

Polarization, Demographic Change, and White Flight from the Democratic Party

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Whites have become less likely to support the Democratic Party. I show that this shift is being driven by two mechanisms. The first mechanism is the process of ideological sorting. The Democratic Party has lost support among conservative whites because the relationships between partisanship, voting behavior, and policy orientations have strengthened. The second mechanism relates to demographic changes. The growth of liberal minority populations has shifted the median position on economic issues to the left and away from the median white citizen's position. The parties have responded to these changes by shifting their positions, and whites have become less likely to support the Democratic Party as a result. I test these explanations using 40 years of American National Election Study and DW-NOMINATE data. I find that whites have become 7.7 points more likely to vote for the Republican Party, and mean white partisanship has shifted .26 points in favor of the Republicans as a combined result of both mechanisms.

Whites have become less likely to support the Democratic Party over the past 40 years. The Democratic Party's struggle to retain whites has been well documented, and numerous explanations have been put forward to explain this shift. Previous studies have focused on how the Republican Party's increasing racial conservatism and opposition to civil rights (Carmines and Stimson 1989), increasing emphasis on cultural and moral traditionalism (Layman 2001), an increasing class divide (Brewer and Stonecash 2001), the enfranchisement of African Americans following the Voting Rights Act (Frymer 2010; Hood, Kidd, and Morris 2014), and opposition to increased levels of immigration (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Hajnal and Rivera 2014) have caused whites to abandon the Democratic Party. I argue that all of these explanations can be viewed as specific manifestations of two general causes. In this article, I propose a general model of partisan change that focuses on how demographic changes have worked in conjunction with changes in party positioning to reshape the party coalitions.

I argue that the shift in white partisan support has been driven by two mechanisms.¹ The first mechanism is increas-

ing elite-level polarization, which has caused mass-level policy orientations to become stronger predictors of electoral support. There is considerable evidence that the increase in ideological polarization among elites across a wide range of economic, social, and racial issues has triggered a process of "sorting" among the masses (Green, Palmquist, and Shickler 2002; Levendusky 2005), where individuals have become more likely to identify with and vote for the party that best matches their policy orientations (Levendusky 2010; Smidt 2017; Zingher and Flynn 2018). I argue that this process has led many moderate and conservative whites to leave the Democratic Party for the more ideologically proximate Republican Party. The second mechanism is driven by demographic changes. Ethnic and racial minorities hold policy orientations that are distinct from whites on both economic and social issues. Ethnic and racial minority groups also represent a continually growing proportion of the electorate. The increasing ratio of nonwhites to whites has shifted the median position away from the median white position. The parties have responded to these changes, and the Democratic Party's position has moved further away from the median white position.

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Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results in the article are available in the *JOP* Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). An online appendix with supplementary material is available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/696994>.

1. I use the phrase "white Democratic support" to mean a combination of short-term, election specific support (vote choice) and long-term enduring attachments (partisanship).

Whites have become more likely to support the Republican Party as a result.

My effort to elaborate and test these proposed mechanisms is organized as follows. In the next section, I detail how white voting behavior and partisanship have changed over the past 40 years. I then articulate two mechanisms that explain these shifts. Next, I develop a measurement strategy to estimate the policy orientations of each respondent in the American National Election Study (ANES) cumulative file. Then, I test the two proposed mechanisms. I use individual-level data in conjunction with elite-level DW-NOMINATE data to assess whether individuals' policy orientations are significant predictors of vote choice and partisanship (conditional upon elite polarization) and whether the distribution of policy orientations and perceptions of party positions have shifted due to demographic changes. I find that the combined effect of these two mechanisms has produced a 7.7-percentage-point shift in the likelihood of whites voting for the Republican Party and a .26-point pro-Republican shift along the 7-point partisanship scale. Finally, I discuss the implications of these findings and conclude.

ELECTION SPECIFIC AND LONG-STANDING PATTERNS OF WHITE REPUBLICAN SUPPORT

Whites have become increasingly likely to vote for the Republican Party in presidential elections (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Frymer 2010; Zingher 2014). Democrat Michael Dukakis won 40% of the white vote in 1988 despite losing the popular vote by a relatively wide margin (53.4% to 45.7%). In 1988, whites were roughly 5 percentage points more likely to support the Republican Party relative to the national two-party vote split. This 5-percentage-point gap between white support for the Republican Party and the national division of the vote typified most presidential elections through the 1990s. The Democrats' performance among whites during the 1990s was even more promising as Bill Clinton managed to win nearly 50% of the white two-party vote in 1992 and 1996.² However, in the 2000s the gap began to increase to 6 points in 2000, 7 points in 2004, 10 points in 2008, and 12 points in 2012. Barack Obama won reelection in 2012 despite winning only 39% of the white vote, which is the lowest level of white support for a winning Democratic candidate in history.

This shift in vote choice is mirrored by a change in whites' partisanship, both inside and outside of the South (see Erik-

2. Although it is important to note that part of Clinton's success in capturing a majority of the white two-party vote was due to the presence of Ross Perot, a strong third-party candidate.

son, MacKuen, and Stimson's [2002, 169] estimates of Southern and non-Southern white macropartisanship, as well as Abramowitz and Saunders's analysis of ANES data [2006, 177], and Abrajano, Hajnal, and Hassell [2017, 16] for additional documentation of this trend). Table 1 displays the distribution of partisanship among white respondents in the ANES cumulative file between 1972 and 2012. In sum, 39% of whites identified as Republicans in 1972 (including independent leaners); by 2012 the percentage of whites identifying as Republican had increased to 49%. This increase in Republican partisanship has coincided with a decline in Democratic partisanship. In 1972, 47% of whites identified as Democrats. In 2012 only 37% identify as Democrats. Southern whites' changing attachments have driven much of this decline. Table 1 also displays the distribution of partisanship among Southern whites. Southern whites are now roughly 25 points less Democratic and 20 points more Republican than they were in 1972, a total swing of almost 45 points. The shift among non-Southern whites is smaller but by no means inconsequential. There has been a 12-point pro-Republican shift among non-Southern whites.

