

# The Home as a Political Fortress; Family Agreement in an Era of Polarization

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## Abstract

The manifestations of party polarization in America are well known: legislative gridlock, harsh elite rhetoric, and at the level of the electorate, increasing hostility across the partisan divide. We investigate the ramifications of polarization for processes of family socialization. Using the classic 1965 Youth-Parent Political Socialization Panel data as a baseline, we employ original national surveys of spouses and offspring conducted in 2015 supplemented by the 2014 and 2016 TargetSmart national voter files to demonstrate that political correspondence between married couples and parent-offspring agreement have both increased substantially in the polarized era. We further demonstrate that the principal reason for increased spousal correspondence is mate selection based on politics. Spousal agreement, in turn, creates an "echo chamber" that facilitates intergenerational continuity. Overall, our results suggest a vicious cycle by which socialization exacerbates party polarization.

**KEYWORDS:** polarization, homophily; assortative mating; generations, partisanship;

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America is a divided society. The most significant fault line in the second decade of the 21st Century is not race, religion or economic status, but political party affiliation. Two-thirds of the electorate (and 80 percent plus counting leaners) affiliate with a political party. Partisan identity creates a sense of "us against them." While partisans' feelings toward their in party have remained stable and favorable over time, evaluations of the out party have become significantly more negative since the mid-1980s (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Pew Research Center 2014). Bias directed at the out-group political party exceeds comparable bias directed at racial minorities even when cognitive processing is suppressed and group identity elicited at the implicit or sub-conscious level (Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

Partisan polarization has important ramifications for family political socialization. First, we anticipate that polarization has led to increased correspondence in the political opinions of married couples. Polarization makes partisan identity more salient (Iyengar and Westwood 2015) and it is well documented that socialization is most effective when political affiliations are salient (Jennings and Niemi 1974; 1981; Jennings, Stoker and Bowers 2009). Since humans are averse to conflict and disagreement, polarization encourages homophily in interpersonal relations. In fact, the evidence indicates that partisan cues have become so powerful in the current era that they affect attitudes in a variety of non-political domains (see, for instance, Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Gift and Gift 2015; Hersch and Goldenberg 2016). Especially relevant to the question of spousal coupling, one study demonstrates that faces are considered more attractive when the target is a co-partisan (Nicholson et al. 2016).

Second, strengthened spousal agreement on politics makes intergenerational transmission of political attitudes more successful (Jennings and Niemi 1974, Rico and Jennings 2016). Heightened in-group favoritism and out-group animosity stimulates more frequent expressions of parental values, providing increased opportunities for offspring to perceive and conform to the party line. In a few cases (e.g. political activists), parents may actively

discourage their offspring from expressing discrepant views; in most instances, however, we suspect that the transmission is less deliberate, and attributable more to prolonged exposure to one point of view (Jennings and Niemi 1974).

Using a national survey of parents and offspring conducted in 2015 and two complete voter files (consisting of all registered voters) compiled by TargetSmart before the 2014 and 2016 elections, we demonstrate that spousal and intergenerational correspondence on party identification increased significantly over the past 50 years, against the baseline of the classic Youth-Parent Socialization Panel administered in 1965, with re-interviews in 1973, 1982 and 1997 (Jennings and Niemi 1974; 1981; Stoker and Jennings 1995; 2005; Jennings, Stoker and Bowers 2009). We go on to show that elevated levels of spousal and intergenerational agreement apply only to political attitudes. On personality and a variety of non-political lifestyle choices there is considerably less correspondence between couples and between parents and their children.

Not only do we demonstrate strengthened familial agreement in the post-polarization era, but we also identify the mechanisms giving rise to spousal homogeneity. While longitudinal data tracking spousal pairs before and after they meet and then marry do not exist, we identify newly formed spousal relationships from the 2014 and 2016 TargetSmart voter files, thus creating a "before-after" research design that allows us to assess the political underpinnings of mate selection as it occurs. We demonstrate that enhanced spousal agreement is attributable primarily to mate choice based on partisan preference and also rule out several plausible alternative explanations for family political correspondence.

Our data provide less leverage over the question of what drives intergenerational agreement, but we use the voter files to show that spousal agreement is, in fact, a key pre-requisite. In the case of the survey data, we consider the extent to which the frequency of political discussions within the household strengthens the likelihood of inter-generational agreement. In closing, we consider the implications of family socialization for mass political behavior in

the aftermath of the hyper-polarized election of 2016.

### **Party Polarization: Implications for Socialization**

One definition of party polarization is ideological; polarized parties are far apart in the policy space. The increased ideological extremity of party elites is well documented, but the extent to which the electorate has followed suit remains unclear (see Fiorina and Abrams 2008 for a summary). A different indicator is the extent to which partisans consider each other a disliked out group. Group polarization occurs when individuals express not only positive sentiments for their own group, but also negative sentiments toward those affiliated with opposing groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979). To the extent that party identification is a form of group identity, partisans should express a preference for co-partisans over supporters of the opposing party.<sup>1</sup>

There is unequivocal evidence that partisans have become more polarized in terms of affect. Beginning in the mid-1980s, data from the American National Elections Studies show that Democrats and Republicans came not only to dislike the opposing party, but also to impute negative traits to supporters of the out party. Most dramatic is the increase in the percentage of partisans who express reservations over the prospect of a son or daughter marrying an out-group partisan – from single digits in the 1960s to a quarter of the electorate in the 21st Century (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). In polarized times, the party divisions and out-party animus are sufficiently strong to inculcate a sense of social distance from political opponents, thus motivating partisans to associate with like-minded others.

This "approach-avoidance" syndrome is especially likely to manifest itself in long-term, emotionally charged relationships. Like-minded parents reinforce each other and raise children in their own political mold. Among ideologues and activists, parental transmission

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<sup>1</sup>There is conflicting evidence over the extent to which polarization is driven by out-party animus or in-party favoritism. Some studies (see Iyengar and Westwood 2015) indicate that partisans are motivated primarily by out-group prejudice; others (see Lelkes and Westwood 2017) suggest the opposite.

may be intentional; for the majority of parents, however, transmission of preferences is inadvertent or unconscious, and occurs primarily because of the frequent opportunities for offspring to observe and model parental attitudes (Jennings and Niemi 1974). Overall, we anticipate higher levels of partisan conformity within the family in the post-polarization era. Not only do we anticipate greater levels of spousal and familial political agreement, but also strengthened mate selection or positive assortment based on partisan preference. As we discuss below, among the multiple factors contributing to familial political agreement, polarization strengthens the selection explanation for why couples in the contemporary era show a high degree of correspondence in their political predispositions.

