

Why Partisans Do Not Sort: The Constraints on Political Segregation

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Social divisions between American partisans are growing, with Republicans and Democrats exhibiting homophily in a range of seemingly nonpolitical domains. It has been widely claimed that this partisan social divide extends to Americans' decisions about where to live. In two original survey experiments, we confirm that Democrats are, in fact, more likely than Republicans to prefer living in more Democratic, dense, and racially diverse places. However, improving on previous studies, we test respondents' stated preferences against their actual moving behavior. While partisans differ in their residential preferences, on average they are not migrating to more politically distinct communities. Using zip-code-level census and partisanship data on the places where respondents live, we provide one explanation for this contradiction: by prioritizing common concerns when deciding where to live, Americans forgo the opportunity to move to more politically compatible communities.

Americans appear to be more socially divided along partisan lines than ever before. On surveys, partisans have expressed increasingly negative judgments toward members of the opposite party (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Malhotra, Margalit, and Levendusky 2015). Partisanship now appears to be an important social identity, on par with race and gender, that shapes everything from media consumption preferences (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Levendusky 2009; Prior 2007) to selection of mates (Alford et al. 2011; Huber and Malhotra 2012; Iyengar et al. 2012). Both explicit and implicit discrimination measures indicate that disdain for the opposite party pervades Americans' attitudes and social interactions. The strong form of such claims is that, given the opportunity, partisans can be expected to actively avoid or punish members of the other party in their day-to-day lives. The weaker and more prevalent version of such claims suggests that an array of racial, socioeconomic, and cultural differences between the two parties leads them to adopt different behaviors, with partisanship lurking in the background. Regardless of

the reason for their social divisions, the sorting of Americans into more homogeneous social networks is a special cause for concern. If Americans isolate themselves from the other party, they may end up living in homogeneous political milieus that breed political extremism (Klar 2014; Sunstein 2009).

In this study, we consider a form of partisan sorting that has been invoked repeatedly as being especially troubling: the alleged tendency of Democrats and Republicans to prefer and move to communities that happen to match their politics (Bishop and Cushing 2008; Gimpel and Hui 2015; Pew Research Center 2014; Sussell 2013). If true, the increased residential separation of Democrats and Republicans could have profound practical and normative consequences, including more polarized metropolitan areas, and could impose substantial effects on elections at several levels of government as districts become increasingly lopsided (McDonald 2011). Such problems may appear even if partisan sorting is a consequence of seemingly apolitical decision making. If partisans not only disagree more often with out-party members but are

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purposefully avoiding even residing near them, it would constitute an unparalleled level of partisan acrimony.

Extant research on partisan residential sorting is marked by a contradiction: survey research shows that partisans differ starkly in their preferences for community type, but studies of actual moving behavior find that Americans have only modestly segregated by partisanship or ideology (Abrams and Fiorina 2012; Strickler 2016). We offer one likely explanation of this inconsistency by conducting, for the first time, a study that examines both stated preferences and moving behavior of self-identified Republicans and Democrats. Using methods specifically designed to identify the marginal effect of community partisanship and related traits on residential choice, we show that partisans give different ratings to communities on the basis of their partisan, urban, and racial composition. However, in a paired-comparison exercise designed to elicit how partisans prioritize different community traits, we find that crime, school quality, and commuting time rank much higher on both Democrats' and Republicans' "hierarchy of needs" (Maslow 1943) than explicitly political concerns.

The relative importance of quality in neighborhood evaluations is essential to explaining why, despite different residential preferences, Democrats and Republicans have both chosen to live in more Republican communities, on average. As individuals engage in "elimination by aspects" (Tversky 1972), winnowing their set of acceptable choices when choosing where to live, they close off opportunities to sort on partisanship. In a study combining our respondents' survey responses with zip-code-level data on community traits, we show that large proportions of Americans hoping to move to more "politically compatible" neighborhoods (Gimpel and Hui 2015) must accept minimal improvement in housing expense and neighborhood quality. This result holds regardless of whether partisans are motivated directly by political preferences (wanting to live around the "like-minded") or indirectly (selecting on neighborhood population density, racial diversity, or other correlates of partisanship; Gimpel and Hui 2015).

Finally, for all their differences in stated preferences, we show that partisans are not, on balance, moving to more compatible communities. While Republicans are moving to more Republican communities, on average, Democrats are as well. An analysis of the moving histories of our survey respondents shows that movers tend to relocate to communities similar to their current residences. Overall partisan residential migration is best described as regression to the mean, with both Democrats and Republicans in extremely copartisan zip codes moving to more moderate neighborhoods, on average. Indeed, we find no evidence that even ideologically

consistent partisans (liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans), those who might be most likely to sort because of the strength of their political concerns, are more likely to sort. While partisans may express strong disdain or even hatred for the other party, their attitudes and preferences are insufficient to drive residential sorting.

THE MISSING LINK BETWEEN PARTISAN PREFERENCES AND BEHAVIOR

The recent literature on partisanship and partisan polarization has suggested that strength of partisan identity predicts meaningful behavioral differences between the two parties in settings that are not explicitly political. There are, in fact, two versions of this claim, which we term *partisan homophily* and *partisan discrimination*.

Partisan homophily is an alleged tendency of copartisans to form relationships within multiplex social networks. That is, "birds of a feather flock together"—whatever the motivation (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). This claim is the weaker of the two, since the impetus for those with like-minded political views associating with one another need not be political at all, despite the popular media's tendency to imply otherwise via caricatures of Democratic and Republican social and consumer preferences. For example, a preference for Subaru station wagons or new-urbanist housing might be correlated with partisanship and a cluster of consumer tastes identified as "liberal Democratic," but it is not evidence that partisanship is bleeding into important social choices. Similarly, regular church attendance is associated with Republican voting (Gelman et al. 2008), and as a result Americans may be more politically segregated on Sunday mornings, but this does not imply that partisanship gives rise to religious choice. However, the increased association of partisanship with different aspects of social life may produce outcomes in social networks that appear as if people had acted on partisan information, with Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives separating into different communities for reasons that may be entirely separate from politics (Pew Research Center 2014, 44).

Partisan discrimination is a stronger claim, suggesting that people seek out or use political information to socially and economically discriminate against members of the opposite party. Individuals may avoid social interaction with known members of the other party or penalize them in other ways in social and economic interactions. One test of such discrimination has been to show that partisans act on information about the partisanship of social acquaintances. Huber and Malhotra (2012), for example, find evidence that individuals use political cues when identifying potential mates on online dating sites, although the effect size is mod-

est.¹ Iyengar and Westwood (2015) present a survey experiment in which individuals were asked to evaluate hypothetical high school scholarship candidates whose composite profiles were randomized to include information on their participation in “Young Democrats” or “Young Republicans” groups. In this experiment, partisans granted more scholarship money to their copartisans. In another study involving a prisoner’s dilemma experiment with real cash payouts, partisans are shown to be willing to leave money on the table rather than cooperate with a member of the opposite party to share winnings (Malhotra et al. 2015). Here, in contrast to the weaker homophily claim, partisanship is a direct impetus of discriminatory behavior.

