Becoming an Ideologue: Social Sorting and the Microfoundations of Polarization

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Abstract: This article elaborates and tests the hypothesis that the sociopolitical segregation of interpersonal networks (i.e., social sorting) is at the root of recent polarization trends in the United States. After reviewing recent trends, the article outlines the micro-level pathways through which social sorting along sociopolitical lines leads individuals to become more ideological in their identities and attitude structures. It then tests these pathways using panel data from the General Social Survey, which includes detailed measures of individuals' social ties, ideological identification, and attitudes across a wide array of issues. Results show two dominant pathways through which more socially sorted individuals become more ideological: a short pathway directly linking social sorting to more extreme ideological identities, and a longer pathway linking social sorting to more extreme ideological identities through an increasingly ideological alignment of individuals' attitude structures. The shorter pathway predominates among conservatives and the longer pathway among liberals. These micro-level pathways are shown to generalize to different macro-level polarization trends in identities and attitude structures for conservatives and liberals. Findings therefore uphold core sociological principles while providing stronger social-structural foundations for a growing body of mainly psychological research on ideological asymmetries.

Keywords: social networks; polarization; attitudes; ideology; social identity; schemas

SOCIAL networks in the United States are segregated, especially along the lines of race, education, income, and religiosity (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Smith, McPherson, and Smith-Lovin 2014), and these divisions extend to both trusted social relations and acquaintances (DiPrete et al. 2011). Moreover, these sociodemographic divisions are increasingly correlated with opposing political factions (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Levendusky 2009 Park 2022), leading to the compounding of a sociopolitical divide in a way that scholars have long considered a threat to pluralism (e.g., Lipset 1960; Lipset and Rokkan 1967). As perhaps best summarized by Peter Blau (1964:396), a stark implication of the compounding—or *consolidation*—of societal divisions is that "without cross affiliations, conflicts tend to be cumulative as many involve the same split in the community, and the predominant communications within each opposition camp may lead to intense hostility and endeavors not merely to defeat the opposition but to destroy it."

The conceptual linkages between polarization and segregated interpersonal networks have strong theoretical foundations in sociology and social psychology. Durkheim ([1893] 1984) saw the division of labor as ideally suited to providing the crosscutting ties capable of producing feelings of connectedness throughout society. Weber (1946) saw fundamental societal divisions as frequently intersecting (rather than aligning) in ways that produce multisided conflicts and stalemates. Simmel

(1955) saw overlapping group affiliations as providing a social web that hinders the spread of hostility (see also Baldassarri and Diani 2007; Pescosolido and Rubin 2000). In Blau's (1977) theory of consolidated social structures, alluded to above, the less correlated the salient dimensions of a society's social structure, the more likely that interpersonal contact will occur across these divisions (see also Skvoretz 1983). Social psychological research on intergroup contact, as well as interpersonal and small group dynamics (Allport 1954; Cartwright and Harary 1956; Newcomb 1961; Sherif et al. [1961] 1988), likewise points to the importance of crosscutting ties—and especially friendships—in reducing intergroup animus (for review, see Davies et al. 2011).[1]

These diverse theories can be used to derive a *social sorting hypothesis* of polarization—namely, *individuals who have fewer social ties crosscutting a sociopolitical divide, or who have many social ties cumulatively sorted within one side of a sociopolitical divide, will have more extreme ideological identities and attitudes*. Such a social sorting hypothesis would also imply a processual account in which individuals' social ties are dynamically interrelated with their ideological attitudes and identities. Processual accounts interrelating social ties, identity, and attitudes are at the core of constructivist approaches, such as those by symbolic interactionists on secondary socialization (e.g., Becker 1953). And yet, more systematic evidence of the pathways by which socially sorted individuals become more ideological—and thereby contribute to polarization more broadly—is lacking. Numerous simulation-based studies strongly suggest that how individuals form and break social ties and influence one another is at the root of large-scale polarization processes (Flache et al. 2017; Goldberg and Stein 2018; Motyl et al. 2014). These simulations, consistent with social constructivist accounts, suggest that individuals who *become* more socially sorted are also more likely to become more divisive in terms of their attitudes and ideological identities and that, in turn, individuals who become more divisive in their attitudes and identities are more likely to become more socially sorted in their interpersonal ties.

The social sorting hypothesis has been made more or less explicitly with respect to recent polarization trends in the United States (e.g., Bishop 2009; Klein 2020; for review, see McCarty 2019) and is popularly evoked through the language of political "echo chambers" and "social bubbles," particularly on social media (Bail 2021). Although some political scientists have focused on the micro-level connections between individuals' crosscutting social ties, divisive attitudes, and political participation (e.g., Mason 2018; Mutz 2002), most polarization research remains focused on the macro level. Such a macro-level focus is sensible considering that polarization is an inherently aggregate phenomenon—that is, a *group* is more or less polarized depending on the overall distribution of its members in terms of their identities and attitudes. And yet, evidence directly linking individuals' social ties to more or less extreme ideological positions is largely absent, as is a more dynamic account of such processes.

This article directly examines the processual microfoundations of recent polarization trends through an analysis of social sorting's effects on individuals' ideological identities and attitude structures. Aided by longitudinal data, I develop an approach capable of demonstrating the predominant pathways through which an individual's social ties, ideological identity, and attitude structures interrelate over

time in ways that contribute to different aspects of polarization writ large. This shift toward examining the microfoundations of polarization also affords the possibility of examining systematic differences in the pathways through which social sorting helps shape ideological identities and attitudes. Specifically, a growing body of primarily psychological research suggests that conservatives and liberals have different moral and psychological foundations and that conservatives' attitudes have stronger affective roots (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Haidt 2012; Jost 2017; see also Bail et al. 2018). Sociological social psychology would suggest that such documented cognitive and affective differences are rooted in and amplified by underlying structures of interaction that uphold distinctive ways of thinking and feeling (Fine 2012; Smith-Lovin 2007; Stryker 1994).

In what follows, after reviewing polarization trends, I outline the recursive micro-level pathways through which socially sorted individuals become more ideological in their identities and attitudes. I use General Social Survey (GSS) panel data and a novel individual-level measurement strategy. Findings show two predominate pathways: (1) a *short pathway* that leads directly from social ties to identity and (2) a *longer pathway* that shapes identities through the intermediary of more aligned attitude structures. Different ideological camps (i.e., liberals vs. conservatives) appear to be more inclined to one pathway to polarization than the other (with liberals becoming more readily aligned in their attitudes and conservatives becoming more readily extreme in their identities). These micro-level pathways are then shown to generalize to different macro-level trends using all three-wave GSS panels between 2006 and 2014. This study therefore substantiates the social sorting hypothesis while providing stronger social-structural foundations to noted asymmetries in political psychology.

Polarization Trends

Polarization research has documented two key trends in recent decades in the United States. One trend points to the increasing importance of ideological *identity* over substantive disagreements on specific issues (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2015, 2018). In short, Americans have become increasingly divided in terms of their loyalties and feelings, especially their negative feelings toward the other ideological camp, but on average not more divided in their actual beliefs and opinions. The other trend points to an increasing *alignment* of attitude structures (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Baldassarri and Goldberg 2014; DellaPosta 2020; DellaPosta, Shi, and Macy 2015; Kozlowski and Murphy 2021). If an ideology is "a learned knowledge structure consisting of an interrelated network of beliefs, opinions, and values" (Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009:310), then the growing aggregate interconnections among attitudes suggest that on average individuals are becoming more ideologically consistent in their thoughts.

In this section I discuss these two key polarization trends in more detail. In the next section, I offer a micro-level account that helps explain both trends as rooted in the depletion of crosscutting social ties and the concomitant rise of cumulatively sorted ties.

Identity Polarization

One indicator of ideological polarization can be found in the distribution of individuals identifying with opposing political parties or ideological camps. This ideological identification can take the form of positive in-group feelings and/or negative out-group feelings. The thicker the tails of such a distribution of identification, the more ideologically polarized the group. But what does it mean for an individual to identify with an ideology? An individual's ideological identification may have only a tenuous connection with *ideology* as a coherent belief system (see Chapter 4 of McCarty 2019). For example, an individual may identify as "extremely conservative" but still be moderate on many ideologically charged attitudes or perhaps even support some liberal ideas (Ellis and Stimson 2012; Malka and Lelkes 2010). Similarly, Iyengar et al. (2012) showed that affective polarization as negative feelings toward the out-group is only loosely connected to differences in ideology.

Consistent with social identity approaches in psychology (Tajfel and Turner 1979), identity polarization suggests that polarization arises from cognitive processes of group identification rather than substantive differences in opinion (Denning and Hodges 2022; Mason 2015). If, as social identity approaches assert, individuals quickly form group identities around even the most arbitrary and minimal differences, then the very clear and increasingly overlapping (i.e., consolidated) social differences of race, education, religiosity, and so on have become distilled into two easily identifiable opposing camps with ideological labels (Conover and Feldman 1981). Such ideological labels—that is, Democrat versus Republican, but perhaps even more clearly liberal versus conservative (see Boutyline and Vaisey 2017:1413; DellaPosta et al. 2015)—have become so-called mega-identities (Finkel et al. 2020; Mason 2018:14). In this case, an individual's identification as "extremely liberal" might equate to "I identify with educated and urban people who have similar tastes and lifestyles to my own" or "I really dislike uneducated and rural people, who have tastes and lifestyles I find reprehensible," rather than reflecting beliefs that are highly consistent with a liberal policy agenda. Clearly, the opposite would hold for those identifying as "extremely conservative."

Additional evidence consistent with social identity approaches can be found in decades of public opinion research extending from Converse's (1964) assertion that most individuals do not hold stable sets of beliefs (see also DiMaggio 1997). In forming attitudes, most individuals appear to take cues from political elites (Zaller 1992). In fact, individuals may be largely incapable of significant attitude consistency (e.g., a coherent ideology) without the considerable social scaffolding provided by, for example, cognitive authorities and tightly knit social groups (Kitts 2003; Martin 2002; Rawlings 2020). In short, if individuals lack clarity in their thoughts to begin with, then any communications across ideological divides are bound to be emotional and identity-laden encounters that may even lead to ideological backlashes (e.g., Bail et al. 2018; Strickler 2018).

