Partisan Sorting and Geographic Polarization: How People and Politics Cluster by Place

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1 Introduction

Modern American politics is defined by clearly sorted parties: ideologically (Levendusky, 2009), demographically (Mason, 2018), and – increasingly – geographically (J. Rodden, 2019). The geographic separation of partisans draws public interest, in part because it provides a marker of deeper political divisions. This separation may seem apparent: each election, Americans are reminded of just how few states are electorally competitive, and the Electoral College map reinforces the perception of red versus blue Americas. However, such maps can be misleading. Popular conceptions of political geography manage to overstate and understate the partisan segregation in 21st-century politics. Sparse data depicting Democratic and Republican parts of the country can simultaneously make states and counties seem more homogeneous than they really are, while masking geographic sorting across local areas. This tension helps explain debates in the literature over the extent of partisan sorting in the American electorate (Glaeser & Ward, 2006; Bishop, 2009; Abrams & Fiorina, 2012).

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Advances in geographic political data at both aggregate and individual levels allow researchers to better explore the nuances of this phenomenon. This research reveals durable patterns. Democrats and Republicans tend to live in different places. This separation is apparent in broad regions, along urban-rural divides, and across neighborhoods (Hopkins, 2017; J. Rodden, 2019; J. R. Brown & Enos, 2021; Mettler & Brown, 2025). Recent evidence reinforces perceptions that such geographic polarization is increasing (Sussell, 2013; Kaplan et al., 2022). However, these trends are not driven by Democrats and Republicans moving to different places (Mummolo & Nall, 2017; Martin & Webster, 2018). Instead, they reflect realignment and electoral turnover that reshape the partisan composition of places over time. (J. R. Brown et al., 2025).

Understanding the extent of political segregation in the U.S. is paralleled by research on the consequences of geographic polarization. Much of the best evidence centers on how the interaction of political institutions and electoral rules with political imbalance across the American map impedes governance. For example, the uneven distribution of partisans across Congressional districts threatens fair representation, creating a natural gerrymander that favors Republican fortunes (Chen & Rodden, 2013; Kenny et al., 2023). Furthermore, polarization across districts has reduced electoral competition, contributing to increasing polarization, as homogeneous districts make it easier to elect more extreme candidates (Fowler, 2024; Jasny et al., 2025). Polarization between cities and their suburbs also acts as an obstacle to cross-municipality cooperation necessary to invest in and coordinate public policy, such as transit infrastructure or investments in public goods (Trounstine, 2016; Nall, 2018). Emerging evidence suggests that living in politically segregated areas influences partisan behavior and attitudes, with geographic homogeneity breeding political conformity and segregation begetting more segregation (Perez-Truglia, 2017; J. R. Brown, 2025; J. R. Brown et al., 2023). Geographic differences may reinforce greater party differences, as geographic identities increasingly map on to political identities (Cramer, 2016; Jacobs & Munis, 2023), and political parties become beholden to distinct geographic constituencies (J. Rodden, 2019).

Altogether, these effects contribute to popular concerns that geographic polarization is an input into other forms of political polarization, particularly increases in negative affective attitudes and partisan hostility (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

Given these impacts, continued research is needed to better understand the causes and consequences of geographic polarization. In this chapter, we summarize research on partisan segregation in the United States and introduce new data that extends analysis to the most recent elections. First, we trace the historical development of partisan segregation in the United States, linking upheavals in residential mobility, urbanization, and industrialization of the American economy to partisan realignments that changed the demographic and ideological makeup of the major political parties. While other chapters in this handbook go into detail on specific elements of the connection between these historical processes and political geography, we aim to set an understanding of how the processes that led to our contemporary geographically polarized moment reflect those that continue to shape American political geography. Second, we detail understandings of what segregation looks like today and assess recent temporal changes. Third, we consider the drivers of recent trends in geographic polarization, and discuss how popular conceptions of segregation mischaracterize these drivers. We summarize previous research on the state of segregation, and conduct our own analyses with recent election data. Fourth, we outline the ways in which political segregation is informed by, but not synonymous with, racial and economic segregation, highlighting ways in which these trends are in tension with one another. Fifth, we discuss the extent to which geographic polarization has become reinforcing, focusing on how voters are influenced by increasingly homogeneous political environments and whether these contextual effects contribute to greater political segregation. Lastly, we consider what is next for American political segregation, exploring whether trends are likely to continue, intensify, subside, or reverse, as U.S. politics takes on a new character. We also discuss what is still not known about political segregation, both in terms of the phenomenon itself and its effects on American politics.

2 How we got to now: when did the parties start separating and why?

The roots of contemporary political geography go back to the late 1800s, when, during the Industrial Revolution, workforce housing was built in urbanizing areas – around railroad nodes, factories, and ports – to satisfy worker demand created by these economic circumstances. In his book, *Why Cities Lose*, J. Rodden (2019) lays out how these economic transformations created circumstances wherein the Democratic party gained strength in urban areas, a pattern that persisted and grew. Part of the impetus for the appeal to urban voters was the Democratic party co-opting leftist urban parties who competed for political power (Oestreicher, 1988). In response to Democratic gains in cities, the Republican Party made appeals elsewhere, to voters in the emerging suburbs and to rural voters and rural business interests (Key, 1949). With the emergence of the New Deal, the parties solidified their orientations with respect to class and urban versus rural interests. This produced a path-dependent trajectory in which parties increasingly became beholden to different geographic groups of voters, drawing candidates from these areas, as well as party activists, and increasing incentives to make geographically-focused political appeals. As J. Rodden (2019) argues, these dynamics are the origin of the contemporary urban-rural divide and point to the fact that the location of workforce housing built at this time, and the location of early 20th century railroad nodes, are still predictive of where Democratic votes are found today (more predictive, even, as this correlation grew across the 20th century).

These developments were preceded by a rapid increase in racial segregation at the household level, from the end of Reconstruction through the Depression (Logan & Parman, 2017). White and Black Americans became less likely to live on the same streets, carving off neighborhoods within cities. Neighborhoods became distinct past the 1940s, moving from household-level sorting to neighborhood and eventually city versus suburb level sorting, as White urban residents departed cities to America's suburbs (Massey & Denton, 1988;

Kruse, 2005). These racial and economic geographic cleavages set the foundation for political geographic divisions, as the parties began to sort by race and racial attitudes in the New Deal, through the Civil Rights Movement and later parts of the 20th century (A. Campbell et al., 1960; Levendusky, 2009; Schickler, 2016).

These patterns of racial, political, and economic segregation were exacerbated by policy. Through redlining and discriminatory lending practices, racial ghettos were created and maintained, building on economic disparities that led to people of different races living in different areas (Massey & Denton, 1993; Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). The Great Migration of Blacks from the South to Northern cities led to the growth of Black neighborhoods in these cities, generating backlash from White residents and local institutions (Wilkerson, 2010). This backlash took the form of using zoning policy to restrict where housing could be built (Sahn, 2025), a practice that was used by (mostly White) homeowners taking control of local politics to protect their wealth and maintain the racial and economic makeup of their towns and neighborhoods (Trounstine, 2018). Urban renewal projects often served to worsen this inequality and segregation, displacing poorer populations and accelerating gentrification (Trounstine, 2018). The construction of interstate highways accelerated suburbanization and White flight, polarizing cities from their suburbs and rural areas (Nall, 2015).

These patterns laid the foundation for later political segregation, which grew in the last quarter of the 20th century and into the 21st century (Kaplan et al., 2022; T. E. Brown & Mettler, 2024). This geographic separation was in part a by-product of the parties sorting ideologically and demographically, with the Democratic party becoming the party of social, racial, and economic liberals and the Republican Party embracing social and economic conservatism (Levendusky, 2009). Polarization along demographics which are highly spatially clustered – such as race, income, religion, and education – emerged. These changes were rapid, with voters changing allegiances, and some did not emerge until new generations of voters entered the electorate with newly sorted allegiances. However, the development of

geographic polarization was not a passive by-product of political realignment. Geographic identities and interests shaped differences between the parties, while parties as endogenous institutions made appeals to distinct geographic constituencies (Cramer, 2016; Mettler & Brown, 2025; J. Rodden, 2019).

Thus, the history of contemporary geographic polarization is a story of path dependence, where structural decisions made at the beginning of the 20th century continue to shape the housing landscape that today defines the contours of modern political geography. It is also a story of realignment, in which parties transform in ways that are geographically clustered, changing who aligns with which party and having an impact on political segregation. Although the origins of contemporary political separation have been observed throughout the 20th century, the emergence of trends in geographic polarization occurred in the last quarter of that century (T. E. Brown & Mettler, 2024). This story is one of emergence due to slow-moving historical processes.

3 Partisan segregation today

As a snapshot of contemporary partisan segregation, we take county and precinct-level data on presidential vote share[1] and in Figure 1 we plot the 2024 nationwide distributions of two-party Democratic vote share across geographic units, with separate density curves weighted by the number of Democratic votes (solid line) and Republican votes (dashed line) in each geographic unit. This visualization informs the type of county or precinct that the average Democrat versus the average Republican experiences in terms of partisan makeup. We observe divergent distributions, with the Democratic distribution containing on average more Democratic counties or precincts than the Republican distribution, meaning that Democrats tend to live around Democrats, and Republicans tend to live around Republicans at the county and precinct level. This gap is more pronounced at the local, precinct, level. Across

[1]County data are sourced from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab (2018), precinct data are sourced from the The New York Times (2024) and from Kenny et al. (2024).

counties, many Democrats and Republicans live in mixed counties, despite the overall divergence. Partisan-mixed precincts are less common, particularly for Democrats, as evidenced by the massing in the distribution of Democrats in ($> 80\%$) Democratic precincts.

