

1 Comparing Political Polarization in
2 Political and Cultural Preferences

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7 **Abstract**

8 The popular press has given substantial attention to the notion
9 that Democrats and Republicans hold diverging cultural and lifestyle
10 preferences that manifest in the TV shows they watch, the music
11 they listen to, and the clothes they buy. The academic research in
12 this area is split, though, with some suggesting that such divisions
13 exist and others arguing that they ultimately fail to materialize in
14 real-world behavior. In this study, I use network methods to evaluate
15 whether such partisan cultural polarization exists at the individual-
16 level. I do so by constructing networks of shared cultural preferences
17 and networks of shared political beliefs based on closed-ended sur-
18 vey responses. For each network, I calculate the assortativity (corre-
19 lation) between linked respondents' partisan identity, ideology, age,
20 gender, race, and education level. I show that the assortativity for
21 the political identity measures is low across the cultural-preference
22 networks compared to the political-belief networks. These results
23 suggest that cultural preferences are not associated with partisan
24 or ideological identities.

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25 The popular press has devoted substantial attention during and since
26 the 2016 presidential election circulating claims about substantial di-
27 visions in the cultural and lifestyle preferences of Democrats and Re-
28 publicans. These arguments build on the analyses showing aggregate-
29 level associations between partisanship and indicators of culture pref-
30 erences, such as television viewing habits (Katz, 2016), concert atten-
31 dance (“Why Obama-Trump swing voters like heavy metal”, 2019), and
32 shopping habits (Kapner & Chinni, 2019). The notion that the parties
33 are culturally divided has since become pervasive, with cultural pref-
34 erences now operating as activators of partisan stereotypes and biases
35 (Deichert, 2018; Hiaeshutter-Rice et al., 2019).

36 However, academics have not found consistent evidence to support
37 these claims. Early work, like Bishop’s seminal analysis of partisan res-
38 idential sorting (Bishop, 2009), argued that partisans preferred to build
39 and live in communities filled with like-minded others. Building on this
40 concept, DellaPosta, Shi, and Macy conceptualized the parties as We-
41 berian “status groups” and showed that homophily and social influence
42 could produce within-party alignment in regards to cultural preferences
43 (DellaPosta et al., 2015). Contrarily, Mummolo and Nall show that re-
44 ported preferences for specific community attributes (e.g., more conser-
45 vative) often do not translate into actual behavior changes when moving
46 (Mummolo & Nall, 2017). Martin and Webster support this finding by
47 showing that partisan biases in residential choice are too small to sus-
48 tain observed geographic polarization (Martin & Webster, 2020).

49 It is possible, though, that individual-level psychological and soci-
50 ological features correlated with partisanship may be associated with
51 cultural and lifestyle preferences. For example, Mutz and Rao demon-
52 strate that liberals are more likely to prefer lattes than conservatives
53 because they are more open to globalization than conservatives (Mutz
54 & Rao, 2018). Similarly, Republicans’ greater religiosity levels lead them
55 to give more to charity than Democrats (Margolis & Sances, 2017). As
56 such, it is entirely possible that, while partisanship or ideology is not
57 the primary pathway through which such divides emerge, the parties
58 are effectively divided in their cultural preferences.

59 Clarifying whether such a divide in cultural preferences exists is
60 crucial because of the pervasiveness of partisan cultural stereotypes.
61 These stereotypes that link partisan groups to specific cultural habits
62 and products are used to infer another’s partisanship when obvious po-
63 litical signals are not available (Deichert, 2018; Hiaeshutter-Rice et al.,
64 2019). These inferences enable people to activate their own partisan
65 biases (Deichert, 2018), fueling affective polarization in situations that
66 would otherwise be devoid of politics. Losing these apolitical moments is
67 concerning because they provide opportunities for positive cross-party
68 contact and relationships to form that could help partisans recognize
69 similarities in the other side, leading to reductions in political hostility
70 (Levendusky, 2018).