Scholars who have studied partisan geographic sorting have pointed to evidence supporting both the homophily and discrimination hypotheses. Pew Research Center (2014) reports that 50% of Republicans and 35% of Democrats say it is “important to live in a place where people share their political views” (11–12). Such explicitly political preferences are consistent with partisan discrimination. However, the balance of studies argue for a partisan homophily mechanism (e.g., Cho, Gimpel, and Hui 2013). Bishop and Cushing (2008) argue that partisans differ on a set of social, cultural, and geographic preferences that have driven Democrats and Republicans to move into different communities since the 1970s. In a host of other studies, Democrats and Republicans each say that they prefer places whose population characteristics are correlated with their partisan composition. For example, partisans more favorably rate metropolitan areas that happen to be dominated by copartisans, even when they are not given direct information about partisan composition (Pew Research Center 2008; Public Policy Polling 2012). Lewis and Baldassare (2010) find that liberals are more likely to support local policies associated with “smart growth” but acknowledge that inferring residential choice from such preferences requires a “heroic leap” (223). Democrats and self-identified liberals are more likely to state a preference for higher population density, “traditional” (non-sprawling) neighborhood design, and racial diversity than Republicans or conservatives (Cho et al. 2013; Gimpel and Hui 2015; Hui 2013; Lewis and Baldassare 2010; Pew Research Center 2014).

One reason for the ongoing attention to individual-level preferences is that aggregate political geography itself has been polarized, and scholars have attempted to link secular

trends in aggregate-level sorting to the preferences expressed in cross-sectional surveys. Previous work has, indeed, shown that Democratic and Republican presidential voters have become increasingly segregated since around the 1970s. Even work that criticizes claims of increasing partisan segregation show that national segregation indexes for the presidential vote have ticked up since the 1970s (albeit slightly in historical perspective; Glaeser and Ward 2006). Other scholarship, based on more recent party-registration data, which tend to capture stronger party commitments, similarly finds that polarization trends may be overstated, with the growth of independents mitigating partisan segregation (McGhee and Krimm 2009). While popular writers such as Bishop and Cushing (2008) have taken note of these long-term changes (while nevertheless implying that present-day cultural preference is a contributing factor), other recent work has also implied that contemporary partisan attitudes toward places are an important factor in moving decisions (Motyl et al. 2014; Pew Research Center 2014). It is unclear whether partisans are currently “voting with their feet” or whether partisan conversion and similar in-place changes are more plausible (Gainsborough 2001; Lang and Pearson-Merkowitz 2014).

One way to isolate the causes of partisan geographic sorting is to analyze contemporary cross-sectional data on attitudes and behavior. However, studies of partisan sorting have not validated respondents’ expressed preferences by measuring their moving behavior, a research design choice that is responsible for conflicting and seemingly paradoxical claims in this literature.² In addition, extant studies based on observed moving data face a fundamental challenge: they are often used to suggest a psychological model of residential preferences that cannot be discerned from the data. Such studies, which often use voter-file data, seek to estimate the effect of individual-level partisanship on residential choice after controlling for various correlates of partisanship, either among individuals or using covariates from aggregate data (Cho et al. 2013; McDonald 2011). This approach has several limitations. First, studies based on voter file archives accurately capture where partisans move but do not explain why they move where they do.³ Second, multiple regression, the primary method used in these studies, obscures the actual quantity of interest—the degree to which partisans are ac-

1. Alford et al. (2011, 369) find that partisanship influences marriage pairings, although, like online dating, this selection may result more from the availability of copartisans in social networks than conscious selection of fellow partisans.

2. A study that uses convenience samples to judge partisan differences in residential preferences does not conclude that migration behavior matches preferences (Motyl et al. 2014).

3. For example, one such study showed that UK Labour and Conservative Party members were more likely to migrate to or remain in more copartisan constituencies over an 18-year period, but the study did not determine why people moved (Gallego et al. 2016).

tually moving to more politically compatible communities—replacing it with a partial correlation with an unclear substantive interpretation.⁴

A more serious threat to the validity of existing studies is that Americans' preferences for neighborhood quality and affordability inhibit sorting. The same issues that make highly correlated regressors a problem for statistical modeling of residential preference confront movers when they are deciding where to live. Partisanship, urbanism, racial composition, the proportion of home owners, and neighborhood home prices are related in ways that constrain household choices. Previous scholarship on residential sorting has noted that household economics, proximity to work, housing affordability, and concerns over neighborhood quality limit opportunities for individuals to engage in partisan residential sorting (Cho et al. 2013). However, this work has not attempted to quantify the likely scope of such constraints or incorporate them into statistical analyses.⁵ An individual hoping to live in a zip code with widely accepted quality indicators such as low crime, high proportions of adult residents with a college degree, and high home ownership rates will find few, and in some cases no, zip codes in a metropolitan area that lie at either partisan extreme. Substantial correlation among regressors therefore leaves findings based on multivariate models highly sensitive to researcher choices and model functional form (Ho et al. 2007; King and Zeng 2006; Schrodtt 2014).

COMBINING EXPERIMENTAL AND OBSERVATIONAL EVIDENCE

To avoid the aforementioned pitfalls, we designed and conducted a survey to capture the association between stated preferences and actual moving behavior. We surveyed approximately 4,800 self-identified Democrats and Republicans, using a quota-sampled panel provided by Survey Sampling

International.⁶ The survey captures both stated preferences and self-reported behavior, allowing us to assess whether partisan homophily or discrimination are sufficient to lead to sorting.⁷

Our survey contained two experiments designed to estimate the marginal effect of community traits on residential preferences. These experiments randomly vary traits of the hypothetical neighborhoods to which partisans might move, with the purpose of assessing which factors are most important and which contribute the most in individuals' selection of a neighborhood. The first study presents hypothetical neighborhoods and asks respondents to evaluate them. The second asks respondents to rank order the factors that play into their residential choices. Unlike survey experiments on residential preference that manipulate only one neighborhood attribute such as partisanship (Hui 2013) or race (Farley et al. 1978, 1994), our experiments allow us to isolate multiple attributes' marginal effect on community preferences.

In both experimental designs, we account for factors that have been considered widely in the residential sorting and segregation literature. One set of explanatory variables, which we call *valence* considerations, consists of cost, distance to work, neighborhood crime rates, school quality, and similar factors that appear elsewhere in residential choice research (Pew Research Center 2008; Rossi 1980). Of these, accessibility of a location to work is typically the number one consideration facing movers. We account for additional factors that we hypothesize to be drivers of potential partisan homophily in residential choice. Preferences over racial composition and their link to racial segregation, for example, has been a topic of considerable research (e.g., Ellen 2000; Farley et al. 1978, 1994; Schelling 1971). They are relevant in our study because black-white segregation in particular is highly correlated with partisan segregation, and blacks vote for Democrats nearly universally regardless of their socioeconomic status (Dawson 1995; Hersh and Nall 2016). Similarly, liberals tend to prefer more urban areas, while conservatives prefer more rural areas, which may lead to differences in partisan

4. Since such analyses often rely on cross-sectional data, posttreatment bias is a serious risk (Rosenbaum 1984).

5. For example, Cho et al. (2013) write that their observational “models indicate that partisanship is significant even after other neighborhood characteristics are taken into account, suggesting that partisan sorting does occur for apparently political reasons.” They acknowledge that “partisan preference is regularly trumped by economic concerns. At the same time, our analysis indicates that partisan sorting is significant for both Republicans and Democrats even after a whole host of neighborhood characteristics have been taken into account” (12). Such conclusions do not incorporate the hard constraints on residential choice that may eliminate choices entirely. Similar critiques have been leveled against hedonic pricing models in studies of housing markets. Linear models can predict the price of real estate as a function of property-level and community-level factors, whose contribution to housing demand (and, by extension, their contribution to utility) can then more easily be inferred (Rosen 1974).