Figure 1 suggests that the geographic separation of partisans can be observed at macro, meso, and micro levels. At the macro-level, we see regional patterns with states and clusters of states running Democratic or Republican, such as the coastal Democratic strongholds versus Republican strength in the Midwest and the South (Hopkins, 2017). The county map in Figure 2 shows Democratic counties along the West coast, in the Northeast, in the South along the Black Belt, and in urban counties elsewhere in the country. Republican counties are clustered in the South (outside the Black Belt), and cover most of the Midwest, Appalachia, and rural areas of the Mountain West.

At the meso-level, we observe urban-rural divides (J. Rodden, 2019; T. E. Brown & Mettler, 2024). Indeed, every large city in the country is Democratic while suburbs and rural areas are more likely to run Republican (Gimpel et al., 2020). This correlation between population density and Democratic vote share (or, put in reverse, the relationship between Republicanism and rural areas) holds in every state (Lang & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2015). We take precinct-level presidential election data from 2016-2024[2], combine it with data from 2020 Census population counts, and compute population density at the precinct-level. We then calculate the relationship between logged population density and two-party Democratic vote share, replicating analyses featured in J. Rodden (2019). Figure 3 panel (a) shows the binned scatter plot between logged population density and two-party Democratic vote share using precinct data for each state in our data, and panel (b) shows the coefficients between these two variables by state. The positive relationship between population density and Democratic vote share is present in every state using 2024 election data. This relationship ranges across states, with the largest gradients observed in Georgia, Tennessee, and southern states (where population density and political polarization both map on to racial segregation at high rates),

[2]Our data exclude Alaska and Maine due to precinct data availability.

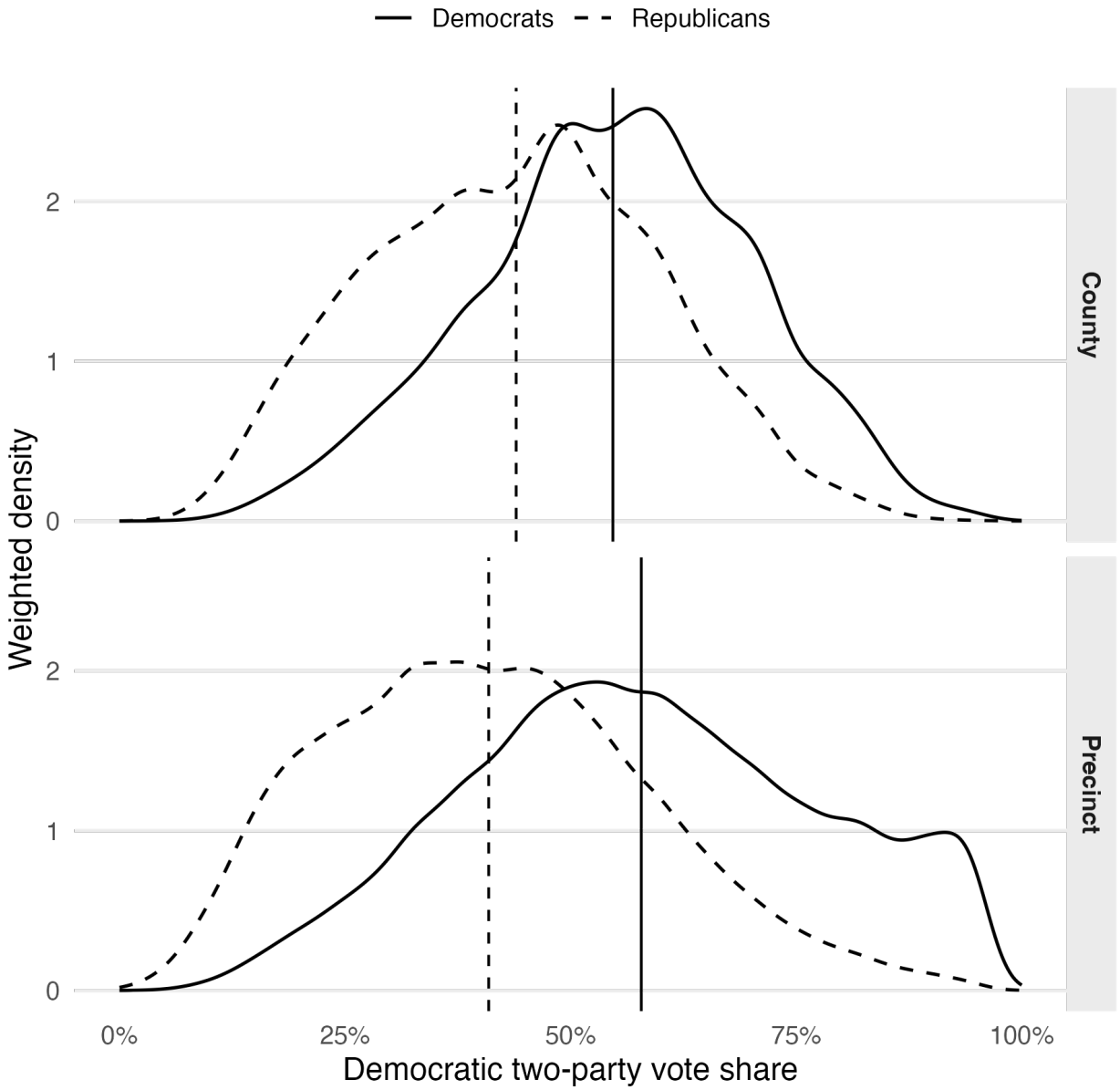


Figure 1: Nationwide distribution of 2024 presidential vote share

Density curves plot distribution of two-party Democratic presidential vote share (2024 election) across counties (top panel) and precincts (bottom panel). Distributions are weighted by number of Democratic votes (solid line) and number of Republican votes (dashed line). Horizontal lines plot the weighted means of the distributions.

