

The Growing Influence of Social Sorting on Partisan Voting Behavior

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Abstract

Social identities like race, religion, and economic class are becoming increasingly aligned with party identification at the individual level. We examine the implications of this social alignment in observed political behavior. We argue that partisan presidential vote choice has become increasingly dictated by voters' social group membership as a result of accelerated social sorting. We test this assertion using combined panel data of county-level demographic and socioeconomic voter data with presidential election results in the United States from 2000 to 2016. Using a pooled random-effects model, we estimate the cross-sectional and over-time effects of county-level social group membership on vote share for Republicans. We find strong evidence that social group membership based on race, gender, age, religion, education, geography and economic status are not only highly predictive of recent partisan vote choice, but that this alignment has steadily and significantly increased over the last two decades for race and gender in particular. Social group membership is growing as a proxy for party affiliation, and therefore is a more reliable determinant of partisan vote choice than ever.

I. Introduction

That American politics at the national level is increasingly viewed through a partisan lens is a significant understatement. Thanks to a number of coalescing forces in the electorate and in Washington, the two major parties and the conflict between them are the frames through which most American voters consider their participation in politics, policy, and elections at the national level. Understanding what truly drives voters' choices between these two parties is an important goal that has been pursued for decades; but this is a difficult task to pursue in a time of such momentous change in our political landscape. The goal of this paper is to bridge groundbreaking theories in social psychology and partisan identity into this modern framework, and understand the tangible electoral outcomes that result from them. We do so using observational data that identifies voters' actual choices at the ballot box in an effort to understand how identity and social sorting instrumentally influence the American electorate in a heavily partisan era.

Some of the most compelling recent work in American political science has centered on social psychological theories of partisanship and its determinants. Specifically, this work has focused on the increasing role of attachments to certain social groups like race, religion, gender, geography, and economic status in determining the direction, depth, and reliability of voters' partisan identity. Prior work in this area has found that while some social sorting takes place between the two parties, many voters act according to "cross-cutting" identities that make their social groupings less predictive of their party identification. These modern studies, however, find that simply the depth of a voter's psychological attachment to certain social identities is increasingly predictive of their psychological attachment to one party or the other. Sharpening

differences between the two parties based on these component social identities are resulting in stronger attachments to one party or the other.

But these findings have yet to be rigorously applied to electoral outcomes to show the extent of their far-reaching effects. In this paper, we argue that the mounting evidence of the connection between social and partisan identity is relevant not only to voters' political considerations at the psychological level, but also to their actual vote choices on Election Day. We use an original county-level dataset that combines estimates of social group memberships like race, economic status, educational attainment, and gender with verified election results from the past five presidential elections. Controlling for other potential drivers of vote choice, we find not only that social group membership is an important driver of electoral outcomes at the group level, but that these effects have increased significantly even over the last two decades. Membership to social groups with which voters identify is an increasingly crucial determinant not just of their psychological attachment to one party or the other, but to the tangible choices they make with their vote. Specifically, we find that more salient cultural identities like race and gender have become particularly powerful determinants of vote choice, while other social groupings based on economic status have remained flat or decreased in importance over the last several elections.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section II presents a brief overview of the two research agendas that inform our work on social groups and partisanship, namely social psychology and political behavior. We establish our empirical expectations based on the main takeaways of this overview. In Section III, we describe our empirical approach, including a detailed presentation of our data sources, and model specification to account for our main variables as well as alternative hypotheses. We compare our results with our expectations in

Section IV, where we present a first analysis of the empirical testing and main highlights. We delve into these highlights and their implications in Section V, followed by our conclusion and future lines of research.

II. Partisanship and Social Identity: Explaining the American Electorate

Partisanship has received much of the attention as a key explanatory variable of voting behavior in American politics. However, the nature of partisanship and what drives it has been historically contested. In *The American Voter (1980)* Campbell et al. explained the significance of the psychological attachment to partisanship as a key explanatory variable for political behavior. Their approach to partisanship, however, suggested that this attachment was consistent in the long term. To the authors, partisanship was rather fixed, resulting from a party loyalty fostered through long-standing traditions and belief systems, including family values. Instead, others have challenged this assumption by showing that partisan identification is dynamic and context-dependent in more recent elections (Smidt, 2014). Two different research traditions have addressed partisan identity to understand these changes. One set of literature on social psychology has focused on the determinants of partisan identity. A second literature in the political behavior subfield has tackled questions on the political outcomes of partisan identity and affective polarization. Our contribution is bridging the gap between the two traditions, offering empirical evidence on how partisan and social sorting translate into political behavior in partisan presidential voting, and how these effects have intensified over time.

While scholars have traditionally argued that liberal vs. conservative ideology is the key factor that determines alignment with Democrats or Republicans and the intensity thereof

(Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006; Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Levendusky, 2009), others suggest that there are a series of demographic factors that increase likelihood of supporting one or the other. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) have suggested that partisan identity is a direct result of an individual's component social identities - characteristics like gender, race, and economic class that were and are becoming more neatly sorted into the two parties. They also found that these social identities ("self-conceptions", as they call them) inform a voter's "partisan stability" over time to a much greater extent than exogenous political considerations not based in self-identification like scandals, national economic conditions, or transitory opinions about relevant politicians. These findings have helped open a new debate that has focused primarily on whether ideology or social identity persistently shape partisanship.

In the latter view, social identification, behaviors and status predict more reliable attachment to one major party or the other as a result of citizens' self-conceptions. In other words, their partisanship derives from social attributes ascribed to each partisan group, as much as citizen's aspirational attitudes about who they want to be associated with based on stereotypes at the group level. In this line of argument, Greene (2004) pointed out that scholarship has overlooked the psychological roots of partisanship, as suggested by Campbell et al. (1980), and that the social identity theory proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) can help us explain this psychological approach to partisan groups. In turn, Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) argue that the campaign messaging in politics has turned social distance between salient groups into a much more impactful factor than ideology, supporting the argument in favor of social identity sorting in partisanship mediated by campaign framing. Their work already hints at the notion that how social groups identification have become increasingly salient for partisan behavior.

More recently, Mason (2015, 2016) has built on the concept of “social sorting” to explain the increasing explanatory power of cross-cutting identities on partisan alignment. She points to the reinforcing effect that the partisan-ideological sorting has on partisan identity, which intensifies the bias in political behavior, such as activism. Theodoridis (2017) presents data from an experimental design that shows what he calls “implicit party identity”: the pre-introspection association between the self and the group that links positive associations of the group with higher self-esteem. Based on the results, the author argues that Americans’ association with parties is stronger and more visceral than what observational data has previously conveyed. Additional work by Mason and Wronski (2018) suggests an important distinction between subjective social sorting (that which comes from individual-level understanding of the partisan group) and objective social sorting (which derives from closeness to the associated groups). Authors show that both of these categories have a meaningful impact on in-group partisan identification. In summary, if other positive social identity attachments are becoming more closely associated with partisan identity, then voters’ attachment to their party should be even stronger.