6. The survey ran from June 4–14, 2013. The sampling design aimed for a target of 50% Republicans and 50% Democrats, using census targets for age, race, and gender. Since our sample is nonrandom, we assess selection bias by comparing unweighted summary statistics of key variables to comparable unweighted statistics for Democratic and Republican identifiers in the 2012 American National Election Study (see sec. A in the appendix, available online).

7. Subject to our quota constraints, we surveyed all individuals, not only self-identified “heads of household” who might make decisions for the household as a whole. We assume that the preferences and moving behavior stated on our survey incorporate considerations involved in household decisions, even when the respondent is not the primary decision maker.

context (Lewis and Baldassare 2010). Finally, in both the fully randomized conjoint and paired-comparison designs, we include partisanship and potentially related cultural factors that we hypothesize may contribute to partisan sorting. While in the conjoint design we account for information about partisanship and closely associated demographic correlates (neighborhood race and urbanism), in the paired-comparison design we include a range of additional variables more explicitly associated with alleged “culture war” attitudes.

We then assess whether partisans, who express preferences consistent with the weak and strong forms of partisan sorting, are actually moving to zip codes that match their partisanship. We begin by highlighting the difficulty of partisan sorting through a set of feasibility analyses. Using respondents’ current residential data, we show that when individuals first screen on neighborhood quality and affordability, they have few remaining options to move to more copartisan neighborhoods. Next, examining respondents’ average net shift in zip-code-level partisan context after their most recent move, we show that both Democrats and Republicans, as well as numerous subgroups within the two parties, tend to maintain the status quo community context when they move. For most partisan subgroups, migration behavior runs counter to the hypothesis of a “Big Sort” driven directly or indirectly by partisan differences. While our observational results are not intended to serve as a direct validation of the experimental results, we nevertheless demonstrate that there is little evidence that preferences stated on surveys are leading to partisan sorting.

EXPERIMENTS ON PARTISANSHIP AND RESIDENTIAL PREFERENCE

Conjoint design

The first experiment is designed to assess the marginal effect of different community traits, including partisan composition, on community selection. We asked individuals to think about communities as an area occupying a zip code. We employ a fully randomized conjoint design: respondents view multiple pairs of randomly generated community profiles assembled from a set of traits that we selected and choose the preferred community from each pair. This design enables estimation of the marginal effect of various factors on community evaluations (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014).⁸

8. Conjoint designs have elsewhere appeared in real estate and residential preference research (Molin 2011; Molin, Oppewal, and Timmermans 1999) and in sociology (as “vignettes”; Alves and Rossi 1978; Faia 1980). The design is used to assess how consumers make trade-offs when evaluating products. In political science, the design is used to assess

Our design prompts respondents to choose between two randomly generated communities labeled “Community A” and “Community B.” Each of the N respondents were presented $K = 5$ “choice tasks” in which they were asked to select one of $J = 2$ alternatives. For each community, respondents viewed $L = 7$ traits with D_l levels of the variable in question, per trait. The design includes “valence” characteristics that both Democrats and Republicans prefer when choosing neighborhoods, as well as neighborhood traits that are more clearly associated with partisanship. We chose as traits those that people most frequently mention as reasons for moving to a new neighborhood (see, e.g., *Los Angeles Times* 1999). We include community partisanship to account for the potential of overt partisan discrimination. Housing cost, one of the top concerns arising in studies of residential choice, is randomized across three levels: 15%, 25%, and 40% of respondent pretax income. On surveys, people regularly cite neighborhood crime as a major factor governing their residential choice (*Los Angeles Times* 1999). We represent crime rates in relative terms: 20% above the national average or 20% below the national average. A “school quality score” similar to those that appear on real estate search sites takes on one of two values: 5 out of 10 or 9 out of 10. Separately, we account for partisans’ attitudes toward urbanism, which appears in previous scholarship (Pew Research Center 2014). Community “type of place” is randomized across six levels that appear in other survey research: city downtown with a mix of shops, businesses, and homes; city residential area; mixed-use suburban neighborhood; suburban neighborhood with houses only; small town; and rural area (Belden, Russonello, and Stewart 2011). One means by which partisans may sort without relying on partisan information is by engaging in racial sorting (Farley et al. 1994; Schelling 1971). Racial composition is expressed in terms of the white/nonwhite racial composition of the neighborhood and takes on four levels: 50% white/50% nonwhite, 75% white/25% nonwhite, 90% white/10% nonwhite, and 96% white/4% nonwhite. The partisanship of the community is expressed in terms of the 2012 presidential vote, randomized across three levels: 30% Democrat/70% Republican, 50% Democrat/50% Republican, and 70% Democrat/30% Republican. Any combination of levels of the above traits may appear in each community profile. An example of such a conjoint comparison exercise appears in figure 1.⁹

support for multifaceted policies or decisions (Bechtel, Hainmueller, and Margalit 2015; Bechtel and Scheve 2013; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014).

9. Since our sampling was not done at the household level, we did not identify whether the respondent was primarily responsible for household

COMMUNITY TRAIT	COMMUNITY A	COMMUNITY B
Total Daily Driving Time for Commuting and Errands	25 min	45 min
Type of Place	Suburban neighborhood with mix of shops, houses, businesses	Small town
Housing Cost	15 percent of pre-tax income	30 percent of pre-tax income
Race	90% White, 10% Nonwhite	50% White, 50% Nonwhite
Violent Crime Rate (Vs National Rate)	20% More Crime Than National Average	20% Less Crime Than National Average
Presidential Vote in 2012	30% Democrat, 70% Republican	70% Democrat, 30% Republican
School Quality Rating (1=Worst, 10=Best)	9	9

Figure 1. Example conjoint forced-comparison exercise. Respondents viewed and chose communities from nine randomly generated pairs

We used responses to the five pairs of profiles to estimate via least-squares regression the average marginal component-specific effect, or the average effect of each trait level on selection of a community (Hainmueller et al. 2014). In the regressions, the residential choice is expressed as a binary dependent variable, and attribute levels enter into the regression as categorical variables. The coefficient on each attribute level represents its effect on the respondent's probability of selecting a community relative to the omitted category, after controlling for combinations of other traits (11).¹⁰