But are attitudes really so weakly implicated in ideological polarization? Some research suggests that people may have more ideological attitudes than previously thought by Converse and others (see Jost 2006). The continued importance of ideology may be supported by a second documented trend in ideological polariza-

tion that is plausibly commensurate with the first—namely, a marked shift toward attitude structures that have become more ideologically aligned.

Attitude Polarization

Attitude polarization has at least two related but distinct facets: (1) *extremism*, which concerns individuals having strong views on polarizing issues, and (2) *alignment*, which refers to the linking together of attitudes in ways that reflect the oppositional structure of an underlying ideology.[2] Attitude polarization can therefore be seen in the extent to which a population comprises individuals who have extreme attitudes (i.e., bimodality on specific issues) and/or whose attitudes are strongly linked together (i.e., correlations across issues) (see Lelkes 2016; Park 2018).

In addressing the key questions of how polarized we are and whether polarization has indeed increased, sociological research has examined trends in both extremism and alignment. Decades of research have found that individuals are not, on average, becoming more extreme in their views (Baldassarri and Park 2020; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Park 2018). The relative lack of bimodality across a wide array of divisive issues provides strong evidence against the more breathless claims of a culture war. However, when examining alignments through bivariate correlations among various attitudes and political identity (i.e., partisan sorting), researchers have found a growing consistency in the sides on which various issues fall (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Levendusky 2009). Consistent with the trend toward a growing intensity of ideological identity, this trend in partisan sorting points to the growing centrality of ideological identity within a broader network of attitudes. The growing centrality of political identity is ripe for a constant stream of potentially divisive issues to quickly gain media attention and stoke divisive feelings, even when most individuals remain moderate in their overall attitudes (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007).

More recently, sociologists have gauged alignments by looking at more extensive sets of correlations among numerous beliefs, opinions, and tastes. As with bivariate approaches to partisan sorting, these more network-like studies of aggregate patterns of attitudes also point to a growth in alignments. For example, consistent with partisan sorting, Boutyline and Vaisey (2017) found that political identity is consistently at the core of entire networks of beliefs. Similarly, Baldassarri and Goldberg (2014) looked to the relational organization of political attitudes and found that ideologues' attitude structures have become increasingly interconnected since the 1990s. Building on this work, DellaPosta (2020) showed that over the last half century, such belief networks have become more interconnected and modular (densely clustered): alignments have spread like an oil spill, incorporating a wider and wider set of attitudes on previously apolitical opinions and tastes (see also Kozlowski and Murphy 2021).

This growing alignment of attitudes is precisely the situation that Simmel (1955) suggested was ripe for conflict. For example, when such dense connections exist, the prohibition often observed during family dinners against speaking of politics or religion is moot: every attitude (and preference) is somehow connected to politics and religion, preventing people from speaking (or even eating) because doing so

reveals what side they are on. The increasing echo chambers inhabited today may add social pressure to appear ideologically consistent in one's attitudes. Bryson (2020), for example, found strong evidence that individuals "cheat" on internet-based political belief surveys by searching for the issue-specific positions that would make them appear more ideologically consistent (i.e., by looking up the party-line response).

Thus, in the aggregate, it appears that attitudes have become more densely connected as ideological identities have strengthened and become more central, although positions on specific issues have not become more extreme. Such trends are undoubtedly fostered by large-scale shifts in political and media environments. However, they are also thought to have microfoundations in how people form ties and influence one another through more or less socially sorted networks.

Microfoundations

Are these polarization trends rooted in social sorting? Given the parallel trends of increasing sociopolitical segregation and ideological polarization, it is fair to presume these trends are reciprocally interconnected. In other words, social sorting is likely driving individuals to identify more strongly with ideological camps and to become more ideologically divided in their attitudes, while social sorting is also likely the *outcome* of such ideological shifts. And yet, without a shift in focus to the microfoundations of polarization, descriptions of parallel aggregate trends may be missing important details and differences at the individual level.

Although polarization is an inherently aggregate-level phenomenon, individuals contribute more to such aggregate patterns to the extent they have more ideological identities and attitude structures. Moreover, aggregate features of polarization may or may not covary within individuals (i.e., different individuals may be contributing more to one polarization trend than the other trend as when an individual strongly identifies with an ideology without having very ideologically organized attitudes). At the individual level, different aspects of one's attitude structure—that is, extremism and alignment—remain distinct cognitive features that are potentially influenced by different social factors. For example, some individuals may hold structural positions that lead them to have strong opinions that are not coherently organized by an ideology (e.g., someone who strongly supports issues on either side of an ideological divide). In contrast, other individuals may be susceptible to influences that make them fairly moderate across a set of issues but in ways that are tightly organized in an underlying ideology connecting issues within and across domains.

Macro-level studies of trends using repeated cross-sectional surveys simply cannot gauge social sorting's potentially varied impacts at the individual level. Do individuals with fewer crosscutting and/or more cumulatively sorted social ties become more extreme in their ideological identities and more divisive in their attitude structures? As should now be clear, several moving parts are implicated in this question. In order to address each of these parts, I shift focus to a longitudinal model of individuals' identities and attitude structures.
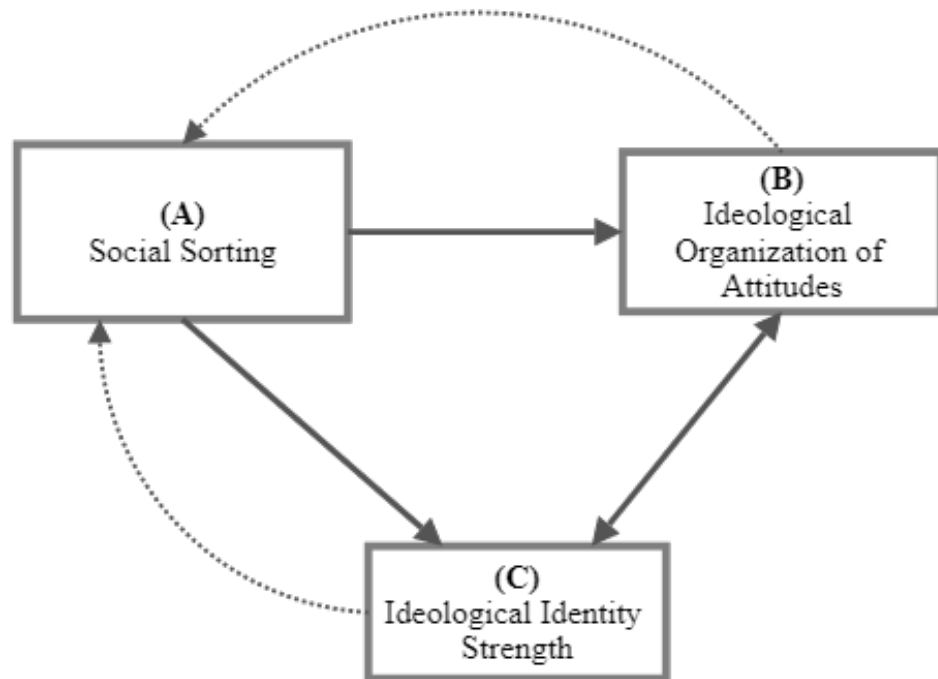
Figure 1: Micro-level pathways of social sorting undergirding polarization. *Note:* Broken lines represent sociopolitical homophily effects.

A Processual Account

Figure **??** presents a micro-level approach linking the social sorting of individuals to more ideologically extreme positions. The model posits a reciprocal causality in the composition of social ties, ideological attitudes, and identity. Individuals have both an identity component and an attitudinal (i.e., ideological) component. These two components of polarization are treated as distinct but likely related manifestations of the same underlying sorting process. In what follows, I draw out these micro-level pathways in more detail.

Short Pathways

Two short pathways toward greater ideological extremism may exist. One pathway directly connects individuals' social ties with their ideological identities (**A**→**C**→**A**). Consistent with core social psychological frameworks, this short pathway asserts that salient social identities are transferred through one's networks (e.g., Stryker 2008). Moreover, social identities and shared attitudes are clearly aspects of how ties form through *homophily*—that is, shared sociodemographics and values lead to greater likelihood of interpersonal contact and tie formation (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; for examples, see Dehghani et al. 2016; Kossinets and Watts 2009; Vaisey and Lizardo 2010). Discussions and displays that signal one's ideological identity are especially likely to occur within the context of family, friends, and neighbors—that is, stronger social ties. Such ideological identities are likely

formed in early socialization but are also subject to secondary socialization. In moving to a new city, a new neighborhood, or taking a new job, individuals may form ties with individuals in ways that are more or less cumulatively sorted within the same camp; thus, even weak ties of acquaintanceship may either reinforce or challenge one's ideological identity. As indicated by the broken arrow leading back to one's social ties, ideological identity is a basis for choosing one's ties, either through propinquity alone or through choice and preferences for *inbreeding* among those with whom one associates, where one lives, et cetera (Boutyline and Willer 2017; Facciani and Brashears 2019; Motyl et al. 2014; Schwarz and Shani 2016).

A second short pathway leads directly between ties and the ideological organization of attitudes (**A**→**B**→**A**). Despite social forces that discourage open political debate (e.g., Cowan and Baldassarri 2018), under the right conditions social influences can be powerful in shaping political attitudes. An extensive literature in political science examines the direct effects of social networks on opinion formation (Huckfeldt and Mendez 2008; Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn 2004; Mutz 2002). Experimental work by Klar (2014) shows that individuals in more homogeneous discussion groups engage in more motivated reasoning on political issues. Recent simulation work by Friedkin et al. (2016) and Goldberg and Stein (2018), as well as empirical work in small group settings (Rawlings and Childress 2019), suggests that social influences operate not only on independent issues but also on how issues go together and become more or less aligned as a network. Thus, both attitude extremism and attitude alignment are likely rooted in more homogeneous social influence networks.[3]

Longer Pathways

Two longer pathways to becoming more of an ideologue are also plausible. One pathway posits that attitude change largely precedes identity change. This pathway runs clockwise in Figure **??** from individuals' network composition through attitude structures to identity (**A**→**B**→**C**→**A**). In this view, identities are likely to change more slowly than attitudes. This is consistent with research in which some attitudes are seen as more central and difficult to change than others (see Peffley and Hurwitz 1985). Similarly, Boutyline and Vaisey (2017) showed that ideological identity holds a central position in belief networks, especially among respondents who are more politically informed. Thus, we may posit that ideological identities are likely more resistant to change than are more peripheral attitudes; and yet, changes in the overall structure of one's belief network are likely to eventually affect one's identity. Thus, the second stage of this longer pathway posits that an individual who adopts a more ideologically oppositional attitude structure will eventually come to embrace a more extreme identity.