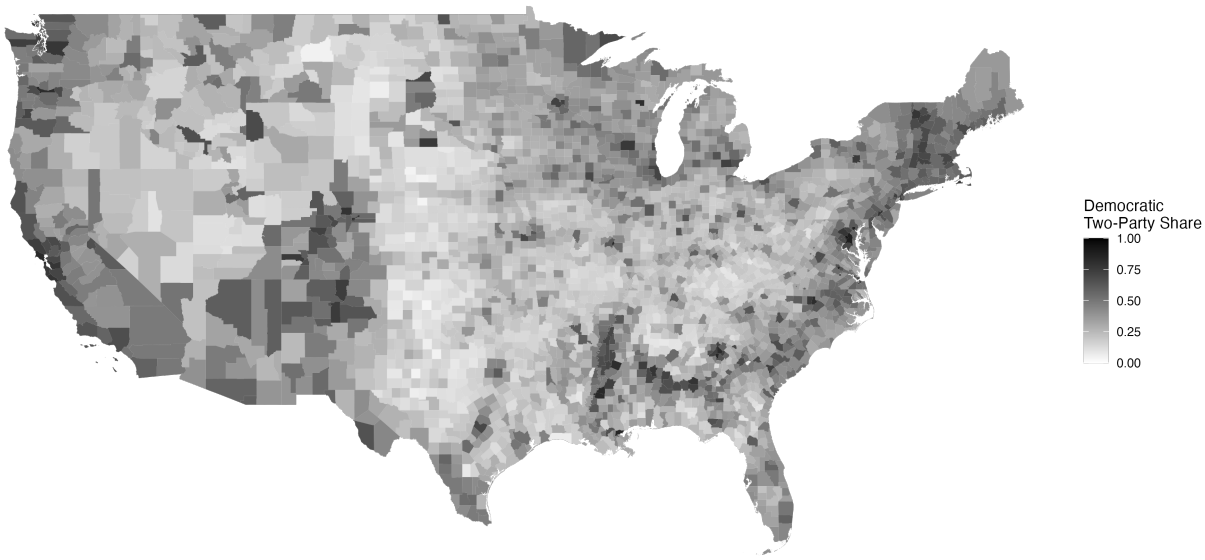


Figure 2: Democratic two-party presidential vote share by county, 2024

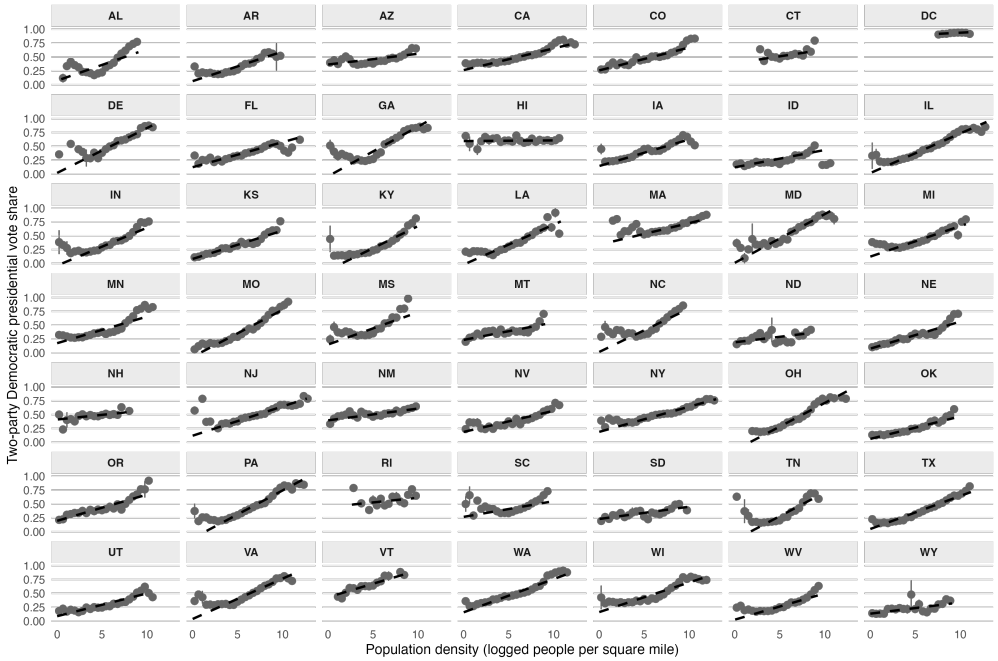
Map shows counties across the continental United States, shaded white to black based on two-party Democratic presidential vote share in the 2024 election.

and in Midwestern states such as Pennsylvania and Ohio. The smallest gradients are found in states such as Hawaii, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire.

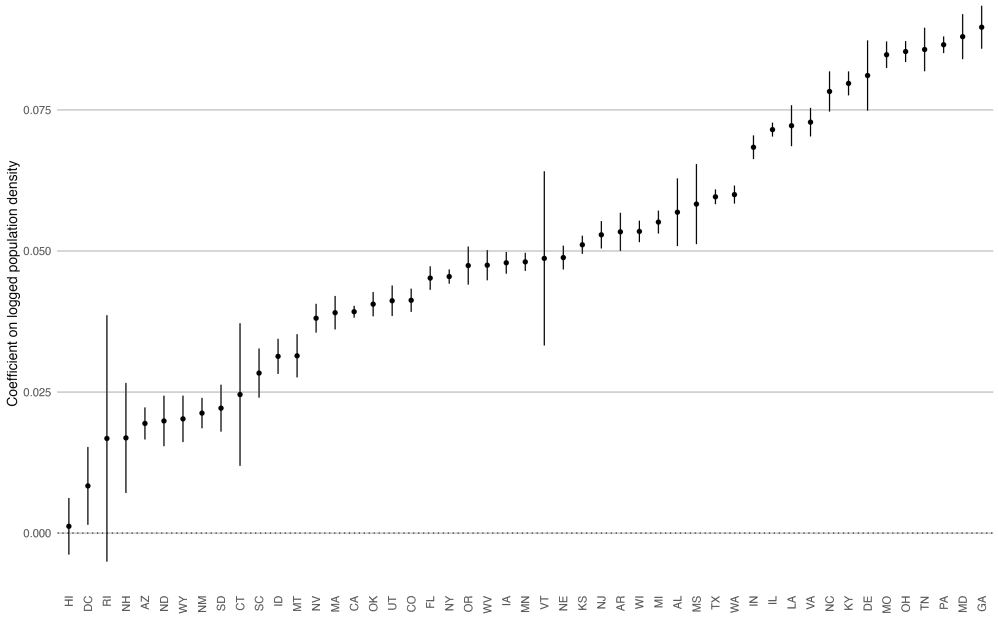
This urban-rural divide is *the* defining feature of American political geography. One symptom of geographic polarization is that U.S. voters are as sorted across places within states – across cities and rural areas – as at any point since the Civil War (Kaplan et al., 2022). The clustering of Democrats in population-dense areas further creates asymmetric geographic polarization, in that Democrats are more likely to live in Democratic localities than Republicans are to live in Republican areas (Chen & Rodden, 2013; J. R. Brown & Enos, 2021).

At the micro level, we can see political differences across towns and neighborhoods, with Democrats and Republicans clustering within local areas. In a study of 2018 partisan segregation using individual registration data and distance-weighted measures of exposure to in- and out-partisans, J. R. Brown & Enos (2021) calculate exposure among voters' neighbors and find that many voters live with limited proximity to out-partisans. This finding is supported by our previous analysis in Figure 1 that voters are more likely to live in homogeneous precincts than counties. J. R. Brown & Enos (2021) further find that Democrats and Republicans tend to live with different levels of partisan exposure even when comparing Democrats and Republicans who live in the same town, Zip Code, or Census Tract. This pattern is supported by the results in Table 1, which models precinct-level two-party Democratic presidential vote-share against logged population density, comparing models without controls to those with race controls, state fixed effects, and county fixed effects. The gradient between population density and Democratic vote is positive, albeit smaller, even when restricting the comparison to precincts in the same county. Although the gradient becomes smaller, the relationship persists, indicating that partisan sorting occurs at local levels.

Examples of partisan variation across precincts within cities appear in Figure 4,



(a) Population density and vote share scatter plots by state



(b) Population density and vote share coefficients by state

Figure 3: Relationship between precinct-level two-party 2024 presidential Democratic vote share and logged population density by state

Top panel shows binned scatter plots of the relationship between logged population density and two-party Democratic presidential vote (2024 election) share at the precinct level for each state in the data. Bottom panel plots in order of magnitude the coefficients from bivariate linear models measuring the same relationship. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Table 1: Population Density and Democratic Vote Share (2024)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Log population density	0.057***	0.042***	0.038***	0.027***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.002)	(0.001)
White share		-0.379***	-0.294***	-0.171**
		(0.003)	(0.063)	(0.051)
Black share		0.148***	0.313***	0.373***
		(0.004)	(0.063)	(0.056)
Hispanic share		-0.279***	-0.217***	-0.076
		(0.004)	(0.054)	(0.048)
Num.Obs.	163333	163203	163203	163203
R2	0.399	0.589	0.661	0.796
Fixed Effects	None	None	State	State + County

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table reports coefficients from linear regressions testing the relationship between logged population density and two-party Democratic presidential vote share (2024 election) at the precinct level. Standard errors shown in parentheses.

which plots choropleth maps of precinct two-party Democratic 2024 presidential vote share in Charlotte, NC, Cleveland, OH, Philadelphia, PA, and Seattle, WA. Each of these metro areas features a Democratic urban core with more mixed or Republican precincts closer to the periphery.

So partisan segregation today is high, observed across geographic levels, and polarized across population density gradients. Recent research demonstrates that this partisan segregation has been increasing through the end of the 2010s (J. A. Rodden, 2011; Sussell, 2013; Kaplan et al., 2022). Kaplan et al. (2022) use county and precinct presidential vote share data through 2016 to show a time series of increasing sorting of partisans across states and counties, particularly across counties, starting in the 1970s and continuing to the end of their time series. In a recent paper, J. R. Brown et al. (2025) use voter registration data from 2008 through 2020 and find that, across geographic units from counties and congressional districts to small neighborhood proxies, such as Census Tracts, Block Groups, and Blocks, there is growing homogenization of the residential experience for American voters. They find

Figure 4: Democratic two-party presidential vote share by precinct, 2024

Maps show two-party Democratic presidential vote share (2024 election) across precincts in Charlotte, NC, Cleveland, OH, Philadelphia, PA, and Seattle, WA, shaded white to black based on two-party Democratic presidential vote share in the 2024 election.

that sorting across neighborhoods within larger geographies (evidence by rising Democrat-Republican Dissimilarity Index) is also increasing, meaning that local homogenization is a result of both sorting at large scales and sorting across neighborhoods conditional on geography baselines. Although they find an increasing trend across their time series, they find that sorting within counties decreases from 2018 to 2020, despite increasing overall from 2008 through 2020.

To investigate these trends, we first reconstruct the nationwide distribution of presidential vote share across counties and precincts, extending the analysis from Figure 1 across election cycles. Figure 5 shows the weighted distributions of the county-level two-party Democratic vote share for presidential elections from 2000-2024, shown separately for Democratic and Republican voters. From 2000 to 2016, these distributions show a widening gap between the partisan makeup of Democratic versus Republican voters. Although this gap stabilizes and even shrinks slightly in 2020 and 2024, it remains wider than at the beginning of the time series. This visualization makes clear the growing homogeneity across counties and the growing gap between residential political experience of Democratic and Republican voters.

Second, we replicate the Kaplan et al. (2022) methodology, calculating the variance decomposition[3] using county-level presidential election data and extending the time series to the 2020 and 2024 elections. The results of this variance decomposition are shown in Figure 6.

[3]The Kaplan variance index measures geographic sorting as the variance of a binary political outcome across space. Let $Y \in \{0,1\}$ denote party choice, $p_c = \mathbb{E}[Y \mid c]$ the county-level two-party vote share, $p_s = \mathbb{E}[Y \mid s]$ the state-level vote share, and $P = \mathbb{E}[Y]$ the national mean, with weights proportional to county vote totals. The index rescales the variance to lie in $[0,1]$:

$$V = 4\,\mathrm{Var}(Y) = 4\,P(1-P).$$

This can be decomposed into across-county (within-state) and across-state components:

$$V = 4\sum_{c} w_c\,(p_c - p_s)^2 \;+\; 4\sum_{s} w_s\,(p_s - P)^2,$$

where the first term captures variation across counties within states and the second captures broader differences across states. In our application, p_c is constructed from county-level presidential returns, so the index summarizes how much partisan differences are geographically concentrated across counties and states.