This research has led to a critical reexamination in what drives partisanship at the psychological level. Recent work by Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018) suggests that affective polarization has increased over time, with detrimental effects for political participation. They find that an increasing emphasis on the “us versus them” approach to politics has led to changes in what motivates people to participate in politics. According to their results, people are increasingly prone to engage in political activities because they dislike the opposite party, rather than because they like their own. These results are also supported by Luttig (2017), who tests the “group centrism hypothesis”: the strengthening of affective polarization in partisan identity is

rooted of “prejudiced personality” and the need for self-identifying in a group context. However, in the context of the 2016 electoral campaign, further work by Luttig, Federico, and Lavine (2017) provides experimental evidence of how the effect of racial cues is mediated by feelings about Donald Trump as candidate, rather than other elements such as partisanship or ideology. This result suggests that there is an underlying identification dynamic that strengthens partisan behavior, and which goes beyond reported partisanship.

But how do these identity-based trends affect tangible outcomes like vote choice? Iyengar and Westwood (2015) present evidence that suggests that affective polarization based on partisan identification is as strong as race-based polarization, with discrimination against opposing partisan groups being higher than racial discrimination. They also argue that this increasing contrast between partisan groups leads to a more contentious political environment, with more incentives for confrontation rather than cooperation. While their argument suggests that partisanship should be considered at the same level as race in terms of its effect on electoral polarization, we propose that the effect of partisan identification on vote choice is supplemented by multiple social group membership identifications, including race. In this line of thinking, identity markers like partisanship and race are not so much equal in their effects on polarization, but rather that social factors like race are becoming direct proxies for partisanship, and that the shrinking difference between them is influencing voters’ partisan behavior. Therefore, stronger identification with (for example) a certain racial group becomes a better predictor of vote choice over time.

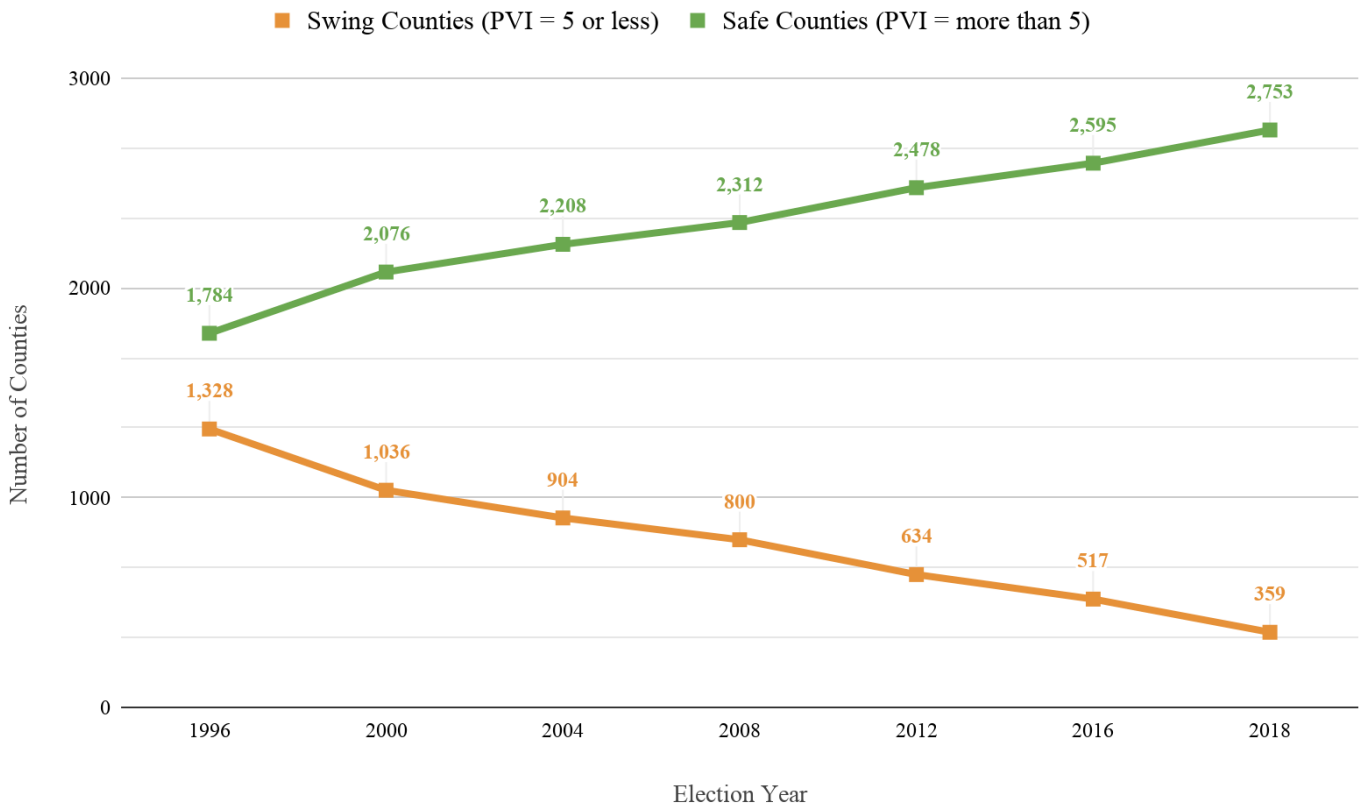
Based on this growing convergence, we argue that social group membership also has significant implications for vote choice. Since scholars of affective polarization show clearly the growing similarities between partisan and social identity in terms of how individual voters view

themselves and other groups, we anticipate that these similarities translate into behavior at the ballot box. In other words, higher levels of social group sorting translate into intensified alignment with electoral support of one party over another. The intensifying nature of this sorting has significant implications for electoral politics in the United States. American campaigns have come to be defined to a greater extent on contentious “wedge” issues which are more likely to encompass issues of social identity (Hillygus & Shields, 2014). As a result, media attention during campaigns has increasingly followed partisan frames and storylines that emphasize these issues and influence vote choice (Dilliplane, 2011; Stroud, 2011). Voting behavior in Congress has been more tightly defined by partisanship (Lee, 2009, 2016), and voters are said to have continued to “sort” geographically into like-minded neighborhoods to a greater extent based on racial, economic, and cultural identities (Bishop, 2009).