A second longer pathway moves in a counterclockwise fashion in the figure (**A**→**C**→**B**→**A**). Research on cue-taking in political science suggests that individuals' ideological identities sometimes precede their adoption of many of the attitudes suggested by political elites (e.g., Kuklinski and Hurley 1994). In this view, an individual may first come to adopt a stronger ideological identity and only then

come to adopt the attitudes that are most characteristic of that identity as one learns what one is supposed to believe given one's identity.

Summary and Possible Asymmetry

Such processual views of identity and attitude formation are common among sociologists but are rarely tested in such a generalizable way. Ethnographic research on social movement mobilization (Carlson 2015; Luker 1984) and generations of symbolic interactionist work on secondary socialization into various subgroups have provided insight into these micro-level pathways. As Stryker (2008:24) summarized the insights from such efforts, "large-scale structures channel persons into social structures on a more intermediate level; the latter then channel persons into interpersonal networks (these, obviously, are probability assertions), and the relationships persons enter will importantly impact their self-concepts, attitudes, and behaviors." For example, individuals recruited to social movements through friends and acquaintances may subsequently become more ideologically consistent with those movements and even the idiosyncrasies of certain subgroups and places in which they form (Fine 2012; Munson 2009; Nelson 2021), summarized as **A**→**B**. At the same time, individuals form an ideological identity (**A**→**C**) through interactions contained with these same relations. As individuals come to internalize a more oppositionally organized attitude structure, they are likely to become more ideologically extreme in their identities (**B**→**C**). Individuals appear to retroactively explain such identity shifts as matters of "discovery"—that is, having always been a member of that identity but only coming to realize this later, as has been demonstrated in various "becoming" narratives (Bearman and Stovel 2000; DeGloma 2010). Having *become* more of an ideologue, an individual is subsequently likely to seek out relations that further affirm one's identity and attitudes through tie formation and dissolution processes (**C**→**A**; **B**→**A**).[4] If this view of micro-level pathways is correct, polarization trends are likely rooted in long-term shifts in the consolidation of social structures that manifest as more sociopolitically segregated social ties.

And yet, the effects of large-scale social sorting may not affect all subpopulations in the same ways. Of particular interest here, social sorting's effects may operate in an ideologically asymmetric fashion by helping to channel different affective and moral foundations for different ideological camps. For example, Jost's (2017) meta-analysis of ideology studies found considerable evidence that conservatives and liberals have different bases of motivated reasoning (see also Shook and Fazio 2009). Evidence suggests that conservatives may be more driven by identity-based processes than are liberals. For example, Bail et al. (2018) found that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to display an ideological backlash when following opposing viewpoints on social media. Thus, if liberals and conservatives are in a sense somewhat different subcultures whose worldviews are grounded in distinct psychological processes (e.g., Graham et al. 2009), we would expect social sorting to uphold these cognitive differences. Greater social sorting should lead to a greater concentration and amplification of these differences, such that more homogeneous networks lead to more extreme ideological identification, but especially for conservatives. Moreover, if, as is suggested by much identity-based research,

identity polarization is largely decoupled from attitude change, then the documented growth in attitude alignment is likely *not* being driven by conservatives. For example, the aforementioned study by Bryson (2020) suggests that conservatives may be less ideologically consistent than liberals and are therefore more prone to "cheat" in order to demonstrate a greater ideological consistency. Thus, we can posit that social sorting is likely to lead to more identity-based polarization for conservatives and more attitude alignment–based polarization for liberals, which should be seen in both different micro-level pathways and different macro-level trends for conservatives and liberals.

Data and Measurement

GSS Panel Data

I test individual pathways in Figure **??** using data from the GSS. The GSS is an annual survey of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in the United States, which began in 1972 and is conducted at the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center (NORC). In addition to the annual cross-sectional survey, NORC has fielded several panel versions of the GSS. These panels follow representative samples of the U.S. population with three surveys taken every other year. I draw on the panel for the 2006-to-2010 period because respondents in the first wave of this panel completed a social networks module with detailed questions on their interpersonal contacts. The network module questions I employ were asked of a subset of 503 respondents in the base year, and complete data for all three survey years with covariates narrowed the number to 355 in 2008 and 245 in 2010. The panel had retention rates of 77 percent from 2006 to 2008 and 83 percent from 2008 to 2010.

Ideally, the GSS would have repeated measures of networks at each panel year in order to assess shifts in one's networks over time. Unfortunately, network measures were gauged only in the first year of the panel (2006), leaving future social sorting somewhat difficult to assess. As already discussed, prior research has established political homophily as a driver of network formation, and there is no reason to suspect otherwise with these data. However, I did perform several checks on this assumption by analyzing future sociopolitical participation (in political and religious groups) and found support for the proposed **C**→**A** and **B**→**A** pathways.[5]

After examining different micro-level pathways, I test the micro–macro link using the entire set of GSS panel data, which includes three rolling three-wave panels that cover the years 2006 to 2014. Specifically, I examine trajectories in ideological identity and attitude structures during this period in order to test out-of-sample validity and generalizability to global trends.

Social Sorting

To gauge social sorting, I examine how much each individual's ties are cumulatively sorted into one camp or cut across camps. I measure the composition of each individual's networks for weak ties (i.e., acquaintances) and strong ties (i.e., trusted relations). Weak ties were assessed by questions asking how many people in various

categories with whom respondents were acquainted (phrased as "you know their name and would stop and talk at least for a moment if you ran into the person on the street or in a shopping mall"). Strong ties were assessed by the same questions, but this time for trusted individuals (phased as "for example, good friends, people you discuss important matters with, or trust for advice, or trust with money"). The response options are measured ordinally (1 = "0," 2 = "1," 3 = "1" to "5," 4 = "6" to "10," 5 = "more than 10").

I examine ties that are directly concentrated within or that cut across ideological camps by examining the number of each individual's strong and weak tie alters who are "strongly liberal" or "strongly conservative." In addition, I follow Mutz (2002:839), who saw "being linked to conflicting social categories" as key to crosscutting social locations, and early work by Powell (1976:2), who saw cumulative social positions as individuals whose "demographic group memberships are all commonly associated with the same party." I therefore examine strong and weak ties with respect to social categories of sexuality, religiosity, and race that are increasingly aligned with one ideological camp.

It is important to note that *what is a crosscutting tie for one ideological camp is equally a cumulatively sorted tie for the other camp*. By definition, individuals identifying as moderates cannot be socially sorted. Social sorting's effects should therefore increase as one moves further away from a moderate position. Thus, each of the categories of ties must be interacted with a focal individual's own ideological identity in order to determine how crosscutting or cumulatively sorted it is. For example, having many gay acquaintances is crosscutting for conservatives, cumulatively sorted for liberals, and neither for moderates. Consequently, each of the seven types of social ties (gay, nonwhite, white, religious, nonreligious, conservative, liberal) represents a nonbiased opportunity to either confirm or refute the social sorting hypothesis. However, the types of ties gauged in the GSS do not exhaust the potentially important dimensions of social structure—for example, gauging ties to "rural" friends or alters who "did not attend college" might be additionally useful in expanding the scope of the analysis to other salient societal divisions.

Ideological Identification

The GSS includes the standard seven-point scale of ideological identification, ranging from "very liberal" to "very conservative," with a midpoint of "moderate." I use this as the indicator of *ideological identification*. This measure has become increasingly synonymous with partisan identification over time (Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Levendusky 2009) and has been shown to represent a social identity (Conover and Feldman 1981; see also Boutyline and Vaisey 2017:1413), which has increasingly become a mega-identity (Mason 2018). I also use this variable to create a time-varying measure of *ideological strength*, assessed as the absolute value of the departure from the midpoint ($|y_i - 3|$); thus, 1 = "moderate," 2 = "slightly _____," 3 = "liberal" or "conservative," and 4 = "extremely _____."
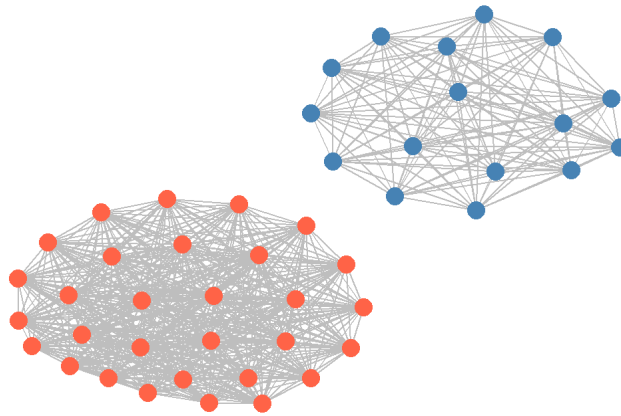
Attitude Structures

A growing body of research has studied intraindividual culture by mapping cultural schemas—that is, "knowledge structures that represent objects or events and provide default assumptions about their characteristics, relationships, and entailments" (DiMaggio 1997:269; see also Boutyline and Soter 2021; Lizardo 2017). Researchers have developed several techniques that support the view that individuals have more or less well-formed schemas that organize knowledge and experience in various domains. Because an ideology can be thought of as a type of schema (e.g., Jost et al. 2009), I develop a technique to gauge an individual's attitude structure as more or less ideologically schema consistent. In short, some individuals are more ideologically oppositional in the organization of their attitudes.