### **Explanations for Family Agreement**

The predominant explanation for spousal agreement is choice homophily – a preference to associate with similar others along a given attribute (Mare 2016; Huber and Malhotra 2017; Stoker and Jennings 2005; Lou and Klohnen 2005; Martin et al. 1986). One version of this explanation is that spousal political homophily occurs because of trait-to-trait political attraction. Democrats (and perhaps liberals) are drawn to the like-minded, and explicitly avoid Republicans (and perhaps conservatives) and vice-versa. The second version is that spousal political homophily is "induced" or spurious, resulting from marital selection on non-political attributes (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987; Stoker and Jennings 2005; Klostad, McDermott and Hatemi 2013). Couples share many attributes in common other than political preferences (Martin et al. 1986; Alford et al. 2011). One such attribute is religion. We would not be surprised if two evangelical Christians who marry are both Republican and ideologically conservative on cultural issues.

The third explanation for spousal political agreement is social homophily. Marital choices are constrained by the supply of suitable partners – referred to as "search frictions" by economists (Bragdon, Hortacsu and Ariely 2010). Children of professionals do not frequently

interact with children from the working class – even more so today than in the 1950s (Mare 2016). Marital correspondence could be boosted in contexts where there is little variation in the social background of potential spouses (Choi and Tienda 2016). Finally, there is the possibility of attitude convergence. Couples talk to each other about politics more than anyone else (Beck and Jennings 1991). Partners might disagree at the time of marriage, but move toward each other over time either through persuasion or exposure to common experiences (e.g. media exposure).

Several studies have addressed political sorting in marriage and dating in the United States with mixed results, but few outside of the online dating studies (described below) have either recent data, nationally representative samples, or longitudinal data on couples before and after mating occurs. The last wave of the Youth-Parent Socialization Panel is now twenty years old. These data show convergence, i.e., couples becoming more alike over the course of the marriage, but this finding is the exception: the Alford et al. (2011) study of the Virginia 30k and their relatives, for instance, based on data collected in the mid-1980s, shows substantial correspondence early in the marriage, with little evidence of increasing agreement over time.

Other studies are based on convenience samples with limited external validity. Buss and Barnes (1986) recruited 92 couples from a large metropolitan area. They found a strong correlation between spouses' political beliefs, but no change over time. Feng and Baker (1994) examined 124 couples from southern California at three points in time. They detected no convergence on any predispositions – political or otherwise. The Iowa Marital Assessment Project, based on 291 newly married couples gathered from Johnson County, Iowa in the early 2000s, showed substantial correspondence among newlyweds, supporting the conclusion that correspondence exists at the time of marriage (Watson et al. 2004; Luo and Klohnen 2005). Still, the Alford et al. (2011) and the Iowa studies are cross-sectional and cannot fully disentangle choice-based from induced homophily, although Alford et al. (2011) present

a good case for ruling out induced homophily by showing that marital correspondence on politics is not diminished when controlling for shared backgrounds on religious belief, church attendance, or education.

One possible explanation for the political homophily found in the Iowa Marital Assessment project and the Virginia 30k twin study that cannot be ruled out is the possibility that marital pairs became more alike during the dating process. As the economists remind us, marriage is a market like any other market. One member of a dating pair may want the marriage more than the other, and simply convert on matters of politics during the dating phase to smooth the path towards the altar. Substantial political convergence on the day of the marriage is, therefore, to be expected in a polarized era. Our approach to teasing out selection from conversion effects is to identify newly formed pairs in the national voter files and to analyze levels of agreement among couples who only recently met.

With the advent of Internet dating sites there is a trove of data to analyze ideological homophily while dating. What do the online dating studies tell us about the role of politics in the mate selection process? First, likes attract likes, including but not limited to politics (Bragdon, Hortacsu and Ariely 2010; Klofstad et al. 2012; 2013; Huber and Malhotra 2017). Second, the politically incompatible either do not communicate or quickly break off communication (Kofoed 2008; Klofstad et al. 2013; Huber and Malhotra 2017). Third, there is continuing disagreement over the extent to which ideological homophily is choice-based or induced. Klofstad et al. (2013) argue in favor of induced homophily and observe that subjects "seek partners who are like themselves on almost all traits" (p. 529). Huber and Malhotra (2017) come down strongly in support of the trait-to-trait political homophily thesis. They find that ideology is a somewhat stronger predictor of joint online messaging than partisanship, and both stand up with controls for induced homophily. With the caveat that only twelve percent of couples married between 2010 and 2015 met on Internet dating sites,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>[www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/5-facts-about-online-dating](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/5-facts-about-online-dating).

this literature documents impressive political correspondence among couples, highlighting the importance of politics in the pre-marital dating ritual.

Turning to intergenerational correspondence, the primary explanation is long established. In 1974 Jennings and Niemi (p. 154) asserted that the single most important determinant of intergenerational continuity is parental political agreement – a position reaffirmed by Jennings, Stoker and Bowers (2009) and again by Rico and Jennings (2016).<sup>3</sup> Mare (2016) reaches the same conclusion for levels of education. Children raised by educationally homogeneous parents select spouses with close matches on education. While other factors, most notably the frequency of political discussion within the household, act as mediators of parental transmission (Jennings and Niemi 1968), the evidence points to the primacy of parental political agreement as the principal driver of intergenerational transmission. As indicated at the outset, the mechanisms underlying the importance of parental political agreement are twofold: first, homogeneous parents send consistent political cues to their offspring. Second, parents who agree and discuss political matters more frequently are more effective in raising offspring in their own mold.

## **Research Design and Data**

To document the change in family political correspondence and the mechanisms that contribute to it, we draw on three data sources. First, we establish a baseline of partisan agreement well before the onset of polarization, using data from the 1965 youth-parent socialization study (Jennings and Niemi 1974). The data contain 430 marital pairs and 1,669 high school seniors paired with one or both parents. We also make use of the 1973 panel wave, pre-polarization, which contains 556 recently married spousal pairs from the

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<sup>3</sup>Jennings, Stoker and Bowers (2009, p. 795) also assert that the trait-to-trait model of intergenerational transmission has proved to be "remarkably robust." On the other hand, there is a growing literature on the genetic transmission of political preferences, including political ideology and specific issue opinions (see Alford et al. 2005; Eaves and Eysenck 1974; Eaves, Eysenck and Martin 1989; Fowler, Baker and Dawes 2008; Hatemi et al. 2010; Martin et al. 1986).

original 1965 high school senior sample. Second, we conducted two original 2015 surveys that replicated many elements of the Youth-Parent study. We recruited a national sample of 559 heterosexual spousal dyads and a national sample of 530 parent-child dyads from the YouGov online panel.<sup>4</sup> The filial generation ranged in age between 18 and 27. These are two independent samples and there are no overlapping triads.<sup>5</sup> Our third source of data is the 2014 and 2016 VoterBase voter files, compiled by TargetSmart. These files encompass over 146 million registered voters in the United States, including address, party registration, gender, age and other demographic variables that allow us to construct marital and parent-offspring dyads.<sup>6</sup> We use the 2014 and 2016 voter files in tandem to address multiple rival explanations – selection, contextual homophily, induced agreement, convergence, and, in the case of parent-offspring correspondence, spousal agreement.