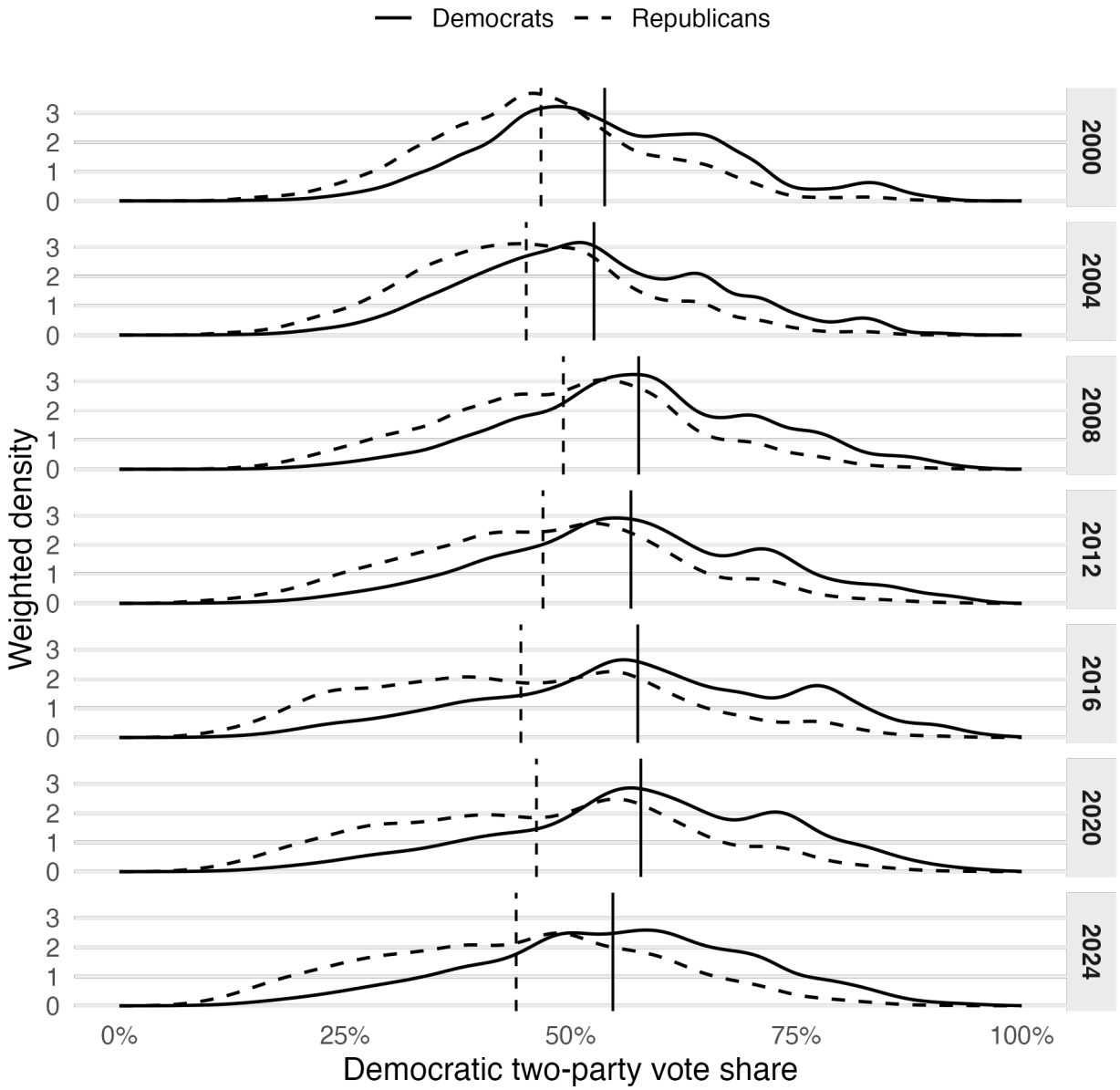


Figure 5: Nationwide distribution of county presidential vote share, 2000-2024

Density curves plot distribution of two-party Democratic presidential vote share (2024 election) across counties by presidential election year from 2000-2024. Distributions are weighted by number of Democratic votes (solid line) and number of Republican votes (dashed line). Horizontal lines plot the weighted means of the distributions.

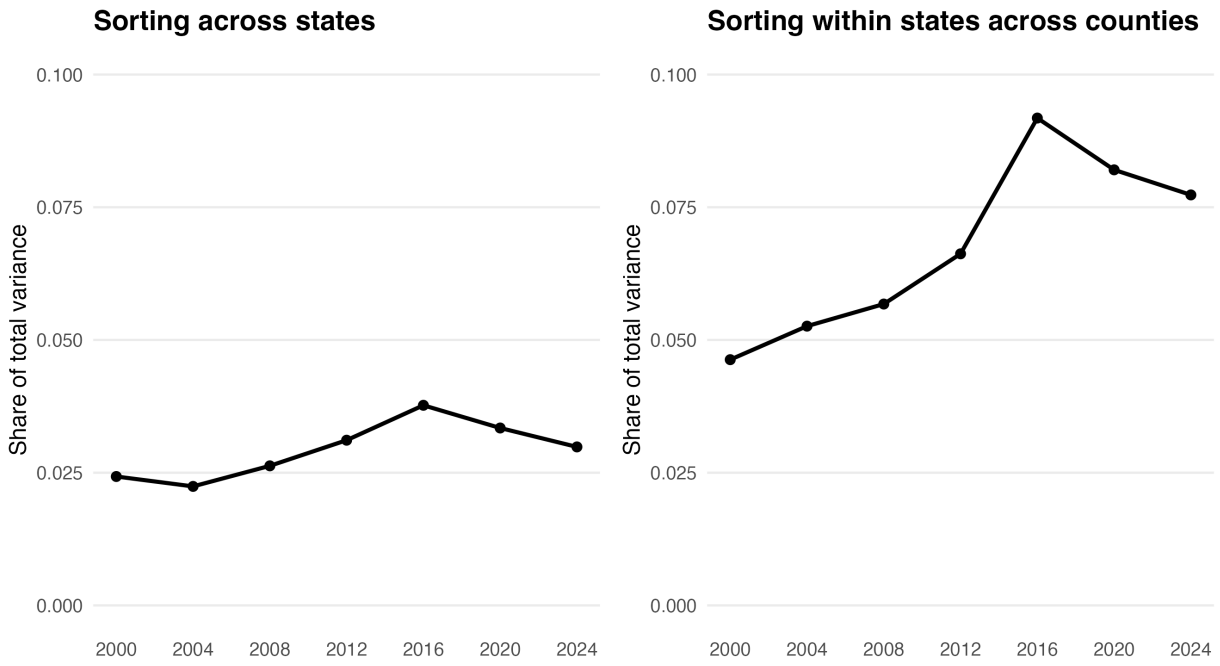


Figure 6: Trends in sorting across states and within states across counties, 2000-2024

Figure plots the share of total variance in county two-party vote share explained by sorting across states (left panel) and sorting within states across counties (right panel), for presidential elections 2000-2024.

We find that, while both sorting across states and sorting across counties increased across the time period, the addition of the 2020 and 2024 election cycles reveals a downturn in these trends, with sorting across states and within states across counties decreasing from 2016 to 2020 and again decreasing from 2020 to 2024. These findings are consistent with the conclusion that partisan segregation has increased over decades, while also raising the question of whether contemporary election cycles represent a downturn in trends or dips along an increasing time series.

Next, Figure 7 compares the 2016, 2020, and 2024 nationwide distributions of precinct-level two-party Democratic presidential vote share, weighted by Democratic and Republican votes. Similar to the distributions in Figure 5, from 2016 through 2020 we see a reversal of the trends through 2016 in the Kaplan et al. (2022) analysis of precinct-level sorting. However, in 2024 we see the widest gap between Democratic and Republican distri-

Table 2: Population Density Slopes by Election Year

	2016		2020		2024	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Log population density	0.047***	0.043***	0.045***	0.041***	0.057***	0.055***
	(0.000)	(0.004)	(0.000)	(0.005)	(0.000)	(0.003)
Num.Obs.	158032	158032	158134	158134	163333	163333
R2	0.323	0.407	0.331	0.412	0.399	0.457
State fixed effects	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table reports coefficients from linear regressions testing the relationship between logged population density and two-party Democratic presidential vote share at the precinct level for the 2016, 2020, and 2024 presidential elections. Standard errors shown in parentheses.

butions of the three presidential elections. Thus, the recession in geographic polarization at the county level since 2016 may not be reflected at the local (precinct) level.

As an additional test, we compare the relationship between two-party presidential Democratic vote share and logged population density at the precinct-level across 2016-2024 presidential election cycles. Figure 8 shows the binned scatter plot separately for each presidential election, and Table 2 reports the coefficients for two-party Democratic presidential vote share on logged population density across elections. We find that this relationship has remained stable across the 2016-2020 period, but increases by 2024. Thus, the association between population density and partisan voting patterns has persisted in recent elections, and may be growing stronger.