Figure **??** takes a subset of the core GSS questions to illustrate this approach. Figure **??** depicts an ideal-typically polarized individual's attitude structure. The nodes are issues that fall into two camps: the somewhat larger cluster represents attitudes toward which an ideal-typically conservative individual would be positive (agree, support, like, and so on), whereas the smaller cluster represents attitudes toward which an ideal-typically liberal individual would be positive.[6] The size of the nodes represents the level of extremism in the individual's response (i.e., larger nodes indicate stronger attitudes). Ties represent the degree to which one could be used to positively predict another attitude (i.e., the attitudes are positively linked within that individual's attitude system). In this case, the absence of a tie could be interpreted as a negative relation. In the prototypically ideological case of Figure **??**, all attitudes are maximally extreme (e.g., all "strongly agree" in one cluster and all "strongly disagree" in the other cluster), and all attitudes are positively or negatively linked.

Figures **??** and **??** are both schema inconsistent, but in different ways. The individual from the GSS whose responses form Figure **??** exhibits high levels of extremism, as depicted by the nodes being relatively large. This individual clearly has strong opinions across a wide range of issues. However, these issues do not follow the oppositional attitude structure of conservative versus liberal: the individual has positive and negative attitudes that defy the expectations of the ideological schema in Figure **??**. In contrast to Figure **??**, the individual whose responses are summarized in Figure **??** is much more moderate across various issues, as shown by the smaller nodes, yet that individual has relatively greater attitude consistency. Ties are more contained within each ideological cluster, suggesting that this individual's attitudes are much more aligned with a conservative–liberal ideological split.

To capture the ideological schema consistency of a wide array of attitudes, I gauge each individual's ideological attitude polarization as a structure, as in Figure **??**, having both extremism and alignment as variables. Having conceptualized individual attitude structures, I now discuss operationalization procedures.

Attitude selection. I examine individual attitude structures using several core GSS questions, which are asked every year and include many attitudes on race, class, gender, religion, and other likely divisive topics. The core survey also includes some questions that are not overtly political (e.g., a belief in astrology), many of which have become associated with ideological camps over time (DellaPosta 2020). To select attitudes, I first calculate Pearson's correlations between ideological identity

(a) Maximally extreme and aligned
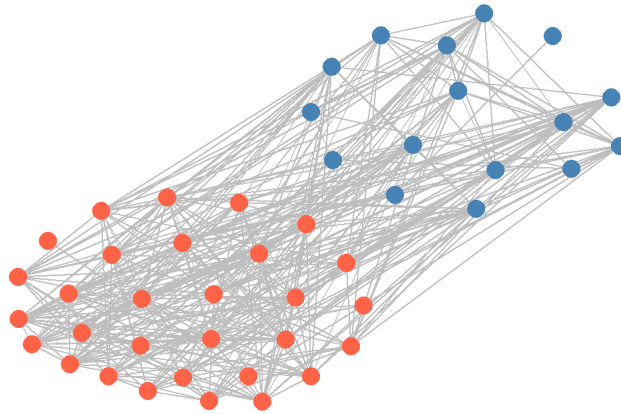
(b) Extreme but misaligned
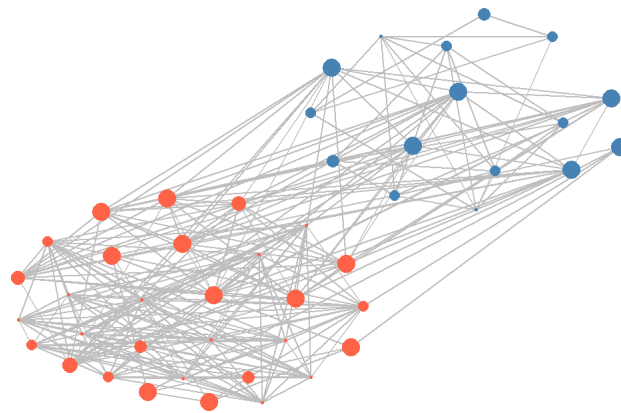
(c) Moderate but aligned

Figure 2: Individual attitude structures. *Notes:* Panels **??** and **??** are taken from actual GSS respondents. The node layout is based on the Kamada–Kawai algorithm of ties shown in panel **??**. Node size is based on extremism. Ties indicate interdependent responses on issues.

and all core items in the 2006, 2008, and 2010 panels. I omit any question that concerned a factual response to focus on opinions, beliefs, and preferences. I retain any core attitude question that is significantly correlated with ideological identity ($r < 0.05$) during this period. Of the 146 questions, 126 have significant bivariate correlations with ideological identity (see Appendix A in the online supplement).

Extremism. The core GSS questions vary in their measurement from binary responses to ordinal outcomes and Likert scales. To gauge extremism, I recode each response to be constrained between 0 (lowest value) and 1.0 (highest value); a midpoint, when it exists, is always coded as 0.5. Following the conventional practice of folding responses along the midpoint (Iyengar et al. 2012; Mason 2015), I calculate extremism for each individual i in each year for k number of nonmissing attitudes as follows:

$$E_i = \frac{1}{k} \sum_{x=1}^{k} |x_i - 0.5|. \tag{1}$$

By definition, binary variables force individuals into extreme positions.[7]

Alignment. To gauge the links among individuals' stated attitudes, I draw on the *constraint satisfaction* measure simulated in Goldberg and Stein (2018:908–12) and adapted to observed attitude structures by Rawlings (2020). The goal of this measure is to compare the alignment of attitudes within each individual's attitude structure with an ideal-typically polarized attitude structure, such as the one depicted in Figure **??**. I begin by creating for each individual i an attitude distance matrix $\boldsymbol{\Omega}_i$ that captures pairwise distances among that individual's k stated attitudes in a given year. The elements in this matrix (ω_{xy}) are distances between attitude x and attitude y calculated by taking the absolute value of the differences between each pair of attitudes ($|x_i - y_i|$), which have all been recoded as falling between 0 and 1. For each individual, this calculation produces a $k \times k$ response distance matrix. Note that this calculation is distinct from attitude extremism in focusing only on the correlational pattern of relationships among attitudes, which is independent of attitudes' departures from neutral. To the extent that attitudes belong in the same ideological camp, the xy dyad should be 0 (i.e., the values of x and y should by identical); when attitudes are located in different camps, the xy element should equal 1 (i.e., the values of x and y should be maximally distant). Based on each individual's attitude vector $\boldsymbol{v_i}$, I then compare the constraint within each $\boldsymbol{\Omega}_i$ with the constraint in the ideal-typically polarized attitude matrix $\boldsymbol{R}$ in which r_{xy} takes the value of 1.00 when attitude x and attitude y are associated with different ideologies and r_{xy} takes the value of 0 when attitude x and attitude y are associated with the same ideology. Attitude alignment for individual i can therefore be written as follows:

$$A_i(\boldsymbol{v_i}, \boldsymbol{R}) = \frac{k}{k(k-1)} \sum_{x=1}^{k} \sum_{y=1}^{k} |r_{xy} - \omega_{xy}|. \tag{2}$$

For an individual who has an attitude vector that is perfectly consistent with the polarized schema (e.g., Figure **??**), the measure would be 1 (see Appendix B in the online supplement for a simplified example). Importantly, the measure is

independent of ideological direction as well as the arbitrary coding of attitudes in terms of their liberal or conservative directionality.

Controls

Finally, I include several controls that are likely related to individuals' social tie composition, ideological identity, and attitude polarization. These variables are respondents' age, years of education, socioeconomic index, gender, race, and urban–rural residency (see Appendix A in the online supplement).

Statistical Tests

To test the various pathways in Figure **??** in a manner that accounts for the GSS longitudinal data structure, I estimate hierarchical linear regression models (HLMs) (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). These models take the following form:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_{0t} + \beta_1 I_{it-1} + \beta_1(I_{it-1} \times I_{it-1}) + X_{it1}\beta_2 \\ + \beta_3(I_{it-1} \times X_{it1}) + Z_t\beta_3 + e_{it}, \tag{3a}$$

$$\beta_{0t} = \gamma_{00} + U_{0i}, \tag{3b}$$

where the dependent variable Y_{it} is the measure an individual's ideological identity strength[8] (models testing **A→C** and **B→C** pathways) or one of the two attitude structure measures[9] (models testing **A→B** and **C→B** pathways). Because key predictors are lagged by one panel wave (i.e., two calendar years), dependent variables are necessarily gauged for only 2008 and 2010. In these models the intercept term β_{0t} is a baseline (for ideological strength or attitude structure measures) at time t, is conditioned on an overall mean intercept across years γ_{00}, and includes random individual effects U_{0i}; I_{t-1} is the seven-point scale of ideological identification at time $t - 1$ (either 2006 or 2008); the squared term for ideological identification is included to account for moderates being the most likely to stay more moderate over time; X_{t1} is a vector of social tie variables gauged in the base year (either weak or strong ties); Z contains both time-invariant and time-varying controls.

To gauge social sorting in a way that simultaneously accounts for crosscutting versus cumulatively sorted tie effects, I interact each individual's lagged ideological identity (i.e., the seven-point Likert scale) with that individual's profile of social ties in 2006. Thus, coefficients in β_2 and β_3 jointly test for social sorting's presumed effects on ideological identity strength and attitude structures.[10] For example, a negative β_2 coefficient for conservative acquaintances with a jointly positive β_3 coefficient for the interaction term with political ideology would indicate that individuals who identify as strongly liberal at time $t - 1$ and who have more conservative acquaintances in 2006 would be less ideological in 2008 and 2010. Consequently, these same coefficients could be read equally as indicating that those identifying as extremely conservative in 2006 and who have more conservative acquaintances would be *more* ideologically extreme in 2008 and 2010. By comparing

predicted values of Y_{it} across the ideological spectrum at different levels of specific types of ties, it is possible to test the overall framework that suggests sorting effects are greater as one moves away from a moderate position. Such predicted values can also gauge any asymmetries in the magnitude of the effects of social sorting as one moves toward more liberal versus more conservative positions.