We begin by comparing the partisan correspondence of marital dyads and parent-offspring dyads on partisanship in 1965 to the 2015 YouGov sample. Moving on from partisanship, we then analyze the correspondence on related attitudes, such as partisan affect and correspondence on issue opinions. Next, we address religious attitudes. Lastly, we consider correspondence on non-political lifestyle preferences.

Note that there are two measures of dyadic agreement: (1) relative, which is the correlation between spousal or parent-child dyad members, and (2) absolute, which is how far apart dyad members are on average. Following the social networks literature, we can assess the relative level of dyad agreement, using a distinguishable or non-exchangeable ordering of dyad members (Gonzalez and Griffin 1999; Gonzalez and Griffin 1997), i.e. listing wives in a

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<sup>4</sup>Individuals who agree to complete online surveys tend to be drawn from a population that is relatively engaged in politics. However, this bias applies to all samples, recruited online and offline, including those based on probabilistic methods. In a recent comparison of the performance of several online, non-probability samples, Pew Research (2016) found that a YouGov sample exhibited the lowest upward bias on multiple indicators of civic engagement.

<sup>5</sup>Each YouGov panelist was given a five dollar incentive to recruit a spouse or a child between 18 and 27. The Human Subjects IRB at the authors' universities approved the survey design (Protocol-34927 and Protocol-15471-EX) on June 9, 2015 and July 28, 2015 respectively.

<sup>6</sup>See online supplemental information (SI)-1 for further details.

fixed column and husbands in the other (i.e. distinguishable). The appropriate indicator of dyad agreement is the polychoric correlation, a measure of association that is also sensitive to the ordinal nature of most of our variables.<sup>7</sup> If the univariate distributions of husbands and wives do not differ, our measure of relative agreement will converge to a measure of absolute agreement. But when differences in distributions across dyad members are stark, as in the case of a significant gender gap, relative agreement and absolute agreement can differ significantly. To account for differences in the univariate distributions, we examined spousal agreement using both exchangeable and non-exchangeable dyad orderings. We obtained consistent results across both specifications and in the sections that follow we present only the findings from the non-exchangeable setup. We provide the exchangeable results in the Appendix.

In the final set of analyses, we consider the alternative causal mechanisms that may have contributed to strengthened spousal political homogeneity in the contemporary era. We begin by assessing the role of social context (constrained partner markets) as a potential rival explanation for spousal agreement. We assess spousal agreement across geographical areas characterized by varying levels of party competition and compare the effects of contextual partisan homogeneity with the parallel effects of contextual racial homogeneity on same race marriages, relying on data from the 2014 voter file. The results indicate only modest contextual effects.

Next, we distinguish between deliberate and induced selection (mate selection based on some non-political attribute that correlates with partisan affiliation), by comparing spousal agreement on latent partisan predispositions to agreement on latent religious predispositions, and latent lifestyle preferences.<sup>8</sup> We distinguish between selection and convergence (persuasion) by allowing length of marriage to affect spousal agreement.<sup>9</sup> As a robustness check, we

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<sup>7</sup>We present all the bivariate polychoric correlations in 1965 and 2015 in SI-3.

<sup>8</sup>See SI-4 for details and all variables used.

<sup>9</sup>We also include education and an indicator of spousal political discussion as a covariate in this analysis

conduct one further analysis to rule out persuasion that occurs through induced selection. In separate models, we regress spousal partisan agreement on the interaction of non-political traits (religiosity and authoritarianism) with length of marriage. If those agreeing more on these non-political traits are more apt to converge on partisan attitudes over the course of marriage, we should observe a significant non-political trait x length of marriage interaction effect.

As an additional test of selection effects, we compare the pre-polarization correspondence on partisanship for recently married couples in the 1973 wave of the youth panel to a subsample of recently married couples in the 2014 voter file. Since newlyweds have had little opportunity to converge, the level of agreement in this group is indicative of selection effects. We then identify newly formed spousal pairs who were living together in 2016, but who lived apart in 2014 (details on the identification of these newly formed pairs are provided in SI-1). In this "before-after" design, we show that political agreement among newly formed partners is substantial, and exceeds agreement on education.

Finally, we shed light on the mechanisms behind intergenerational agreement by comparing transmission rates of parents who a) agree politically and b) discuss politics more actively relying on both, our surveys and the full voter file.

## **Partisan Agreement**

We begin by mapping partisan agreement in the 2015 YouGov survey. Coding partisan agreement as pairings of Democrat/Democrat, Independent/Independent, and Republican/Republican, we obtain a spousal agreement level of 81.5% and an intergenerational agreement level of 74.2%.<sup>10</sup> Between the 1965 and 2015 surveys, spousal agreement increased by over 8 percent from 73.2% to 81.5%, while disagreement declined by a similar margin from 13.0% to 5.8%. Intergenerational correspondence reveals a similar trend, mov-

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because of the typical bias toward high education in online samples.

<sup>10</sup>We treat leaners as partisans in the YouGov surveys and Youth-Parent Socialization data.

ing from 68.6% to 74.2% – an increase of around 6 percent, while disagreement declines only modestly from 13.7% to 11.3%. We further compared spousal agreement in both years across levels of education; the results were consistent indicating that the increase in agreement is not concentrated among more involved (educated) households.<sup>11</sup>

Given the typical bias in online samples and the possibility of selection bias resulting in artificially high agreement for the YouGov panelists who successfully recruited their spouse or offspring for the study, we carry out two robustness checks. First, we compare our 2015 survey estimate of spousal agreement with the estimate from the 2014 voter file. We identify spouses in the voter file as adults of similar age and differing genders residing at the same address. For this set of 18,628,609 spousal pairs in states that allow for party registration, the spousal correspondence in the voter file is almost identical to the YouGov estimate. Using the three category partisan breakdown, the voter file shows 80.5% spousal correspondence, a trivial difference from the YouGov estimate of 81.5%. To rule out roommate situations that might contaminate our estimates, we compute agreement for dyads (i.e. two-adult-households) separately, with a very similar agreement rate of 79.9%.<sup>12</sup> Once again, there are only trivial differences in agreement across varying levels of household education.<sup>13</sup>

As a second test for possible bias in the YouGov results, we leverage access to background data from panelists who were unsuccessful in recruiting their spouses. Looking for covariate balance or absence of selection bias (see SI-2), we find that respondents who successfully recruited a family member resemble those who did not in all respects but gender (females were somewhat more successful in recruiting spouses/offspring).