71 In this study, I take a new approach to assessing the magnitude of
72 the partisan divide in cultural preferences. Drawing on closed-ended
73 survey questions, I construct two sets of networks. The first set rep-
74 resents shared cultural preferences between the survey respondents.

75 The second set represents shared political concerns between the same
76 set of survey respondents. I then analyze each network's structure and
77 compare the association between that structure and respondents' polit-
78 ical identity, ideology, age, gender, race, and education level. I find that
79 the association between network structure and respondents' political
80 identity and ideology is substantively higher in the networks of politi-
81 cal concerns than in the networks of shared cultural preferences. In
82 the latter set, the association between individual-level political features
83 and network structure is effectively zero. This result suggests that peo-
84 ple do not encounter substantial partisan polarization in their cultural
85 preferences.

86 **Data**

87 This study's data came from multiple waves of a larger study adminis-
88 tered on Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk) in the Spring and Winter of
89 2019. Across all waves of the study, over 1,300 workers completed a
90 survey asking about their demographics, cultural preferences, and po-
91 litical opinions. Descriptive statistics about the sample are provided in
92 Appendix B.

93 The questions about cultural preferences were based on those used
94 by Bourdieu in his study of cultural prestige (Bourdieu, 1984). These
95 questions asked respondents to indicate their three favorite musical
96 artists, television programs, literary genres, and film genres from closed
97 lists, as well as their single favorite style of clothing from a closed list.

98 The questions about political beliefs and concerns included a sim-
99 ilar question asking respondents to indicate their three most pressing
100 political concerns from a closed list. The survey also asked respon-
101 dents to indicate their specific preference for raising or lowering taxes,
102 involvement in foreign conflicts, and a pathway to citizenship for un-
103 documented immigrants.

104 All respondents also completed a set of demographic items that asked
105 them to report the year they were born, their highest level of completed
106 education, and how they identify in regards to gender, race and ethnic-
107 ity, political party, and ideology. These last two items, political identity
108 and ideological identity, were reported on seven-point scales. I collapsed
109 the measure of highest educational achievement into a binary indicator
110 for holding a college degree or not.

111 For the cultural-preference questions, the political issue concerns
112 questions, and two of the political policy questions, the order of the
113 responses was randomized to avoid order effects.

114 All questions and response options are included in Appendix A.

115 **Network Methodology**

116 Networks have been employed to study polarization in political beliefs
117 and consumer habits. These networks break from a traditional "so-
118 cial" framework by studying the two-mode networks of people and ob-