4 What drives recent increases in partisan segregation?

A popular expectation, given geographic polarization, is that this pattern is driven by voters choosing where to live based on their political preferences, with Democrats choosing to

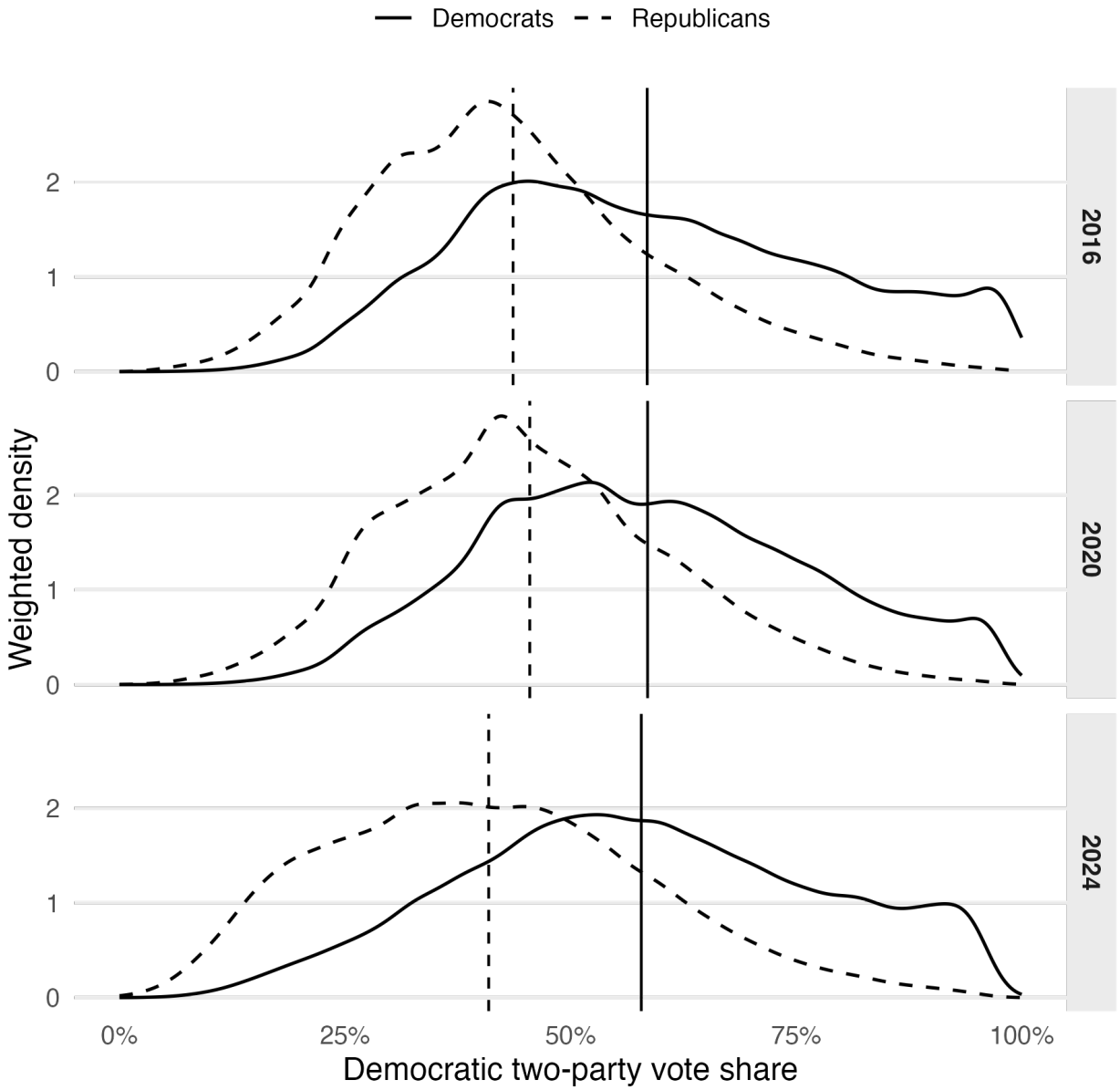


Figure 7: Nationwide distribution of precinct presidential vote share, 2016-2024

Density curves plot distribution of two-party Democratic presidential vote share (2024 election) across precincts by presidential election year from 2016-2024. Distributions are weighted by number of Democratic votes (solid line) and number of Republican votes (dashed line). Horizontal lines plot the weighted means of the distributions.

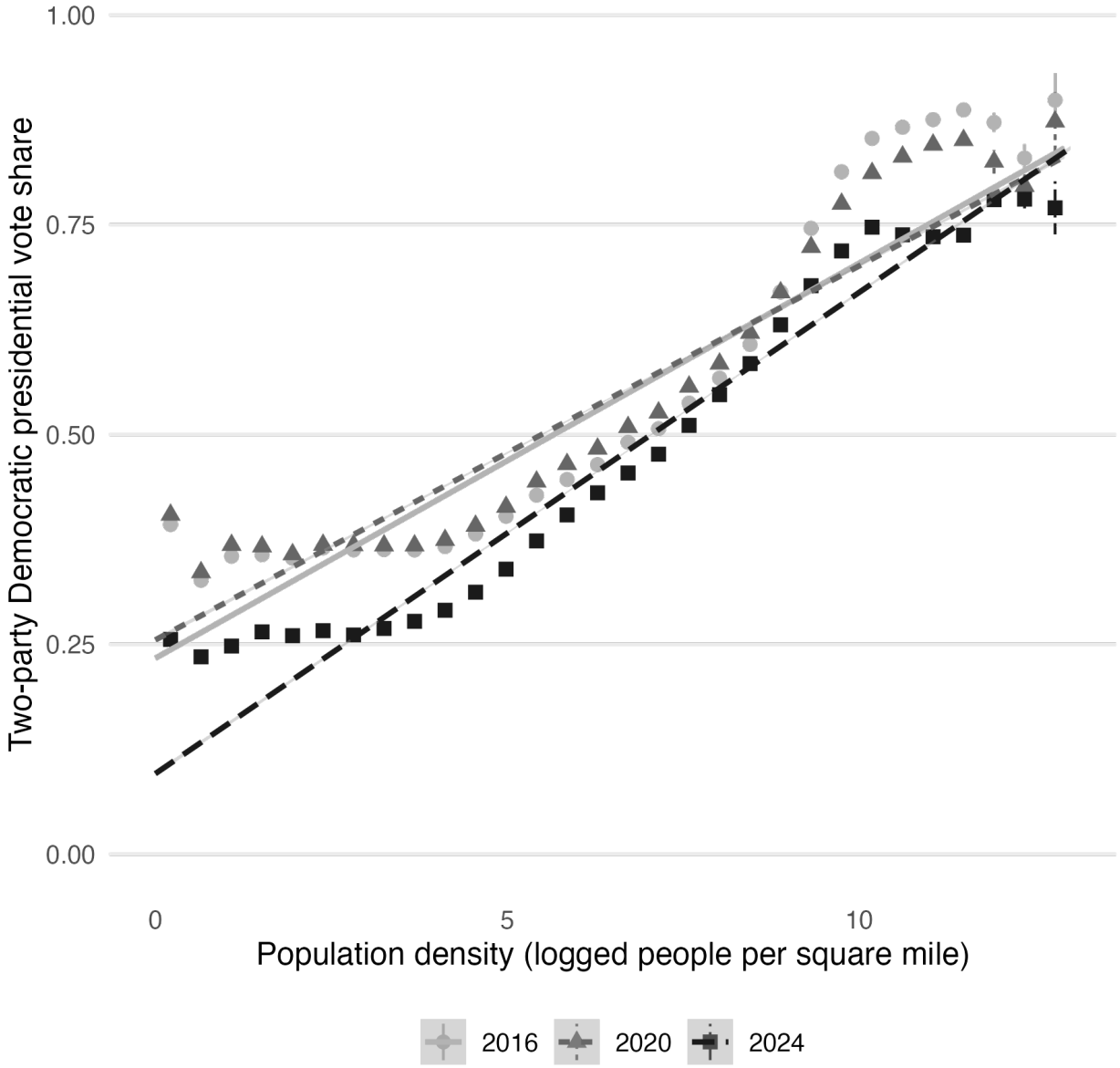


Figure 8: Two-party presidential Democratic vote share and logged population density at the precinct-level, 2016-2024

Figure shows binned scatter plots of the relationship between two-party Democratic presidential vote share and logged population density at the precinct-level for presidential elections 2016 (points), 2020 (triangles), and 2024 (squares). Lines represent bivariate linear regression models.

live among Democrats, and Republicans choosing to live among Republicans. This partisan sorting could be overt: directly choosing where to live because neighbors will share their political preferences. Or it can be indirect: Democrats and Republicans have different preferences for regions, localities, and neighborhoods and these preferences result in geographic polarization. While evidence exists of partisan-motivated choice in residential location (Gimpel & Hui, 2015; McCartney et al., 2024), the best evidence suggests that both direct and indirect forms of partisan sorting are low, and insufficient to fully explain recent increases in geographic polarization (Mummolo & Nall, 2017; Martin & Webster, 2018; J. R. Brown et al., 2025). Research by Mummolo & Nall (2017) surveys voters on the amenities they prefer when choosing where to live, estimating which characteristics of neighborhoods are most influential by using force-choice paired comparisons across many characteristics. They find that while people express a preference to live near people who share their political preferences, those considerations lag behind material considerations – quality of schools, access to jobs, etc. – when choosing where to live. Furthermore, results of respondents' residential history show that they did not move to more homogeneous neighborhoods. Research by Martin & Webster (2018) uses voter registration data to estimate partisan bias in mobility and finds it is 5-10 times too low to explain changes in partisan geography. Recent analyses of cross-state movers by the New York Times (Kaysen & Singer, 2024) find evidence of partisan bias in neighborhood choice moving across states from 2020 to 2024, so it is possible that the partisan bias in residential mobility is higher in recent years than in the past, but further research is needed to establish this trend. Given the low and declining rates of residential mobility in the American electorate (CPS, 2020), it is unlikely that residential mobility will have increased impacts on trends in partisan segregation.

