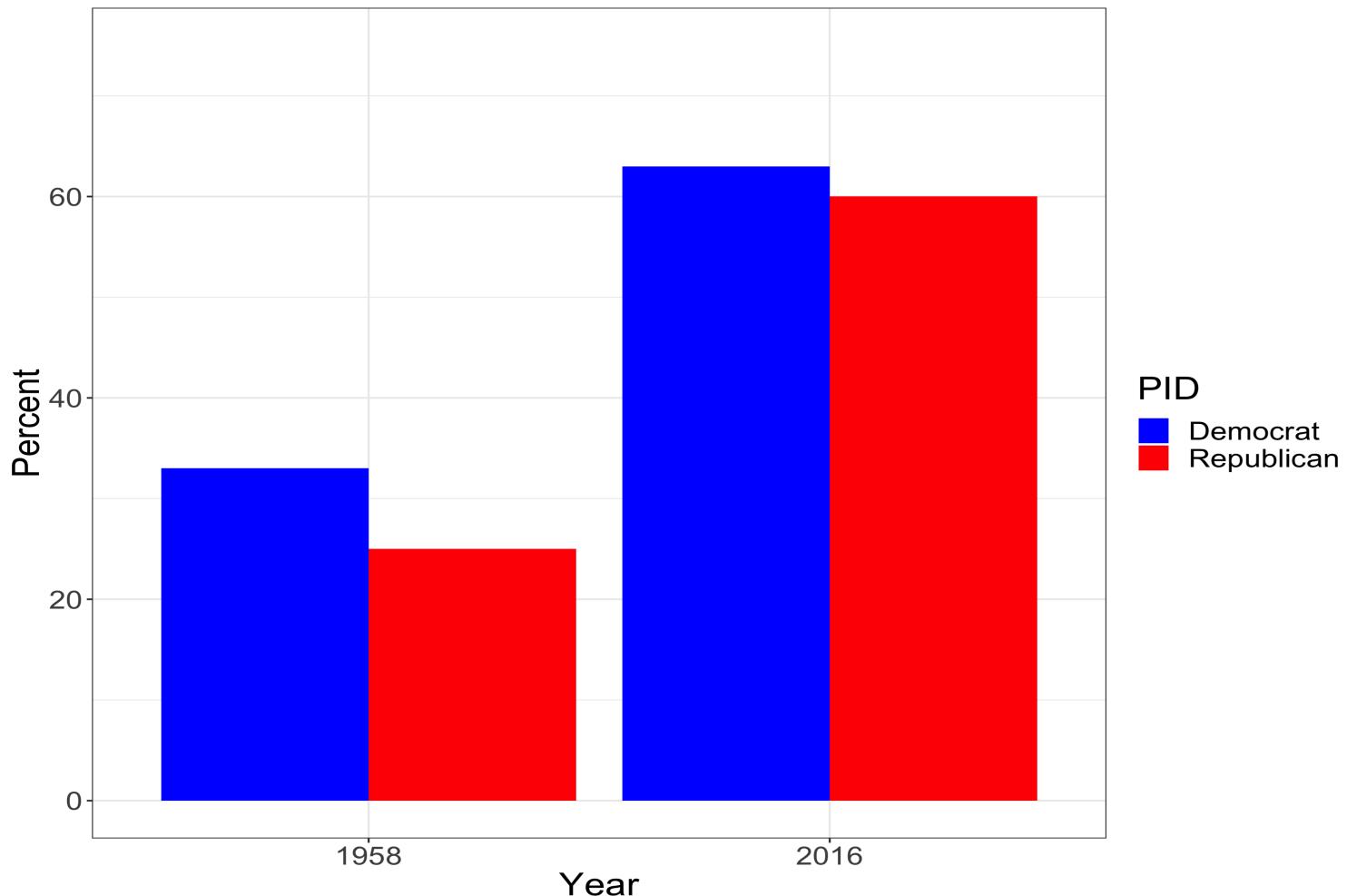
# Interparty Marriage

- Would you be unhappy if your kid married someone from the other party?