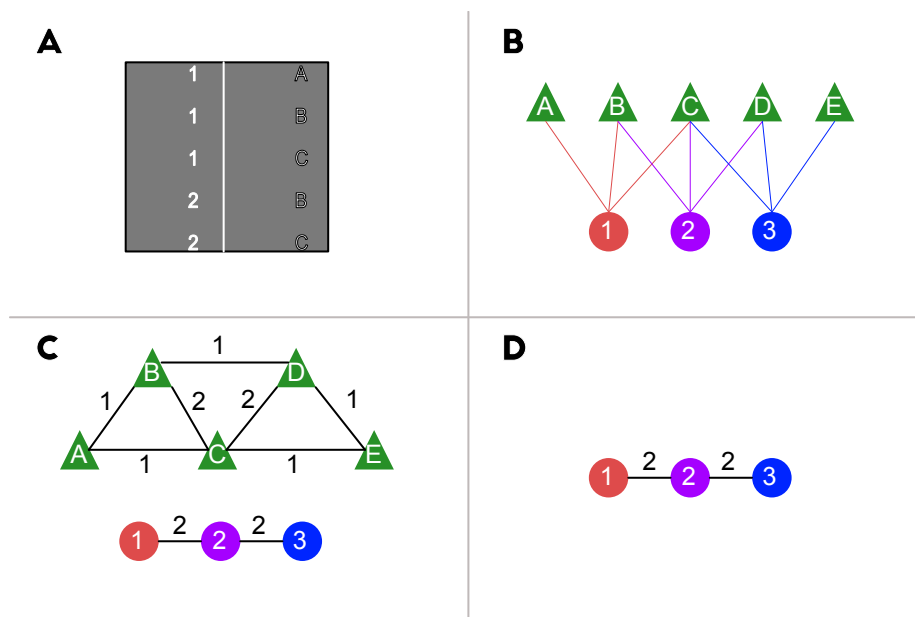


Figure 1: **A.** Data are generated from survey responses. **B.** The survey data are used to create a two-mode network linking respondents to their preferences or beliefs. **C.** The two-mode network is used to create two different one-mode networks. The top network maps the overlap in those who hold any two preferences. The bottom maps the shared preferences between any two respondents. **D.** From the two one-mode networks, I preserve the network of shared preferences between respondents.

119 jects. These objects may be political beliefs (DellaPosta, 2020) or cul-
 120 tural goods (Hoffman, 2019). In either case, the two-mode networks are
 121 converted into single-mode networks for analysis.

122 Traditionally, these projections have been into networks that map
 123 the ties between objects based on them being shared by multiple people.
 124 While this does allow for aggregation of features such as the average age
 125 or ideology of the people holding a belief or consuming a product, the
 126 resulting measures come with their own additional uncertainty.

127 To avoid this unnecessary uncertainty, I instead take my two-mode
 128 networks of people and objects (political concerns and cultural prefer-
 129 ences) and convert them into one-mode networks of people. In these
 130 new networks, the nodes (people) are connected when they share at
 131 least one concern or preference with someone else. The resulting edges
 132 then take on a weight equal to the count of shared concerns or prefer-
 133 ences, while the nodes are assigned their individual-level demographic
 134 features. The network generating process is visualized in Figure 1.

135 In these networks, the network structure, the set of connections
 136 between nodes, reflects shared political concerns and cultural prefer-
 137 ences. As such, we may ask whether it depends on the demographic
 138 features of the nodes. More simply, this network approach allows me to

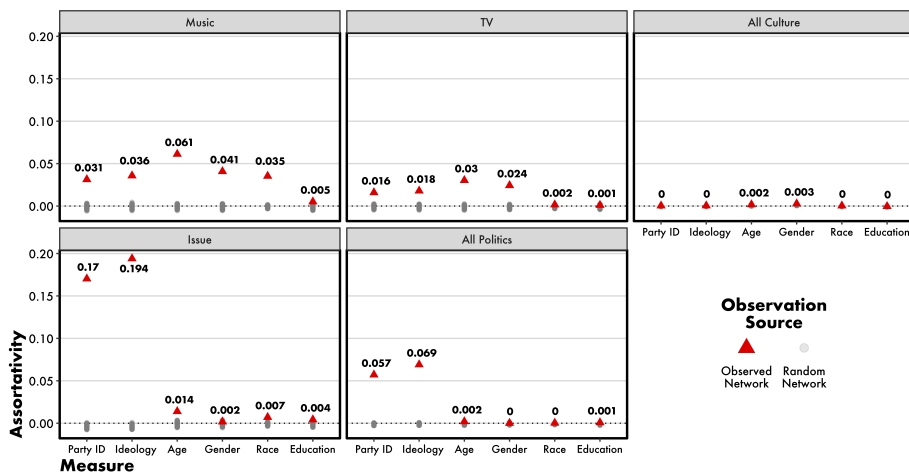


Figure 2: Assortativity by network and measure. Red triangles mark the observed assortativity for each measure in the original networks, while gray circles indicate the assortativity for each measure from a randomly rewired network with the same degree distribution.

139 ask whether nodes are more likely to share political concerns or cultural
 140 preferences with those who are similar to them on a range of demo-
 141 graphic features, including political identity, ideology, age, gender,
 142 and education level. These associations are measured by the network
 143 assortativity. Assortativity is a correlation-like statistic ranging between
 144 -1 and 1. Higher values indicate that nodes that are more similar on
 145 given measure are more likely to share an edge. Lower values indicate
 146 that nodes are more likely to be connected to others that are different
 147 from them on the given measure. A value close to zero indicates no
 148 relationship between the network structure and a given measure.