There is good reason to believe that memberships to certain social groups are making voters more reliably partisan. One descriptive way to shed light on recent trends in partisan vote choice is to observe these trends in communities oriented around these groups over time. Figure 1, for example, uses the Cook Political Report’s Partisan Voting Index (PVI)¹ to show the share of reliably “safe” vs. “swing” counties in the U.S. from 1996 to today. While this distribution of safe vs. swing geographic areas is more often used for congressional districts, using counties - whose borders are static and do not change over time - allows us to track changes in partisanship while controlling for factors such as partisan gerrymandering. Figure 1 indicates that static communities like counties are sharply diverging in partisan competition, and that an increasingly higher share of counties are becoming safer for one party or the other.

¹ The PVI is essentially an average of how a geographic political community voted in the previous two presidential elections. A higher PVI indicates a district that is “safer” and more reliable for one party or the other.

Figure 1: Swing vs. Safe Partisan Counties, 1996-2018



Despite the aforementioned theory that like-minded voters are geographically migrating close to each other, it is highly unlikely that domestic migration is substantially responsible for the changes observed in Figure 1. For example, the median 2016 county rate of in-migration - in this case, the percentage of residents who did not live in that county in the previous year - was only about 6%, and only about 40 counties (out of 3,100) had rates of in-migration that exceeded 15%.² County-level rates of migration are simply too low, even over longer periods of time, to feasibly explain such sharp changes in partisan reliability. Not only would migration rates need

² American Community Survey data (2016)

to be higher, but there would need to be evidence that the migration into or out of most counties consistently results in lopsided partisanship.

In this paper, we propose instead that identification and membership with salient social groups drives partisan voting behavior in these communities, and that its effect has intensified over time. We test these expectations across the five recent presidential elections in the United States (2000 to 2016) to demonstrate that the alignment of social group membership and partisan behavior matches the previously-described findings in the social psychology literature. The nature of the past three presidential campaigns in particular, in which race, gender, and socioeconomic status have been put front and center of the national political conversation, forces us to question and redefine the way we think about partisanship, its root causes, and its resulting behavior on the part of the voters.

We formulate our expectations about the demographic composition of counties and their partisan vote share based on existing work that offers insights about the social sorting of political engagement across parties, and across social identifiers such as race, religion, and geographic location (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Bishop, 2009; J. C. Green, Kellstedt, Smidt, & Guth, 2007; Krupnikov & Piston, 2015; Layman, 1997, 2001; Mangum, 2013). We also take into account results from more recent surveys on party identification and the composition of the electorate (Pew Research Center, 2018; Bump, 2017). Based on this extensive body of work and evidence, we expect Democratic counties to be more racially diverse, younger, and have higher rates of educational attainment. Alternatively, we expect Republican counties to be whither, older, and less educated on average. We formulate these expectations in Hypothesis 1. Since we also account for this relationship between social sorting and partisan behavior over time, and

suggest that this effect has increased in recent years, we formulate our temporal expectation in Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 1a: Counties with larger proportions of white, Evangelical Christian, or higher-income residents, as well as those located in the South, will on average produce *higher Republican presidential vote share* in those counties.

Hypothesis 1b: Counties with larger proportions of Hispanic, black, female, or higher-educated residents will on average produce *lower Republican presidential vote share* in those counties.

Hypothesis 2: The predicted effects of Hypotheses 1 become significantly stronger with each successive election year.

In the discussion of partisan voting behavior and recent electoral outcomes, academic scholarship and mainstream media have pointed out to a variety of potential mechanisms driving partisan sorting. We address them as alternative hypotheses to our analysis in different ways. First, we have already pointed out the traditional suggestion that partisan vote choice is determined by ideology. Additionally, others have suggested that increasing economic inequality at the state and national level has fostered economic grievances that incentivized voters to align with one party or the other one (Garand, 2010; Gelman, Kenworthy, & Su, 2010). Similarly, geographic sorting has also been considered as a potential mechanism for increasing political and social sorting among voters, with mixed results (Abrams & Fiorina, 2012; Bishop, 2009; Gimpel

& Hui, 2015; Lang & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2015; Sussell, 2013; Tam Cho, Gimpel, & Hui, 2013). We expand on our statistical model and how we account for these alternative mechanisms in the following section.

III. Data and Methods

Our hypotheses suggest that changes on measures of social group membership predict variation in partisan behavior - specifically, Republican party share of the presidential vote. We further hypothesize that social group membership has increasingly and more strictly aligned with one of the two major parties over the last several presidential elections, and that this alignment is reflected in vote choice.

To test these hypotheses, we utilize an original county-level dataset that merges data reflecting voters' social group memberships with presidential election results for every consistent county in the U.S. from 2000-2016 (N=15,551)³. Our approach uses the social group membership variables to predict partisan vote share based on previous consistent findings at the group level that are reflected in Hypotheses 1a and 1b.

The dependent variable - county-level Republican vote share in presidential elections - was obtained from Polidata and cleaned by the authors. While third-party candidates did make appearances in the results, we limited our analysis to the proportion of the combined vote of the

³ The state of Alaska was removed from the sample since it divides into "boroughs" rather than counties, and does not report election results by this metric. Some additional county changes occurred during this time period, but these were minimal and excluded from the dataset.

two major parties in order to best capture partisan balance in the vote. Descriptive statistics of all variables⁴ can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics, County-Level Observations

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min.	Max.
GOP Pct. of Presidential Vote	58.8	12.2	12.0	93.1
Pct. Female	50.2	2.3	21.3	59.9
Pct. White	85.8	15.9	3.8	100.0
Pct. Black	9.5	14.6	0.0	86.8
Pct. Hispanic	7.9	13.0	0.0	98.6
Pct. Evangelical Christian	26.7	17.4	-30.5	172.6
Median Age	39.3	4.9	20.6	66.0
Pct. Bachelor's Degree or Higher	11.4	8.8	0.0	78.8
Median Income	42.6	11.7	12.7	123.5
Southern County	0.5	0.5	0.0	1.0
Total Population	101297	324316	117	10000000
Voter Policy Mood (State)	6.0	1.5	0	10
Gini Index (State)	0.6	0.0	1	1
Congressional Polarization (National)	0.4	0.4	0	1

The independent variables - social group membership data - were obtained from various sources, including the Decennial Census, the American Community Survey estimates, and the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies. The primary independent variables of interest capture the county-level variation in the following measures: percentage of female residents; percentage of Black, Hispanic, and White residents; median county age; percentage of

⁴ Due to space constraints, we have pooled all descriptives for the five election years. Demographic estimates did change from year to year, though in most counties not substantially.

Evangelical Christians⁵; median household income in the county; and educational attainment, as measured by percentage of the county's residents with a bachelor's degree or higher. We also include several controls, which do not accord with our hypotheses directly but are still relevant to the county-level political dynamics, including unemployment rate in that year and total county population. These variables were then merged with the presidential voting data.