## Percent saying they would be unhappy at interparty marriage



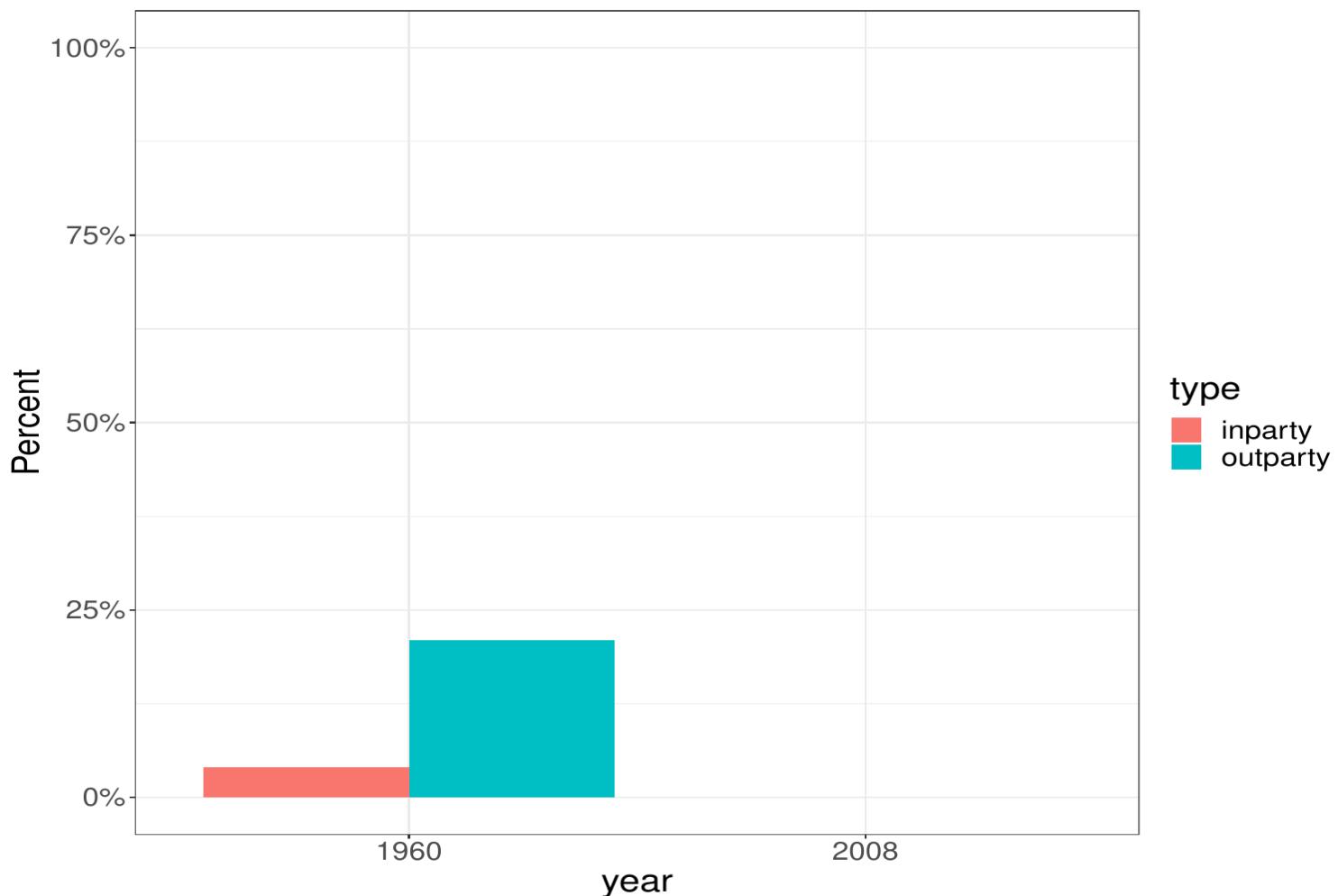
## Percent saying they would be unhappy at interparty marriage