POLICY ORIENTATIONS AND THE MECHANISMS DRIVING PARTISAN CHANGE

What is driving this shift in white partisanship and vote choice? My explanation rests on the claim that there is a foundational relationship between policy orientations and vote choice/partisanship. Policy orientations are the predisposition to view a particular set of government actions within a specific domain with a certain amount of favor or disfavor (Goren 2013, 54–56). Policy orientations are the broad set of beliefs about what government should or should not do, as opposed to more narrow and specific positions on a particular policy. Previous analyses have demonstrated that policy orientations are stable over long periods of time (Goren 2013; Jewitt and Goren 2016). For the purposes of this article, I assume that policy orientations are exogenous, and partisanship and vote choice are endogenous. This is a relatively strong claim, one that departs from the perspective of the Michigan Model, which posits that partisanship precedes both attitudes and behaviors.

However, the assumption I make is not without a considerable body of supporting evidence. Several recent studies based on the analysis of panel data have shown that both social and economic policy orientations shape partisanship more than the reverse. First, a number of recent analyses have demonstrated that key social issues such as attitudes toward abortion and gay rights (which comprise part of the social policy orientations scales used both later on in this article

Table 1. ANES Party ID, 1972–2012 (%)

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012
White respondents:											
Strong Democrat	12	12	13	15	12	15	14	15	14	13	13
Weak Democrat	25	22	20	17	16	15	19	15	11	13	13
Independent Democrat	12	11	13	10	10	15	13	16	17	15	11
Independent	13	15	14	10	10	11	8	12	8	10	14
Independent Republican	12	12	13	14	11	14	12	14	13	14	15
Weak Republican	15	16	17	18	17	17	18	14	16	17	14
Strong Republican	12	10	10	16	18	14	16	14	22	17	19
<i>N</i>	2,353	1,885	1,338	1,043	1,059	1,523	1,090	950	714	734	1,710
Non-Southern white respondents:											
Strong Democrat	11	11	12	14	11	14	14	16	14	15	16
Weak Democrat	21	20	22	16	15	15	21	15	10	16	14
Independent Democrat	13	12	14	11	10	15	13	18	18	18	12
Independent	13	16	13	9	11	11	8	10	10	8	15
Independent Republican	13	13	14	14	15	13	10	13	13	15	14
Weak Republican	16	17	16	20	19	17	18	14	16	17	14
Strong Republican	12	11	11	16	19	14	13	13	21	12	16
<i>N</i>	1,630	1,196	600	753	769	1,093	747	658	518	426	1,125
Southern white respondents:											
Strong Democrat	13	16	16	17	16	16	14	13	12	10	9
Weak Democrat	33	27	19	17	19	16	16	14	14	10	12
Independent Democrat	9	9	12	9	12	13	12	10	14	13	10
Independent	13	15	14	14	7	11	8	15	5	12	13
Independent Republican	10	10	11	15	19	16	15	16	12	13	17
Weak Republican	12	15	19	14	11	16	18	15	18	18	13
Strong Republican	10	9	9	15	17	12	16	18	26	24	25
<i>N</i>	580	433	284	281	290	430	343	292	196	308	585

Note. American National Election Study (ANES) 7-point party identification. Numbers do not always add up to 100 due to rounding.

and elsewhere) strongly influence partisanship (Dancey and Goren 2010; Goren and Chapp 2017; Hout and Fischer 2014; Killian and Wilcox 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Second, and perhaps more important, studies that examine operational ideology (which includes a lot of the measures of economic orientations employed later on in the proceeding analysis) using panel data have found that it shapes partisanship more than partisanship shapes operational ideology (Chen and Goren 2016; Goren and Chapp 2017; Highton and Kam 2011).³ While individuals might not have a firm grasp on the specifics of many issues, there is a considerable amount of evidence that suggests individuals have stable orientations

3. In sec. 3 of the appendix I provide additional empirical support for this claim.

regarding what they want the government to do generally and that these orientations shape attitudes and behaviors. This suggests that although the academic debate is far from over, there is clear evidence that policy orientations are at least as much a cause as a consequence of partisanship. Because this idea is the starting point for the article, I provide much supplementary evidence for this in the second section of the appendix, available online. But the rest of this article examines how policy orientations cause partisanship and vote choice, in the specific case of American whites.

My claim is that individuals have a stable sense of how active they want the government to be in economic and social life, and these orientations shape partisan attachments and voting behaviors. What follows is that individuals will support the party that best matches their orientations. Thus, changes in white support for the Democratic Party either

are being driven by changes in how policy orientations are translated into expressed attitudes and behaviors or are a result of the Democratic Party adopting positions that are less well matched with whites' policy orientations. I argue that both of these factors are playing a role. I expound on these possibilities in the proceeding sections.

EFFECT OF POLARIZATION ON PARTISANSHIP AND VOTE CHOICE

The first mechanism driving partisan change is that individuals' policy orientations have become stronger predictors of vote choice and partisanship (Abramowitz 2010; Levendusky 2005; Zingher and Flynn 2018). Over the past several decades there has been an increase in the strength of the relationship between policy orientations and expressed partisan support. Moreover, individuals are exhibiting greater ideological constraint over the course of their lifetimes (Stoker and Jennings 2008, 632). This is the process known as the partisan sort, where liberals (conservatives) are increasingly likely to identify with and vote for the Democratic Party (Republican Party). There is a considerable amount of evidence that ideological polarization on the elite level is driving this process (Green et al. 2002; Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2010; Zingher and Flynn 2018). Voters have an easier time determining which party is closer to their own position when the parties' policy offerings are more distinct (Dancy and Goren 2010; Levendusky 2010; Smidt 2017; Taylor 2017). Since the 1970s, the parties' policy offerings have become increasingly distinct. Republican and Democratic elected officials are now divided along economic, social, and racial lines (Layman and Carsey 2002). Ideological disjunctions between voter and party are especially glaring in times of high polarization. Individuals have an easier time responding to elite cues when the messaging is clear (Jewitt and Goren 2016; Zaller 1992). The clearer the parties' positions, the better voters are at distinguishing the available options and choosing the most appropriate one (Levendusky 2010; Smidt 2017; Taylor 2017; Zingher and Flynn 2018).