Results from the conjoint design appear in figure 2. They show that Democrats and Republicans have similar preferences on several neighborhood indicators, including housing costs, school quality, crime levels, and long commutes. On the remaining traits in the conjoint design, however, partisan preferences diverge. Respondents of both parties were about 13 points less likely to select a community with 30% copartisans versus one with 70% copartisans, all else equal. This is a large divide but not as significant as both parties' responsiveness to more basic considerations. However, there was a larger partisan difference in response to community racial composition. Republicans were, in com-

moving decisions or shared those responsibilities with another person. However, to partially address this concern, we separately analyze data for married (or partnered) households and single-person households. See figs. D9, D10, E5, and E6 in the appendix

10. Specifically, the coefficients are estimated by combining the $J \times K$ choices for each respondent into a panel data set and then running a categorical least-squares regression with standard errors clustered by respondent (Arai 2011). The outcome variable, Y_{jk} is coded 1 if the community described in profile jk was selected, zero otherwise. The explanatory variables included in each row are the randomized values of the L categorical variables generated as the traits for each community option.

paring communities against a 50% white community, 6 points more likely to choose a 75% white community, 10 points more likely to choose a 90% white community, and 11 points more likely to choose a 96% white community. Democrats were barely more likely to prefer more homogeneously white communities.¹¹ At least when it comes to stated preferences, white and nonwhite Democrats derive less additional utility from homogeneously white communities than Republicans do.¹²

As expected, ideologically consistent partisans are more responsive to partisanship and party-correlated community features. Conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats explain most of the interparty differences. On neighborhood quality and affordability, even sorted partisans agree. They differ over type of place, racial composition, and neighborhood partisan composition. On the margins, conservative Republicans give higher ratings to communities that are homogeneously white, Republican, and rural, while liberal Democrats are more likely than nonliberal Democrats to prefer racially diverse and high-density places.¹³

11. One reason for the nonlinearity in the Democratic racial results is that Democrats are a more racially diverse party. All else equal, even nonwhites are more likely to prefer diverse but majority-white neighborhoods (see fig. E11 in the appendix). Our results are consistent with findings from the Detroit Area Study and Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality: whites prefer more homogeneously white neighborhoods, while nonwhites prefer more racially mixed neighborhoods (Farley et al. 1978, 330; Farley, Fielding, and Krysan 1997).

12. We have confidence in these results because the conjoint design functions like a list experiment by allowing individuals to conceal their individual racial attitudes when choosing composite profiles.

13. Conjoint results broken down by ideology appear in fig. E1 in the appendix.

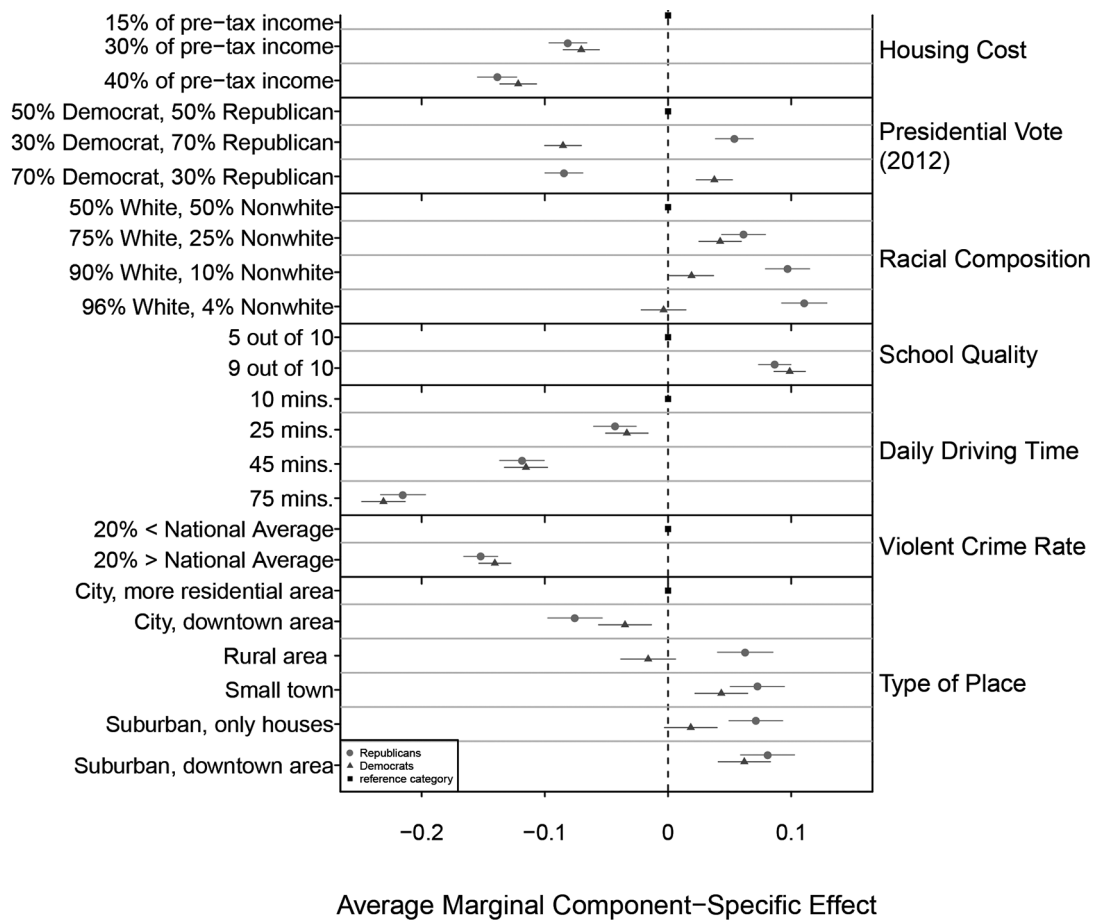


Figure 2. Average marginal component-specific effects of community traits on residential selection, among self-identified Democrats and Republicans

Paired-comparison tests on important factors in residential choice

While the conjoint experiment examined the joint effect of a limited set of variables, we conducted a second experiment to assess the relative importance of community political composition and related community characteristics on the residential choice decision. In a set of paired comparisons, individuals viewed pairs of community traits and were asked which general neighborhood trait was more important to their decision about where to live. From the responses, we establish an overall ranking based on both the proportion of time each community trait was picked (conditional on being offered) and the proportion of time each type of community trait (grouped into substantive categories) was picked over other types of traits in a head-to-head comparison.

Under paired-comparison tests, respondents are presented k pairs of attribute labels, each drawn randomly from a set of t predefined traits $(i, j) \in (i = 1, \dots, t) \times (j = 1, \dots, t), i \neq j$. In our design, individuals viewed $k = 9$ randomly generated pairs of community traits drawn from a list of $t = 62$ char-

acteristics. For each pair, we asked, “Which of the following is a more significant factor when you are deciding where to live?”¹⁴

Respondents viewed pairs of community traits, then identified which was more significant to their residential choice (David 1969; Salganik and Levy 2015; Thurstone 1927). Our list of traits is drawn or adapted from previously published work, including scholarship on public choice and on attitudes toward sprawl.¹⁵ Because the paired-comparison design has substantial statistical power, we included additional com-

14. This phrasing is, in theory, susceptible to multiple interpretations. For example, an atheist might consider the proportion of a community that is religious to be both “significant” in the decision-making process but undesirable, while a religious person might view that attribute as both significant and desirable. Our results suggest that interpretation of items as desirable rather than “significant” was consistent with our prior knowledge of preferences within the two parties.