Finally, in order to examine the micro–macro link, I estimate HLMs with all three-wave GSS panels (2006 to 2010, 2008 to 2012, and 2010 to 2014). I estimate ordered logistic HLMs where ideological identity is the dependent variable, and linear HLMs where attitude extremism and alignment are the dependent variables. The key predictor in these models is the year of the survey. I include the same controls already noted for other models with an additional control for the panel wave in order to better isolate period effects.

Results

In reporting results, I first discuss models testing the presumed pathways outlined in Figure **??** leading from social sorting to ideological identity strength. Afterward, I examine possible asymmetries by using the significant coefficients from these models to synthesize different individual-level ideological trajectories for liberals and conservatives. Finally, I evaluate the presumed micro–macro linkages by examining recent trends in ideological identity strength and attitude structures for conservatives and liberals.

Shaping Ideological Identity Strength

Table **??** shows results from HLMs predicting ideological identity strength in 2008 and 2010 as a function of social sorting in 2006. Models 1 and 3 test the presumed **A**→**C** pathway in Figure **??** (i.e., social sorting shaping identity), whereas models 2 and 4 test the **B**→**C** pathway (i.e., ideological attitudes independently shaping identity). The significant curvilinear effect of ideological identity indicates a sensible lag effect: the more extreme the identity at time 1, the greater the identity strength at time 2. The interaction between one's lagged identity and one's (more or less) socially sorted ties supports the proposed **A**→**C** pathway—that is, the more extreme one's previous identity and the more sorted one's social ties, the more likely one is to become and remain more extreme in one's identity over time.

Results are consistent with the social sorting hypothesis. When individuals have weak and strong tie networks that are less crosscutting and more cumulatively sorted, these individuals have more ideological subsequent identities. However, social sorting's effects are significant primarily when considering ideologically salient ties—that is, those ties that directly gauge interaction within or across liberal and conservative camps. Ties to categories of individuals who are strongly associated with ideological camps (e.g., religious contacts for liberals or gay contacts for conservatives) do not have a direct net impact on a focal individual's identity over time when controlling for the effects of ties across ideological camps. A small but statistically significant effect that runs counter to the social sorting hypothesis is that liberals who have more white acquaintances tend to have somewhat stronger

Table 1: HLMs predicting subsequent ideological identity strength.

Variable	Weak ties (1)		(2)		Strong ties (3)		(4)	
Ideological identity time $t-1$	$-0.75^\dagger$	(0.23)	-0.58^*	(0.22)	$-0.77^\dagger$	(0.20)	$-0.66^\dagger$	(0.19)
Ideological identity time $t-1$ squared	$0.13^\dagger$	(0.02)	$0.10^\dagger$	(0.02)	$0.11^\dagger$	(0.02)	$0.10^\dagger$	(0.02)
A→C *pathway*								
Gay ties	0.01	(0.12)	-0.05	(0.11)	0.07	(0.12)	0	(0.12)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	0	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)
Nonreligious ties	0.06	(0.10)	0.06	(0.09)	0.02	(0.09)	0.04	(0.09)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	-0.02	(0.02)	-0.01	(0.02)	-0.01	(0.02)	-0.01	(0.02)
Religious ties	0.15	(0.12)	0.07	(0.12)	0.14	(0.11)	0.12	(0.11)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	-0.04	(0.03)	-0.02	(0.03)	-0.04	(0.03)	-0.03	(0.02)
White ties	0.25	(0.14)	0.21	(0.14)	0.17	(0.12)	0.14	(0.12)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	-0.09^*	(0.04)	-0.09^*	(0.04)	-0.04	(0.03)	-0.03	(0.03)
Nonwhite ties	-0.04	(0.04)	-0.02	(0.04)	-0.03	(0.04)	-0.04	(0.04)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	0	(0.01)	0	(0.01)	0	(0.01)	0	(0.01)
Conservative ties	-0.20^*	(0.10)	-0.17	(0.09)	-0.28^*	(0.11)	-0.18	(0.11)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	$0.08^\dagger$	(0.02)	$0.07^\dagger$	(0.02)	$0.09^\dagger$	(0.03)	0.07^*	(0.03)
Liberal ties	0	(0.10)	-0.02	(0.10)	0.17	(0.11)	0.12	(0.11)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	-0.03	(0.02)	-0.02	(0.02)	$-0.07^\dagger$	(0.03)	-0.06^*	(0.03)
B→C *pathway*								
Attitude extremism time $t-1$			0	(0.01)			0	(0.01)
Attitude alignment time $t-1$			$0.05^\dagger$	(0.01)			$0.05^\dagger$	(0.01)
Controls								
Age	0	(0.00)	0	(0.00)	0	(0.00)	0	(0.00)
Education	-0.02	(0.02)	-0.02	(0.02)	-0.03	(0.02)	-0.03	(0.02)
Socioeconomic index	0	(0.00)	0	(0.00)	0	(0.00)	0	(0.00)
Sex: Female	-0.12	(0.08)	-0.15	(0.08)	-0.09	(0.08)	-0.12	(0.08)
Urban–rural	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.01	(0.01)	0	(0.01)	-0.01	(0.02)
Race (white omitted)								
Asian	-0.3	(0.20)	-0.25	(0.20)	-0.22	(0.21)	-0.14	(0.21)
Hispanic	0.16	(0.26)	0.1	(0.26)	0.29	(0.26)	0.25	(0.26)
Black	-0.09	(0.16)	-0.08	(0.16)	0.02	(0.15)	0.04	(0.15)
Constant	$3.44^\dagger$	(0.82)	0.53	(1.02)	$3.16^\dagger$	(0.69)	0.55	(0.95)
Number of observations	469		469		469		469	

Notes: Standard errors, clustered on individual identities, are shown in parentheses. See Figure **??** for pathway diagram. $\dagger$ $p < 0.01$; $*$ $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed tests).

identities over time. However, this effect only emerges when including all other types of ties, and the effect was not present in the ordered logistic regression specification. Finally, consistent with the view that weak ties may not be as bridging as previously thought (Granovetter 1973), few differences are found in the effects of strong versus weak ties in shaping subsequent identity.

Models 2 and 4 in Table **??** show evidence in support of the **B→C** pathway (i.e., attitudes shaping identity). Individuals with more ideologically aligned attitude structures are more likely to have stronger subsequent ideological identities (net of the effects of lagged social ties). Whereas attitude alignment strengthens subsequent identity, having more extreme attitudes does not. In short, individuals who have more ideologically consistent attitudes have stronger ideological identities over time.

Table 2: HLMs predicting subsequent ideological organization of attitudes.

| | Weak ties | | | | Strong ties | | | |
| | (1) | | (2) | | (3) | | (4) | |
Variable	Extremism		Alignment		Extremism		Alignment	
C→B *pathway*								
Ideological identity time $t-1$	−1.74	(1.25)	−1.63[†]	(0.63)	−1.13	(1.08)	−1.73[†]	(0.55)
Ideological identity time $t-1$ squared	0.28*	(0.11)	0.21[†]	(0.06)	0.19	(0.11)	0.15[†]	(0.05)
A→B *pathway*								
Gay ties	0.76	(0.76)	0.42	(0.44)	2.19[†]	(0.82)	0.55	(0.49)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	−0.08	(0.17)	−0.02	(0.10)	−0.42*	(0.20)	−0.06	(0.12)
Nonreligious ties	0.03	(0.63)	−0.42	(0.36)	−0.58	(0.61)	−0.47	(0.35)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	0.01	(0.15)	0.05	(0.09)	0.15	(0.14)	0.07	(0.08)
Religious ties	1.41	(0.75)	−0.92*	(0.42)	0.45	(0.68)	0.38	(0.38)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	−0.26	(0.17)	0.21*	(0.09)	−0.19	(0.15)	−0.09	(0.08)
White ties	−1.01	(0.87)	0	(0.49)	−0.83	(0.73)	0.7	(0.40)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	0.1	(0.20)	0.05	(0.11)	0.09	(0.16)	−0.12	(0.09)
Nonwhite ties	0.22	(0.28)	−0.40*	(0.16)	0.48	(0.28)	−0.08	(0.16)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	−0.06	(0.06)	0.10[†]	(0.03)	−0.08	(0.06)	0.04	(0.04)
Conservative ties	−0.6	(0.63)	0.47	(0.36)	−1.23	(0.71)	−1.25[†]	(0.41)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	0.16	(0.15)	−0.09	(0.08)	0.31	(0.17)	0.27[†]	(0.10)
Liberal ties	−0.23	(0.65)	0.73*	(0.36)	0.48	(0.67)	0.43	(0.38)
× Ideological identity time $t-1$	−0.11	(0.14)	−0.18*	(0.08)	−0.23	(0.16)	−0.12	(0.08)
Controls								
Age	0.02	(0.02)	0	(0.01)	0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.01)
Education	−0.34[†]	(0.12)	0.16*	(0.07)	−0.42[†]	(0.11)	0.15*	(0.06)
Socioeconomic index	−0.01	(0.01)	−0.01	(0.01)	−0.02	(0.01)	−0.01	(0.01)
Sex: Female	1.86[†]	(0.59)	0.46	(0.39)	2.14[†]	(0.59)	0.51	(0.38)
Urban–rural	0.32[†]	(0.11)	−0.01	(0.07)	0.36[†]	(0.10)	0.04	(0.06)
Race (white omitted)								
Asian	−1.73	(1.36)	−0.09	(0.79)	−2.56	(1.38)	−0.27	(0.79)
Hispanic	0.54	(1.54)	1.24	(0.78)	0.46	(1.52)	1.32	(0.79)
Black	2.78*	(1.13)	−0.24	(0.74)	2.52*	(1.08)	−0.49	(0.69)
Constant	36.26[†]	(4.99)	52.24[†]	(2.79)	35.63[†]	(4.13)	53.74[†]	(2.31)
Number of observations	476		476		476		476	

Notes: Standard errors, clustered on individual identities, are shown in parentheses. See Figure **??** for pathway diagram. † $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Shaping Attitude Structures

Table **??** shows coefficients from HLMs predicting individuals' ideological attitude structures (i.e., extremism and attitude alignment) as a function of social sorting in one's weak and strong tie networks (**A→B** pathway), as well as one's lagged ideological identity (**C→B** pathway).