If individuals respond to what the parties do and the positions they adopt, increasing polarization is key to understanding mass partisan change. This strengthening relationship between policy orientations and attitudes and behaviors is significant since whites (as a group) hold more conservative policy orientations than the American electorate as a whole. This was true in the 1970s, and it is still true today. On balance, the Republican Party has benefitted from the strengthening relationship between policy orientations and vote choice since the majority of whites hold conservative orientations. This is true nationally and especially true in the South, where there was once a large disjunction between

policy orientations and partisan support, as the majority of Southern whites were both economically and socially conservative but identified as Democrats. The disjunction has disappeared as the parties have polarized.

Phillip Converse noted in 1966 that Southern whites' conservatism made the group a natural ideological fit within the Republican coalition and that a partisan realignment was imminent (1966, 213). However, Converse argued that for such a partisan realignment to occur, "the alternatives offered by the parties (must) be clear cut in the public eye" (240). Converse viewed an increase in polarization between Democratic and Republican elites on civil rights as the potential catalyst of widespread partisan change. Converse's prediction has largely come to fruition. The Democratic Party's congressional delegation became increasingly progressive on social, racial, and economic issues, while the Republican's moved in the opposite direction. This increase in elite-level polarization helped to bring Southern whites into their natural ideological home within the Republican Party. Whites in the South were always conservative (Hood et al. 2014, 55–58; Key 1949); the change is that their votes and partisan attachments now reflect these underlying orientations (see figs. A3–A5 for empirical verification of this claim; figs. A1–A10 are available online in the appendix).

I contend that the increasing polarization between the parties and the associated change in white partisan support is a striking example of a more general phenomenon. Whites, on average, hold policy orientations that are to the right of the median. The Republican Party is winning a greater proportion of these conservative white votes as it has adopted an increasingly unified conservative position on social, racial, and economic issues (Hood et al. 2014; Layman and Carsey 2002). Individuals have become decreasingly likely to overlook a mismatch between their own policy orientations and the parties' position as the contrast between the parties has become increasingly stark. My expectation is that individuals' policy orientations have both become stronger predictors of partisan support as a result.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE, PARTY POSITIONS, AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF POLICY ORIENTATIONS

While there is reason to think that a portion of the increase in white support for the Republican Party is being driven by changes in how citizens translate orientations into votes and partisanship, I argue there is a second mechanism that is driving changes in white partisan support. Changing demographics have altered the distribution of orientations. The movement of whites away from the Democratic Party has coincided with a considerable shift in the country's demographics (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Hajnal and Rivera 2014; Zingher

2014, 2016). Ethnic and racial minorities comprised 28% of the electorate in 2012, up from just 11% in 1972. These demographic changes are politically meaningful because whites and ethnic and racial minorities hold very different attitudes regarding the proper degree of government intervention in the economy and issues of moral traditionalism. The changing ratio of groups is altering the median position along both policy dimensions.

Understanding the political ramifications of demographic change requires some thought as to how the distribution of policy orientations is related to the parties' positions. Downs (1957), and others such as Black (1987) and Hotelling (1929), made the seminal observation that the median voter is pivotal in two-party electoral competition if citizens cast their ballots on the basis of which party's position is closest to their own. The party that captures 50% of the vote plus the vote of the median elector wins. The median is pivotal; parties cater their positions in an effort to win this critical vote. As a result, when the median elector's position changes, we should expect that the parties alter their positions. There is considerable empirical evidence to suggest that political parties actually do so (Budge et al. 2012, 229–41).

The argument I make is that changing demographics have altered the median position, and the parties have shifted their own positions in response. Demographic changes are politically consequential because there is a distinct gap between whites and nonwhites' positions on both social and economic issues. As a group, nonwhites favor a greater degree of government involvement in the economy and are more likely to support policies that uphold moral traditionalism (Dawson 1994, 183–90; Hajnal and Lee 2011), and as I later show, the median position along both the economic and social dimensions has shifted as a function of the increasing size of the nonwhite population. The size of the shift has been greater on the economic dimension, but the distributions of voters along both dimensions have changed in substantively important ways. The Democratic Party has tracked these changes in the median position; a growing proportion of whites perceive the Democratic Party as having moved further away from their own positions as a result.

This claim is evidenced by changes in how white Americans place themselves and the parties along a 7-point Likert scale. According to the ANES, Americans (correctly) perceive the parties as having become more polarized. As the top-left panel of figure 1 illustrates, on average, individuals now place the parties as holding more extreme positions than they did during previous decades. However, what is especially interesting is the change in how an average white citizen perceives the parties' positions. The bottom-left panel displays these perceptions. Whites perceive the Democratic Party as having

moved further and further away from their own ideological positions. Some of this shift might be explained by the increasing polarization of the party system generally, but whites did not perceive a comparable rightward shift in the Republican Party's position.⁴ On average, whites perceived the parties as being roughly equally close to their own positions in the late 1970s and early 1980s (with the exception of McGovern in 1972), but from the 1980s onward, whites have perceived the Democratic Party as moving further and further away while the Republican Party's position is perceived as having remained static. The change in these perceptions coincides with a marked change in the country's demographics (top-right panel). A greater proportion of whites should support the Republican Party if these perceptions of party proximity are linked to vote choice