The authors acknowledge some possible shortcomings of using county-level data, most notably that this model treats all counties with the same level of importance despite sharp differences between them: for example, Logan County in Nebraska (among several others) has under 1,000 residents, while Miami-Dade (Florida) has over 2.5 million. However, most of these sharp differences are accounted for in our models by measures that capture the sometimes-extreme variation between counties, including total population.

In turn, there are multiple advantages to using county-level data as opposed to individual-level survey data that outweigh these concerns. First, this data is not subject to response bias, over- and under-reporting of behavior on the part of respondents, question wording issues, or any other potential problems that can bias survey results. The data used for this project measure not just reported behavior on behalf of the voter, but fully verified election results with measurable, practical consequences. Second, using data at the group level helps to capture social effects of voting that happen at certain geographic levels. We know that political participation and opinion formation among the electorate are activities influenced by social ties (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). Therefore, measuring these effects by county retains much of the group-level nuance produced by overlapping social and partisan identities. Third, counties produce ideal group-level data because, in most cases, the geographic boundaries do not change election-to-

⁵ The values for this variable were only available decennially (for the years 2000 and 2010) - the county-level values for Evangelical Christian percentage were therefore used for whichever was closest to the year in question; i.e. the 2000 figures were used for the 2000 and 2004 elections, and the 2010 figures were used for 2008, 2012, and 2016.

election. This allows us to provide consistent specification and variable distributions in each of our models, and to essentially control for the effects of possible confounders like partisan gerrymandering.

The purpose of our study is to estimate the separate and cumulative effects of component social group membership variables on partisan voting patterns, and to show whether these effects have strengthened over time. To assess these expectations, we use a pooled generalized least-squares model with county-year observations from 2000-2016, with random effects and clustered standard errors by county to account for county-level electoral dynamics not captured by the independent variables. To address Hypotheses 1a and 1b, we focus on the base effects reflected by the individual, non-interacted social group membership coefficients in the models. These coefficients tell us how predictive social group membership has been of partisan vote choice at the national level.

In Hypothesis 2, however, we expect that the effect of social group membership variables has grown over time. To assess this, we interact all social group Membership variables with a linear time variable, with the values of 1-5 corresponding to the 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016 county-years respectively. In doing this, we will be able to separately report the effects of Social Group Membership on partisan vote choice in general, as well as the over-time changes in the size of effect of these variables. Larger and more precisely estimated coefficients for these interaction terms will signal a greater change in how determinant social group membership has been for partisan voting behavior over time.

To account for some of the alternative explanations for over-time changes addressed earlier, we have also included control variables that capture both between-region and over-time effects of ideological extremism and partisan distance, as well as structural economic inequality,

which may independently affect partisan vote choice at the county level. Variables included for these controls are state-level voter policy mood, national congressional polarization, and state-level economic inequality.

To address the alternative hypothesis that suggests voters' ideology drives their vote choice, we use a state-level voter ideology variable. We use Berry et al's (1998) Voter Policy Mood measure, constructed originally at the state level to account for congressional-level issue positions and voters' subsequent electoral reactions to them. In our models, if it were true that ideological sorting drives vote choice, we should expect the power of this measure to increase over time. We also control for lagged elite polarization, based on the alternative theory that elite cues shape voters' behavior. To do so, we measure the distance between congressional representatives by subtracting the DW-NOMINATE scores for the median Democratic House member from the median Republican House member in a given year. We also lagged this measure by one year to take into account voters' delayed reactions to legislator activity, most of which tends to take place during electoral off-years.

One last alternative hypothesis we control for in our model is economic inequality. As previously noted, scholars and journalists alike have suggested that increasing economic inequality has engendered grievances that intensify differences between the two parties, driving voters to align more consistently with one or the other. To account for this hypothesis, we use state-level Gini coefficients for each year in our dataset.

The authors concede clear issues with several of these measures, most of which stem from endogeneity concerns. While ideological considerations may be a component driver of vote choice, to say that they are a cause of cross-sectional and over-time changes in the partisan voting framework requires two equally suspect assumptions: that ideology is formed prior to and

independently from partisan identification; and that ideology is not itself dictated by social group memberships. But given voters' general lack of informed policy preferences, and recent studies indicating that ideology is assimilated in support of voters' pre-existing partisan identities, it is likely that both of these assumptions go too far.

These concerns carry over to the elite level. While Poole and Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE measure has been used as a proxy for ideology in recent work, others -- most notably, Lee (2009) -- have persuasively argued that NOMINATE (and similar measures), while valuable, is simply a measure of strategic partisan behavior in the chamber, and are inherently dependent on the institutional constraints of the chamber and party leadership.

The causal argument for social group membership measures, however, is far more compelling because of their exogeneity. Nearly all of these measures represent demographic or socioeconomic characteristics that are either completely out of voters' control, or at least cannot plausibly be a result of prior ideological considerations, partisan identities, or vote choices. As a result, if social group memberships are becoming increasingly predictive of partisan vote choice at the presidential level, we can be more confident that these groupings are the original determinant of that choice.

IV. Results

We predict that partisan sorting of social group membership is a key determinant of voters' actual vote choices in presidential elections, and that this explanatory power has increased significantly in recent years. Table 2 displays the results of our random-effects regression analysis, which appear to confirm a number of our expectations. The base effects on

the left side of Table 2 indicate that counties that are wealthier and located in the South see significantly higher Republican vote share, while when more county residents are black, Republican vote share decreases. But while these social group memberships meet the expectations described in Hypothesis 1, there are a number of others that buck these trends. While we expected social group memberships like Hispanic, being highly educated, and women to predict lower Republican vote share, the opposite appears to be true, in some cases even at our high standard for statistical significance ($*p < .05$). The converse is true for group memberships like age and Evangelicals, who have base effects of lower Republican vote share. Is it possible that Hispanic social group membership, for example, actually predicts *higher* Republican vote share?

The time interactions on the right side of Table 2 give us reason to believe that our initial suspicions about the contemporary partisan congruence of some social groups may not have been wrong, but simply have unfolded and accelerated over a much shorter time span than first believed. Comparing the base and time effects of each group membership side-by-side shows that, for example, knowing the gender balance of a county prior to 2000 may not have been a reliable piece of information in predicting partisan vote choice. However, the political developments since appear to have cemented these social group memberships as much more powerful predictors of partisan behavior in the directions we expect and observe today. Despite their null base effects, membership to social groups such as women and whites became increasingly predictive of negative and positive Republican vote share respectively. Instead, membership to other groups, such as Hispanics and Evangelicals, switches directions entirely, and over time appear predictive in the ways posited by our hypotheses.