Thus, the literature leaves a puzzle. If partisan segregation does not come from voters moving, where does it come from? This question reflects that the sources of recent trends are not well understood. This understanding is due to difficulties in measuring and differentiating the contributions of mechanisms, but also to the lack of fully developed

theoretical frameworks. Recent work by J. R. Brown et al. (2025) takes up this puzzle, formalizing changes in partisan geography into distinct contributing factors, and quantifying their contribution. When a political map changes across elections, a few things can be going on. First, voters may be moving, and if moving is correlated with partisanship then that will produce a more segregated map. Second, even in the case where no one changes residences, voters may switch parties in such a way that is itself spatially correlated, producing a more segregated map through party switching, rather than mobility. Lastly, even if no one switched parties and no one moved, a map could become more or less segregated based on electoral turnover: which voters are entering or leaving the electorate and where are they appearing. This turnover can be generational, driven by young voters replacing older voters who die, or it may reflect voters registering for the first time, due to delayed entrance into civic engagement, becoming citizens and replacing voters who drop out of the electorate due to disaffection, disenfranchisement, or other reasons.

In their paper, J. R. Brown et al. (2025) decompose changes in partisan geography into contributions from these factors using individual registration data. They find that in both Democratic-trending and Republican-trending places residential mobility can only explain a small part (approximately 15%-20%) of changes in partisan composition from 2008 through 2020. Instead, they find reasons for increasing partisan segregation. Democratic-trending places are trending more Democratic across this time period due to new young voters entering the electorate, particularly young women and non-white voters, while Republican-trending areas are trending more Republican due to older White voters switching from the Democratic party to the Republican party.

The fundamental lesson from the literature, then, is that the rise of political segregation in the U.S. is more about the changing nature of partisan composition as patterns of residential mobility. In other words, political segregation is driven less by the relocation of voters and more by shifts in who identifies as a Democrat or a Republican. This is reflected

in the historical roots of contemporary partisan segregation, where realignments and sorting across parties are as large a part of the story of why we are segregated today as large-scale shocks to or longer-term trends in residential mobility.

5 Is partisan segregation distinct from other forms of segregation?

What follows from this lesson is that we can understand segregation as in large part a function of the increasing alignment of partisanship with other demographic markers that are spatially correlated. This dynamic points to two questions about political segregation: 1) how it compares to other forms of segregation, and 2) the extent to which it can be described by other forms of segregation versus distinguished from them. In Figure 9 we present comparisons of county-level Dissimilarity indices measuring racial and partisan segregation across precincts within counties.[4] We find that racial segregation, measured by White-Black dissimilarity, White-Hispanic dissimilarity, and White-Nonwhite dissimilarity, is higher than party segregation, particularly for Black-White dissimilarity. These results indicate that partisan segregation is less intense than racial segregation across neighborhoods.

While partisan segregation is not as intense as racial segregation in the United States, it may still be produced by it. Politics is polarized by race; race is polarized across geography; therefore political segregation exists where racial segregation exists. Figure 10 illustrates this relationship, correlating 2024 racial segregation across counties with partisan segregation. In Figure 11, we extend this analysis to show the relationship between partisan segregation

[4]The Dissimilarity index is a canonical measure of segregation and is computed by: $D = \frac{1}{2}\sum_{i=1}^{N}\left|\frac{a_i}{A} - \frac{b_i}{B}\right|$, where N is the total number of neighborhoods in the larger geography, A and B are the total number of each group (i.e., Democrats and Republicans) in the larger geography as a whole, and a_i and b_i are the counts for those groups in neighborhood i. The Dissimilarity Index can be interpreted as the percentage of residents who would have to move across neighborhoods to achieve full integration, or balanced distribution of groups across neighborhoods (Massey & Denton, 1988).

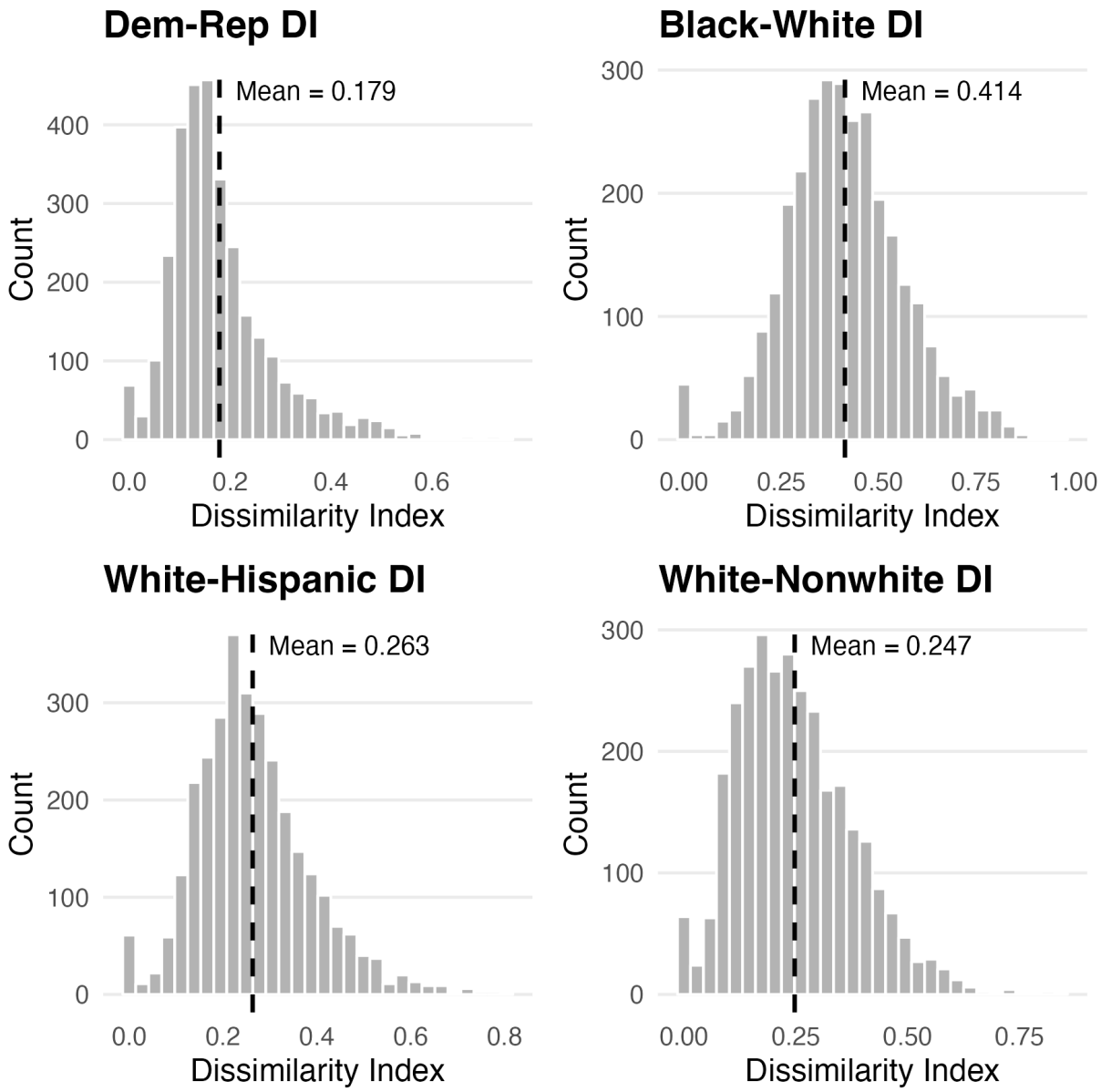


Figure 9: Comparing partisan and racial segregation within counties using the Dissimilarity Index, 2024

Histograms plot the county-level dissimilarity index for Democratic versus Republican votes (2024 election) in the top left, Black versus White population in the top right, White versus Hispanic population in the bottom left, and White versus Nonwhite in the bottom right. Horizontal lines plot the distribution average. All dissimilarity index values are calculated using 2024 precincts as the county sub-group.

and income segregation[5], variation in housing type within a county[6], and segregation of renters versus homeowners within counties.[7] Across these dimensions, partisan segregation increases with economic segregation, decreases as the mix of homeowner versus rental housing in a county becomes more homogeneous, and increases as the extent to which renters and homeowners live in different neighborhoods increases. Thus, segregation by race, income, and housing can explain variation in partisan segregation.