My claim is that the parties have both tracked changes in the median position and have become more polarized. The end result of this process is that the Democratic Party has tracked the median voter to the left as demographic changes have increased the ratio of comparatively liberal nonwhites to whites, while the Republican Party has moved to the right. The Democratic Party has found new sources of electoral support in the form of ethnic and racial minority groups that are growing in size. The perception among whites is that the Democratic Party is catering its positions to these burgeoning groups of leftward-leaning citizens. A growing proportion of whites perceive the Democratic Party as moving away from their own positions and, as a result, view their own positions as being closer to that of the Republican Party. The net effect of these shifts has been an increase in white support for the Republican Party. These demographic shifts have also interacted with increasing polarization to push whites into the Republican coalition. Not only are policy orientations a stronger predictor of behaviors, but also a greater proportion of whites now hold policy orientations to the right of the median. The combination of sorting (induced by elite-level changes) and a change in the distribution of policy orientations (driven by demographic changes) is pushing whites toward the Republican Party.

MEASUREMENT OF POLICY ORIENTATIONS

In the previous section, I outlined an explanation of white partisan change that contends that whites have become more

4. What is interesting here is that there is a distinct gap between whites' perceptions that the Democratic Party has moved to the left and that the Republican Party's position has remained relatively stable and objective estimates of the parties' positions derived from the Comparative Manifestos Project (or DW-Nominate), which show the Democratic Party's position remaining relatively stable but the Republican Party's position moving sharply to the right in recent decades.

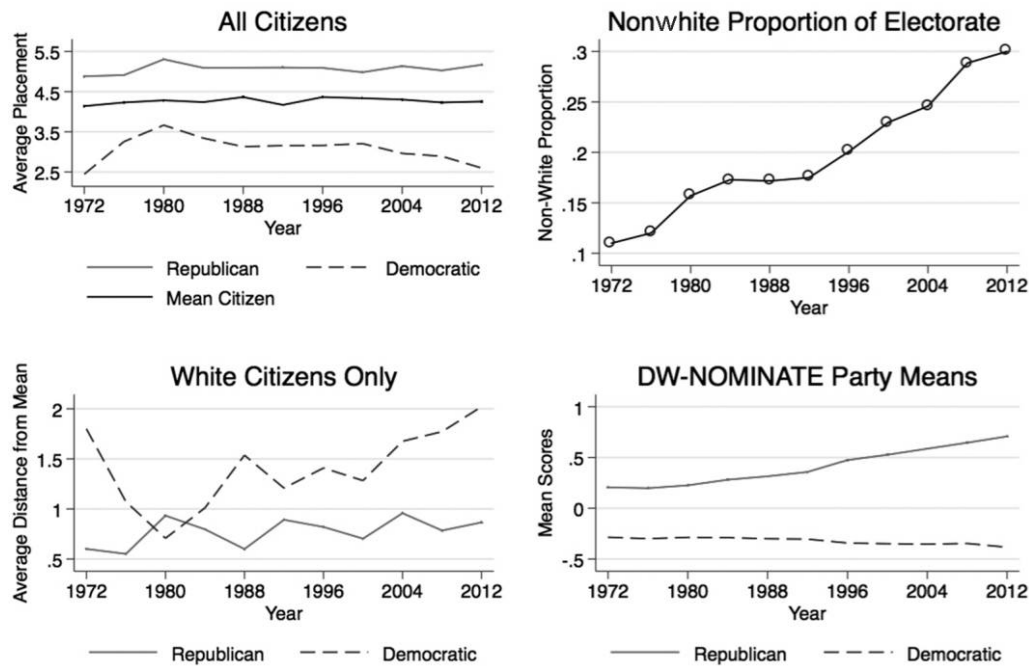


Figure 1. Aggregated party placements and distances from group means

likely to support the Republican Party for two reasons: (1) Policy orientations are becoming a stronger predictor of attitudes and behaviors as a function of elite-level polarization. (2) Demographic changes have resulted in a greater proportion of whites holding orientations to the right of the median, meaning that a greater proportion of whites now hold positions that are closer to that of the Republican Party. Testing these relationships requires me to develop a measurement strategy that is capable of estimating individual's policy orientations and then assessing whether the relationship between policy orientations and partisanship and vote choice has changed. Testing these propositions requires consistent estimates of policy orientations that span a considerable period of time.

I use the ANES cumulative file to construct these estimates. By 1972, the ANES began to include a battery of questions designed to gauge the respondents' attitudes and positions on a variety of political issues, many of which have been asked in each subsequent year. The ANES asks respondents about their attitudes toward government intervention in the economy, aid to the poor and ethnic minorities, foreign policy, a woman's role in society, gay rights, and government involvement in health care. Individuals are given an ordinal set of possible responses to choose from (e.g., strongly oppose, oppose, neutral, support, strongly support). The battery of questions I employ contains a mixture of questions regarding broad orientations (e.g., moral traditionalism) as well as positions on more specific issues (e.g., abortion). I use this battery of ques-

tions in conjunction with a measurement model to construct an estimate of each individual's policy orientations.⁵

I determine the dimensionality of the electorate's policy orientations using confirmatory factor analysis. Factor analysis is a statistical technique that is used to uncover the latent dimensions that structure individual attitudes by examining the patterns of interrelationships that exist within a set of variables (Gorsuch 1974). Factor analysis has been used by a number of scholars to analyze ANES data in an effort to determine the dimensions that structure Americans' policy orientations (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008; Goren 2013; Jewitt and Goren 2016; Layman and Carsey 2002; Layman et al. 2010; Schofield and Miller 2007; Schofield, Miller, and Martin 2003; Zingher and Flynn 2018).⁶ The results of the factor analyses reveal that there are two underlying dimensions that structure orientations. Questions of government involvement in the economy, health care, aid to the poor and African Americans, and Social Security all load highly on this first dimension. Social issues (such as gay