Results offer some support for the presumed **A→B** pathway (i.e., social sorting shaping subsequent attitude structures). Results show that both weak and strong tie sorting have clear impacts on attitude alignment; however, social sorting has relatively little impact on attitude extremism. With the exception of having more trusted ties to gay people, which predicts having subsequently more extreme attitudes among liberals and less extreme attitudes among conservatives, social sorting has little impact on attitude extremism. Consistent with prior work showing a lack of growth in attitude extremism, attitude alignment appears to be the more clearly moving part in social sorting's impact on attitude structures. Results in Table **??** also show that attitude alignments are importantly shaped by weak ties:

for conservatives, having more liberal acquaintances leads to less aligned attitude structures, whereas, for liberals, having more cumulatively sorted ties leads to more aligned attitude structures. Weak ties to religious individuals lead to more attitude alignment for conservatives and to less attitude alignment for liberals. Once again, a finding running counter to the social sorting hypothesis concerns race: when controlling for all other types of ties, liberals with more nonwhite acquaintances are slightly less ideologically aligned, and conservatives are slightly more ideologically aligned. As with the previous finding in Table **??**, this finding only holds in saturated models.

These findings suggest that, in general, having social ties to individuals who are associated with the opposing ideological camp leads to greater compartmentalization of attitudes (i.e., less far-reaching alignments), whereas having more cumulatively sorted ties leads to a more oppositional organization in one's attitude structure. In short, having more socially sorted ties leads to attitude structures that are more organized within an "us versus them" framework.

Results also offer support for the proposed $\mathbf{C} \rightarrow \mathbf{B}$ pathway (i.e., identity shaping subsequent attitude structures). The significant curvilinear effect of ideological identity in model 1 indicates that individuals with more extreme ideological identities at time $t-1$ are more likely to have more extreme and more aligned attitudes at time t. However, when controlling for the effects of strong tie sorting (model 3), the direct effect of ideological identity on attitude extremism disappears. This suggests that both identity and attitude extremism are largely reflections of prior social sorting, whereas ideological alignment is reciprocally interconnected with one's ideological identity. Consistent with the view that ideological identity is central within belief networks (Boutyline and Vaisey 2017), ideological attitudes and identities appear to be closely linked within individuals, and a shift in one is likely to produce a subsequent shift in the other.

Asymmetries and Ideological Identity Trajectories

Do these results point to asymmetric pathways in becoming an ideologue for liberals and conservatives? Figure **??** uses significant coefficients in models reported in Tables **??** and **??** to predict ideological identity and attitude structures based on the effects of social sorting along the ideological continuum. Results show clear asymmetries. For conservatives, social sorting has a much greater direct impact on subsequent ideological identity strength. As shown in Figure **??**, conservatives who have many trusted ties to conservatives and none to liberals are far more likely to become and remain more conservative (although there is some evidence of an overall "regression to the mean" at both extremes of the ideological spectrum). In contrast, for liberals, social sorting has a much greater impact on subsequent attitude alignment. As shown in Figure **??**, liberals who have no strong ties to conservatives have clearly more aligned attitude structures than liberals who have many crosscutting ties to conservatives, and this difference is much greater than the differences for cumulatively sorted versus crosscutting ties for conservatives.
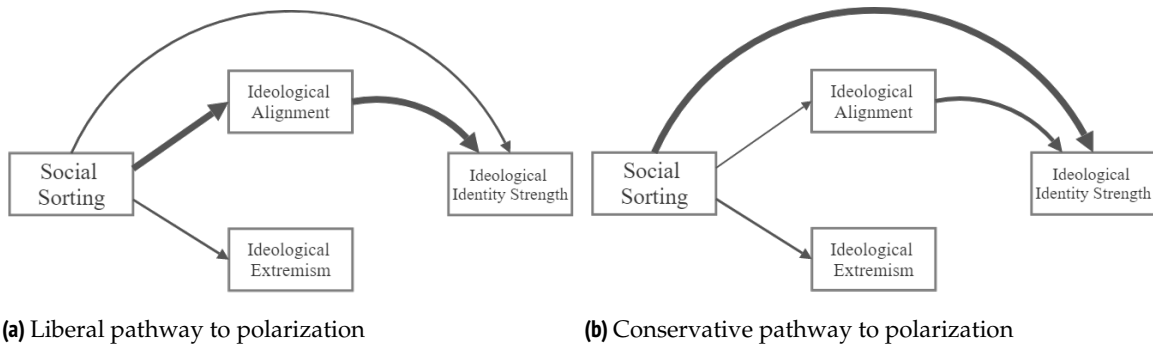
Figure **??** summarizes the predicted pathways for liberals and conservatives based on the effect sizes of coefficients in Tables **??** and **??**.[11] For conservatives,
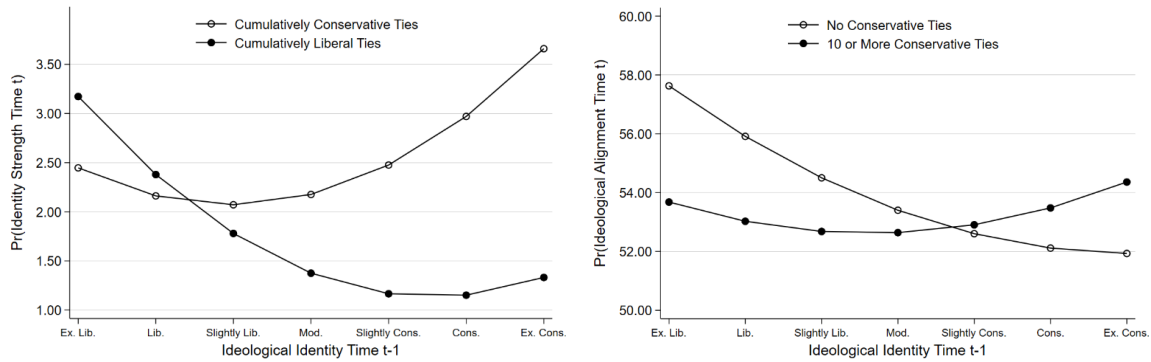
(a) Social sorting on identity strength   **(b)** Social sorting on attitude alignment

Figure 3: Asymmetric effects of social sorting on subsequent ideological identity strength and attitude alignment.

(a) Liberal pathway to polarization   **(b)** Conservative pathway to polarization

Figure 4: Two predominant pathways leading from social sorting to ideological identity strength based on significant coefficients in reported models.

a shorter pathway predominates: social sorting has a more immediate effect in shaping one's subsequent identity strength while more weakly operating through ideological alignment, which in turn shapes one's subsequent identity strength. This more direct pathway to identity strength is consistent with the view that conservatives as a group have a more identity-based foundation to polarization. In contrast, social sorting has a greater impact on liberals' attitude structures. The pathway to polarization that predominates among liberals operates more strongly through ideological alignment—that is, for liberals, a shift toward a more extreme ideological identity follows a shift in one's attitude structures becoming more aligned. This leads to a somewhat longer (and presumably slower) pathway in shaping one's future ideological identity strength.

Based on the significant coefficients gauging different pathways, it is possible to synthesize *trajectories* for individuals based on their ideological identities and attitudes while varying the level of initial social sorting and its impact on subsequent identities and attitudes. Figure **??** shows the different predicted trajectories leading from a moderate ideological identity toward a more extreme identity based on significant coefficients in models of strong tie social sorting (model 4 in Table **??**)
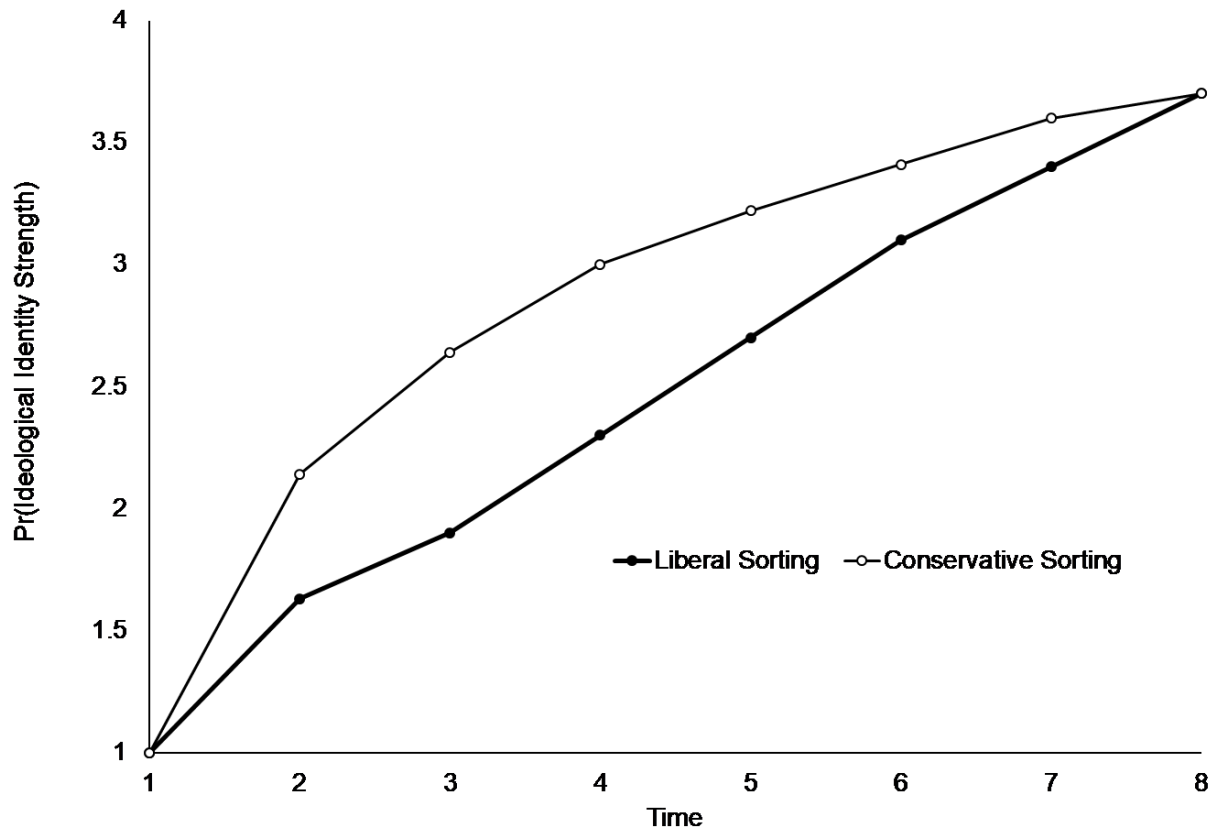
Figure 5: Predicted trajectories of ideological identity strength based on significant coefficients in reported models. *Notes:* All individuals start as moderates. Liberally sorted individuals have 10 or more trusted liberal ties and no trusted conservative ties. Conservatively sorted individuals have the inverse tie profile. Liberal sorting leads to an eight-point increase of ideological attitude alignment, whereas conservative sorting leads to a two-point increase at each iteration.