149 Results

150 For the set of networks mapping shared political beliefs and concerns,
 151 I constructed two specific networks. I built the first by only using data
 152 from the question asking respondents to identify their three most press-
 153 ing political concerns from a closed list. Pulling from this limited set of
 154 data ensured that all ties were based on a single consistent question,
 155 which ensured that potentially differing interpretations between con-
 156 cerns and policy beliefs were avoided. In the second network, I included
 157 data from the question about pressing issues and three policy opinion
 158 questions about taxes, foreign conflict, and a pathway to citizenship for
 159 undocumented immigrants.

160 For the set of networks mapping shared cultural preferences, I built
 161 three networks. The first was based only on the data from the question
 162 about favorite musical artists. The second was based only on the data
 163 from the question about favorite television programs. The third utilized

164 the data generated from all of the cultural preference questions. Again,
165 these distinctions were made to isolate data generated from questions
166 that could have been interpreted differently from the others.

167 For each network, I calculated the network assortativity based on
168 the partisan identity, ideology, age, gender, race, and education level
169 of each respondent in the networks. Figure 2 presents the statistics
170 for each network based on each category, as well as a distribution of
171 statistics for each network-measure pair that are drawn from random
172 networks with the same degree distribution as the observed network.
173 These observations from the random networks provide essential infor-
174 mation about whether the observed values are extreme and go beyond
175 what we would expect from a generating process in which the measures
176 and the preferences were not linked.

177 We can see in the figure that for the three cultural-preference net-
178 works, the assortativity statistic for all five measures is low, although in
179 some cases the statistics from the observed networks are greater than
180 we would expect from the null model. For the music network, assortiv-
181 ity statistics for party identification ($r = 0.031$) and ideology ($r = 0.036$)
182 are comparable to the statistics for age ($r = 0.061$), gender ($r = 0.041$) and
183 race ($r = 0.035$), while the statistic for education is much lower than the
184 other four ($r = 0.005$). In the TV network, the assortativity statistics for
185 party identification ($r = 0.016$) and ideology ($r = 0.018$) are slightly lower
186 than that for age ($r = 0.03$) and gender ($r = 0.024$), but are higher than
187 those for both race ($r = 0.002$) and education ($r = 0.001$). In the network
188 using all of the cultural-preference data, the assortativity statistics for
189 all measures but gender drops close to zero ($r < 0.01$).

190 By contrast, we can see that in the political-belief networks, the as-
191 sortativity statistics for party identification and ideology are both much
192 higher than any of those for gender, race, or education. In the network
193 built using only the respondents' three most pressing political concerns,
194 the assortativity statistics for partisan identity ($r = 0.17$) and ideology
195 ($r = 0.19$) reach the two highest marks across all of the observed net-
196 works. Notably, these marks, while they indicate only a weak associ-
197 ation between the measures and the network structure, are substan-
198 tively greater than any of the other relationships observed across all of
199 the networks. Additionally, in the issue-concern network, the other four
200 measures produce statistics close to zero, three of which fall in the null
201 model's distribution.

202 When adding ties based on respondents' political opinions to the is-
203 sue network, as I do in the full political-beliefs network, the assortativity
204 statistics for partisan identity ($r = 0.057$) and ideology ($r = 0.069$) both
205 drop substantially. However, we see that in this case the other four
206 features all remain effectively zero and within the bands of the observa-
207 tions drawn from random networks. While very weak, the only features
208 that have any association with shared political beliefs are respondents'
209 partisan identity and ideology.

210 **Discussion**

211 In this study, I constructed two sets of networks from survey responses.
212 The first set of networks mapped shared cultural preferences for musi-
213 cal artists, television programs, and a combination of these two, liter-
214 ary genres, film genres, and clothing styles. The second set of networks
215 mapped shared political considerations for specific issue concerns and
216 then a combination of issue concerns and issue positions. For each
217 network, I calculated the assortativity statistic, a measure of the cor-
218 relation in linked nodes' features, for respondents' party identification,
219 ideology, age, gender, race, and education level. Higher values for these
220 statistics indicate greater levels of homophily, the tendency for like indi-
221 viduals to be connected in the network. By comparing how these statis-
222 tics vary across networks, I can assess whether some preferences are
223 more associated with political identities than others.