Table 2
Effects of Social Group Membership on County-Level GOP Presidential Vote Share, 2000-2016

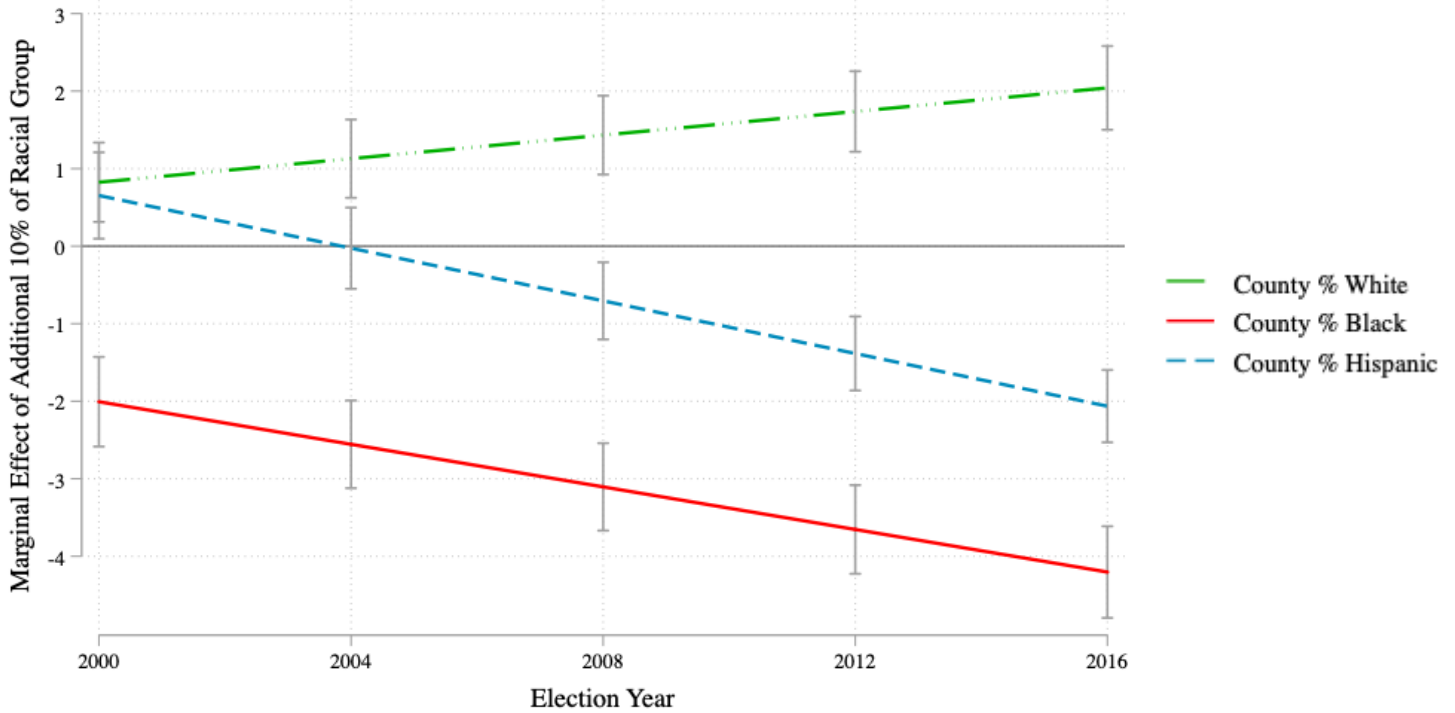
Dependent Variable	GOP Presidential Vote Share		GOP Presidential Vote Share
<i>Base Effects</i>		<i>Time Interactions</i>	
% Female	0.06 (0.06)	% Female x Time	-0.12*** (0.01)
% White	0.05 (0.03)	% White x Time	0.03*** (0.00)
% Black	-0.15*** (0.03)	% Black x Time	-0.05*** (0.00)
% Hispanic	0.13*** (0.03)	% Hispanic x Time	-0.07*** (0.00)
% Evangelical	-0.05*** (0.01)	% Evangelical x Time	0.01*** (0.00)
Median Age	-0.11** (0.04)	Median Age x Time	0.06*** (0.01)
% Bachelor's Degree or Higher	0.20*** (0.02)	% Bachelor's Degree or Higher x Time	-0.02*** (0.00)
Median Income	0.25*** (0.02)	Median Income x Time	-0.06*** (0.00)
Total Population (Logged)	-4.11*** (0.17)	Total Population (Logged) x Time	0.08** (0.03)
Southern County	3.19*** (0.52)	Southern County x Time	1.81*** (0.09)
Voter Policy Conservatism (State)	1.36*** (0.10)	Voter Policy Conservatism x Time	0.06* (0.03)
Gini Index (State)	2.95 (1.73)		
Congressional Polarization (National)	-3.78*** (0.80)		
Time (Linear)	5.77*** (0.82)		
Constant	69.06*** (4.77)		
R-Squared (Within-effects)	.51		
R-Squared (Between-effects)	.48		
R-Squared (Overall)	.48		
N	15554		

Results found using random-effects generalized least squares regression; Standard errors (in parentheses) clustered by county
 *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

To move towards the substance and size of the actual effects and interpret the coefficients for time interactions, we also present graphs displaying the predicted marginal effects of our time-interacted social group memberships at each of the five presidential elections in our dataset. While graphs for all effects can be found in the Appendix, we highlight the most striking ones here. Each graph displays predicted marginal effects by year with 95% confidence intervals. Unless otherwise noted in the graph, the marginal effect is of a 10 percentage-point increase in county social group membership to the group in question.

We start by plotting the marginal effects of social group membership for the three race variables in our model in Figure 2. The effects of county-level membership to these racial groups are striking in their over-time divergence. In 2000, white and black social group membership show the expected effects, while Hispanic social group membership is (only barely) predictive of higher Republican vote share. After 2000, however, the size and direction of these effects steadily increase for white and black groups. Hispanic membership, on the other hand, begins a steady and increasing trend in the opposite direction. The effects on Republican vote share of a county's share of black and of white voters both double by 2016, while county share of Hispanic voters comes to predict Democratic vote share at an even sharper rate of change. The steep time effects evidenced by Figure 2 resonate with the growing definition of American politics - and specifically, partisan politics - along racial lines, and by racial issues. This dynamic is particularly striking for Hispanic voters.