5. A full list of which items were employed in each year can be found in app. table A1-1.

6. Some scholars have argued that Item Response Theory (IRT) has some more desirable properties compared to factor analysis (Treier and Hillygus 2009). As a result, I have replicated the preceding analyses using estimates of policy orientations derived from a hybrid IRT model. The results of these additional analyses can be found in app. 4.2.

rights, abortion, and prayer in school) load highly on the second dimension.⁷ The range of values on each dimension spans from about -2.5 to $+2.5$, with negative 2.5 being the most liberal and positive 2.5 being the most conservative. In each year, the mean policy orientation on each dimension is zero. I use individuals' factor score on the economic and social dimensions as their policy orientations.⁸

EFFECT OF INCREASING POLARIZATION ON WHITE SUPPORT FOR THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Now that I have developed a measure of policy orientations, the task becomes estimating how these policy orientations are translated into partisan attachments and vote choice. I first establish the relationships between policy orientations, polarization, perceptions of party positions, and partisan support before moving on to estimate how changes in these parameters are related to changes in the aggregate level of white support for the Republican Party.

My claim is that individuals tend to support the party that best matches their own orientations and they become more successful at doing so as the parties' positions become more distinct. The empirical manifestation of this claim is that the relationship between policy orientations and polarization is conditional—the translation of orientations into partisan support varies as a function of elite polarization. I posit that there is an interaction between the two variables.

$$Y_i = a + B_1E_i + B_2S_i + B_3(R_j - D_j) + B_4[E_i \times (R_j - D_j)] + B_5[S_i \times (R_j - D_j)] + P_i + X_i + X_j + e_i,$$

where Y_i is the dependent variable (i.e., vote choice or party ID), a is a fixed regression constant, E_i is individual i 's economic orientations relative to the yearly median (0), S_i is individual i 's social orientations relative to the yearly median (0), R_j is the mean Republican congressional NOMINATE position in year j , D_j is the mean Democratic congressional NOMINATE position in year j , P_i is individual i 's evaluation of which party's position is closer to his or her own position, X_i is a vector of control variables for each individual respondent, X_j is a vector of control variables for each year j , and e_i is an error term.

The intuition of this model is straightforward. Individual-level partisanship and vote choice is modeled as a function of an individual's policy orientations, perceptions of the parties' positions relative to their own, party polarization, plus a set

of demographic and macrolevel control variables. I measure party distance by taking the difference in perceived distance between individuals' positions and where they place the parties' positions on the same 7-point scale.⁹ The measure ranges from -6 to 6 , with a mean of $.11$ and a standard deviation of 2.46 . If individuals perceive the parties as being equally far away from their own positions, the variable is scored as zero (e.g., an individual places herself at 4, the Republicans at 6, and the Democrats at 2). Positive numbers reflect instances when individuals placed the Republican Party as closer to their own position than the Democratic Party. Negative numbers reflect the opposite.¹⁰ Individuals' perceptions of the parties' positions have become more accurate over time. This implies that "sorting" can follow two empirical pathways. The first is through the interaction terms between economic and social policy orientations and polarization. The second is through the increasing accuracy of perceived party distances. Not only have policy orientations likely become stronger predictors of partisanship and vote choice, but also citizens now have an easier time determining which party is closer to their own positions, which exerts its own effect.

The set of control variables consists mainly of demographic group memberships, but I also include a control for the Democratic share of the presidential vote (to control for good or bad democratic years) and policy mood (Stimson 2015) in an effort to control for vacillations in the public's disposition toward liberal and conservative policies.¹¹

9. The ANES does not contain the set of questions necessary to gauge where individuals place the parties on the economic and social dimensions; thus I measure perceived party proximity along a single dimension. However, individuals' perceptions of how proximate the parties' positions are to their own positions are informed by both their economic and social orientations, and this relationship has grown stronger over time. I provide empirical evidence for this claim in app. table A10.

10. Individuals must respond to three separate questions in which they are asked to place their own positions along a 7-point ideology scale, as well as the positions of the Democratic and Republican parties, in order to construct the "party distance" variables. It is impossible to calculate the party distance measure for any ANES respondent who fails to answer any one of these three questions; there are a nontrivial number of missing observations as a result. As a result, I present models that do not include party distance.

11. There are numerous other variables that could explain a portion of whites' shift toward the Republican Party. I tackle two of the most important competing alternative explanations in sec. 2 of the appendix, where I assess how levels of implicit racism and attitudes toward immigrants shape vote choice and partisanship. I find that racial attitudes and attitudes toward immigrants exert a significant effect on the outcome variables. One alternative explanation that I am not able to directly test is the relative advantage hypothesis developed by Hood et al. (2014) to explain partisan change in the South. Hood et al.'s explanation relies on registration data by race, which are not widely available.

7. I took several steps to ensure that the results of the factor analysis are comparable from year to year. Please see app. 4.1 or more details.

8. I have taken steps to ensure that these same latent dimensions can be found in other data sets as well. Sec. 1 of the appendix contains a full replication of the analyses included in the main text using the General Social Survey (GSS) cumulative data file.

I do not expect that an individual’s policy orientations exert a constant effect on vote choice over time. Rather, I expect that the effect will be conditioned by elite polarization. The expectation is that policy orientations will become a stronger predictor of partisanship and vote choice as polarization increases; therefore, I model them with a pair of terms that interact an individual’s economic and social orientations with the level of congressional polarization. I operationalize polarization as the gap between the median Republican and median Democratic position in Congress in the DW-NOMINATE data (Carroll et al. 2013). I use this measure of congressional polarization as a proxy for polarization writ large. Party elites have become more ideologically divided both inside and outside of Congress. Including a measure of congressional polarization is a way of capturing this increase in polarization in an empirically tractable way.