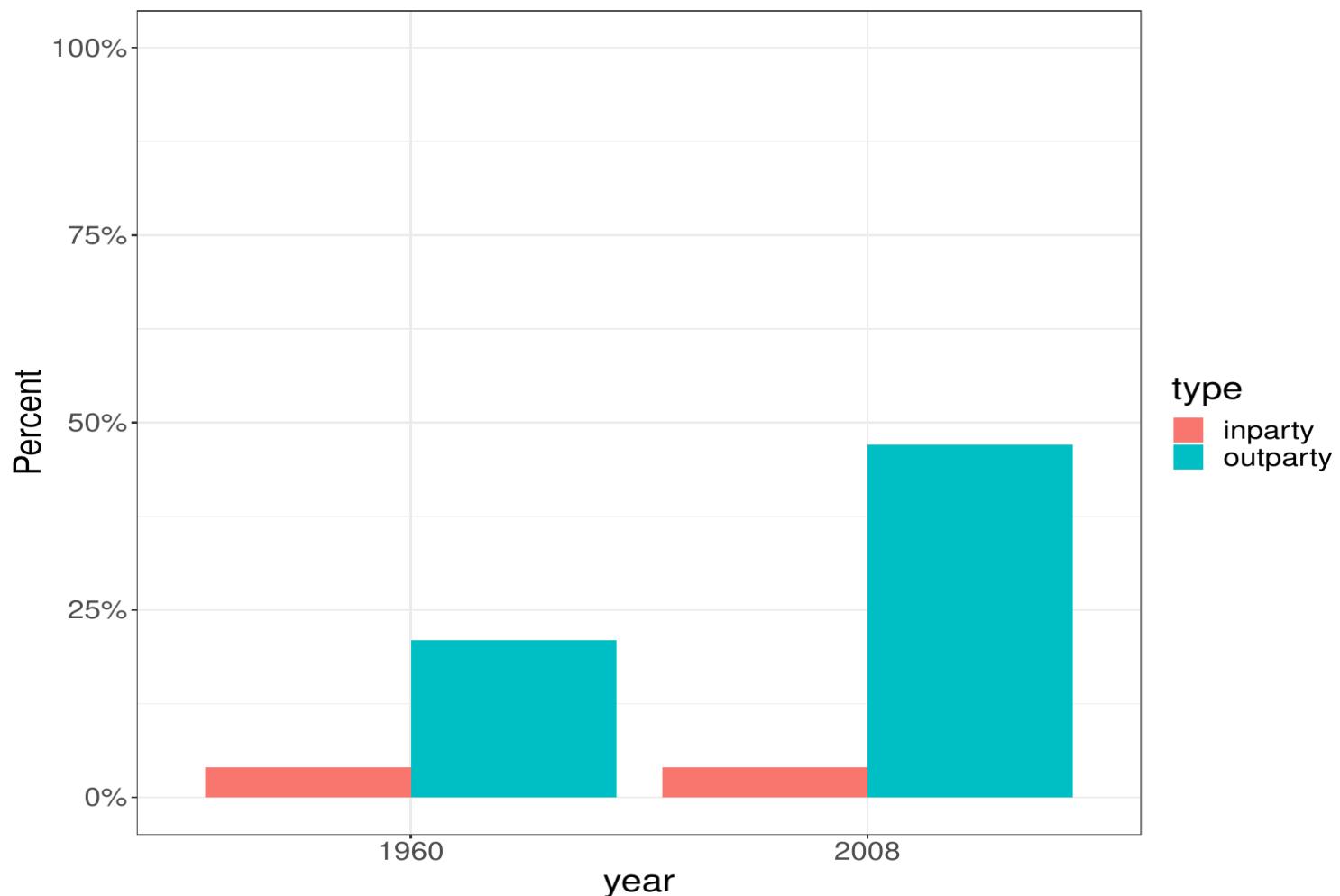
# Name calling

- Percent of americans calling the other side selfish or intelligent

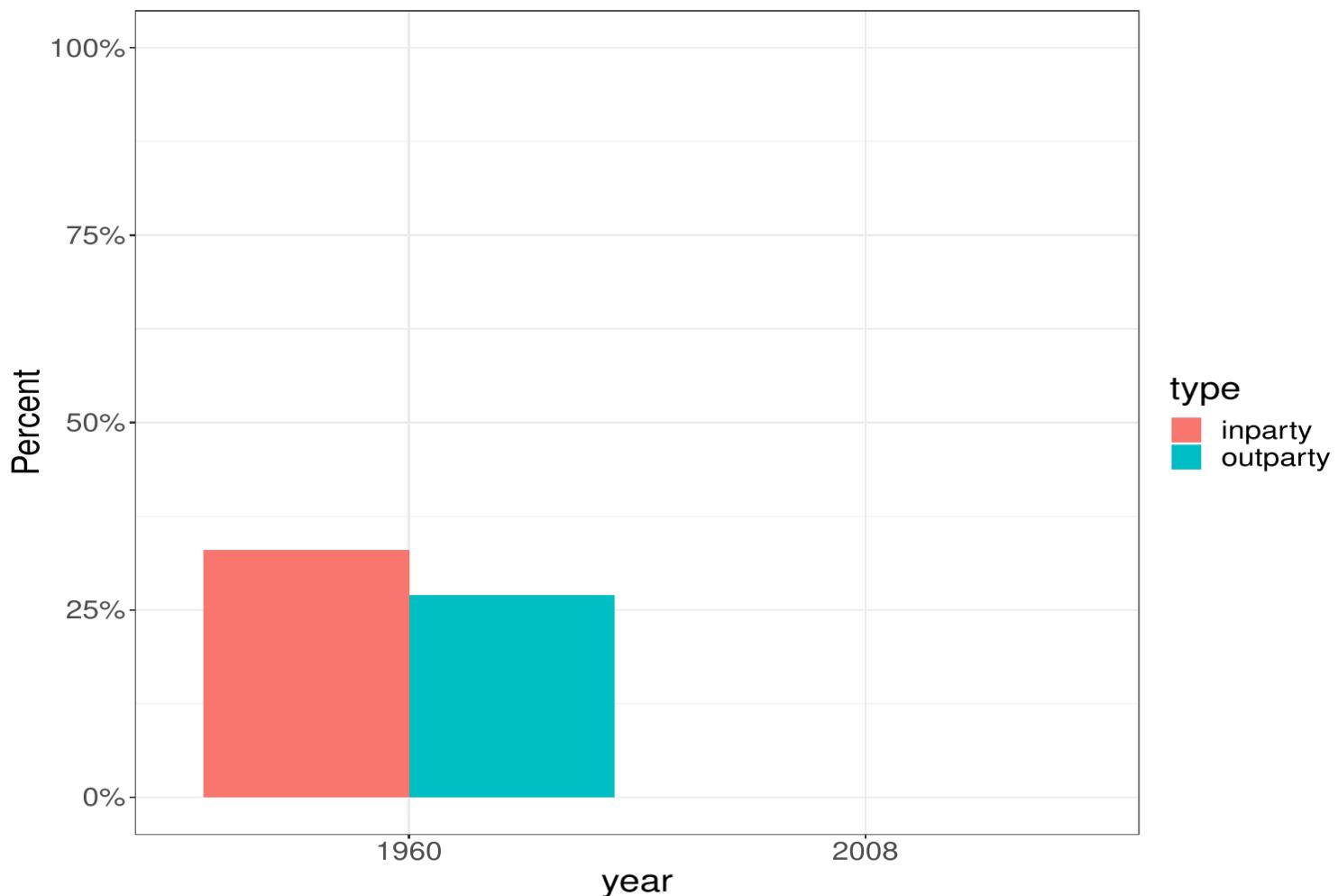
## Percent saying that the target group is selfish



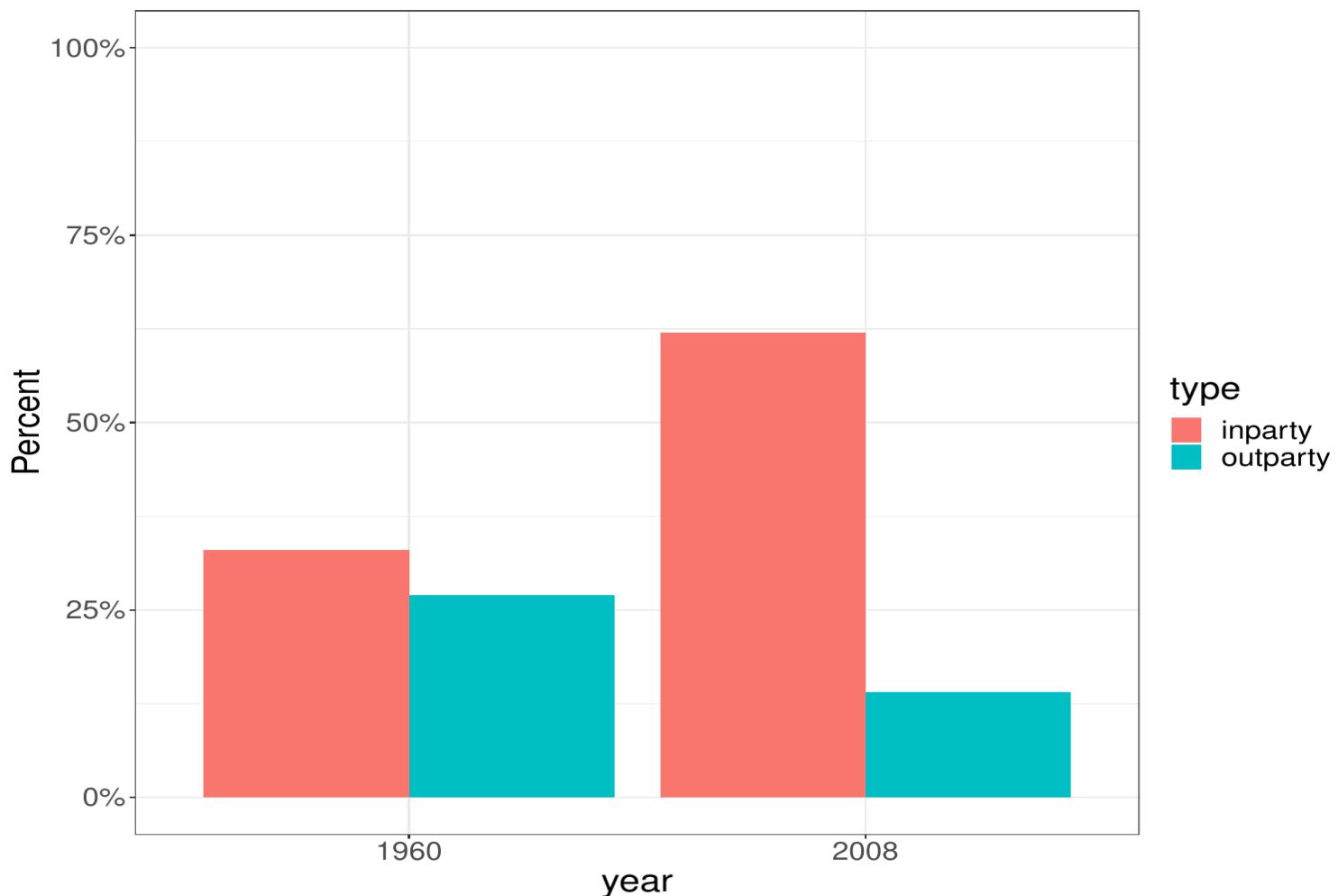
## Percent saying that the target group is selfish