224 I find that the political networks, particularly the network based on
225 shared issue concerns, show higher levels of political homophily and
226 much lower levels of age-, gender-, race-, or education-based homophily
227 than the cultural-preference networks. In these cultural-preference
228 networks, all of the features besides education-level show very weak
229 associations with shared preferences.

230 These patterns undermine claims made in the popular press and
231 scholarly research that partisans are deeply divided in their cultural
232 and lifestyle preferences. I show that partisans are not any more likely
233 to share their cultural preferences with fellow in-party respondents than
234 out-party respondents. Furthermore, my results indicate that the very
235 weak associations observed between cultural preferences and political
236 identities are not substantively different from those observed in regards
237 to age, gender, and race. The lack of differentiation suggests that this
238 very weak association is not likely to stand out in everyday experiences.

239 By contrast, the observed associations between political identities
240 and shared political beliefs are likely to stand out, especially regarding
241 issue concerns. While the observed relationships are still weak, they are
242 substantially stronger than those observed for any other demographic
243 feature. This difference in the magnitudes makes these relationships
244 more likely patterns to be casually observed in everyday life.

245 However, this study comes with an important set of limitations. First,
246 the networks I built and studied were constructed based on closed-
247 ended survey questions. It is possible that these closed-ended ques-
248 tions did not properly represent the set of musical artists, television
249 programs, political issue concerns, or policy preferences that matter to
250 most Americans. For the cultural-preference questions, list items were
251 chosen based on current popular artists and television programs. Other
252 cultural-preference topics were broader, with lists composed of genre de-
253 scriptors. Without examples, these descriptors may not have been well
254 understood by respondents. While based on existing question designs
255 used in large surveys, the political-belief questions could also have been
256 hard to understand and interpret for respondents, leading to confusion
257 when answering. Additionally, the issue-concern question did not pro-
258 vide respondents with the ability to indicate their preferred policy, if

259 any, in response to the issue; Democrats and Republicans could easily
260 have said the same issues were concerns because of prominent political
261 debates at the time, but held drastically different opinions about how
262 best to address the issues. While it is unclear how addressing other
263 concerns about the questions used would affect the observed results, in
264 this case it is likely that improving the issue concern question to include
265 information about how to respond to those issues or which party would
266 be better suited to addressing the issue would produce even higher lev-
267 els of partisan homophily in the issue network, making the observed
268 relationships likely lower-bounds for this empirical network.

269 Furthermore, generating the data used to build these networks through
270 direct survey questions leaves open the possibility that respondents
271 would bias their responses either through satisficing or motivated re-
272 sponding. In the case of satisficing, respondents may have selected the
273 first items in the randomly ordered lists presented to them or only se-
274 lected a few very popular artists because they were quickly identifiable
275 without giving proper consideration to their preferences. It is unclear in
276 which direction this type of behavior would bias the resulting network
277 statistics. In the case of motivated responding, respondents may have
278 felt the need to align their answers to these questions with their stated
279 identities earlier in the survey. For example, Republican respondents
280 may have felt the need not to indicate a preference for musical artists
281 that supported Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election, like Beyoncé, even
282 though they actually enjoy their music. Depending on which identities
283 respondents felt motivated to align their responses with, some observed
284 relationships may have appeared greater than they actually are.

285 Altogether, these limitations likely balance out for the cultural-preference
286 networks and negatively bias the observed relationships between politi-
287 cal issue concerns and partisan identity and ideology. Of course, these
288 results should be replicated under other conditions, ideally using trace
289 data or other records of actual behavior paired with surveys. This ap-
290 proach would resolve many of the concerns and limitations involved
291 with relying on closed-ended survey responses.