I test the hypothesized conditional relationship between individual-level policy orientations and elite-level polarization in table 2. The dependent variable in columns 1 and 2 is vote choice (Democratic vote 1/0), and the equations are specified as probit models. The dependent variable in columns 3 and 4 is partisanship (7 equals strong Democrat, 1 equals strong Republican). These equations are specified as ordinary least squares.¹² The sample is limited to whites.

The results of the models in table 2 illustrate the conditional relationship between policy orientations and polarization. Because the effect and statistical significance of these interaction terms vary according to the value of the modifying variable, it is best to interpret the significance of these interaction terms graphically (Berry, Golder, and Milton 2012). Figure 2 displays the effect of these key interaction terms. The figure demonstrates the effect of a 1-unit increase along the economic and social policy orientations scale across a range of values for polarization (i.e., the more conservative orientations scale runs from roughly -3 to 3). The dashed line represents a kernel density plot of the distribution of the values of polarization that occur in the data. All four panels of the figure illustrate a common finding—a 1-unit increase along the policy orientations scale is associated with a greater change in vote choice and partisanship as polarization increases. In substantive terms, an increase in polarization amplifies the effect of a 1-unit increase in policy orientations—both economic and social.

The panels in figure 2 illustrate several other points that are worth noting. First, the relationship between economic orientations and vote choice and partisanship is especially strong.

12. I also estimated multilevel versions of these models. The substantive results of both sets of models are nearly identical.

Table 2. Probit/Ordinary Least Squares Models Testing the Conditioning Effect of Polarization on the Relationship between Policy Orientations and White Vote Choice/Partisanship

Variable	Vote Choice		Party ID	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Econ orientations	.16* (.07)	.13 (.10)	.09 (.06)	-.04 (.06)
Social orientations	.24* (.06)	.16 (.09)	.41* (.06)	.26* (.06)
White Southerner	-.01 (.04)	.03 (.05)	.33* (.04)	.34* (.04)
Female	.04 (.03)	-.11* (.05)	.02 (.03)	-.02 (.04)
Income	-.13* (.02)	-.08* (.02)	-.14* (.02)	-.09* (.02)
Age	.00* (.00)	.00* (.00)	.01* (.00)	.01* (.00)
Weekly church	-.20* (.04)	-.00 (.05)	-.19* (.04)	-.02 (.04)
Catholic	.16* (.04)	.10 (.05)	.45* (.04)	.35* (.04)
Jew	.64* (.14)	.41* (.19)	1.08* (.09)	.71* (.09)
Union	.36* (.04)	.30* (.06)	.56* (.04)	.41* (.04)
Education	-.06* (.01)	-.05* (.02)	-.13* (.01)	-.09* (.01)
Polarization	-.55* (.14)	-.28 (.19)	-.52* (.13)	.05 (.13)
Polarization × econ	-1.18* (.10)	-.76* (.14)	-1.06* (.08)	-.31* (.08)
Polarization × social	-.82* (.09)	-.52* (.12)	-1.01* (.08)	-.46* (.08)
Policy mood	-.00 (.00)	.01 (.01)	-.01 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Democratic vote (%)	3.26* (.27)	2.88* (.37)	1.01* (.28)	-.67* (.29)
Party distance		-.45* (.01)		-.45* (.01)
Constant	-.67* (.25)	-1.35* (.35)	4.73* (.26)	4.48* (.27)
Observations	8,785	6,849	12,359	9,002
Pseudo-R ² /R ²	.27	.50	.23	.45

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.
* $p < .05$.

Individuals’ vote choice and partisanship is most strongly determined by their position along the economic dimension. Second, although economic orientations remain the strongest predictor, the relative increase of the predictive power of the social dimension is greater. Social orientations have be-

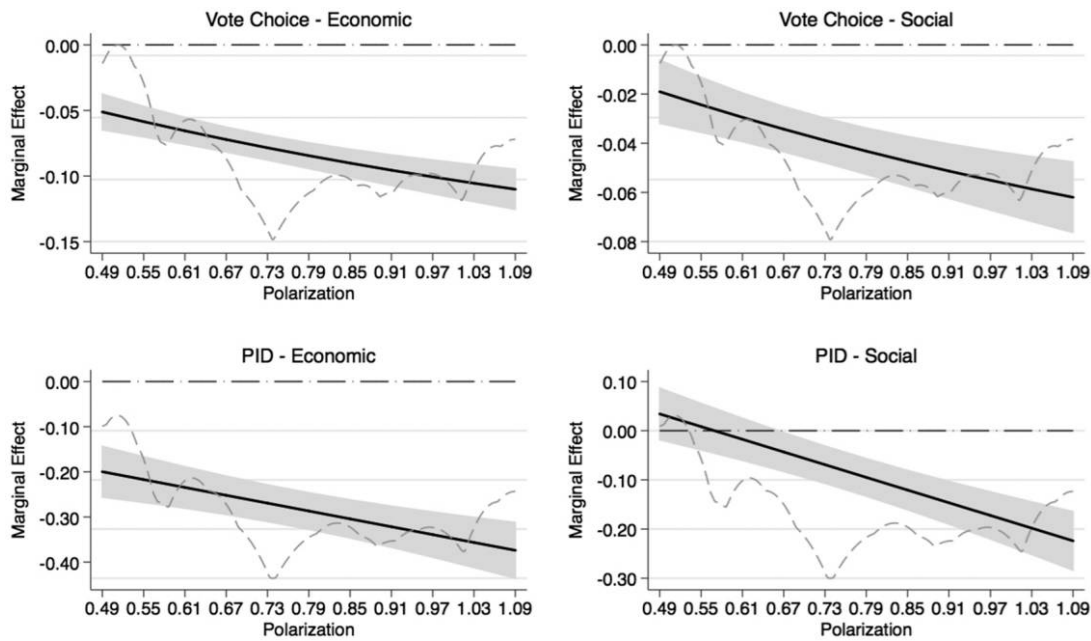


Figure 2. Marginal effect of a 1-unit increase in policy orientations across a range of values of polarization. Y-axis values reflect the change in the probability of voting for/identifying as Democrats associated with a 1-point increase along the policy orientations scale (generated using the coefficients from models 2 and 4 in table 2). PID = party ID.

gun to catch up. A clear secular/religious partisan divide has emerged as the predictive power of the social dimension has increased. The party coalitions in the electorate have sorted on both the economic and social dimensions, which points to conflict extension, as opposed to conflict replacement, which is in line with the findings of Layman and Carsey (2002).