Yet, partisan segregation is also distinct from these other forms of segregation. For example, J. Rodden (2019) shows that the relationship between density and Democratic vote share is still present even in homogeneously White areas. To demonstrate this, we regress county-level partisan segregation against each of the predictors in Figures 10 and 11, in

[5]We measure income segregation with a rank-order information theory index (Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). Let i index tracts within county c, let t_i denote the total number of households in tract i, and let $p \in (0,1)$ denote an income rank cutoff in the county-wide household income distribution. For each cutoff p, define $x_i(p)$ as the number of tract-i households with income below rank p, and $t_i - x_i(p)$ as the number above that cutoff. We then compute the binary information-theory segregation index at cutoff p as

$$H(p) = \frac{\sum_i \left(\frac{t_i}{T}\right)\left[E(p) - E_i(p)\right]}{E(p)},$$

where $T = \sum_i t_i$, $E(p) = -p\log p - (1-p)\log(1-p)$ is the county-wide binary entropy at cutoff p, and

$$E_i(p) = -\frac{x_i(p)}{t_i}\log\left(\frac{x_i(p)}{t_i}\right) - \left(1 - \frac{x_i(p)}{t_i}\right)\log\left(1 - \frac{x_i(p)}{t_i}\right)$$

is the corresponding tract-level entropy, with the usual convention that $0\log 0 = 0$.

The rank-order income segregation index is then the entropy-weighted average of these binary segregation profiles across all rank cutoffs:

$$H_R = \frac{\int_0^1 E(p)H(p)\,dp}{\int_0^1 E(p)\,dp}.$$

[6]Housing inequality is measured as the county-wide owner-renter imbalance within counties, computed as

$$\frac{|O-R|}{O+R},$$

equivalently $\frac{|O-R|}{\text{occupied housing units}}$, where O and R are county totals. Higher values indicate a more homogeneous (more homeowners or more renters) county by housing type.

[7]Housing segregation is measured as the county-level owner versus renter dissimilarity across Census tracts, computed as

$$D = \frac{1}{2}\sum_t \left|\frac{O_t}{\sum_t O_t} - \frac{R_t}{\sum_t R_t}\right|,$$

where O_t and R_t are owner- and renter-occupied units in tract t.

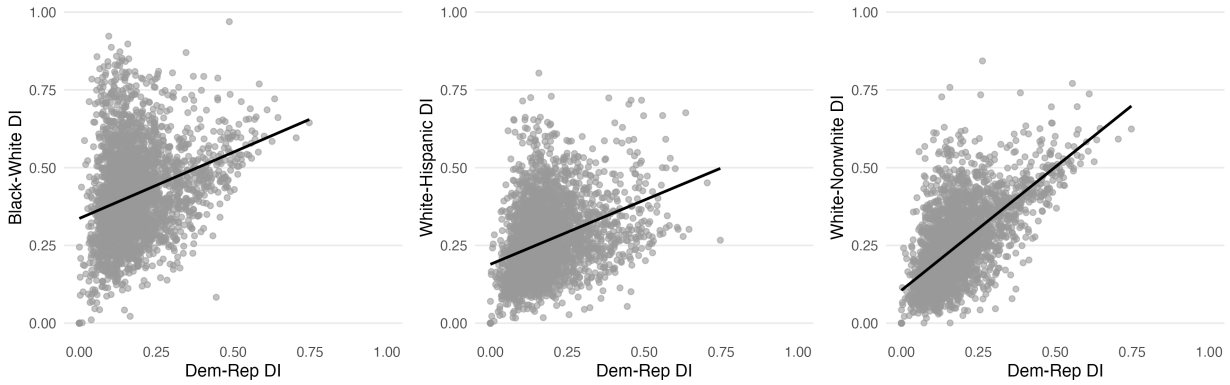


Figure 10: Relationship between partisan segregation and racial segregation, county dissimilarity index 2024

Figures show the relationship between county-level partisan dissimilarity and racial dissimilarity. All dissimilarity index values are calculated using 2024 precincts as the county sub-group.

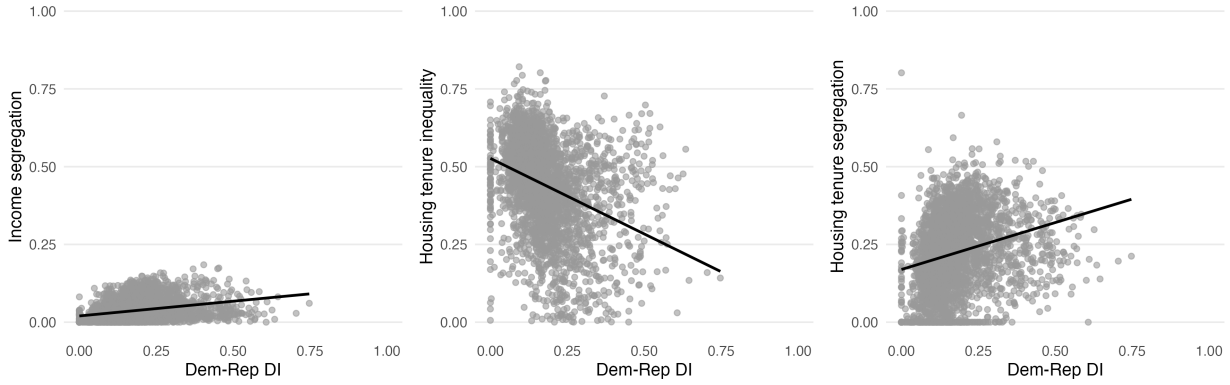


Figure 11: Relationship between partisan segregation, economic segregation, and housing segregation, 2024

Figures show the relationship between county-level partisan dissimilarity and economic segregation (left panel), housing segregation (middle panel), and housing segregation (right panel). All dissimilarity index values are calculated using 2024 precincts as the county sub-group.

Table 3: Partisan Dissimilarity and County Characteristics

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Income segregation	0.971***						-0.095
	(0.055)						(0.070)
Housing tenure inequality		-0.242***					-0.110***
		(0.012)					(0.011)
Housing tenure segregation			0.220***				0.010
			(0.015)				(0.018)
Black-White DI				0.196***			-0.023*
				(0.012)			(0.011)
White-Hispanic DI					0.309***		-0.260***
					(0.015)		(0.018)
White-Nonwhite DI						0.516***	0.677***
						(0.011)	(0.019)
Counties	3065	3065	3065	3004	3063	3065	3004
R^2	0.092	0.118	0.066	0.083	0.128	0.409	0.463

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table reports coefficients from linear regressions testing the relationship between racial, economic, and housing segregation and two-party Democratic presidential vote share at the county level for the 2024 presidential election. Standard errors shown in parentheses.

separate models and in one full model. We evaluate the R^2 to see what proportion of the variation in county partisan segregation can be explained by each predictor and how much the full model can explain. In the full model, the R^2 reaches only 0.467, indicating that less than half of partisan segregation can be explained by these predictors. This suggests that partisan segregation remains distinct from these other forms of segregation.

There are cases where racial segregation and partisan segregation may be in tension. (J. R. Brown & Enos, 2021) show that nonwhite Republicans have higher exposure to Democratic neighbors because they are more likely to still live near Non-White neighbors who are disproportionately Democratic. Similarly, White Democrats have higher exposure to the out-party than their Non-White partisan peers, as forces of racial segregation shape the map such that White Democrats sorting away from Non-White populations results in Whites living in greater proximity to the out-party. Therefore, racial segregation produces partisan integration.

6 Do place effects reinforce geographic polarization?

Together, two findings from the literature raise a question. Evidence indicates that voters are influenced by where they live, either in direct response to the politics of those they live around or due to the effects of where they live (D. E. Campbell, 2006; Cantoni & Pons, 2022; Perez-Truglia, 2017; J. R. Brown, 2025; J. R. Brown et al., 2023). In combination with the understanding that party switching and generational turnover are impactful in increasing geographic polarization, may geographic polarization be reinforcing? Are place effects such that people who live in more Democratic (Republican) places become more Democratic (Republican) themselves, and are the magnitudes of these effects large enough to meaningfully impact trends in partisan geography? It could be the case that changes in party affiliation are happening in a spatially-clustered manner for reasons not directly related to the influence of where someone lives – i.e. Southern White voters slowly and generationally shifting to Republican allegiance largely due to political events, rather than contextual effects. In this section, we consider how recent research informs how geographic polarization might beget more geographic polarization by influencing voters to adopt the partisanship of their environment.