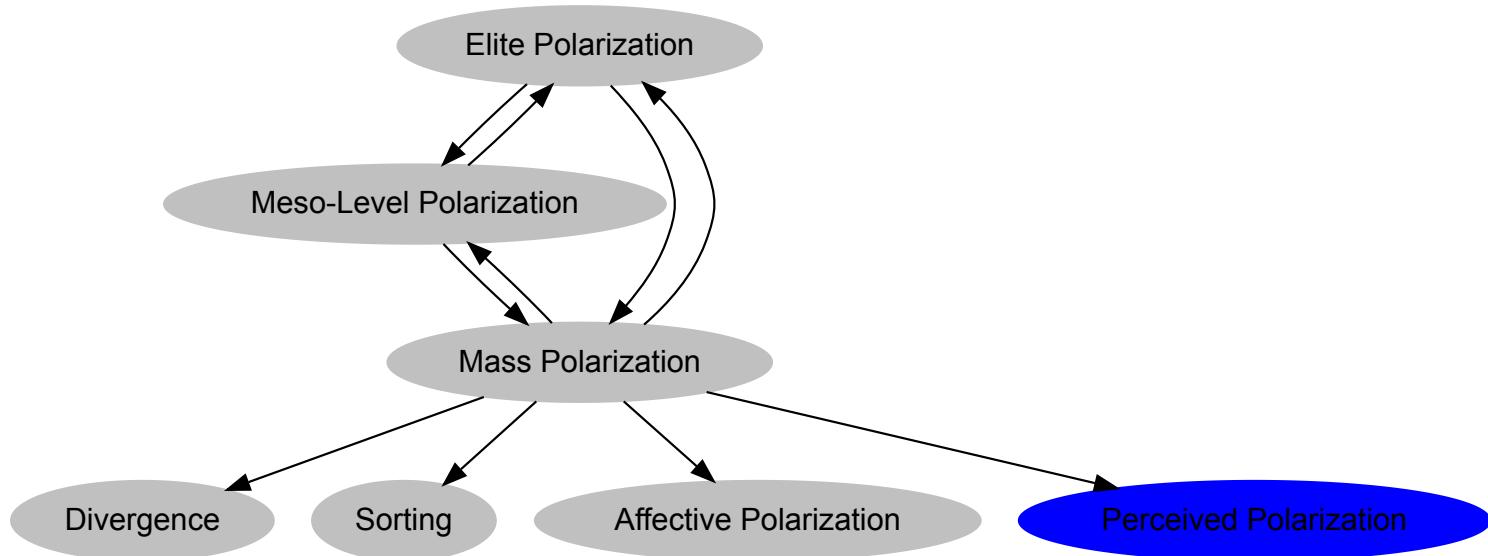
## Percent saying that the target group is intelligent



