

Research Article

The End of the Middle as we know it; a Cross-Sectional Comparison of Political Polarization among College Students in 2005 and 2020

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Article history

Received: 22-10-2025

Revised: 19-12-2025

Accepted: 01-05-2026

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Abstract: The growing political polarization in America is demonstrated in many ways, including through increased salience and extremity of political identity. According to social identity theory, people are more likely to view ingroup members positively, and outgroup members negatively, especially when that group identification is particularly salient. This paper examines the evolution of political identity by reporting on surveys of college students at an American University in 2005 and 2020, revealing how political identities and issue attitudes among this population have shifted and/or polarized over time. Results are consistent with increased salience of political identity in that it is a stronger predictor of political issue agreement than other identities like gender in 2020 than in 2005. Findings also show stronger identification with political parties and less identification with the political middle in 2020 than in 2005, especially among college Democrats. Results indicate a growing gender discrepancy, with males shifting towards conservative beliefs and females trending more liberal. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Polarization, Social Identity, Salience, College Students, Gender

Introduction

While there has always been a political divide in America, research suggests an increase in polarization of both political opinions and political party identities (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Iyengar et al., 2019) in America. This is evidenced by a divergence towards the extremes and away from the middle on a variety of issues (Pew Research Center, 2022e). Though the impact of polarization has been contested (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021), there is wide general agreement that political divergence and animosity between those with differing party identification is increasingly prevalent (Rathje et al., 2021). Indeed, while there can be some positive outcomes of polarization such as more engagement with the democratic process and higher voter turnout (Suk et al., 2021), the effect on society as a whole is largely negative. Polarization can lead to contentiousness, an unwillingness to seek common ground, and governmental dysfunction (Arbatli and Rosenberg, 2021; Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021).

In the United States, polarization of political party identification (party ID) is increasingly leading people to view their Republican or Democratic identification as a salient, important and meaningful social identity (Rogers and Jones, 2021). Social Identity Theory (SIT) suggests that different identities vary in terms of salience or importance to the sense of self (Hogg et al., 2017), and can shift over time (Tajfel, 1981). The theory predicts that increased salience of an identity encourages people to selectively expose themselves to others within that same identity, a process often referred to as sorting (Mason, 2015). This can make certain identities like party ID become stronger than others. It can also mean that our strongest identities are reinforced by other identities like gender (Mason, 2018a). This process can result in increased polarization, sorting, and homophily over time (Mason, 2018b). Thus, political polarization today may in part be a result of party ID becoming more salient, leading to stronger political viewpoints and ultimately, extremity and incivility (Mason, 2015).

People have multiple identities that intersect and coexist with varying levels of salience. However, the

increase in salience of party ID (West and Iyengar, 2022) occurs alongside a decrease in the salience of other identities like gender (Törnberg, 2022). Sorting can cause conflict when people have to make decisions that would be consistent with one identity but not the other. For example, a person may feel more connected to those of the same party ID, leading them to make decisions that are inconsistent with their other identities, like gender, race, or socioeconomic status. Even so, the salience of party ID may be reinforced by other identities like gender and race.

Using social identity theory as a framework, this cohort study uses data collected in 2005 and in 2020 to survey the salience of party ID, ideology, issue stances and attitude strength to explore how political attitudes among a key population college students have shifted and become more polarized over time. Because this population has been shown to trend more liberal (Deckman, 2024), Gen Z participants are a particularly timely group to watch. Results are consistent with social identity theory, showing that party ID is now more important to sense of self than previously relevant identities like gender (Bittner and Goodyear-Grant, 2017) and that political identity and opinions have moved away from the middle and toward the extremes.

Literature Review

Political Polarization in America

Research continues to suggest that American political views are polarizing over time. This is clear not only in party identification (e.g. Democrat, Republican, Independent), but also across specific opinions on issues (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Iyengar et al., 2019). This divergence is true of both ideological polarization and of affective polarization. Where ideological polarization refers to differences in beliefs and political viewpoints (i.e. conservative, liberal) (Iyengar et al., 2019), affective polarization refers to the increasing animosity between each political group (i.e. Democrat, Republican) in America (Iyengar et al., 2019; Mason, 2018a).