292 Even so, this study presents essential first evidence contradicting the
293 view of partisan cultural polarization. By using networks to map shared
294 preferences and individual-level demographic features, we can see that
295 Democrats and Republicans do not hold diverging cultural preferences
296 across various domains, while such divisions do appear, as expected,
297 in regards to political considerations.

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337 **Appendix A - Survey Questions**

- 338 1. What year were you born?
- 339 2. Which of the following best describes your gender?
- 340 - Man
- 341 - Woman
- 342 - Nonbinary
- 343 - Other (please specify)
- 344 3. Which of the following best describes your own background in
- 345 racial and ethnic terms?
- 346 - African American
- 347 - White
- 348 - Hispanic or Latino
- 349 - Asian
- 350 - Native American or American Indian
- 351 - Middle Eastern
- 352 - Other (please specify)
- 353 4. Which of the following best describes the highest level of education
- 354 you have completed?
- 355 - Some high school, but no degree
- 356 - High school degree
- 357 - Some college, but no degree
- 358 - Associate's or Bachelor's degree
- 359 - Some graduate school, but no degree
- 360 - Graduate degree (e.g. MA, PhD, MD, or JD)
- 361 - Other (please specify)
- 362 5. Which of the following best describes your party affiliation?
- 363 - Strong Democrat
- 364 - Democrat
- 365 - Independent, but I lean Democrat
- 366 - Independent
- 367 - Independent, but I lean Republican
- 368 - Republican
- 369 - Strong Republican
- 370 6. Which of the following best describes your ideology?
- 371 - Very liberal
- 372 - Liberal
- 373 - Moderate, but I lean liberal
- 374 - Moderate
- 375 - Moderate, but I lean conservative
- 376 - Conservative
- 377 - Very conservative
- 378 7. Which are your three favorites among the following musicians?
- 379 - Childish Gambino
- 380 - Kacey Musgraves
- 381 - Dua Lipa

- 382 - Lady Gaga
- 383 - Willie Nelson
- 384 - Ariana Grande
- 385 - Silk City
- 386 - Justice
- 387 - Steve Gadd Band
- 388 - Chris Cornell
- 389 - High on Fire
- 390 - Greta Van Fleet
- 391 - Beck
- 392 - H.E.R.
- 393 - Leon Bridges
- 394 - Beyoncé
- 395 - JAY-Z
- 396 - Kendrick Lamar
- 397 - Drake
- 398 - Cardi B
- 399 - Keith Urban
- 400 - John Daversa
- 401 - Cécile McLorin Salvant
- 402 - The Wayne Shorter Quartet
- 403 - Brandi Carlille
- 404 - Ludwig Göransson
- 405 - John Williams
- 406 - None of the above

- 407 8. Which style of clothes do you prefer the most?
- 408 - Classically cut and good value for your money
 - 409 - Sober and correct
 - 410 - Daring and out of the ordinary
 - 411 - Comfortable
 - 412 - Chic and stylish
 - 413 - Other

- 414 9. Which are your three favorites among the following types of books?
- 415 - Thrillers
 - 416 - Poetry
 - 417 - Love stories
 - 418 - Political
 - 419 - Travel / exploration
 - 420 - Philosophical
 - 421 - Historic novels
 - 422 - Classical authors
 - 423 - Scientific
 - 424 - Modern authors
 - 425 - Fiction
 - 426 - None of the above

- 427 10. Which are your three favorite types of films?
- 428 - Adventure
 - 429 - War

- 430 - Musicals
- 431 - Westerns
- 432 - Comedies
- 433 - Thrillers
- 434 - Dramas
- 435 - Historical
- 436 - Documentary
- 437 - Superhero
- 438 - Fantasy
- 439 - Action
- 440 - Romances
- 441 - Sci-Fi
- 442 - None of the above

443 11. Which three of the following television shows do you like the best?