## Percent saying that the target group is intelligent

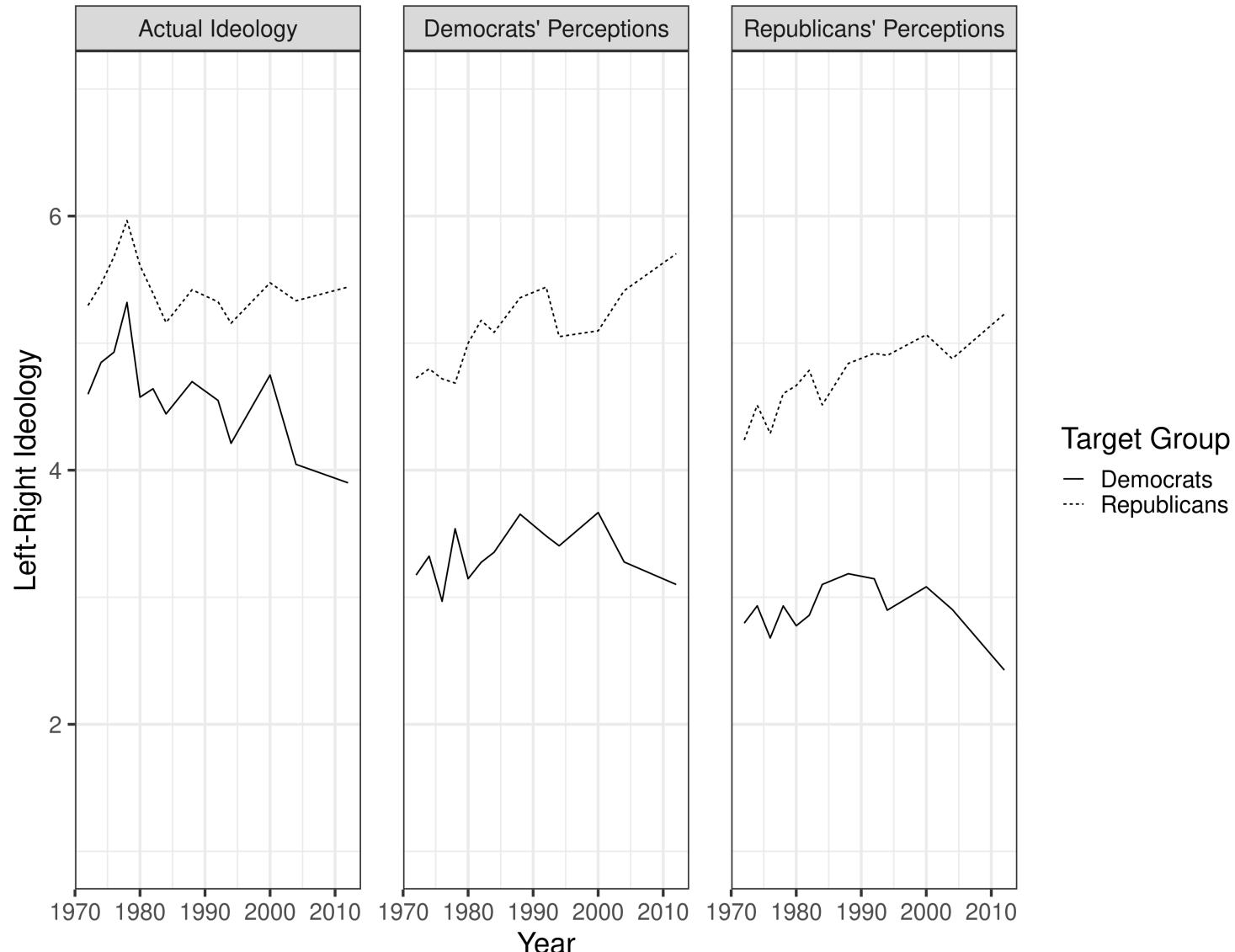


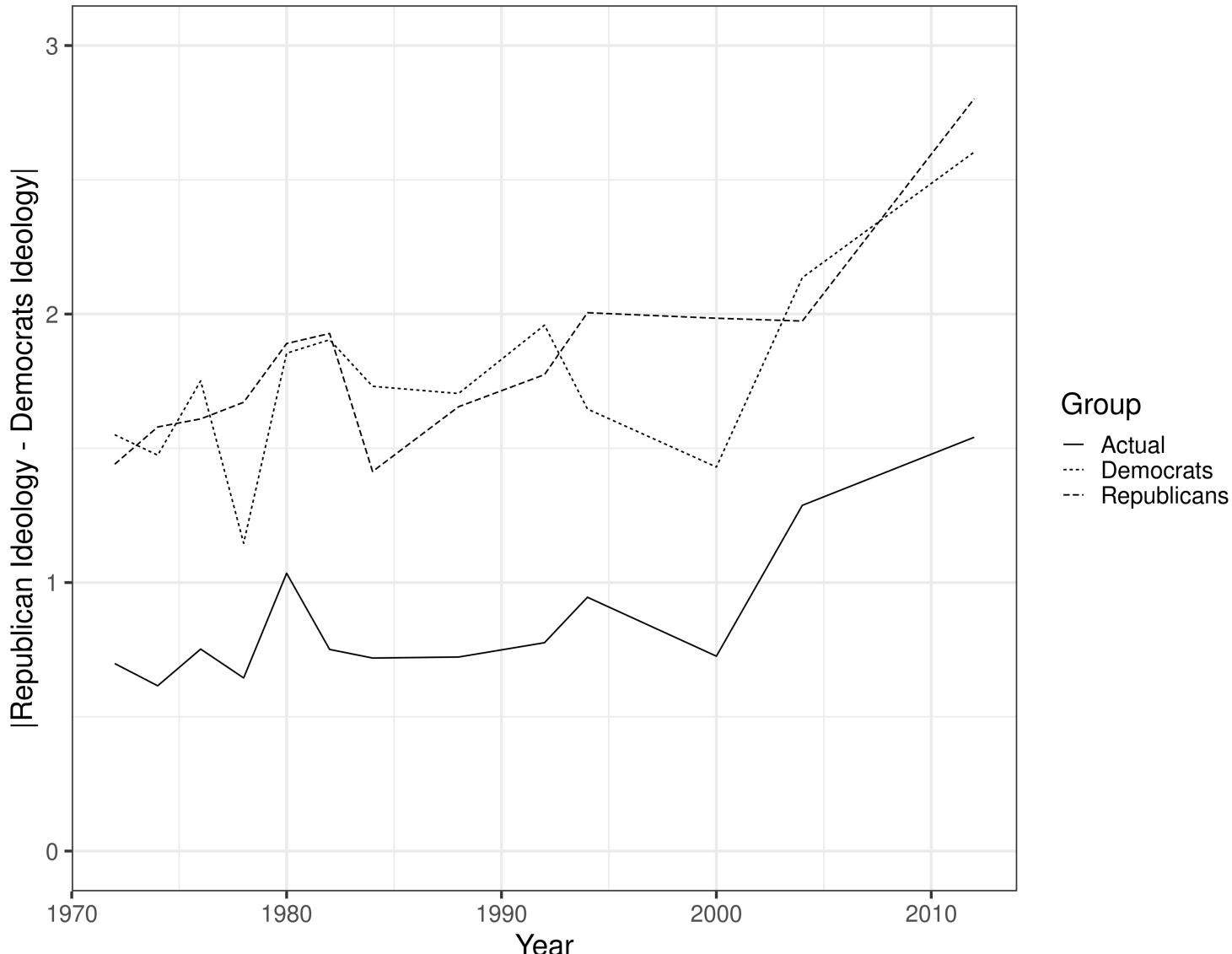
**In sum: Pretty clear evidence  
partisans dislike one another**