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<sup>11</sup>In 1965, agreement rates were 73.9% for a household with a mean level of high school or less, 77.6% for a mean of some college, and 67.2% for college degree or more. In 2015, the corresponding numbers were 82.3%, 89.0%, and 79.5%.

<sup>12</sup>Because party registration is limited to Democrat, Republican and Independent, we decompose the Independent category into partisan leaners and pure Independents using an imputation procedure that uses voting in partisan primaries and other relevant factors to identify Democratic and Republican leaning Independents. For details on the imputation and the validation of the methodology, see SI-1.

<sup>13</sup>Agreement rates range from 82.0% for a household with a mean level of education of high school to 81.6% for college degree or more.

We next turn to the voter file to construct a population estimate of intergenerational agreement by looking at parent-offspring dyads in states that allow for partisan registration, again using a three category breakdown.<sup>14</sup> In total, our approach yields 4,111,860 cases. The overall intergenerational partisan correspondence in the voter file is 78.6%, slightly higher than our survey estimate of 74.2%.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for both spousal and intergenerational agreement, the survey and voter file data converge.

### **Family Agreement across Attitude Domains**

As already noted, our measure of relative agreement is the polychoric correlation. On the key variable of party identification, agreement between spouses and across generations is higher in 2015 than in 1965. The spousal correlation increased from .72 to .80 and the parent-child correlation increased from .60 to .72.<sup>16</sup>

The trend is strengthened when we look at the feeling thermometer evaluations for groups and opinions on contemporary issues.<sup>17</sup> We start with group thermometer scores for marital pairs. As seen in Figure 1, the average spousal correlation in 1965 is .39; the comparable correlation in 2015 is .77. Turning to the intergenerational pairs shown in Figure 2, the average parent-offspring correlation for the group thermometers in 1965 is .20; the average in 2015 is .64.

[Figure 1 and Figure 2 about here]

The 1965 survey included questions on four issues: support for school prayer, racial desegregation of public schools, freedom of speech (allowing speech critical of churches), and political tolerance (allowing an elected communist to take office). The 2015 respondents

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<sup>14</sup>See SI-1 for a detailed description of our indicator of intergenerational party agreement.

<sup>15</sup>Our estimates of elevated spousal and intergenerational correspondence in the polarized era are consistent with those obtained by Bond and Messing (2015) using Facebook data.

<sup>16</sup>Because family members in 1965 can consist of either dyads or triads we look at parent-child dyads separately to ensure comparability with our 2015 results. See SI-3 for detailed correlations.

<sup>17</sup>The specific groups evaluated and specific issue positions along with the individual correlations are shown in SI-3.

indicated their preferences on ten policy issues, including immigration, business regulation, crime, income inequality, welfare, healthcare, abortion, military involvement in Syria, marijuana legalization and gay marriage. The average issue correlation for marital pairs in 1965 is .45; by 2015 it has risen to .83. The significant increase in issue agreement over time is attributable in part to the absence of standard social welfare or scope of government issues from the 1965 survey, issues on which couples may have been more likely to agree, although our latent variable analyses, presented in SI-3, bolster our findings. For the 2015 data the average correlation on issues roughly equals that for party identification.<sup>18</sup>

The average correlation on issue opinions across generations is .24 in 1965 (see Figure 2). The same correlation in the 2015 survey is .68. We are reluctant to make strong claims about strengthened parent-offspring issue agreement given the differences in the content of the survey items and the absence of "classic" social welfare issues in the 1965 survey. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that an increase of this magnitude can be attributed wholly to the content of the questionnaire. In addition, our latent variable analyses, less susceptible to the specific nature of survey questions, point to the same result (see SI-4).

We turn next to correspondence on religious attitudes. The 1965 and 2015 surveys both tap attendance at religious services and beliefs about the Bible with the same questions. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the trend – strengthened over time correspondence on religiosity.<sup>19</sup> The average 1965 spousal correlation is .61, compared to .86 for 2015. For the parent-child dyads, the 1965 correlation is .35, increasing to .64 in 2015. Overall, by 2015, family agreement on religiosity equals that on party identification, while in 1965 partisan agreement substantially outstripped agreement on religiosity.

Lastly, we turn to non-political predispositions. We use four items from the 2012 ANES

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<sup>18</sup>There is one outlier in the 2015 data – support for the death penalty – on which the spousal correlation is notably lower (.63) than on the other issues and there is a statistically significant absolute value gender gap.

<sup>19</sup>The questions are frequency of church attendance and inerrancy of the Bible. See SI-3 for item-by-item correlations for spousal pairs and intergenerational pairs.

authoritarianism scale and a set of questions tapping preferences for recreational and social activities. As shown in Figure 1, the spousal correlation on these items is notably lower than for the items with political content. The average marital pair correlation among the four authoritarianism items in 2015 is .61. For the battery of lifestyle and recreational choice items, the average spousal correlation is weaker still (.42). For the intergenerational dyads, the average correlation across the battery of authoritarianism items is .52.<sup>20</sup> The lower agreement for these attitudes indicates that identity politics matters a good deal more to families than non-political activities and interests.

In sum, familial correspondence has increased in most domains we consider, but it is most pronounced in the political domains of partisan attitudes and policy preferences. As noted earlier, Jennings and various coauthors have asserted several times over the past 40 years that nothing is more effective in promoting political continuity between generations than parents who agree with each other politically. We have no reason to expect this family dynamic to have changed in the contemporary era. Indeed, as we show in the next section, elevated spousal agreement has contributed to higher rates of parent-offspring agreement in the post-polarization era.

### **Mechanisms for Family Political Agreement**

In this section we address explanations for spousal and intergenerational agreement on politics. In the case of the former, we previewed four possibilities – active selection based on political predispositions, induced homophily arising from selection on non-political traits related to politics, constrained partner markets (contextual effects), and persuasion or convergence over time. Both selection mechanisms (active and induced) and persuasion are individual-level mechanisms we can address with survey data, although our 2015 survey has insufficient sample size to test the contextual hypothesis (constrained partner markets). We

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<sup>20</sup>We did not include the recreational and lifestyle items in the 2015 offspring survey.

can, however, test this explanation using the 2014 voter file. Couples are sorted by zip code, and correspondence on party affiliation and same race marriages are compared across homogeneous and heterogeneous geographic locations.