15. We referred to past studies to generate our list of traits. These included Belden, Russonello, and Stewart (2004, 2011), Cho et al. (2013), Hui (2013), and *Los Angeles Times* (1999).

munity traits that have rarely been mentioned in other studies. A great advantage of the paired-comparison design is that additional traits, and even slight wording variations, can be added to the trait set without jeopardizing statistical power (Salganik and Levy 2015). As a result, we canvassed the literature to generate an inclusive list of traits, arriving at a list of 62, which we group into the following general categories:

Disorder: Community problems, including crime, gang activity, and public drug use.

Geography/Location: Region of the country, proximity to a major metropolitan area, climate.

Friends/Family: Nearness of friends and family.

Neighborhood Income: Home values and community wealth.

Government: Local tax rates, police quality, parks quality, local government corruption, quality of services.

Transportation: Daily driving time, transit and highway access, road and transit quality, bike friendliness.

“Smart Growth” versus Sprawl: Privacy, housing size and density, walkability, parking.

Children: School quality and school- and child-related services.

Social Life: Quality restaurants, retiree friendly, active street life.

Neighborhood Social Composition and Attitudes: Having a lot in common with neighbors, community religious composition, partisan composition, “gay friendliness,” whether neighbors share religious values, distance to house of worship.

Neighborhood Race: White, black, Hispanic, and Asian composition.

Using two different methods, we find that Republicans and Democrats agree on the importance of higher-priority issues and disagree on the importance of lower-priority issues. To demonstrate this, we first calculate the proportion of the time each community trait was chosen by respondents of each party in head-to-head matchups. These estimates, with 95% confidence intervals, appear in figure 3.¹⁶ Democrats and Republicans both identify region of the country, home prices and values, property tax rates, crime levels, and personal privacy as important considerations. While a large minority list “having a lot in common with neighbors” as a consideration, when they are asked to prioritize specific

ways in which they may have much in common with their neighbors, the two parties tend to diverge. Both Democrats and Republicans identify having neighbors who share their politics as an important factor only 30% of the time. However, partisans are quite divided on religious composition and indicators of social attitudes, such as how “gay friendly” a community is. Republicans identify “How Christian the community is” as an important factor 46% the time, Democrats only 29% of the time. Both white and nonwhite Democrats are more likely than Republicans to identify racial diversity as an important consideration. While Republicans identified “The share of the community that is white” as a significant factor 40% of the time, Democrats do only 28% of the time. In line with findings elsewhere in the sorting and polarization literature, on almost every point of partisan disagreement, ideologically consistent partisans explain the interparty difference (see figs. D1 and D2 in the appendix).

As figure 4 shows, community traits most often associated with partisan residential sorting are picked infrequently, and they lose, on average, against other categories of considerations. Each square in the figure displays the proportion of the time that an option from the row category was selected over an option from the column category. For example, items in the “neighborhood beliefs and values” section were identified as important factors only 20%–30% of the time against most other categories.¹⁷ Even against items related to racial and ethnic composition, which might have been selected less because of social desirability concerns, social and political concerns were identified as a more significant factor only about half the time. Our results lend only weak support to both the partisan homophily and partisan discrimination hypotheses: individuals prioritize factors with a clear link to partisanship only about 20%–30% of the time.

PRIORITIZING QUALITY AND AFFORDABILITY LIMITS SORTING

Given the real but limited role of partisanship and closely related factors in partisans’ stated residential preferences, we now turn to observational data to explain why, even if partisans were able to directly or indirectly sort, they have limited latitude to migrate to more politically compatible neighborhoods. Our goal in presenting these results is less to offer a direct individual-level validation of the experimental results than to show how real-world limits can inhibit even

16. Confidence intervals were constructed using simple random sampling assumptions for each mean.

17. Unlike the conjoint design, the paired-comparison test does not provide the same shield against social-desirability bias on sensitive questions. However, the partisan differences on these questions were consistent with the conjoint results: Republicans were, e.g., more likely to say that “how white the community is” is a more important factor.

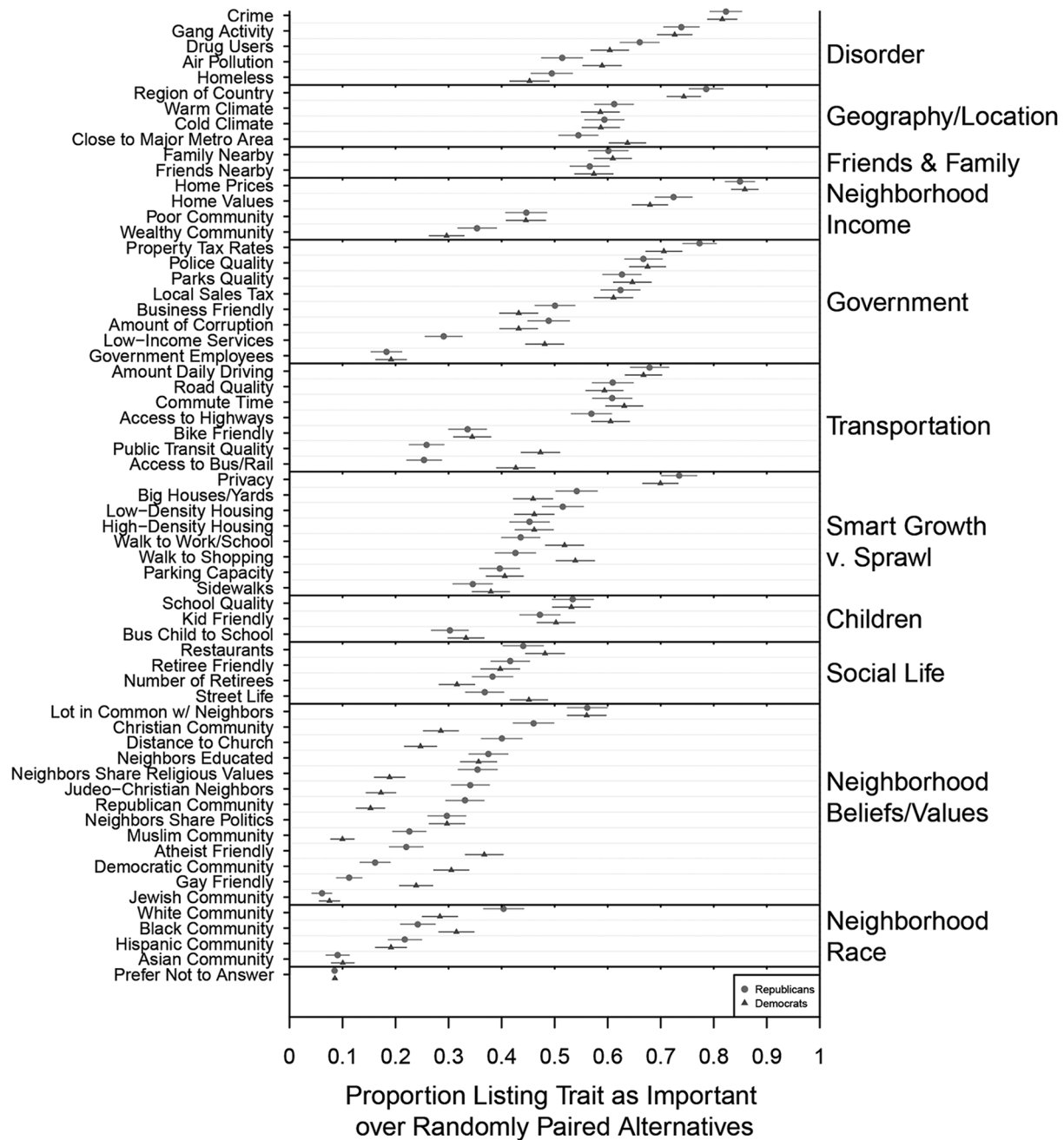


Figure 3. Relative ranking of factors used in residential choice by Democrats and Republicans. Proportion of pairwise comparisons in which a community trait was identified as more important than a second randomly chosen trait.