However, research on polarization is not consistent; some studies show a clear trend in ideological polarization over time (Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2022e), while others find no meaningful difference (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Hetherington et al., 2016). However, research on affective polarization consistently depicts a stark and increasing political divide. Affective polarization has led Americans to disagree with policy proposals of the “other” party and view compromise as a weakness (Kozlowski and Murphy, 2021; Garrett et al., 2014). As a result, people are more likely than ever to agree with one sole political party and view political outgroup members unfavorably (Iyengar et al., 2019; Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021). And though political engagement can be good for democracy, the

strife, disagreement, and an unwillingness to cooperate associated with affective polarization is not (Garrett et al., 2014; Mason, 2018b).

Today, Americans are more likely to engage with politics than in the past (Pew Research Center, 2022c; Lelkes, 2018), suggesting that a degree of ideological polarization is increasing (Hetherington et al., 2016) as well. Though some reports show that more people than ever formally identify as independents in the context of voting (Pew Research Center, 2024), these voters often cite dissatisfaction with the two-party system, and a lack of political involvement/interest, or split agreement with a given party’s issues (Pew Research Center, 2024). Because recent statistics also show signs of polarization such as increased voter turnout and engagement with the democratic process (Ohme et al., 2022), it is important to further investigate political identity and polarization from a group identification perspective.

Political Social Identity

Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1981) suggests that people belong to many groups which have differential influences on behavior and identity. People stack their group identities such that more salient social groups have more influence on attitudes and become more central to the sense of self (Abrams and Hogg, 2010). Peoples’ most salient groups can predict communication patterns, friendships, opinions, values, and even behaviors (Buliga and MacInnis, 2020; Hogg et al., 2017). In addition, SIT recognizes that the most salient or relevant identities can shift over time (Tajfel, 1981).

This leads to the prediction that polarization extends beyond increased party ID alone. When identities become more salient and important to the sense of self (Hogg et al., 2017), they become more likely to influence opinion formation (West and Iyengar, 2022). When a social identity is salient, people are more likely to categorize and judge others based on identity membership alone (Greene, 1999), which is consistent with affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019; Mason, 2018b). This identity-based sorting process allows people to completely immerse themselves in the views and behaviors of their self-identified group (Mason, 2015).

Party ID salience in particular can result in both positive and negative outcomes. When people feel more ingroup identification, they make decisions that are good for the group or community rather than just for themselves (Hogg et al., 2017). It also gives people a sense of connection to ingroup members, encouraging communication with likeminded others and a greater sense of belonging (Kozlowski and Murphy, 2021; Suk et al., 2021). On the other hand, ingroup identification can decrease levels of empathy for outgroup members, resulting in dehumanization, lack of communication, and potential conflict between groups based on sorting alone

(Wojcieszak and Warner, 2020). Furthermore, outsiders can be viewed with suspicion or hostility (Tajfel, 1981) and considered less credible (Suk et al., 2021) which can lead to communicative incivility and conflict, and an unwillingness to compromise.

This process can help explain trends of political polarization. For example, people increasingly prefer to associate with those of a similar party ID and lack a willingness to date or spend time with those of a different party ID (Easton and Holbein, 2021; Mason, 2015; Tyler and Iyengar, 2022). In fact, Americans are more likely to exhibit friendliness towards a stranger who shares their political views than towards friends and family who do not (Buliga and MacInnis, 2020), providing evidence of affective polarization and suggesting that party ID is a powerfully salient identity. In addition, Americans have grown increasingly more hostile towards political outgroup members (Lelkes, 2018; West and Iyengar, 2022) over the past 45 years (Pew Research Center, 2022a). As a result, people continue to value partisan sources that further entrench them in their own views, especially in digital media environments (Törnberg, 2022). Therefore, party ID salience is likely to increase polarization over time. This leads to the following prediction.

H1: Increased political polarization will result in increased political party identification over time.