Critically, individuals' perception of parties' ideological positions relative to their own position is a substantively important and statistically significant predictor of partisanship and vote choice. A 1-unit shift along the party proximity scale is associated with a .47-point shift in partisan identification, which is a substantively large effect. I also estimate that there is a 77% chance that people who view the Democrats' position as 2 units closer to their own than the Republicans' will vote for the Democratic candidate, holding all other variables constant. This likelihood declines to 14% if the individual is 2 units closer to the Republicans. Perhaps more importantly, whites have continued to perceive the Democratic Party as being further and further away from their own positions as demographic changes have worked to reshape the composition of the electorate and the position of the median voter. Additionally, citizens' perceptions of the parties positions relative their own have become more strongly influenced by their own positions. In other words, individuals are having an easier time determining which party's position is closer to their own. In the next section, I examine how changes in these perceptions among whites are related to increasing support for the Republican Party.

Additionally, several control variables exert a significant effect on vote choice and on partisanship. Catholics, union members, women, and Jews are all more likely to identify with and vote for the Democratic Party than would be expected on the basis of their policy orientations alone. This same holds true for Southern whites in respect to partisanship (in some models) but not for vote choice. Weekly church attendees were more likely to identify with and vote for Republican candidates than would be expected, as are those that are in the top third of the income distribution and those with higher levels of education. Policy mood exerts little effect.

AN ESTIMATE OF HOW SORTING HAS RESHAPED WHITE PARTISAN SUPPORT

Policy orientations have become stronger predictors of both vote choice and partisanship. The increasing significance of policy orientations raises the question of how this increase has affected the aggregate distribution of white partisan support. The median white economic orientation across the 40-year sample is .22 (standard deviation of .95), while the median social orientation is $-.02$ (standard deviation of 1.02). Substantively, whites hold economic orientations that are, on average, to the right of the overall median and social orientations that are slightly to the left of the overall median. The question is how do these positions translate into partisan attachments and vote choice, and has this relationship changed over time?

To estimate how increases in polarization affect aggregate white support, I use the coefficients from models 2 and 4 in table 2 and assume that the distribution of whites' orientations and perceived party distances have remained constant while polarization has increased and then assess how much voting behavior and partisanship are predicted to change. To produce these estimates, I generated a simulated distribution of white citizens with the same parameters as the overall sample and then assessed how vote choice and partisanship would be affected by an increase in polarization while holding all other variables constant. I estimate that the strengthening relationship between policy orientations and attitudes and behaviors (induced by an increase in polarization) is associated with a 2-point increase in white support for the Republican Party in presidential elections. The overall distribution of white partisanship was not significantly affected by the increasing predictive power of policy orientations. Whites with moderate and conservative policy orientations have become increasingly likely to translate these orientations into votes for Republican presidential candidates. Sorting has led to a net gain in support for the Republican Party because the majority of whites hold orientations to the right of the median on the economic dimension.

CHANGES IN DEMOGRAPHICS AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARTIES' LEFT-RIGHT POSITIONS

The previous sections established that policy orientations have become a stronger predictor of vote choice. Yet focus-

ing on whites' average orientations over the past 40 years does not tell the whole story, since the overall average does not capture systematic changes. This is an important point, since the gap between the median white citizen's policy orientations and the overall median has increased, and the average white citizen now perceives the Democratic Party as further away from his or her own position.

The reason for these increases is straightforward. On average, nonwhites hold economic orientations that are considerably to the left of whites' and hold social orientations that are somewhat to the right. These differences are important because the ratio of groups has changed considerably. Nonwhites constituted only 11% of the electorate in 1972. That number had increased to 28% in 2012. The growth of the nonwhite population has pulled the overall median away from the median white citizen's position. This is true on both dimensions. This relationship is depicted in figure 3. The gap between the overall median position and the median white position has increased steadily. The median white position on the economic dimension has moved from roughly .1 standard deviations to the right of the median in 1972 to .3 standard deviations to the right in 2012 (roughly 58% of whites were to the right of the median in 1972 compared to 65% in 2012). The opposite has occurred on social issues. The median white social orientation was virtually indistinguishable from the overall median in 1972 (roughly 49% of whites were to the left of the median in 1972 compared to 57% in 2012) compared to .15 standard deviations to the left in 2012.