the limited sorting that could be anticipated from our experimental findings. We collected respondents' moving history, allowing us to determine whether, in fact, they move to communities that are more partisan. We operationalize communities using zip codes, which are widely used as a proxy for communities into which people consider moving.¹⁸ We collect all respondents' current zip codes, as well as the

18. For a discussion of alternate approaches to measuring community, see Wong et al. (2012). Zip codes tend to be larger than areas that most

most recent previous zip code of individuals who moved in the last five years. These zip codes were merged with precinct-level presidential election returns data from 2008 using ArcGIS (Ansolabehere and Rodden 2012).¹⁹ Using

people would consider "neighborhoods," but they are often used as a proxy for communities of interest, especially in major cities.

19. The precinct shape files were converted into centroids and then spatially joined with a polygon layer of zip-code tabulation areas, and the precinct-level values were aggregated within each zip code.

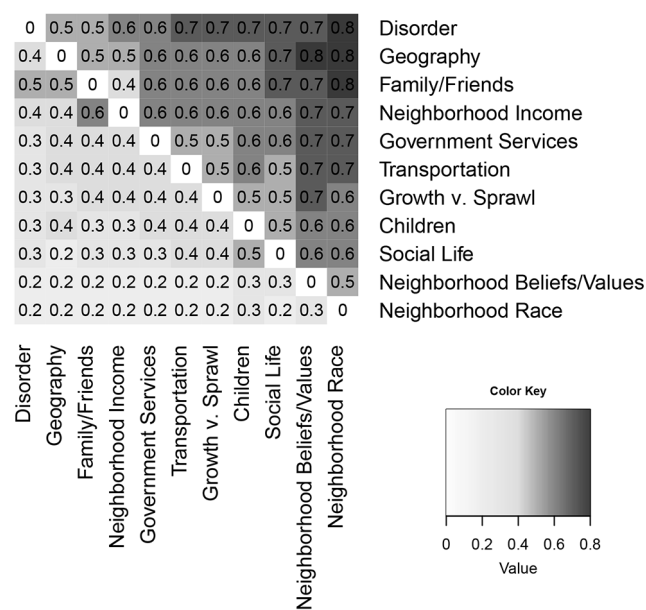


Figure 4. Ranking of factors used in community selection by Democrats and Republicans. Proportion of pairwise matchups in which an item from the row category was identified as more significant than an item from the column category.

these data, we show that it is infeasible for partisans to move to more politically compatible places. These constraints exist regardless of the strength of factors driving partisan homophily or partisans’ underlying motivations.

To determine the feasibility of moves, we create a set of potential choices and then progressively apply a set of reasonable constraints that movers might apply when engaged in a home search. We begin by treating every zip code in the United States as a potential place of residence, thereby allowing potential movers a much larger set of options than they would typically consider. We then apply a set of resource and quality constraints using data from the 2008–12 five-year combined American Community Survey (ACS). To begin, we apply the widely accepted rule that individuals should spend no more than three times their annual pretax income on a house (Schwartz and Wilson 2008). For each respondent, we consider a zip code affordable if the 25th percentile home value as captured in ACS is at most three times the respondent’s self-reported income (Fitch and Ruggles 2003).²⁰ While there are many indicators of community quality, including crime levels and school performance, few of these are reliably publicly reported at the zip-code level. We

20. The ACS reports only the median and interquartile range of home values for each zip code. While the differential between rental and ownership costs varies across metro areas, we assume that they are comparable.

therefore adopt one indicator of neighborhood quality: whether the proportion of home owners is at least as high as in the respondent’s current zip code.²¹

In figure 5, we report the feasibility of moving to a zip code with a greater share of copartisans as constraints are progressively applied and then plot the share of national housing units (as measured in the ACS) that satisfy the listed constraints requirement. This number represents partisans’ capacity for sorting. We plot the distribution of this feasibility value, using histograms binned into 5-percentage-point intervals. In each graph, some individuals already live in maximally copartisan neighborhoods and appear on the far left of the histogram, since they have no opportunity to move to more partisan places. Others live at the opposite extreme, in precincts dominated by the other party, and have nearly limitless options to move into more politically compatible neighborhoods. From left to right, we present the effects of incremental resource and quality constraints. First, in panel 1, we show the proportion of housing units that satisfy the neighborhood partisanship requirement.²² Without constraints, large majorities of both parties have an abundance of zip codes to choose from. In panel 2, we apply only the affordability constraint. Doing so shifts the density in the histogram substantially to the left for both parties, indicating that sorting is increasingly difficult. Approximately 38% of Democrats and 28% of Republicans would have almost no housing options (less than 5% of total national housing stock) or would have to risk housing-related financial hardship to move to a more copartisan zip code. In panel 3, we add the quality constraint (percentage of units owner occupied), which results in majorities of Democrats and Republicans having a choice of at most 10% of the national housing stock if they simultaneously seek to maintain or improve zip-code-level quality, affordability, and copartisan percentage. Finally, for illustration of this concept, we add a loose geographic constraint: a requirement to live in the west census region. In practice, such a constraint is weaker than

21. Home owners maintain their properties and add to neighborhood home values (see, e.g., Glaeser and Shapiro 2003). Home ownership is also correlated negatively with crime rates. Crime statistics are reliably reported at the county level. Violent crimes per capita are negatively correlated with the percentage of owner-occupied housing units as reported in the 2012 five-year ACS cross-section ($r = -.40$; Federal Bureau of Investigation, US Department of Justice 2012). Another potential proxy for neighborhood quality, percentage of individuals with a bachelor of arts degree, is uncorrelated with crime rates at the county level ($r = .01$).

22. Because we are analyzing feasibility, this “requirement” need not be explicitly adopted by movers. We are merely capturing whether they can tenably move to a more copartisan place, regardless of their underlying motivations.