Our analysis of the mechanisms underlying parent-offspring agreement is less extensive and focuses on the availability of partisan cues within the home. Obviously, a child must accurately perceive the political affiliation of the parent for socialization to occur (see Tedin 1974; Ojeda and Hatemi 2015). Our expectation is that when parents agree, the signal they send to their children is clear, resulting in greater perceptual accuracy and parent-offspring agreement. We test this argument with the survey data and the voter file; in both cases the evidence fits with the expectation that parental agreement facilitates transmission of partisan identity. In the case of the surveys, we further show that the accuracy of the offspring’s perception of parental preferences has increased substantially over time. Finally, we assess a variant of the cue availability hypothesis by comparing parent-offspring agreement in households characterized by more or less inter-personal discussions over politics.

### **Contextual Spousal Homophily**

We begin by testing the constrained partner market hypothesis. Figure 3 displays the effect of geography on spousal agreement by mapping variation in partisan registration by zip code. Note that this analysis assumes that people seek out spouses from the area contiguous to their residence, rather than moving to more distant areas, or using online databases. We examined the geographic stability of the marriage market for couples that married (or began living together) between 2014 and 2016.<sup>21</sup> The vast majority of people in this subset selected spouses from their zip code of residence. For men in this subset, two-thirds found their partner from the same zip code. For women, the result is virtually identical – 65 percent.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>For details on how we constructed this subset of marital pairs, see SI-1.

<sup>22</sup>Additional evidence suggest online dating resulting in marriage is rare (see <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/5-facts-about-online-dating>); our own Yougov sur-

[Figure 3 about here]

Marital pairs are most likely to share partisan registration when zip codes are politically homogeneous suggesting that the supply of copartisans matters. Going from one standard deviation below and above the mean homogeneity score (rescored to range from 0 to 1) produces an "effect size" of 5.7 points for spousal partisan homogeneity (78.7 percent to 84.4 percent).<sup>23</sup> In substantive terms, however, the effects of contextual homogeneity on partisan correspondence appear modest. Consider the most diverse zip codes (those with scores of zero), where there is an abundant supply of potential spouses of all political stripes. Even in these areas, spousal agreement reaches nearly 80 percent.

To place the effects of geography on spousal homogeneity in context, we conduct a parallel analysis of contextual racial homogeneity and spousal racial agreement (see Figure 4). The measure of contextual racial homogeneity is based on the proportion of residents from the modal ethnicity in any given zip code; it ranges from .25 in perfectly heterogeneous zip codes to 1 in perfectly homogeneous zip codes.<sup>24</sup>

[Figure 4 about here]

It is clear from Figure 4 that most zip codes are racially homogeneous. Importantly, context exerts a considerably stronger effect on same race than same party marriages. A shift of one standard deviation below and above the mean homogeneity score produces an increase of 9.2 percentage points in same-race marriage, notably higher than the comparable effect on partisan homogeneity. Overall, the supply of potential spouses with common attributes is more consequential for same-race than same-party pairings, and these results bolster our ar-

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vey puts this figure at 6 percent.

<sup>23</sup>Dyadic-level partisanship is coded as 1 if both spouses are affiliated with the same party and 0 if not. The measure of partisan affiliation is  $(\%Registered\ Republicans - \%Registered\ Democrats) / \%Registered\ Partisans$ . We only use zip codes for which we have at least 100 registered voters.

<sup>24</sup>We consider all zip codes for which we have at least 100 residents, leaving us with 23,610 zip codes for which we have a median number of 646 spousal pairs.

gument that constrained partner markets are not a major factor underlying spousal political agreement.<sup>25</sup>

### **Selection versus Persuasion as Determinants of Spousal Homophily**

Selection results in spousal agreement, either because politics was important to the marriage decision, or some related factor – such as religion – played a leading role leading to induced homophily. Persuasion, on the other hand, implies some initial disagreement followed by greater agreement over time. We implement separate models to assess the effects of marriage duration on spousal correspondence in the domains of partisanship, religiosity, and lifestyle preferences.<sup>26</sup> The outcome variable of interest is the absolute spousal difference within each domain.

As shown in Table 1 for the 2015 YouGov data, the level of disagreement at the onset of marriage (given by the constant term) is weakest for partisanship (.35 versus .51 and .75). While persuasion effects (the length of marriage coefficient) are non-significant in the case of partisanship (and in the case of lifestyle interests), they are present in the case of religious attitudes, i.e. absolute spousal differences in religiosity decrease significantly over time, although the effect is quite small. These results do not support the contention that spousal political homogeneity is attributable to initial political disagreement followed by convergence, although some gains in correspondence likely occur over the long haul.<sup>27</sup>

[Table 1 about here]

One explanation for the weak persuasion effects in Table 1 is that most of the spouses in the YouGov sample have been married sufficiently long to have already converged on politics – if convergence of any consequence actually occurs. To validate our survey findings

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<sup>25</sup>For more in-depth analyses on location effects on racial and partisan homogeneity of spouses, including analyses at the census block level to assuage concerns about aggregation, see SI-5.

<sup>26</sup>These correspondence scores are derived from latent variable models, which are presented in full in SI-4.

<sup>27</sup>See Stoker and Jennings (2005); in addition, Alford et al. (2011, Table 7) report somewhat higher correlations for couples married more than 28 years than for couples married four years or less.

of limited convergence, we first look at young spousal pairs in the 2014 voter file. When we group spousal pairs by the age of the younger spouse, agreement increases as the designated spouse advances in age. However, it never drops below 72.4%, no matter the age of the designated spouse.<sup>28</sup>

To demonstrate the sharp contrast in persuasion effects before and after polarization, we now turn to the 1973 wave of the Youth-Parent panel which includes the spouses of the 1965 high school seniors. Since these respondents were 17 or 18 in 1965, they could not have been married for more than eight years. For this group of relatively recently married couples in 1973, spousal partisan agreement registers at 54.3%. For the comparable group of recently married couples in the 2014 voter file – couples in which the younger spouse is either 25 or 26 – spousal partisan agreement is 73.9%. This is an increase of 36 percent in partisan agreement among couples who have had little opportunity to persuade each other. These data demonstrate a substantial strengthening of the selection mechanism. In the post-polarization period, the difference in partisan agreement between recently married couples and couples married for more than two decades is only 10.2 percentage points (72.1% vs. 82.3%).<sup>29</sup>

Our findings of weak persuasion are bolstered through analyses of newly formed spousal pairs using the 2014 and 2016 voter files. We create new pairs by identifying spouses in 2016 in the same fashion as we did for 2014. These are pairs living at the same address in 2016, but who lived at separate addresses in 2014.<sup>30</sup> For this subset, the partisan homogeneity rate is still substantial – 67.7%. We also have estimates of partisan affiliation for these spouses before they chose to live with each other from the 2014 voter file. For this subset of "prospective spouses" the agreement rate is 64.7 percent. Thus, spousal correspondence

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<sup>28</sup>We use five-year increments. See SI-5 for details.