Identity Salience Shift; Gender, Ideology, and Party ID

SIT also predicts that people have many interconnected identities. When one identity like party ID becomes more salient, other identities like race, gender, or socioeconomic status may see a decrease in importance (Mason, 2018b). This is consistent with reports that party ID continues to supersede the salience of other historically key identities, like gender (Westwood et al., 2018). Despite nuances within gender identification and a recognition that there are many non-binary or other gender identities, the male/female identification has continued to be a predictor in understanding voting behaviors. As political polarization enhances the relative salience of party ID, it has become an even stronger predictor of attitudes, positions on issues, and behaviors (Westwood et al., 2018).

Though party ID is a more salient identity today, gender differences are still important, and these two identities may interact. Gender identity has historically played an important role in predicting political identity, with those identifying as male being more likely to identify as Republicans, and those identifying as female being increasingly more likely to identify as Democrats, especially among White voters (Gillion et al., 2020). While White men have traditionally supported Republicans more than White women or Black male or female voters, the difference is negligible and has held

over time (Junn and Masuoka, 2020). Furthermore, Black women and men have historically identified as Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2024). Therefore, an anticipated shift towards Democrats should be most noticeable for White women who previously identified with the political middle. These trends should reveal that any political change over time is likely to have occurred among the strength of identification of women, suggesting that party ID and gender have become interconnected. This leads to the following prediction.

H2: Women will be more likely to identify more strongly with Democrats in 2020 than in 2005.

Though party ID and ideology are related, they are still two distinct constructs (Malka and Lelkes, 2010). Where party ID in America refers to Democrat or Republican identification, ideology refers to the norms, values, and ideas that guide political attitudes including opinions on issues (Mason, 2018a). Historically, scholars have sought to differentiate ideology and party ID to determine whether ideology influences party ID or vice versa (Barber and Pope, 2019). But this is a very challenging endeavor, as party ID and ideology are deeply interconnected in the United States (Barber and Pope, 2019). As would be predicted by SIT, the noted increase in sorting should result in stronger party ID overall and a conflation between party ID and ideology (Levendusky, 2009). Because people identify with multiple groups, the most salient identities should reliably predict opinion and behaviors (Tajfel, 1981) depending on the salience of each identity over time. Thus, the most salient social identity should predict a person's political ideology (Törnberg, 2022).

There is still a significant gender gap between male and female identities (Ondercin and Lizotte, 2021), but the role of party ID might predict this dynamic more accurately. In line with dynamics of party ID, men (especially white men) who identified as Republicans have historically identified with conservative beliefs, and women who identified as Democrats have historically identified more strongly with liberal beliefs (Mason, 2015). However, the shift in salience of party ID may result in gender identity becoming less of a predictive factor on ideology and issues when compared with political identities. This shift would result in men's and women's views becoming more aligned over time while the salience of party ID continues to increase. Thus, polarization should increase the connection between party ID and political ideology as moderated by gender. Therefore, the following prediction is made.

H3: Party ID will more strongly predict political ideology in 2020 than in 2005, and this relationship will be moderated by gender.

If polarization is increasing the salience and interconnectedness of political party ID and political ideology, these factors should be more likely to influence

attitude strength and issue opinions as well. This means that salient social identities serve as a filter to readily adopt ideas and topics that are consistent with ingroup attitudes (Malka and Lelkes, 2010). SIT predicts that issue opinions should be consistent with the views of the social groups to which people belong (Tajfel, 1981). As a result, party ID should be a better predictor of party issue agreement due to polarization and group salience (Gillion et al., 2020; Lelkes, 2018; Malka and Lelkes, 2010).

Consistent with trends in polarization, people report choosing their opinions on issues based on party ID rather than a consideration of how the issues may affect their other identities (Malka and Lelkes, 2010; Mason, 2015). While historically people were expected to choose a political party based on existing values and issue opinions, people are now more likely to base their support for issues on the norms of their party ID (Mason, 2015). Issue opinions are also likely to be impacted by different identities of varying salience (Bittner and Goodyear-Grant, 2017). Though party ID as an identity is likely to supersede the role of gender identity if it is more salient (Bittner and Goodyear-Grant, 2017), gender and party ID may be mutually reinforcing (Mason, 2018a) and gender may still show meaningful trends in overall party issue agreement.