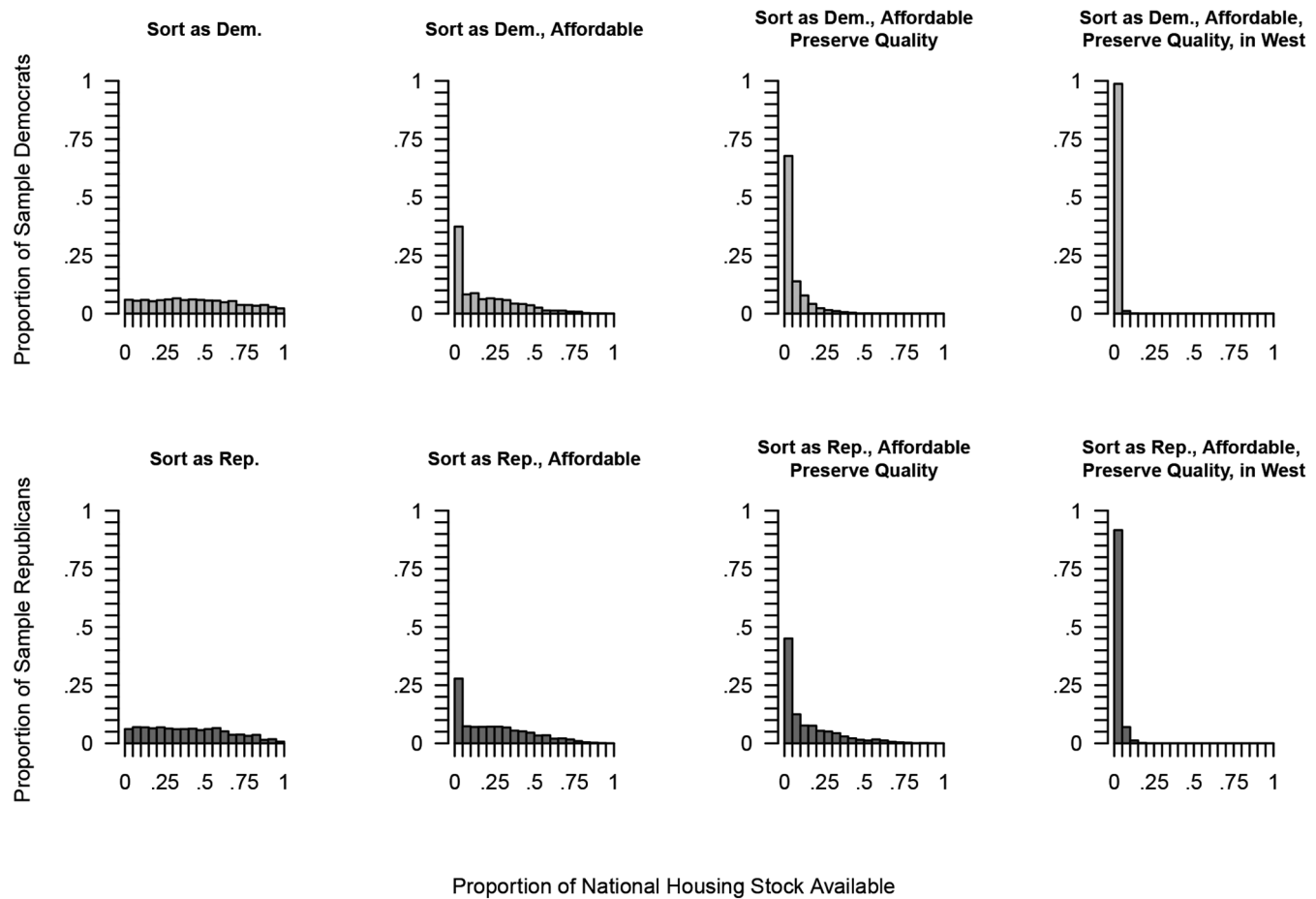


Figure 5. Feasibility of partisan migration. Histograms display proportion of Democrats and Republicans by the proportion of national housing units that are in zip codes more Democratic or Republican than the current zip code. First panel: no constraints. Second panel: Affordable zip codes only. Third panel: Affordable zip codes with a greater than or equal proportion of housing units owner occupied than respondents' present zip code. Fourth panel: exclusion of zip codes outside the US census west region.

the geographic constraint most Americans have to deal with: moving to or remaining in a specific metropolitan area for familial or employment reasons. When these constraints are applied, more than 90% of both Democrats and Republicans have, at most, 5% of the nation's housing stock to choose from while still migrating to a more copartisan place. Incorporating additional constraints monotonically reduces housing options. While people rarely have zero housing choices, many desirable combinations of zip-code-level partisanship, quality, and affordability indicators simply do not exist.

Of course, Americans rarely search nationally for housing, but our choice to analyze national data works against our claim. Limiting a housing search to a metropolitan area first, then applying the same constraints, only shrinks the choice set further and rules out a home search in some metropolitan areas entirely. In the appendix, we show that a handful of metropolitan areas have zero zip codes that are a landslide (greater than 60% Democratic or Republican)

while passing cost and quality criteria (see figs. F17–F24 in the appendix).

WHO SORTS?

The preceding analysis outlines examples (among many) of the deterministic bounds on residential sorting. The final test of the experimental and observational results presented above is whether individuals' moving behavior is consistent with stated preferences that, on the margins, differ between the two parties. While we cannot directly validate each respondent's experimental findings, we can examine whether behavior indicates any kind of partisan differences. We might expect key partisan subgroups to be more likely to sort on partisanship. Ex ante, we expected Democrats and conservative Republicans, who drive the partisan differences in stated preferences, to be most likely to act on their preferences. Similarly, the young, who are not bound by the same set of quality concerns as the middle class, may be more re-

ceptive to “low-quality” neighborhoods, allowing them to choose places that match their political preferences, in contrast to the middle aged and parents with children who appear to take more seriously “pocketbook” household issues such as school quality. Finally, *ex ante*, we expected that higher-income partisans would be more likely to move to places that match their partisanship for several reasons: housing cost is a lower constraint, and they may have resources to substitute private for public goods in areas such as policing and schooling (Gans 1991, 54–56). To test these hypotheses, we again use respondents’ self-reported current zip code and the most recent previous zip code if they moved in the last five years.²³ For both the current and previous zip codes of movers (and nonmovers), we calculate the average change in the political composition of zip codes of Democrats and Republicans in subgroups hypothesized to have either strong preferences or an easy ability to move.

Across the full sample of partisans, we find no evidence that Democrats move to more Democratic zip codes (fig. 6). Republicans have been moving to more Republican neighborhoods, but Democrats have as well. Nor do we find substantial or consistent evidence of sorting across the various subgroups in which we thought sorting was most likely to occur. Self-identified “strong” Democrats and Republicans were most likely to separate on preferences over partisan composition and race. However, on average this did not translate into changes in behavior. Strong Republicans on average picked destinations that matched the two-party vote of their current zip code, and strong Democrats moved to places that were on average four points more Republican. Ideological partisans of both parties, on average, maintain their status quo political context when they move.

Partisan subgroups that were expected, *ex ante*, to be more likely to act on their partisanship in fact do not. Both poorer (household income less than \$40,000 per year) and richer (household income greater than \$80,000 per year) individuals maintain the status quo, on average, contrary to our expectations regarding resource effects. Having children in schools coincides with both parties moving to more Republican places. Giving strongly positive ratings to “urban people” or “rural people” appears to have no bearing on one’s sorting behavior, regardless of party. The only group in which there is a weak indication of sorting is among the middle aged (those 35–65 years old). In this group, Republicans moved to places that were on average 4 points

23. We omit respondents who moved within the same zip code. For purposes of zip-code-level sorting, this is equivalent to not moving at all, and including these moves could bias results against the sorting hypothesis. See fig. G1 in the appendix for results using data on all movers.