combined with social sorting's impact on ideological alignment (model 4 in Table **??**). The predictions are based on individuals who have cumulatively sorted social ties, as well as the predicted impact of such social sorting on subsequent ideological alignment. The effects are cumulative—that is, at each time point, I re-estimate the prediction based on the predicted new level of ideological identity strength and attitude alignment. For conservatives, the effects of social sorting are more immediate but begin to level off over time, whereas, for liberals, the effects of growing ideological alignment take somewhat longer to translate into a stronger ideological identity. For both liberal and conservative sorting, after eight iterations (i.e., 16 GSS years) a moderate individual is predicted to have become close to extreme in their ideological identity.

Table 3: Hierarchical ordered logistic regression models predicting trends in ideological identity strength, 2006 to 2014.

Variable	Conservatives (1)		Liberals (2)	
Year	0.10*	(0.04)	0.06	(0.04)
Controls				
Panel wave	−0.17	(0.09)	−0.15	(0.09)
Attitude alignment	0.14[†]	(0.02)	0.14[†]	(0.02)
Attitude extremism	0.07[†]	(0.01)	0.08[†]	(0.01)
Age	0.01	(0.00)	0	(0.00)
Education	−0.05*	(0.02)	−0.02	(0.02)
Socioeconomic index	0	(0.00)	0	(0.00)
Sex: Female	−0.04	(0.12)	0.13	(0.12)
Urban–rural	−0.01	(0.02)	−0.03	(0.02)
Race (white omitted)				
Asian	−0.45	(0.41)	0.4	(0.33)
Hispanic	−0.3	(0.33)	0.06	(0.27)
Black	−0.05	(0.21)	0.64[†]	(0.17)
Cut 1	208.81*	(84.97)	136.2	(84.64)
Cut 2	212.81*	(84.99)	139.66	(84.66)
Number of observations	3,239		2,673	

Notes: GSS panel data from 2006 to 2014 taken every other year, consisting of three panels. Standard errors, clustered on individual identities, are shown in parentheses. † $p < 0.01$; ∗ $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed tests).

Micro–Macro Linkages

Do these micro-level pathways anchor macro-level trends in ideological identity and attitude structures? To address this question, I turn to the complete GSS panel data set, which includes three separate panels between 2006 and 2014 with a total of 5,634 respondents. I estimate HLMs with dependent variables for ideological identity strength and attitude structures (i.e., extremism and alignment). I split the sample into two subsets: one for individuals identifying as liberal and another for individuals identifying as conservative. Because I am interested in period effects, the main coefficient of interest in these models is the year of the survey (models also include controls for cohort year, as well as controls for age; see Yang and Land [2013]).

Results in Table **??** show that ideological identity strength increased on average, but only for individuals identifying as conservative. Figure **??** shows predicted identity strength for conservatives over this period. Consistent with the micro-level pathways, results in this larger sample suggest that social sorting during this period is at the root of a large-scale strengthening in conservative ideological identity.

But does this shift in identity also reflect a shift in underlying ideological attitude structures? Results in Table **??** show that ideological attitude structures are *not* becoming on average more extreme or aligned for conservatives. In short, consistent with identity-based approaches to polarization, social sorting has led to a stronger ideological identity without a commensurate growth in more ideological attitude
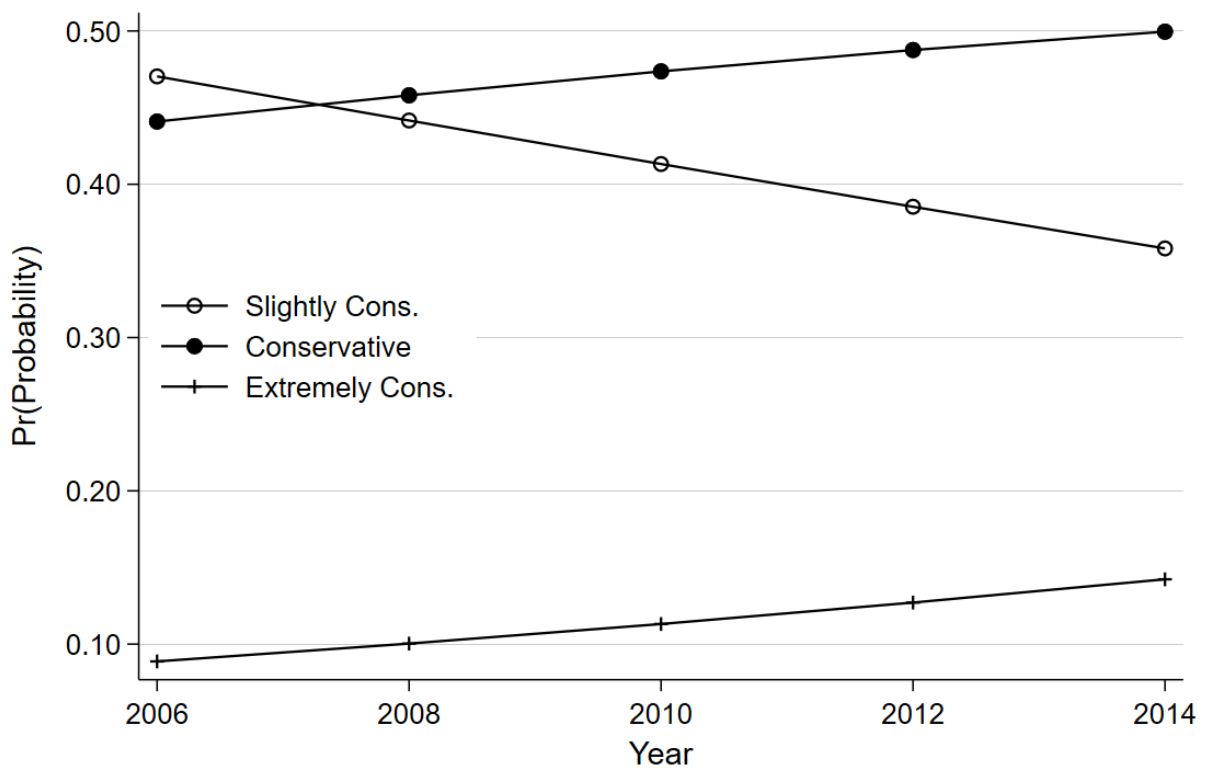
Figure 6: Predicted probabilities of conservative identity strength: GSS panel data, 2006 to 2014.

structures. However, in contrast to results for conservatives, results for liberals show a growing ideological alignment but a decrease in ideological extremism during this period. Figure **??** shows predicted shifts in the average liberal individual's attitude structure during this period.

Consistent with the micro-level pathways, results for this larger sample suggest that social sorting for liberals leads to a growing consistency in ideological attitude structures, whereas shifts in ideological identity strength take a longer pathway to become realized. Moreover, these results are consistent with prior research on polarization trends that show no secular trend in attitude extremism even as alignments have grown through a widening "oil spill" of polarization.

Discussion

Foundational sociological theorizing helped to formulate the hypothesis that social sorting promotes sectarian identities and attitude structures. Although considerable research has investigated large-scale trends in polarization, and some individual-level research has presented findings consistent with this hypothesis, the microfoundations of polarization today—that is, how more or less socially sorted individuals form more or less ideological attitude structures and identities—have been largely

Table 4: HLMs predicting trends in attitude extremism and alignment, 2006 to 2014.

| | Alignment | | Extremism | |
| | Conservatives | Liberals | Conservatives | Liberals |
Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Year	0.06	0.15[†]	−0.12	−0.33[†]
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.08)
Controls				
Panel wave	−0.06	−0.08	−0.12	−0.01
	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.15)	(0.17)
Attitude alignment			0.10[†]	0.28[†]
			(0.03)	(0.03)
Attitude extremism	0.03[†]	0.13[†]		
	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Age	0.02[†]	0	0.02[*]	0.01
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Education	−0.01	0.36[†]	−0.03	−0.19[†]
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Socioeconomic index	0	0.02[†]	−0.03[†]	−0.02[*]
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Sex: Female	−0.03	−0.29	0.17	0.47[*]
	(0.12)	(0.17)	(0.22)	(0.24)
Urban–rural	0.07[†]	−0.12[†]	0	0.08
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Race (white omitted)				
Asian	−0.17	−1.14[†]	−0.38	−0.98
	(0.38)	(0.44)	(0.69)	(0.63)
Hispanic	−0.2	−0.51	0.88	−0.17
	(0.27)	(0.33)	(0.49)	(0.49)
Black	−0.84[†]	−1.87[†]	3.18[†]	2.40[†]
	(0.19)	(0.23)	(0.35)	(0.33)
Constant	−77.41	−261.38[*]	269.19	672.51[†]
	(79.34)	(109.36)	(144.96)	(157.43)
Number of observations	3,544	2,673	3,544	2,673

Notes: GSS panel data from 2006 to 2014 taken every other year, consisting of three panels. Standard errors, clustered on individual identities, are shown in parentheses. † $p < 0.01$; ∗ $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed tests).

unsubstantiated. Whereas prior research has tended to document macro-level trends using survey data and then infer or perhaps simulate their presumed microfoundations, this article has directly evaluated and validated several presumed micro-level pathways and then substantiated their linkages to polarization with observed macro-level trends.