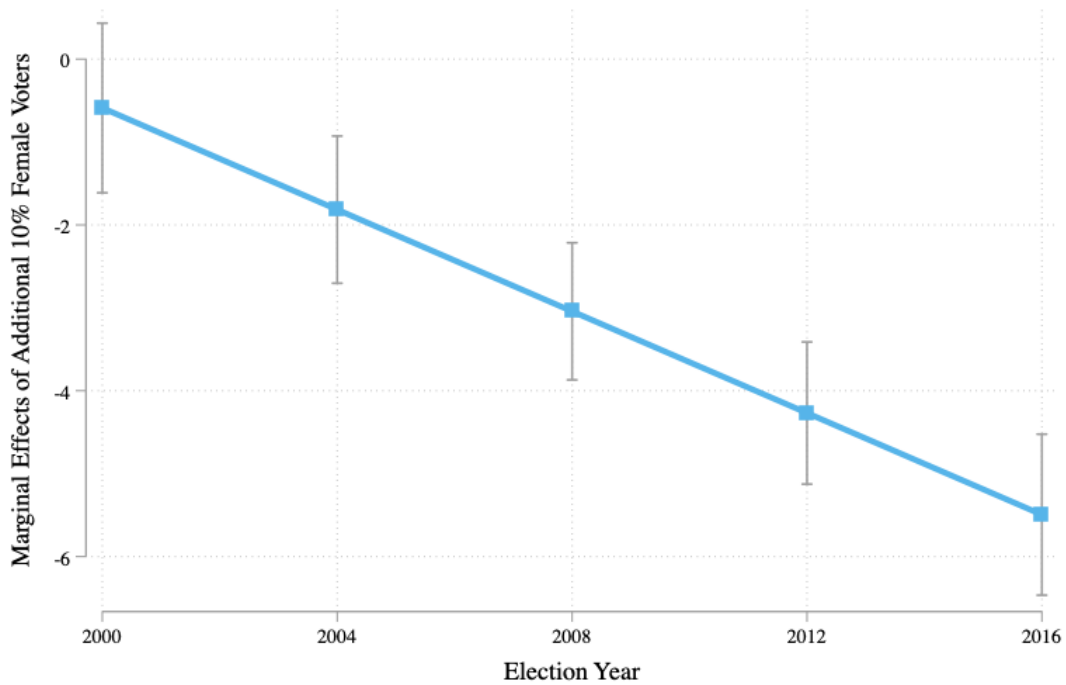
Figure 2: Marginal Effects on GOP Presidential Vote Share - Race Variables



Gen

der is another clear dividing line in American partisanship. That women have been a crucial component to the Democratic coalition is not a new observation, but our results indicate that the reliability of Democratic support in communities where women make up larger shares of the electorate has steadily increased over time. Figure 3 displays the development of this temporal phenomenon. Notably, the marginal effect of more women voters fits this expectation directionally, but the effect is small and not statistically significant. From year to year, however, higher proportions of a county who are female has become increasingly predictive - and with greater statistical certainty - of lower Republican vote share.

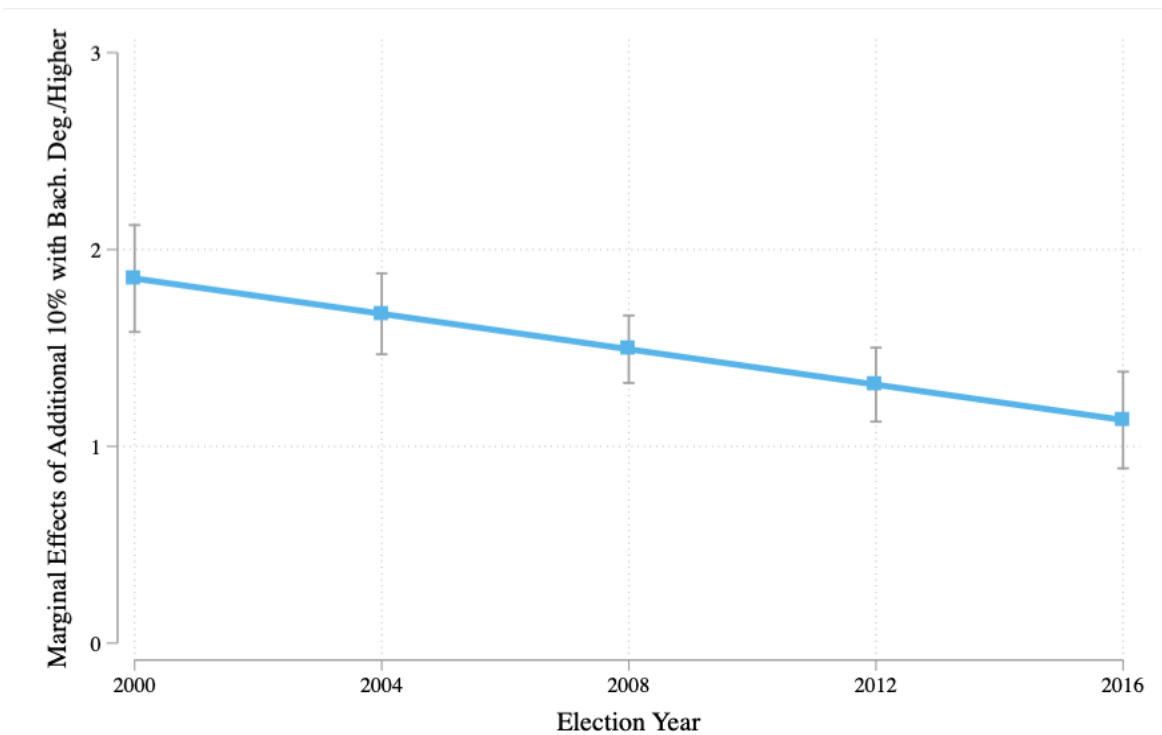
Figure 3: Marginal Effects on GOP Presidential Vote Share - Pct. Female



In addition to these striking findings, other sets of substantive results show marginal effects that are less powerful than hypothesized and in some cases run contrary to our expectations. For example, while higher levels of education are trending away from Republicans as a predictor of their vote share at the county level, it continues to predict Republican vote across all years, contrary to our expectations in Hypothesis 1. This trend, as well as the confounding trend in Figure 7 (appendix) showing a trend away from Republicans for counties with higher median incomes, both run against the conventional wisdom of partisan and social group alignment. These over-time results could be indicators that social group memberships related to socioeconomic status may still matter, but have not substantially changed in the past several presidential elections. While social group memberships as a whole are undoubtedly

framing partisan vote choice to a greater degree than previously, it appears that the growing impact is not uniform across all social groups.