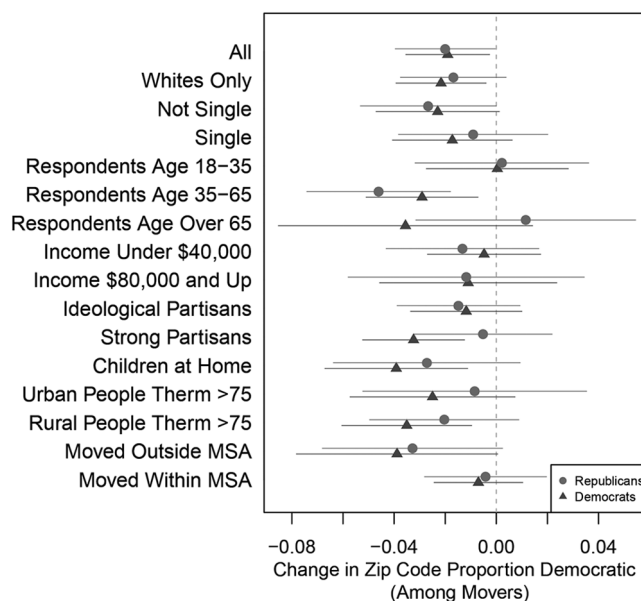


Figure 6. Average difference between origin and destination zip codes in the Democratic proportion of the 2008 two-party presidential vote, for the full sample and for subgroups believed more or less likely to sort geographically by partisanship. Sample: individuals who reported moving to a different zip code in the last five years.

more Republican, while Democrats moved to places that were only 3 points more Republican.²⁴

A number of factors may explain the Republican lean of both Democrats and Republicans in our sample. One is that migration from the north to the Sunbelt may lead both Democrats and Republicans to move to more Republican communities. For example, a software worker who moves from Silicon Valley (a landslide Democratic area) even to reputedly liberal (but actually politically balanced) Austin—would help to explain results such as these. More generally, both Democrats and Republicans have been suburbanizing for some time and may be drawn to more rural and affordable real estate in more Republican areas. Our feasibility analysis provides some insight into these macro trends and suggests why partisan differences have not been larger.²⁵

Of course, over a long time period, serious partisan geographic sorting could occur, but if it does it is unlikely to be a result of the moving of Democrats and Republicans. On average, Democrats and Republicans are about equally likely to migrate, and the partisan shift associated with their moves

24. Movers between metropolitan areas will have a different set of concerns than individuals within metropolitan areas. Intermetropolitan moves account for only 20% of the moves in our data, and we are not able to detect a difference in sorting behavior between intercity and local moves. Figure G1 in the appendix contains results for moves within and between metropolitan statistical areas.

25. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

has, at least recently, been nearly identical, so that there is practically zero net difference in migration.²⁶ Major sorting has occurred over time and in the past, but our data do not support the idea that strong partisan attitudinal differences are at the heart of continuing partisan geographic sorting.

CONCLUSION

We explain a paradox in the literature on partisan polarization and sorting: partisans differ in their stated preferences over the partisanship of communities and numerous correlates of partisanship, but these preferences do not lead to meaningful partisan differences in residential migration. An advantage of our study is that we are able to assess stated preferences and real-world behavior in the same sample. Like previous scholars, we find evidence that partisans will rate more politically compatible communities higher and even stronger evidence that partisans differ on a range of correlates of partisanship, including race and urbanism. Despite the statistically significant influence of community partisan composition on partisans' community ratings, partisanship's direct effect on where people live is likely to be weak due to the low priority that Americans assign to the partisanship of their communities and neighbors. But we also find scant evidence that other indirect factors have been sufficient to drive partisan sorting. We offer a reason why: potential movers with a stated propensity to move to more copartisan neighborhoods are, regardless of their underlying motivations, more likely to have few choices if they select first on affordability and quality. While there are instances when sorting is more feasible (e.g., among the few Republicans living in urban or racially diverse Democratic areas or the few Democrats living in rural Republican areas), such cases are rare if other considerations are first used to narrow residential options.

Those hoping to move to a more "politically compatible" community (Gimpel and Hui 2015), or even those who have a set of preferences to live in places that tend to be dominated by Democrats or Republicans, will need to be flexible in choosing a metropolitan area, have sufficient means to afford a large set of potential neighborhoods, or neglect neighborhood quality in order to move to a place dominated by one party or the other. Most surprising, those who have the most desire and most latitude to sort by party are not doing so. The young (who are less invested in neighborhood quality), the rich (who have the means to live where they like), and strong and ideologically consistent partisans (who

may be more directly motivated by partisan affect) behave much like other partisans.

Our findings do not deny the existence of other forms of segregation, especially on income, or that these can have importance consequences for politics and potentially for political geography in the long run. While overall racial segregation has been persistent but declining, income segregation has worsened (Reardon and Bischoff 2011, 2013). Our results indicate one way that this income sorting may be important: it can lead to polarization within communities. One reason partisan sorting has not been worse is that affluent Democrats and Republicans are converging on the same types of neighborhoods in "purple," nonlandslide areas. Our results can help to explain why recent scholarship has demonstrated that such balanced areas can be internally polarized (McCarty et al. 2014). The politically engaged, ideological, and affluent—those with the highest degree of engagement in politics and the means to act on their political preferences—are not sorting by party, but they are bringing their polarized partisan attitudes to balanced and sometimes internally polarized communities.²⁷

Our findings can also be situated in a broader literature tracking historical changes in American political geography. Scholarship on such long-term changes sometimes focuses on changes, such as the development of industrial centers (Rodden 2014) or the construction of the Interstate Highway System (Nall 2015), that occur much earlier in the "funnel of causality," to borrow Converse's language (Campbell et al. 1960, 24–37). Numerous historical and institutional factors have contributed to the evolution of political geography over time. The account in this article is closer to the end of the funnel than to the beginning. By comparing present-day stated preferences and actual moving behavior, which have been the crux of studies of social polarization of partisans, our study is like many others decidedly closer to the narrow end of this funnel. Alongside a set of instances of affective polarization between the two parties (Iyengar et al. 2012), we find some reassuring evidence that there are dimensions of behavior on which partisan differences are having minimal effect.

Partisan identity may be growing in strength and salience across numerous facets of daily life and may be an increasingly useful indicator of a set of shared behaviors. However, as our study shows, neither partisan affect nor its correlates are sufficient to overcome the substantial material concerns that inform a decision as weighty as residential choice. When

26. Our results do not rule out the possibility that sorting could be occurring within specific regions.

27. If there is an additional cause for concern, it is that class segregation of communities could have implications for policy attitudes (Newman, Johnston, and Lown 2015) or that the segregation of the rich has implications for the distribution of public goods.

it comes to one extremely important household decision, politics remains, in Robert Dahl's (2005) words, a "sideshow in the great circus of life."

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