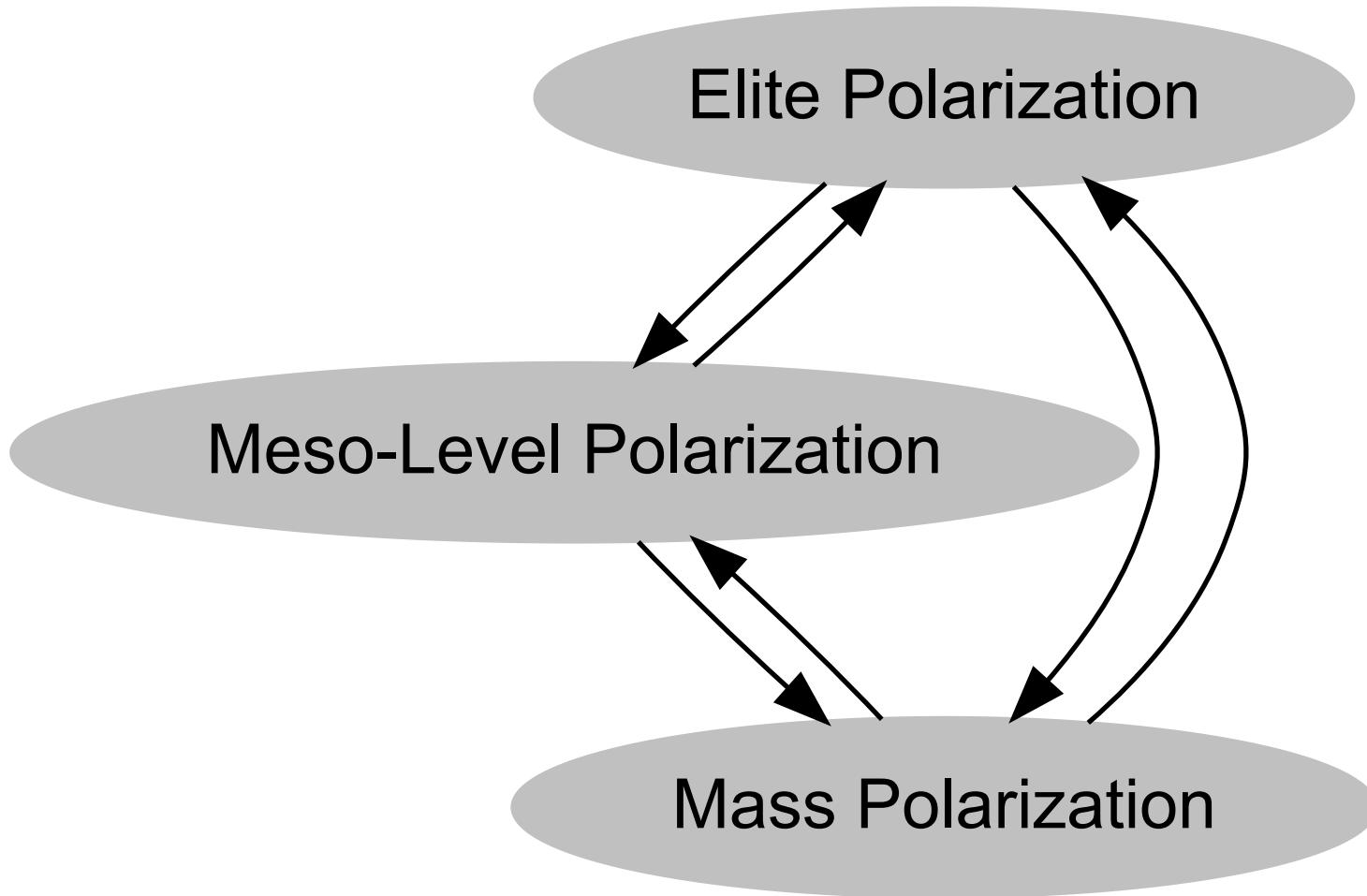


# Perceived (or False) Polarization

1. Americans perceive that the country is more ideologically polarized than it actually is.
2. For instance, the ANES asked people to place the two parties on a scale from left (1) to right (7)
3. Compare where Democrats/Republicans actually stand, where Democrats perceive Republicans/Democrats to stand, and where Republicans perceive Democrats/Republicans to stand







**In sum: Pretty clear evidence that  
perceived polarization outpaces actual  
polarization**

# Meso-level polarization

1. Institutions that link elites and the mass public.
  - a. Interest groups: Crosson, J. M., Furnas, A. C., & Lorenz, G. M. (2020). Polarized pluralism: organizational preferences and biases in the American pressure system. *American Political Science Review*, 114(4), 1117-1137.
  - b. state parties: Shor, B., & McCarty, N. (2011). The ideological mapping of American legislatures. *American Political Science Review*, 105(3), 530-551.
  - c. party activists: Collitt, S., & Highton, B. (2021). The Policy Polarization of Party Activists in the United States. *American Politics Research*, 49(4), 386-399.
  - d. media

# Media polarization

1. Eunji Kim (Vanderbilt), Josh McCrain (Utah), me tied together several databases to examine changes in ideology on cable tv (Fox News, CNN, MSNBC)

# Took data from the Stanford Cable News Analyzer

Showing clips (up to 3 minutes) from **Feb 2016**.