<sup>29</sup>We compare homogeneity estimates for couples in which the younger spouse is 25 or younger with those for couples in which the younger spouse is 45 or older.

<sup>30</sup>See SI-1 for details.

is only 3 percentage points higher after couples begin to live together than before. This is close to a "pure" selection effect if we assume these couples had relatively little opportunity to engage in persuasion since the prospective spouses did not live together in 2014.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, we turn to a possible non-political explanation for the enhanced importance of selection in the current era. We have argued that the major factor underlying the importance of selection is polarization. An alternative explanation is that today both men and women are exercising choice, while in the 1960s and 1970s, women were yet to achieve the economic standing that granted them equal status in the partner market.<sup>32</sup> We attempt to get at this "double barreled" selection process by comparing the agreement rates among three categories of the newly formed spousal pairs, using education as our proxy for economic independence – pairs in which each partner has at least a college degree, pairs in which the male is more educated than the female, and pairs with the opposite pattern. In fact, homogeneity rates among newly formed pairs in which both spouses are highly educated are higher – 69.9%, compared to pairs in which the woman is more educated (65.8%), and couples in which the man is more educated (66.6%). While this is some indication that selection exercised by both partners strengthens spousal agreement, the scale of the effect is insufficient to account for the massive observed over-time increase in political agreement.

### **Induced Selection as Determinant of Spousal Homophily**

Induced selection results in political homophily because some non-political attribute related to politics – such as religion – was an important factor leading to induced or causally spurious political homophily. In this case, couples may largely agree on their wedding day, but only because they were drawn to each other through agreement on some non-political

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<sup>31</sup>See SI-1 for full cross-tabulation on partisan correspondence of prospective spouses.

<sup>32</sup>Among the subset of newly formed spousal pairs, those with equal levels of education are the modal category, but among all spousal pairs across all age groups taken from the 2014 voter file, pairs with unequal levels of education are the modal category (see also Footnote 34). This suggests that the modern marriage market is in fact characterized by gender equality, more so than in the past.

attribute.

We have good reasons to discount this rival mechanism. First, as shown in Table 1, initial spousal disagreement is lower for party affiliation (.35) than religiosity (.51)<sup>33</sup> This is preliminary evidence for greater selection based on partisanship. Second, if it is true that people attracted to each other on the basis of some non-political trait gradually move toward each other politically over the course of their marriage, we should observe a negative interaction between these traits and length of marriage in a regression analysis of spousal partisan differences, i.e. a decrease in differences over time. As presented in Table 2, we find no such interaction effect for either religiosity or authoritarianism. Note that these results are unchanged when we treat spousal dyads as exchangeable (see SI-5).

[Table 2 about here]

Finally, our confidence in the lack of induced agreement effects is bolstered through analyses of newly formed spousal pairs. For this subset, we can rule out induced homophily due to selection based on education (scored as high-school or less, some college, college graduate or greater) since agreement on education is only 56.0% – notably lower than the partisan homogeneity rate of 67.7%. Clearly, partisanship surpasses education as a basis for marital selection.<sup>34</sup>

## **Mechanisms of Intergenerational Transmission**

We consider two related mechanisms underlying parent-offspring transmission. First, transmission could be triggered by partisan signaling. Co-partisan parents provide more consistent cues, making it easier for offspring to perceive and model their parents' views. Second, transmission could be a result of identity salience and the frequency of political

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<sup>33</sup>The constant in the partisanship model is not statistically distinguishable from the constant in the model for religiosity, but does deviate significantly from the constant in the model for lifestyle preferences.

<sup>34</sup>For an additional baseline, we computed the spousal agreement rate on education – scored as high-school or less, some college, college graduate or greater – among the 18,628,609 married pairs in the voter file. The homophily rate was 43.2% – notably lower than the agreement rate of 80.5% for partisan affiliation.

discussions in the home. This corresponds to our suggestion at the outset that some parents raise children in their own political mold by actively communicating their views. Of course, the causal dynamic behind transmission is likely a combination of both.

We begin by comparing transmission rates across generations among spouses in the voter file data whose partisanship is either consistent or inconsistent. Transmission rates for consistent parents are 85.6 percent, compared to only 39.4 percent for inconsistent parents.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to these findings, intergenerational transmission in 1965 was unaffected by spousal political homogeneity. Among the subset of 430 dyads that consist of husband, wife and offspring, the percentage of offspring disagreeing with both parents, was 24.7% for offspring with heterogeneous parents and 23.5% for offspring with politically homogeneous parents. Not only has spousal agreement become more important as a determinant of parent-offspring agreement, our data also indicate that one explanation for this trend is increased perceptual accuracy. In our 2015 survey, errors in perception – offspring misclassifying their Republican parents as Democrats and vice-versa – occur in only 4 percent of the partisan parent-offspring pairs. In the 1965 wave of the youth-parent study, the error rate was 26 percent (Niemi 1974, 59).

Turning to the possibility of "active" or more motivated transmission, the 2015 survey data reveals that the frequency of spousal political discussion increases successful transmission significantly.<sup>36</sup> The 1965 survey results are consistent, at least with respect to the difference between spouses who indicate they never discuss politics and those indicating that they do. Parent-offspring agreement for the former group is 60.6%, moving to 70.5% for the latter.<sup>37</sup> The survey data thus confirm that in pre- and post-polarized times alike, political

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<sup>35</sup>As a robustness check, we compute the percent of offspring agreeing with neither parent ("total disagreement rate") for homogeneous and heterogeneous parent-offspring pairs. For offspring with heterogeneous parents, the total disagreement rate is 25.4%, but drops to 10.5% for offspring with politically homogeneous parents.

<sup>36</sup>For those indicating they almost never discuss politics with their spouse, the transmission rate is 63.3%, moving to 71.2% for those discussing politics with their spouse a few times a month, to 79.1% for those doing so several days a week, and peaking at 81.2% among those discussing politics every day.

<sup>37</sup>Despite the substantial difference between couples who do and don't discuss politics, among those who

discussion within the family strengthens parent-offspring agreement.