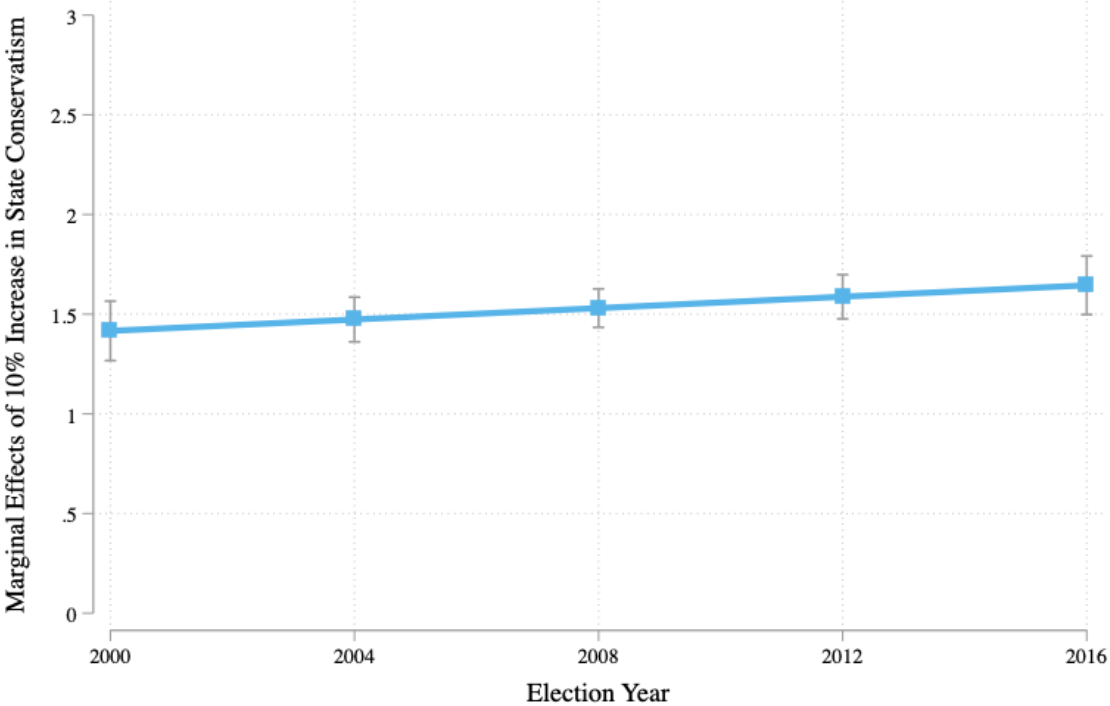
Figure 4: Marginal Effects on GOP Presidential Vote Share - % Bachelor's Degree or Higher



Finally, we produce the marginal effects of state ideological conservatism on Republican vote share over time in Figure 5. That the ideological leaning of a community's voters has some influence on their partisan vote choice, as evidenced by their base effects in our model, is difficult to dispute. But there appears to be little evidence to show that ideological polarization is causing U.S. counties to further polarize in a partisan manner any more than it was in 2000. Instead it is salient social group memberships like race and gender that appear to be sorting more neatly into allegiance towards one party or the other, and as a result are dictating partisan vote choice to a greater degree than before. In other words, our results showing this declining

significance provide further support for our expectations, and against the notion of ideology as an alternative explanation.

Figure 5: Marginal Effects on GOP Presidential Vote Share - State-level Ideology



Discussion

In this paper, we have offered compelling empirical evidence for the implications of social and partisan identity theories on understanding the choices voters make when they go to the polls. To a greater extent than in any recent time in recent American history, the demographic and socioeconomic makeup of a voting community can give us enough information to predict their partisan vote choices to a certain extent. Memberships to exogenous social groups - race and gender in particular - are more likely than ever to be the key determinants of which party a voter or group of voters support on Election Day.

These findings speak to two of the key competing narratives seeking to explain the results of the 2016 election: was support for such an unconventional candidate as Donald Trump driven by cultural issues and racial resentment? Or was it driven by “economic anxiety” among less-educated, lower-income voters? Our findings bear out the growing conventional wisdom in both the media and in academic scholarship (Tesler 2012; Tesler 2016; Sides et al. 2018) that it is the former - issues of race and culture - that drive partisan vote choice at the national level. We show not only that social group membership is a key determinant of vote choice in America, as the social psychology literature suggests; but also that within these social groups, some (race and gender) are more closely aligned with and predictive of partisan behavior than others (economic status).

The most telling example of this recent divide is the result detailing the trending of Hispanic social group membership away from Republican vote choice. Hispanic voters display a striking evolution that can tell a broader story about racial identity in the United States. In 2000, the percentage of Hispanic voters in a given county had a positive and significant effect on Republican vote share. However, the share of Hispanic voters per county has had an increasing negative effect since then. By the 2016 election, a 10% increase in Hispanic population in a given county correlated with a 4 percentage-point decline in Republican vote share. In this sense, the role of Hispanic identity in public discourse in recent years leads us to believe this stark difference across elections it is not coincidental. Instead, Hispanic voters might be increasingly responding to a national political discourse that alienates their racial and ethnic identity as part of a broader conversation about immigration.

The increasing alignment of salient social groupings and partisan behavior has implications that go beyond the ballot box. The more voters (and elites, for that matter) sort

socially into one of the two parties, the sharper the differences become between these parties. These differences have significant, and perhaps worrying, effects on both our political culture and our ability to agree on national ideals and constitutional principles that may have once unified us. Previous work demonstrates both the institutional (Theriault 2009, Lee 2009, 2016) and the behavioral and psychological polarization (Mason 2018) that results when the parties become more diametrically opposed and appear to be more different from each other. Even if parties are well-sorted ideologically, as they seem to have been for some time now, there is still significant opportunity for cross-cutting social identities to reinforce social ties and linked fate between disagreeing political coalitions. Our results, along with other more descriptive trends, show that many social group memberships like race, gender, and religion can no longer be relied upon for this function. The result is a continuously compounding effect on the intersection of social and political life for most Americans: as social groups sort more neatly into the two parties, the parties become more different, increasing the social and psychological incentive to sort accordingly even more. The result is that cross-pressured identities - and therefore, swing-voting political communities of all shapes and sizes - have become increasingly scarce and aren't likely to return soon.