- Click on the thumbnails to expand videos and press **Space** to play/pause.
- The playback position is indicated by the **green** bar.
- **Gray** bars indicate time intervals in video that match the query (note that commercials are excluded).
- Relevant words in the captions are bolded in **red**.
- Expand the video thumbnail to show labeled identities.

name="joe biden"



Previous Next Page 1 / 15 (73 videos)

name="donald trump"



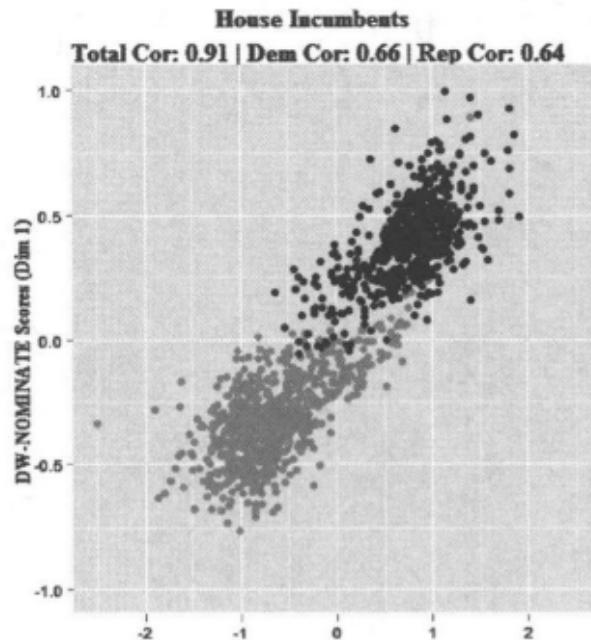
Previous Next Page 1 / 286 (1,428 videos)

# Took data from the Stanford Cable News Analyzer

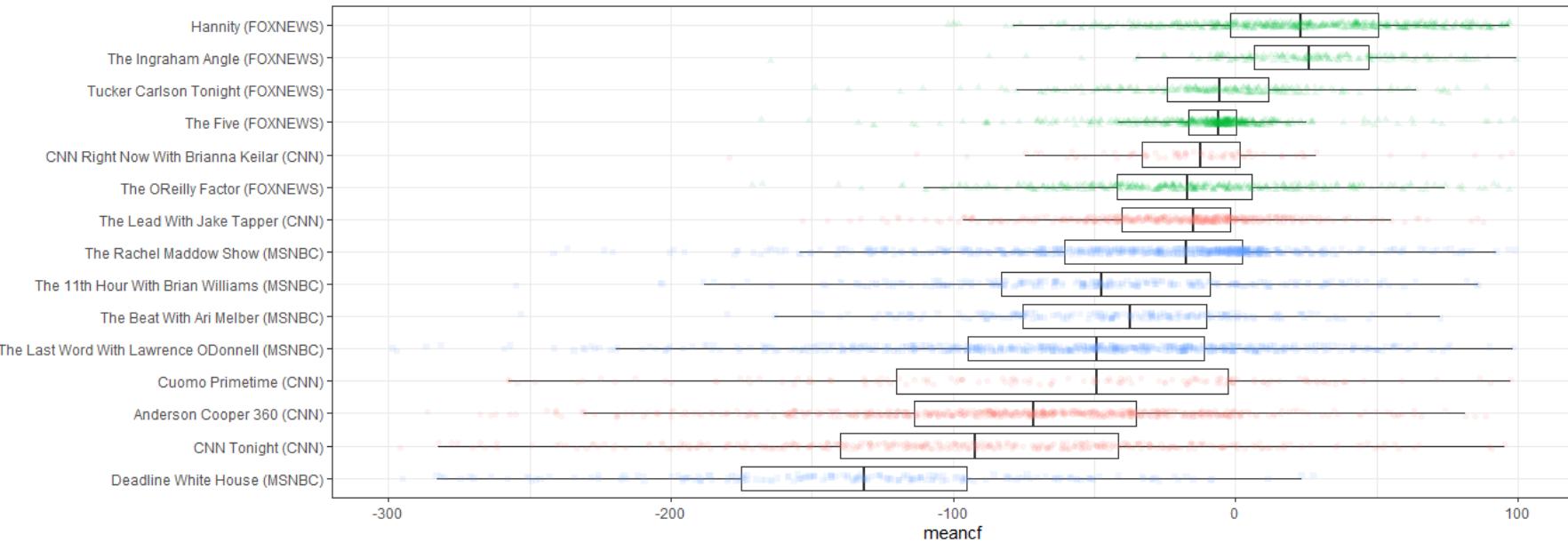
1. Dataset of a decade worth of video (January 1, 2010 - March 4, 2021) on CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC