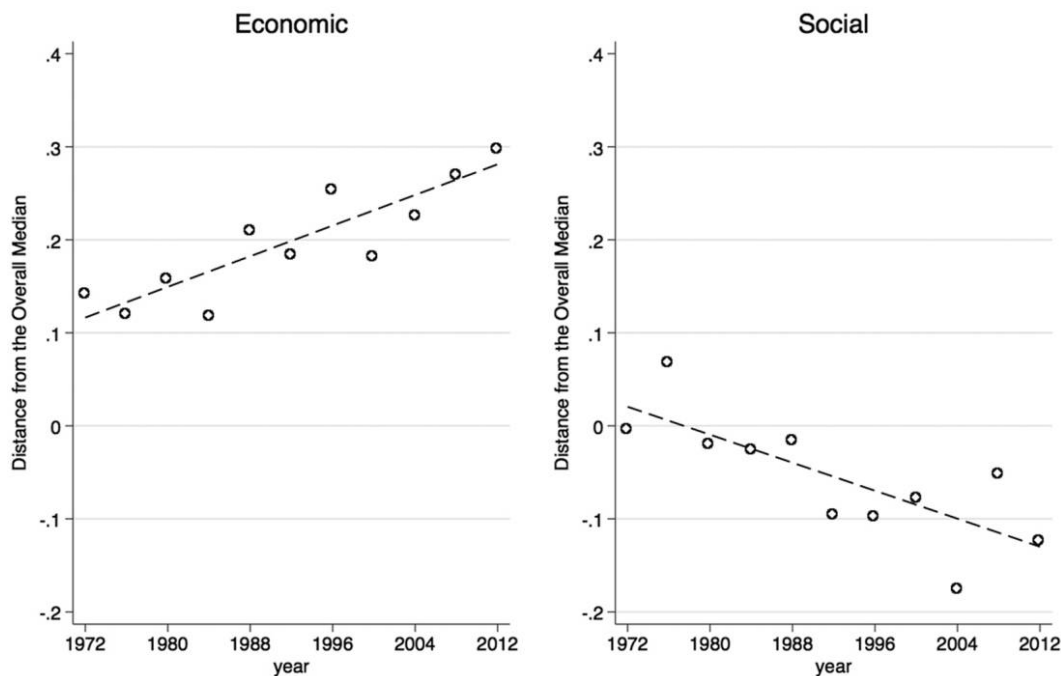


Figure 3. Gap between the overall median economic and social orientations and the median white orientations, with line of linear best fit

The reason why these changes are important is because there is considerable evidence that the parties' positions track changes in the overall median position (Budge et al. 2012). In the aggregate, white citizens have viewed the Democratic Party as moving progressively further and further away from their own position. An increasing majority of whites hold the perception that the Democratic Party has followed the shifting median on the economic dimension to the left.

I now turn to assessing how much the increasing gap between the median white position and the overall median on both dimensions has affected white partisanship and vote choice. Again, I use the coefficients from models 2 and 4 in table 2 to produce these estimates. Here I allow whites' median policy orientations to shift and then compare these estimates to the initial set of estimates where whites' median policy positions are held constant. The difference between the two is the portion of white partisan change that is being driven by changing demographics.

I estimate that this shift in the distribution of economic orientations alone is associated with an additional 1.2-point shift in white support for the Republican Party in presidential elections (again, this shift did not meaningfully affect the distribution of partisanship). However, it is important to note that not all demographic changes have pushed whites toward the Republicans. Demographic changes have also worked to push socially liberal and moderate whites toward the Democrats. As figure 3 demonstrates, while an increasing proportion of whites are holding economic orientations that are to the right of the median on the economic dimension, the opposite is true on the social dimension. I estimate that this shift in the distribution of social orientations has produced approximately a 1-point pro-Democrat shift in white vote choice. The net effect of whites' rightward shift along the economic dimension and leftward shift on the social dimension is a wash—the effects largely cancel each other out. Yet these shifts are important for understanding some qualitative changes in the party coalitions. These shifts in the distribution of orientations help to explain why the Democratic Party has been making inroads with socially liberal secular whites even though the Democratic Party is losing white support generally. Additionally, as I show in appendix 2.2, white citizens have also sorted along the grounds of racial attitudes as well—the parties' coalitions have become sorted along a number of nonpolicy dimensions.

The factor that has really driven changes in both white partisanship and vote choice is the change in perceptions of the parties' positions. On average, whites viewed the Republican Party as roughly .2 units closer to their own position from the mid-1970s through the 1980s. The Republican advantage in perceived positions had increased to .68 units

in 2012 (the average is .45 with a standard deviation of 2.49). I estimate that this growing Republican advantage has caused a 6.6-point pro-Republican shift in white vote choice and a .22-point shift in white partisanship. The shift in the perceptions among whites has produced a substantively large shift in both white vote choice and partisanship. Whites have moved away from the Democratic Party as demographic changes have brought more ethnic and racial minorities into the Democratic coalition. The changing proximity of the median white citizen to the overall median and whites' shifting perceptions of the parties' positions are testament to this fact.

Overall, the net result of shifts in the perceptions of the parties' positions and the distribution of orientations combined with the strengthening predictive power of these orientations is a 7.7-point pro-Republican shift in vote choice and a .26-point pro-Republican shift in partisan identification. Whites' election specific support and long-term attachments have both shifted toward the Republican Party as a result of the increasing explanatory power and shifting distribution of policy orientations. The combined effect of these two forces explain why the Democrats won nearly 50% of the white two-party vote as late as the 1990s but have struggled to win even 40% in recent elections.

CONCLUSION

The results of this analysis generate some interesting implications. As many have previously noted, the party coalitions have sorted. The composition of Democratic and Republican support has fundamentally changed. Socially liberal whites and ethnic and racial minority groups are becoming increasingly important components of the Democratic coalition, just as economically moderate and conservative whites have been moving toward the Republicans. From a broader perspective, the results help to explain one of the core empirical regularities in American politics: the existence of a competitive equilibrium. Stokes and Iversen (1962) noted that the pattern of partisan wins and losses in presidential elections is indistinguishable from a coin flip. In the context of contemporary politics, the Democrats have not been able to assemble a stable majority coalition in spite of favorable demographic changes because these changes are associated with the loss of other groups. The evidence presented here suggests that the entrance of new voters into a coalition fundamentally changes it, making the party less attractive to some portion of the party's current base of support. Lasting majority coalitions are a rarity in American presidential politics because the gain in support among some groups is seemingly inextricably linked with the loss of support among others.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A previous version of this article was presented at the 2016 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association. The author would like to thank Ben Farrer for reading and commenting on multiple iterations of this article. The author would also like to thank Jesse Richman, Mike Flynn, Eric Moore, Paul Goren, Michael D. McDonald, and four anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and critiques.

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