Thus, this article has begun to fill in an important micro–macro gap in polarization research. Results suggest an integration of prior findings while documenting the processual mechanisms through which they occur. Becoming an ideologue
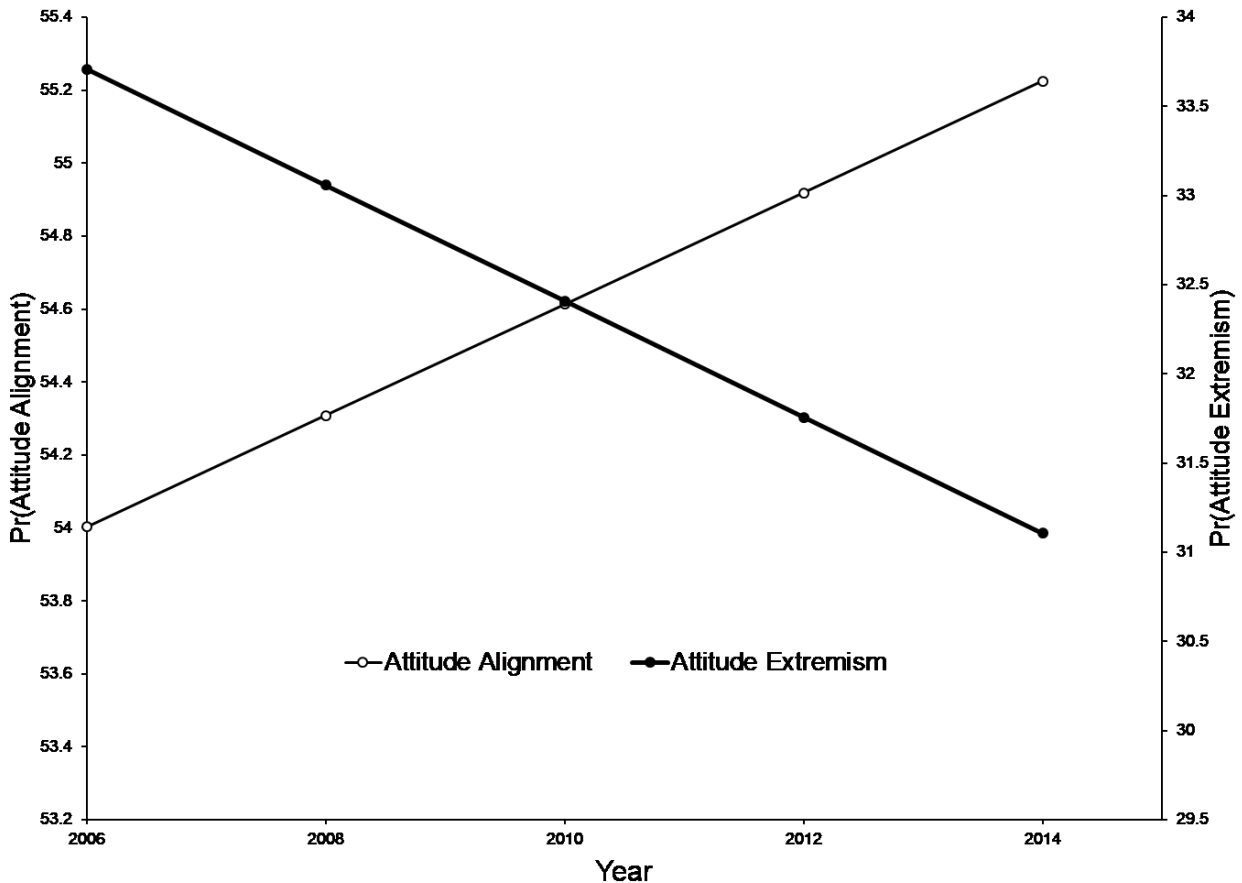
Figure 7: Predicted shifts in ideological attitude structures for liberal respondents: GSS panel data, 2006 to 2014.

occurs through two predominant pathways: one is a short pathway that runs directly between one's social ties and one's identity and thus does not require much alteration in one's actual attitude structures, whereas the other pathway is longer and runs from social ties through more aligned attitude structures, which in turn promotes more ideological identities. As individuals make more ideologically consistent connections between issues, they eventually come to embrace a stronger ideological identity, which in turns helps to form even greater ideological consistency.

Although these two micro-level pathways co-occur in the population, social sorting appears to interact with the different political psychologies and worldviews of those being socially sorted. Liberals and conservatives are divided not only in their attitudes and identities but also in how the composition of their ties affects their attitudes structures and identities. Conservatives appear more engaged in a shorter pathway of polarization, and liberals more engaged in a longer pathway. Thus, part of what may be contributing to a sense of deepening polarization today is an asymmetry in what it means to be an ideologue—that is, whether that implies being

more strongly committed to an ideological identity or having a more ideologically consistent set of attitudes. Results suggest that psychological accounts of such asymmetries in worldviews and their moral and affective roots are incomplete without being anchored in increasingly sociopolitically segregated social networks, which are likely to amplify differences in political psychology.

One limitation in the present work is that attitude structures were gauged based on a purely left–right spit. Future work may build on the empirical approach in order to gauge more complex cultural schemas beyond the bifurcated ideological attitude structure shown in Figure **??** and positing other ideal-typical attitude structures. One might, for example, examine where the "alternatives" that Baldassarri and Goldberg (2014) identified, or the different nationalist schemas that Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2016) outline, interact with social sorting. Or one could posit more complex schemas—for example, schemas connecting specific issue domains (e.g., science, religion, the economy, cultural tastes)—and theorize about how these schemas may become more or less anchored in social sorting (e.g., DiMaggio et al. 2018). Such an analysis might uncover which attitude domains are becoming more or less compartmentalized and what types of social ties facilitate the broader spillage of politics into different domains that were once more cordoned off from politics. One may even be able to map out which clusters of attitudes serve as cultural anchors (Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011) that, when changed, lead to more far-reaching cascades of attitude changes.

Future research may also want to disaggregate the effects of crosscutting ties from those of cumulatively sorted ties on subsequent ideological identities and attitudes. Models employed here simultaneously tested for these effects as equally important aspects of social sorting—that is, having more ties within one's own camp was treated as equivalent to having fewer ties cutting across camps. Although this allowed for a parsimonious test of the social sorting hypothesis, it is plausible that crosscutting and cumulative-sorting effects differ in their overall influences of identity and attitude structures. For example, it is plausible that having more crosscutting ties may operate more strongly in mollifying one's identity than in making one's attitudes less extreme or less aligned. Such differential effects of crosscutting versus cumulative sorting may also differ for liberals versus conservatives, adding to the complexity of the asymmetries found here. In short, investigating such differences could provide greater specificity and scope conditions for results presented in this report.

Ultimately, this research extends from the same sociological sensibilities as more qualitative accounts of conversions, secondary socialization processes, and social movement mobilization—all of which show that becoming a member of an identity category occurs through a combination of social ties, reflected appraisals, and time. This work therefore contributes to a generalizable symbolic interactionism that follows in the footsteps of Stryker (1994:132), who summarized sociological identity theories by saying, "whatever constrains social network formation, maintenance, and change constrains identity formation" (see also Hogg and Ridgeway 2003; McFarland and Pals 2005; Walker and Lynn 2013). Large-scale shifts in the consolidation of social structure appear to have altered the underlying ecology of affiliations and situations that shape identity (Smith-Lovin 2007). This consolidation

has led not only to a greater cumulative sorting of interactions and relations but also to a production of selves that is divided, even in *how* they are divided. On a more positive note, these findings also imply that crosscutting ties, although depleted, still exist and are a continuing basis for ideological moderation and social integration.

Notes

1 A related anthropological perspective on social cohesion and crosscutting ties also exists (e.g., Tuzin 1976).

2 Alignment is sometimes referred to as *consistency* (Mason 2018) or *tightness* (Martin 2002; Rawlings and Childress 2019).

3 An even larger literature links social ties with political *participation* (especially voting) but does not address changes in attitudes per se (e.g., Mutz 2002).

4 Socially sorted individuals therefore tend to be more politically engaged than those with more crosscutting social ties (Campbell 2013). This may be an endemic paradox of democracy: that which divides us drives us to the polls.

5 Results available on request.

6 Of course, one could reverse code or rephrase any number of these questions to relocate them in the opposing camp's cluster or to create one single cluster. However, preserving the directionality of issues as belonging to two clusters helps to illustrate the approach. Moreover, such reverse coding would not alter the measurement of attitude structures.

7 I estimated models omitting all binary variables and found results that were largely consistent with those reported here. Including these more extremal variables may therefore estimate an upper bound of extremism. Consequently, the largely nonsignificant results of extremism are therefore unlikely to be an artifact of the mix of variables included in these analyses.

8 Because ideological strength is ordinal, I first estimated ordered logistic regression models. The results (available on request) were substantively very similar to the linear models presented here. Thus, for the sake of consistency with the models testing other pathways, and for greater simplicity in interpretation, I present results from the linear models and note a few minor differences in the results section.

9 When estimating HLMs in which the dependent variables are the measures of extremism and alignment, I multiply these by 100 to facilitate the interpretation of coefficients. These variables are normally distributed with no extremal values and are therefore suitable to linear models. Fractional logit estimators on the untransformed variables produced substantively identical results.

10 I also estimated models with interaction terms between the curvilinear effect $I_{it} \times I_{it}$ and social ties contained in X_{it1}. Results did not differ markedly from those presented here, and I therefore omitted these additional terms for the sake of parsimony.

11 Additional figures substantiating these differences are available on request. I also estimated separate models based on splitting the sample into liberals and conservatives. Results from this split-sample approach confirmed the results of interaction effects in the pooled models reported here.

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