- 444 - The Umbrella Academy (Netflix)
- 445 - Game of Thrones (HBO)
- 446 - True Detective (HBO)
- 447 - The Walking Dead (AMC)
- 448 - Doom Patrol (DC Universe)
- 449 - Whiskey Cavalier (ABC)
- 450 - Dirty John (Bravo / Netflix)
- 451 - Grey's Anatomy (ABC)
- 452 - Sex Education (Netflix)
- 453 - Shameless (Showtime)
- 454 - Russian Doll (Netflix)
- 455 - The Orville (Fox Broadcasting Company)
- 456 - Brooklyn 99 (NBC)
- 457 - Vikings (History)
- 458 - Black Mirror (Channel 4 / Netflix)
- 459 - The Punisher (Netflix)
- 460 - The Big Bang Theory (CBS)
- 461 - Supernatural (CW)
- 462 - Suits (USA)
- 463 - Star Trek Discovery (CBS)
- 464 - None of the above

465 12. Which of the following do you think are the three most important
466 problems the United States is facing today?

- 467 - Dissatisfaction with government / poor leadership
- 468 - Immigration / illegal aliens
- 469 - Race relations / racism
- 470 - Unifying the country / divisions in country
- 471 - Healthcare
- 472 - Environmental concerns / pollution / global warming
- 473 - The media
- 474 - Guns / gun control
- 475 - Education
- 476 - Crime / Violence / Justice System
- 477 - Welfare
- 478 - Ethics / Moral / Religious / Family Decline

- 479 - Lack of respect for each other
 - 480 - The economy, in general
 - 481 - Unemployment
 - 482 - Distribution of wealth / inequality / poverty
 - 483 - Federal budget deficit / federal debt / government spending
 - 484 - Taxes
 - 485 - Corporate corruption
 - 486 - Foreign policy, in general
 - 487 - National security / defense
 - 488 - Foreign trade, in general
 - 489 - International issues
 - 490 - Terrorism / war
- 491 13. Which of the following options comes closest to your view on what
- 492 we should be doing about federal income taxes?
- 493 - Taxes should be cut
 - 494 - Taxes should be kept pretty much as they are
 - 495 - Taxes should be raised if necessary in order to maintain current
 - 496 federal programs and services
 - 497 - Taxes should be raised in order to expand federal programs and
 - 498 services
 - 499 - None of the above
- 500 14. Do you mainly consider yourself ...
- 501 - A "hawk" who believes military force should be used frequently
 - 502 to promote US policy
 - 503 - A "dove" who believes the US should rarely or never use military
 - 504 force
 - 505 - None of the above
- 506 15. Please indicate whether you favor or oppose the following proposal
- 507 addressing immigration: provide a path to citizenship for some un-
- 508 documented immigrants who agree to return to their home country
- 509 for a period of time and pay substantial fines.
- 510 - Strongly favor
 - 511 - Somewhat favor
 - 512 - Somewhat oppose
 - 513 - Strongly oppose
 - 514 - None of the above

515 **Appendix B - Sample Details**

516 The survey sample studied here was collected in three waves of a larger
517 study in Spring and Winter 2019 via Amazon Mechanical Turk.

518 The mean birth year among respondents was 1982, while the median
519 was 1985. The interquartile range ran from 1976 to 1991.

520 The sample was relatively balanced in regards to gender. 681 re-
521 spondents identified as men, 645 as women, 6 as nonbinary, and 1 as
522 Other.

523 This relative balance was not repeated in regards to race. 939 of the
524 respondents identified as white, 159 as African American, 100 as Asian,
525 96 as Latino, 28 as Other, 9 as Native American or American Indian,
526 and 2 as Middle Eastern.

527 Similarly, educational attainment was not well balanced. 910 re-
528 spondents reported achieving a college degree, while 423 did not.

529 Political identity was also slightly imbalanced. 158 respondents re-
530 ported identifying as a Strong Democrat, 334 as Democrats, 167 as
531 Independents that leaned Democrat, 235 as Independents, 126 as In-
532 dependents that lean Republican, 231 as Republican, and 82 as Strong
533 Republicans.

534 Ideological identity followed the same pattern. 180 reported being
535 very liberal, 311 as liberal, as moderate, but leaning liberal, 254 as
536 moderate, 131 as moderate leaning conservative, 201 as conservative,
537 and 78 as very conservative.