As anticipated, intergenerational transmission appears to reflect some mix of inadvertent and motivated partisan signaling on the part of co-partisan parents. While the importance of parental agreement has been magnified over time, household communication about politics works to facilitate parent-offspring agreement both before and after the onset of polarized politics.

Overall, we have presented strong evidence showing increases in choice-based spousal homophily between 1965 and 2015. Our data suggest a marked strengthening of the trait-to-trait process over the last fifty years as a function of political polarization. We find considerably less support for the alternative causal mechanisms – persuasion or convergence, contextual homogeneity, and induced political homophily stemming from selection on non-political traits. We do not mean to imply that induced homophily has disappeared in the post-polarization era; indeed the finding of increased family agreement on religion merits further investigation. Nor do we claim that partner markets have no bearing on spousal choice. Instead, our contention is that individuals are entering into long-term relationships on the basis of partisan agreement significantly more frequently in the contemporary era than in the past.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

As anticipated, polarized politics creates pressures toward conflict avoidance in interpersonal relations, increasing the importance of partisanship as a basis for mate selection. We have shown that spousal and intergenerational agreement both increased significantly following the onset of polarization. Conformity within families is strongest for politics and religiosity, and significantly lower for non-political attributes including personality traits and lifestyle preferences. This agreement gradient – from the political to the non-political – is

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do, the frequency of these discussions has negligible effects on intergenerational agreement.

further evidence of the impact of polarization on the socialization process; families are more likely to agree on political than non-political questions.

We have also shown that in the post-polarization era, it is selection rather than convergence that explains spousal agreement. The survey data and voter files both reveal limited differences in family agreement associated with length of marriage. One reason behind heightened selectivity is that both men and women are exercising choice, while in the 1960s and 1970s, women were yet to achieve equal status in the partner market. While we find some evidence for this dual selection process, it does not in and of itself explain increased spousal homogeneity in the polarized era.

Contextual effects also prove limited; while spousal partisan correspondence does fall off in areas where individuals have greater opportunity to encounter opposing partisans, contextual effects are more pronounced for same-race than same-party marriages. Finally, we show that there is more evidence for selection based on partisanship than convergence over time. Moreover, the selection effects are not simply induced through other common traits such as religious beliefs. Politics plays a major role.

The shifting importance of the underlying mechanisms helps explain the only modest increase in spousal partisan agreement over the 1965-2015 period. The spousal correlation on party affiliation was .72 in 1965. This relatively strong correspondence in 1965 is attributable to the fact that the 1965 sample over-represented spouses with lengthy marriages, since they all had children that were high school seniors (e.g. Jennings, Stoker and Bowers 2009). The somewhat higher level of correspondence in 2015 (when the spousal correlation is .80) is attributable instead to assortative mating. The diagnostic comparison over time, therefore, is the level of agreement among relative newlyweds – only 54 percent in 1973, but 74 percent in 2014. Clearly, partisanship has become a more important litmus test for spousal compatibility.

We have argued that polarization has strengthened processes of socialization by which

spouses come to agree on their partisan loyalties. Spousal agreement, in turn, creates an "echo chamber" that facilitates intergenerational continuity and strengthens group polarization. When family members identify with the same party, they also express more extreme positions on the issues and harbor hostile views toward their opponents. In the case of the 2015 couples survey, we asked respondents to evaluate the eventual presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (using a 100 point feeling thermometer). Among spouses who agreed on their party identification, the average difference between the in-party and out-party candidate evaluation was 59 points (70 versus 11 degrees on the thermometer). In the few pairs consisting of spouses with divergent loyalties (Democrat-Republican pairings), this margin of difference fell by more than 30 degrees. Partisan agreement within the family strengthens polarization.

We may surmise that the rate at which any given society undergoes polarization will be accelerated by the extent to which families are politically homogeneous. Recent simulations by Klofstad et al. (2013) suggest that assortative mating rapidly induces ideological polarization. In their models, the equilibrium outcome (maximal polarization) is reached by the 11th generation following the onset of parental assortment, but most of the increased polarization occurs as early as the fifth generation (Klofstad et al. 2013, pp. 530-31). We would similarly expect generations to move increasingly apart on their evaluations of party leaders and candidates for elective office to the extent families correspond in their political predispositions.

In closing, we note that increased family conformity is a likely explanation of recent findings documenting the intrusion of partisan bias into a variety of non-political judgments and behaviors. In this era of heightened polarization, partisan cues induce out-group bias in evaluations of high school students' academic credentials (Iyengar and Westwood 2015), levels of inter-personal trust (Carlin and Love, forthcoming), willingness to interview job applicants (Gift and Gift 2015), and judgments of physical attractiveness (Nicholson et al.

2016). In the aftermath of the most divisive and conflictual election in recent memory, our evidence on family agreement suggests still more discord and animus in elections to come.

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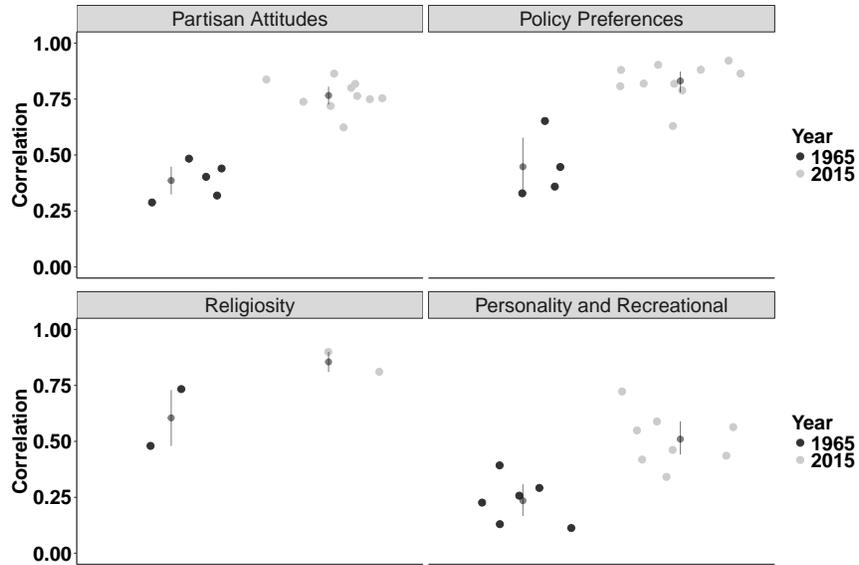


Figure 1: Spousal Correlations within Domain for 1965 and 2015. Black Dots and Bars Indicate the Domain Mean Correlation and 95% Confidence Interval