In their study of contextual determinants of participation and partisan registration, Cantoni & Pons (2022) find large effects of moving to a new state or county on partisan registration, indicating that effects of context for adults may be meaningful, although it is less clear if their results speak directly to partisan context versus characteristics of place, and whether they correspond to changes in context for voters who do not move. Complementing this work, J. R. Brown (2025) analyzes local changes in the partisan composition of voters' neighbors, finding that voters become more likely to change their registration to match changes in the composition of their neighborhood. These local effects are too small to have a major impact, however, on trends. Other work pushes back on the idea that local context is influential on what voters think, particularly on individual issues. Hopkins (2018), for

example, demonstrates that many opinion issues are not correlated with localized impacts, attributing greater influence to nationalized political conditions. It is not clear whether place effects on adult voters are a driver of the influence of party switching on trends in political geography, particularly when we consider that party switching is rare and influential on Republican trends in the J. R. Brown et al. (2025) decomposition in rural areas with lower populations and limited population growth. Within-individual changes in partisanship across elections occur only at moderate rates, and only a component of those changes is likely the result of the influence of living in more politically homogeneous places.[8]

Other research suggests that geographic cleavages may become impactful on political psychology when geographic identity becomes a part of partisan identity. Work by Cramer (2016), for example, illustrates that urban versus rural interests can take on an us versus them dynamic wherein rural voters identify with being rural, non-city folks and perceive city populations as adversaries claiming government resources. Mettler & Brown (2025) explain this dynamic in their study of the rise of the urban-rural divide in American politics, describing how voters first reacted to shifts in political and economic circumstances in rural areas that then fostered rural resistance to national policies perceived as favoring urban areas. Ternullo (2024) complements these findings, and contributes arguments as to how local organizations structure how voters respond to local circumstances, leading to locally shared definitions of political challenges and identities as they relate to national party politics. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that the effect of places becoming more Democratic or Republican, so to speak, comes from many of the other things that, directly or indirectly, come with that contextual change, rather than any response to local partisan composition being attributable solely to pure exposure to more Democrats or Republicans.

Other recent research suggests that place effects may be influential during childhood, and thus a portion of the impact of generational turnover may be attributable to the influence

[8]It is also possible that studies reliant on partisan registration as a proxy for partisanship understate change in underlying partisan attitudes.

of where people live *before* they enter the electorate – where they grow up. J. R. Brown et al. (2023) combined voter registration data from 2012-2021 with address history data from 1992 to the present and quantified the effect of where someone grows up on how they register in the first elections they are eligible for (after they turn 18). Using a movers design (Chetty & Hendren, 2018), they find that spending more time in a more Republican (Democratic) county or Zip Code increases the chance of registering as a Republican (Democrat). The estimates from this type of mover design can be interpreted, with assumptions about how estimates extrapolate to voters that did not move across counties during childhood, as the proportion of the cross-county cohort-level variation in partisan registration that is due to the effect of where each county-cohort grows up. By the estimates in J. R. Brown et al. (2023), approximately 40% of the variation in partisan registration across counties for new cohorts entering the electorate is attributable to the influence of childhood environment. This quantity speaks to the decomposition from J. R. Brown et al. (2025), which finds that 47% of the trend in Democratic-trending areas is due to new young voters entering the electorate. Together, 19% of this trend could be due to the effects of growing up in more Democratic areas – a contribution larger than the impacts of mobility or adult party switching in these areas.

While not conclusive, this logic implies that the reinforcing aspect of geographic polarization, rather than acting in the short term on voters established in their partisanship, is impactful across generations. As places become more Democratic or Republican, future voters are influenced differently than they would have been by their childhood location, and thus partisan segregation during childhood may lead to greater partisan segregation in adulthood.

In this context, the distinctions between residential mobility, electoral turnover, and party switching blur. The confluence of each of these factors can set the foundation upon which trends in political geography can grow. The compounding effects of time should be

considered when making claims about what matters for changes in political geography. If places are made more or less Democratic or Republican, inputs change, and geographic polarization changes. Relatedly, it is not that residential mobility is inconsequential, but rather that short-term mobility is not the primary explanatory factor. The residential mobility decisions decades ago inform the impact of generational turnover today, shaping the context in which young voters grow up and where they will enter the electorate. Mobility decisions also shape the influence of party switching today, since the party switchers of today chose where to live in a manner that their later party switch would be influential on geographic polarization. Realignments that influence party switching also influence cohort-level shifts in party affiliation – so the actions of parties to win votes or the shift of groups of people from one party to another can act generationally, as well as within voters across time.

7 What's next: future trends and future research

Progress has been made on understanding the extent, sources, and nuances of partisan segregation in the United States. This progress is due to computational advances in spatial methodologies and increasing access to fine-grained voter and election data at individual levels and across geographic scales. Such data show that partisan segregation is widespread, historically high, and increasing over the past few decades. Yet, the data demonstrate that these trends should not be overstated: while many voters do live in towns and neighborhoods where one party is the majority, on average both Democrats and Republicans have pluralities of their neighbors who support the opposite party. Partisan out-group exposure is higher than out-group exposure by race. Taken together, these findings put this phenomenon in perspective, and researchers and policymakers must hold in their minds two truths: that geographic polarization, across urban-rural divisions, is close to as high as it has ever been in the country's history, and that Americans are not completely isolated geographically from people who disagree with them politically.

Still, contemporary levels of geographic clustering by partisans remain concerning, as research demonstrates policy implications for politically segregated societies as well as challenges to governance. Furthermore, geographic political polarization coincides with political segregation in other parts of life, such as dating (Huber & Malhotra, 2017), friend groups (Mosleh et al., 2021), social gatherings (Zhang et al., 2023), and the workplace (Khwaja & Mian, 2005; Kempf & Tsoutsoura, 2021; Fos et al., 2021; Frake et al., 2025; Chinoy & Koenen, 2024). Lack of exposure across spheres of social life may exacerbate political conflict, either by influencing in- and out-party attitudes or by adding to the difference between partisan constituencies.

The two questions, then, are what we still do not know about political segregation, and what trends in geographic polarization will look like. To the first, there are several areas for future research. The lingering lesson from lack of partisan-motivated sorting, and limited impact of residential mobility on changes in political geography, is that partisan segregation occurs due to the increasing alignment of the political parties along other characteristics – race, education, income, religion, housing, etc. – that are spatially clustered. Future research should focus on disentangling how political polarization and geographic segregation of these demographics interact to produce political segregation, as well as levels of political segregation that cannot be explained by demographic models. Progress here would enable researchers to understand how realignments – such as erosion of Democratic strength in some minority group, or increased polarization by college education – may shape political segregation.

Other research should expand beyond binaries to examine political segregation across other political characteristics. Major trends in voter registration and partisan identification show that unaffiliated (no major party) voters are increasing as a proportion of the electorate (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). What is the clustering of independents in the electorate? To what extent do independents reflect the partisan breakdown of the places they live, and

does this reflection vary by geography? Geographic polarization across specific issues and other elements of opinion is worth examining, but faces measurement challenges given the sparsity and unrepresentativeness of survey data. But research making progress in this area (for example, see T. E. Brown & Mettler (2024) or Munis (2022)) can explain how specific disagreements are a cause or consequence of geographic polarization. This type of inquiry can reckon with the potentiality that Democrats and Republicans in one place are different from Democrats and Republicans in other places, and that a focus on nationalized party brands – while increasingly appropriate (Hopkins, 2018) – obscures differences within the parties.

Lastly, geographic separation is a blunt (sometimes limited) instrument for cross-partisan interaction underlying models of behavior. Inquiries into political segregation in other parts of social life, where contact is more likely, can inform how limited contact with voters of the opposite opinions influences voters. Research on the extent of political segregation in other areas, as well as the behavioral effects of that segregation, helps further understanding of contextual and exposure effects. Of interest to this chapter are the ways in which segregation in other spheres informs or is informed by geographic segregation, and the ways in which these different contexts influence voters.

What might trends in partisan segregation look like? Some of the evidence presented in this chapter points to a plateauing of trends, with the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections not showing increases compared to previous electoral cycles. Whether this slowing down represents a reversal of increases, or merely a dip in an otherwise increasing time-series, requires data over longer periods. Nonetheless, we can construct hypotheses for why trends in geographic polarization may slow. Two demographic trends point to this potentiality: increasing polarization by college education, and Republican gains among minority voters. Prior to recent elections, there was an income cleavage in American politics where wealthier people voted conservative (Gelman, 2010; Hersh & Nall, 2016). This cleavage has been su-

perseded by a cleavage by education, with college-educated voters supporting Democrats and voters without college degrees supporting Republicans (Marble, 2024). This demographic realignment challenges urban-suburban polarization, previously falling along the income gradient, effectively liberalizing the suburbs relative to cities, reducing polarization along this dimension. Republican gains with minority voters can erode Democratic strong points and upend urban-suburban divides.

Other shifts could produce dramatic changes in geographic polarization. An increase in residential mobility, for example, could reshuffle the map more rapidly than mobility has done in the past. In particular, if it is paired with an increase in partisan bias in residential mobility, then this would dramatically increase segregation. High housing costs and increasing reliance on friendship and kin networks constrain mobility, so it is not clear that these constraints will be alleviated enough to cause mobility to rise. Increased remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic prompted speculation that migration patterns may become untethered from location, but it is not clear if this has resulted in changes to where people live and work (Bick et al., 2024).

However, the American electoral map is headed towards an age cliff. The distribution of age in the electorate is such that the largest voting bloc is at or approaching senior status. The Baby Boomer generation dwarfs younger generations. Thus, a large aging group of voters anchors the political geography of the electorate, in that they are unlikely to move because of their age and are either set in their ways or trending Republican in a manner that increases geographic polarization. But as this generation dies off, they are replaced by a younger, more mobile electorate. This distributional shift could produce a shock to levels and trends of geographic polarization. When we consider the strong role of generational turnover in describing trends in partisan segregation, the impact of young voters will be stronger when they make up a larger share of the electorate. Thus, current forces may grow stronger and shock political geography. Whether this shock makes voters more or less

segregated can be revealed in time.

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