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Appendix

Figure 6: Marginal Effects on GOP Presidential Vote Share - Median Age

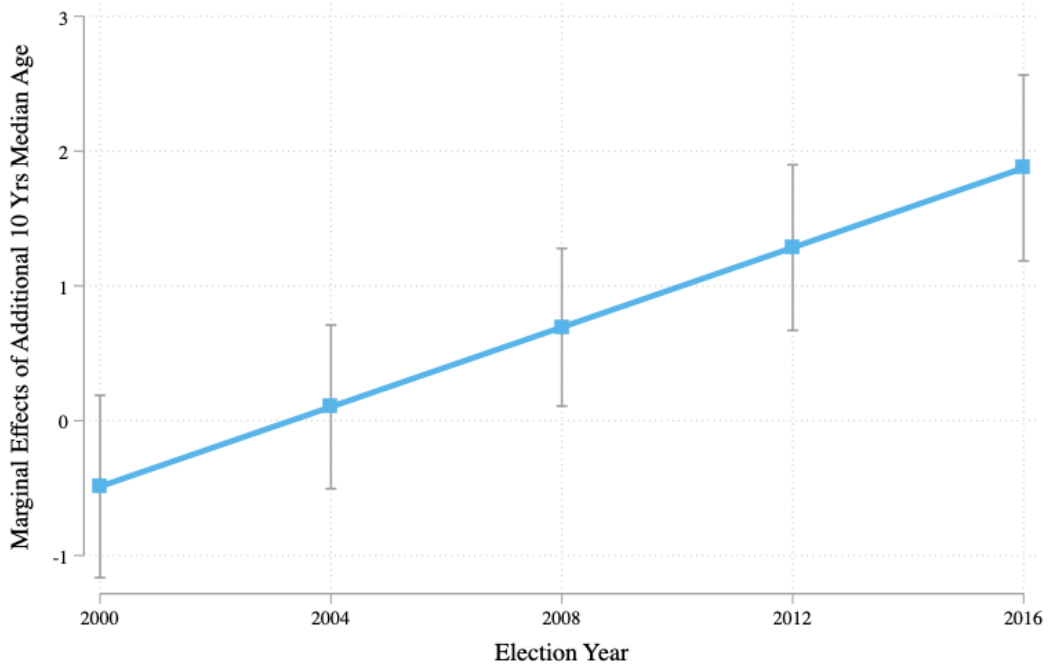


Figure 7: Marginal Effects on GOP Presidential Vote Share - Median Income

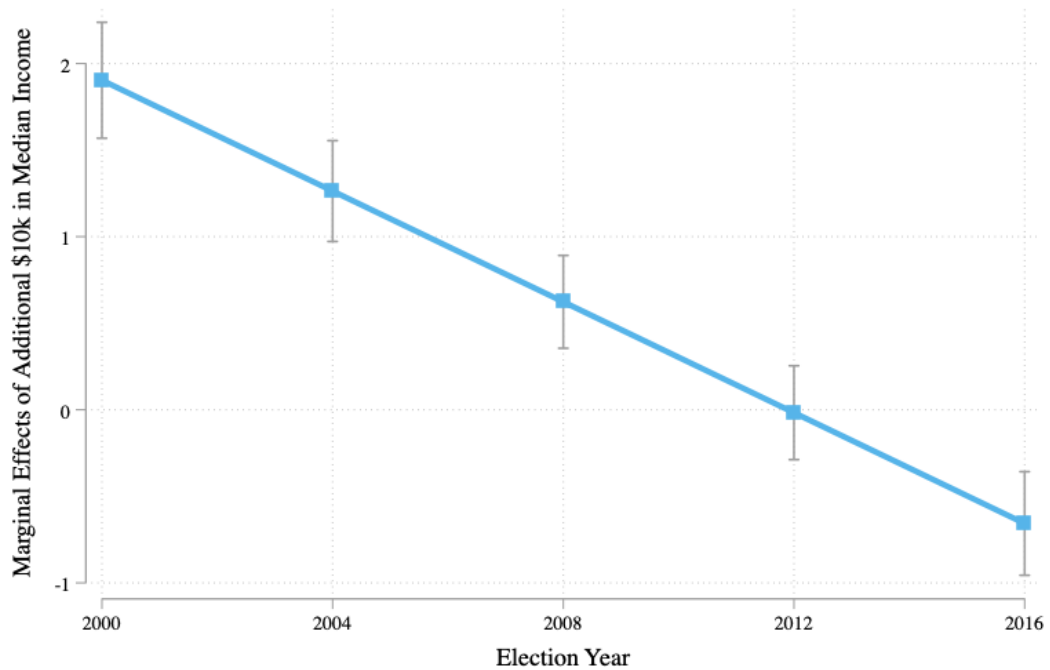


Figure 8: Marginal Effects on GOP Presidential Vote Share - % Evangelical Christian

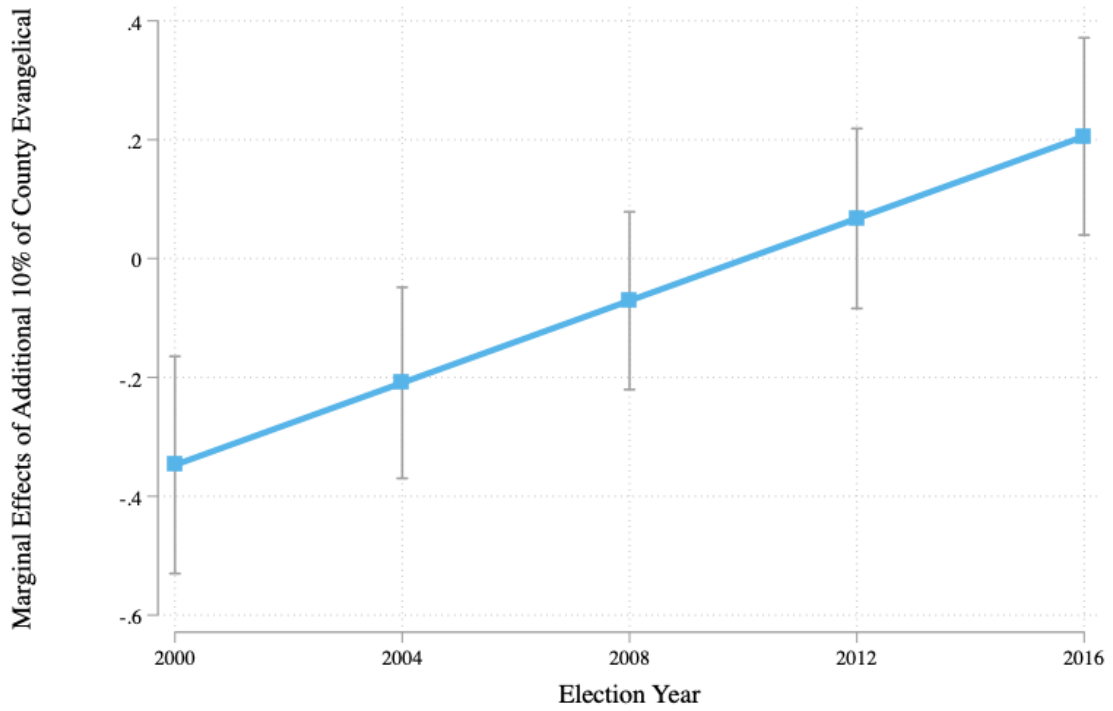


Figure 9: Marginal Effects on GOP Presidential Vote Share - Southern County