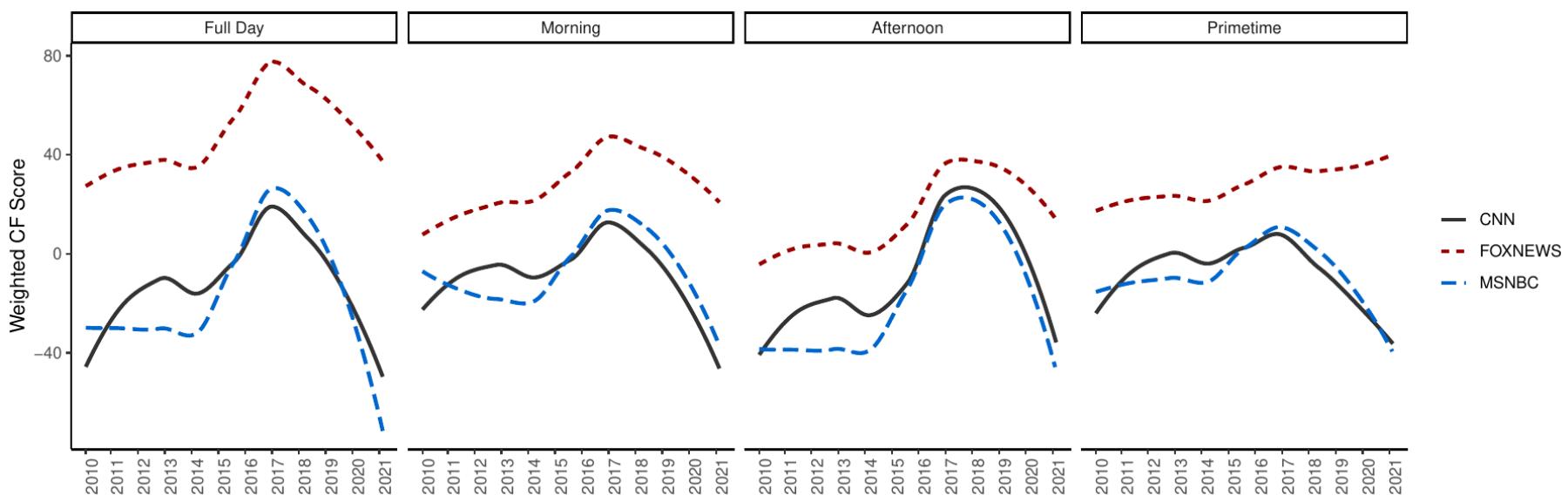
# Matched names to their ideology score from the DIME database

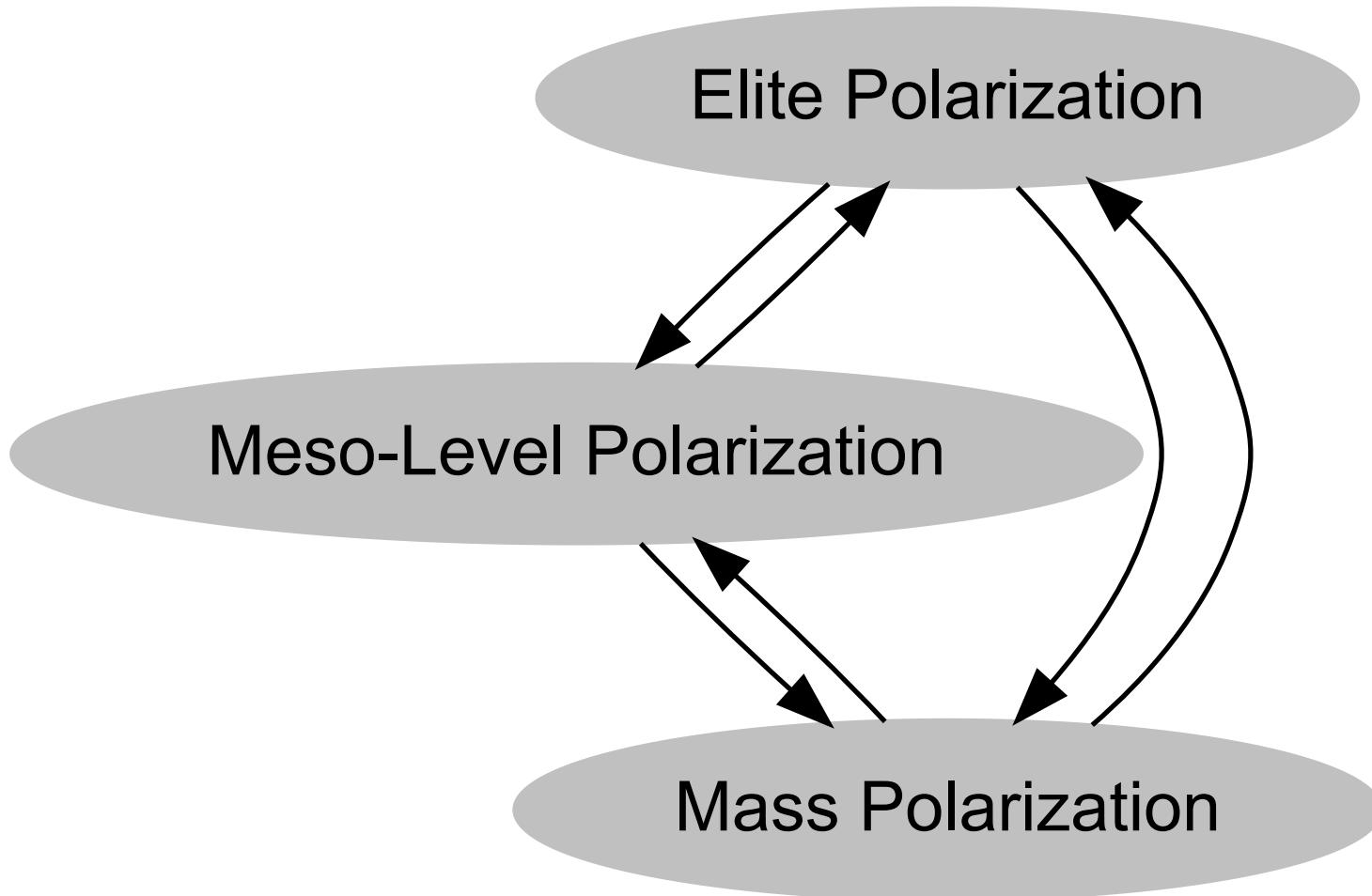
1. The Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections uses campaign donation data to scale donors and candidates on a single dimension
2. Matched the contributor list from DIME to the names in the Stanford database
3. 704 names that appeared in both Stanford and DIME were matched
4. Estimated the ideology of an outlet by the average ideology of the guests over time



show







# Concluding thoughts

1. We have lots of trends, some piecemeal explanations (e.g., the internet, rise in social media, etc) but few holistic models that consider the three levels of polarization
2. We need a better understanding of mechanisms that tie together levels and types of polarization
3. When studying polarization, make sure you clearly define the level and type of polarization.