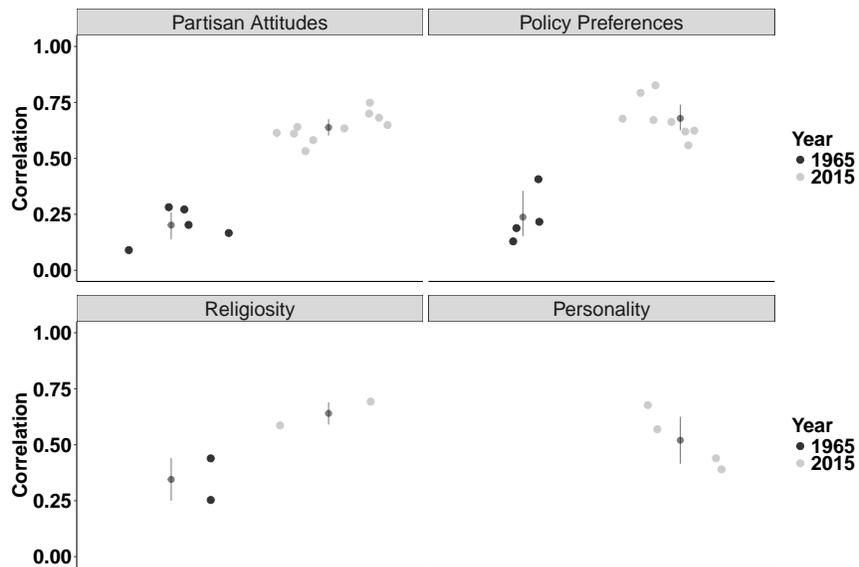


Figure 2: Intergenerational Correlations within Domain for 1965 and 2015. Black Dots and Bars Indicate the Domain Mean Correlation and 95% Confidence Interval

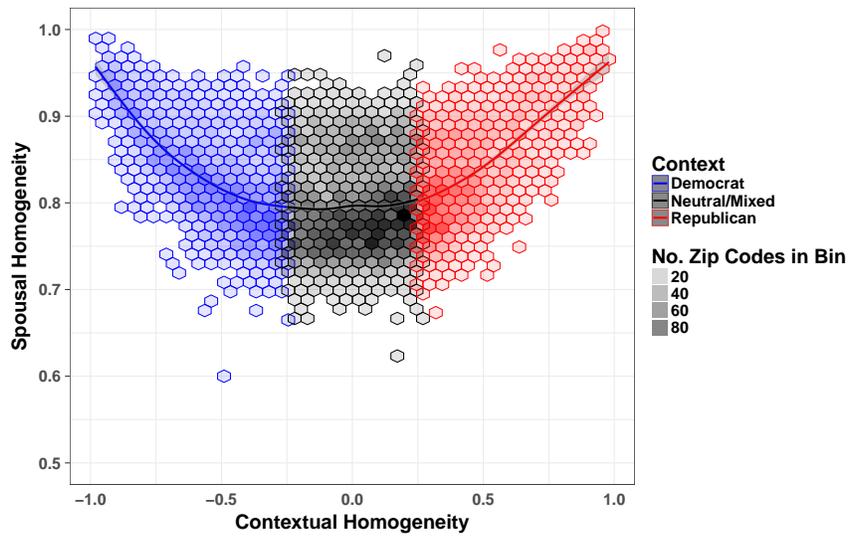


Figure 3: Partisan Homogeneity of Spousal Pairs for Zip Codes with Differing Partisan Composition (Amount of Scatter Reduced by Hexagonal Binning)

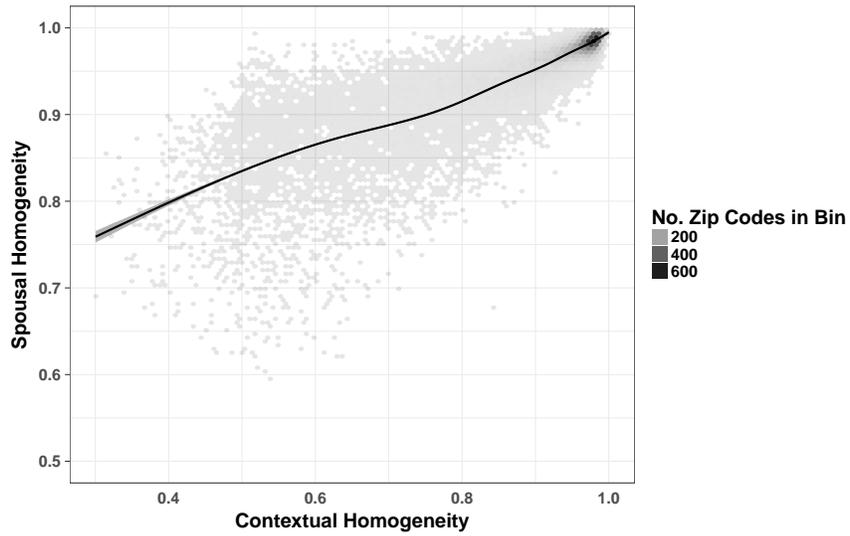


Figure 4: Mean Racial Homogeneity of Spousal Pairs for Zip Codes with Differing Racial Compositions (Amount of Scatter Reduced by Hexagonal Binning)

Table 1: Impact of Length of Marriage on Spousal Agreement

	Partisan attitudes	Religiosity	Lifestyle Interests
Constant	0.354*	0.509*	0.746*
	(0.063)	(0.093)	(0.136)
Length of Marriage	-0.001	-0.002*	0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Household Education	0.025	0.001	0.014
	(0.020)	(0.027)	(0.044)
Household Political Discussion	-0.031	-0.016	-0.019
	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.032)
$N$	557	557	557
$R^2$	0.012	0.012	0.001
adj. $R^2$	0.007	0.007	-0.005
Resid. sd	0.315	0.405	0.635

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\* indicates significance at  $p < 0.05$

Table 2: Impact of initial Agreement on Religiosity and Authoritarianism on Partisan Convergence

	Religiosity	Authoritarianism
Constant	0.354*	0.353*
	(0.063)	(0.064)
Household Education	0.025	0.025
	(0.020)	(0.020)
Household Political Discussion	-0.031	-0.031
	(0.020)	(0.020)
Length of Marriage	-0.001	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Religiosity/Authoritarianism	-0.086	-0.006
	(0.058)	(0.058)
Religiosity/Authoritarianism x Length of Marriage	0.003	0.001
	(0.002)	(0.002)
<i>N</i>	557	555
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.019	0.013
adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.010	0.004
Resid. sd	0.315	0.316

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\* indicates significance at  $p < 0.05$