Research has shown long-term increases in polarization (Gillion et al., 2020; Iyengar et al, 2012; Lelkes, 2018; Mason, 2015). However, a closer look at relevant political issues is essential to better understand how political social identity has shifted over time. According to data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), attitudes towards political issues have become stronger over time (Iyengar et al, 2012; Lelkes, 2018). This leads to the prediction that party issue agreement, or the agreement with issues advocated by the political party with which one identifies, has become more extreme and polarized as evidenced by increased party ID salience.

Political issue opinions considered in this paper include nine key political issues: abortion, education, morals and values, the economy, gun control, environmental policy, war & foreign policy, social security & Medicare, and national security. Each topic has been impacted by polarization and social identity in its own way. For example, while people's positions on abortion may involve religion or other moral considerations (Jozkowski et al., 2021), there is a clear divide between the Democratic Party's "pro-choice" stance in support of abortion access which is supported by more than 60% of Americans (Pew Research Center, 2022b) and the Republican Party's "pro-life" stance in opposition of abortion access in most forms (Jozkowski et al., 2021). With regard to environmental policy, the Democratic Party is in favor of regulations to support the environment, the Republican Party is largely against any

regulations requiring corporate environmental consideration (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2020). This is an issue where voter attitudes seem to be moving toward Democrats regardless of party ID (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2020), with more than two thirds of Americans supporting US involvement in climate change efforts (Pew Research Center, 2023) though there is less cross-sectional data on the matter. On gun control, the Republican Party itself has moved to an extreme position that largely opposes any regulations and the Democratic Party advocates for background checks and further restrictions on gun ownership (Miller, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2021). This is another issue where public opinion is moving toward the Democratic Party, as more than 8 in 10 people are in favor of background checks for gun purchase (Pew Research Center, 2021) regardless of party ID, but especially among the college educated (Miller, 2019). Morals and values can also be tied to party ID, where more polarized voters would delineate between political parties as "good vs. evil" or "right vs. wrong" more so than those who base their political attitudes on personal preferences (Garrett and Bankert, 2020). Other issues where people are predicted to clearly differ by party ID include that of national security and war & foreign policy (Hall and Ross, 2015). Attitudes towards social security & Medicare policy, Republicans and Democrats are increasingly divided, where 88% of Democrats support Medicare policy, compared with only 34% of Republicans (Pew Research Center, 2020a). Finally, there is also a clear delineation between the Republican Party that advocates for economic conservatism (Suhay et al., 2021) and the more liberal economic positions associated with the Democratic Party (Pew Research Center, 2020b).

Though there is intermittent data on these issues and at different points in time, it is important to explicitly compare how individual attitudes towards these issues have developed over time when framed with party ID, especially while analyzing varying levels of salience. The above research indicates that political polarization has made party ID more salient, resulting in a stronger connection with one's political party that begets increased party issue agreement. In turn, this should mean that while gender might predict differences in party issue agreement in the past, party ID should be a more salient predictor in 2020. This leads to the following prediction.

H4: Party ID will more strongly predict issue agreement in 2020 than in 2005, and this relationship will be moderated by gender.

Taken together, all hypotheses explore how college students have changed their political attitudes by investigating possible identity-based indicators that may inform these shifts over time.

College-Aged Voters

This study specifically explores polarization and party ID salience among college students. Young voters

constitute a unique and meaningful subset of the population to explore. Recent polling data of Gen Z suggest that young voters continue to turn out in high numbers (Ohme et al., 2022; Pew Research Center, 2022a). Young voters are also especially likely to support Democrats and lean liberal (Deckman, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2022e). This population continues to exhibit a further shift towards Democrats and liberal ideologies, given that college students increasingly vote for Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2024). This is especially true of young voters who currently or have recently attended college. Though college students are not representative of the population at large, they do encompass an important demographic group to explore and can help illustrate the changes seen in this population over time (Pew Research Center, 2022d). Therefore, this paper explicitly investigates this demographic as a meaningful contribution to the overall polarization trends in America.

Materials and Methods

This cross-sectional study examines opinions on education, national security, war & foreign policy, gun control, abortion, social security & Medicare, morals & values, environmental policies, and economic policies, as well as party ID and ideology to see how attitudes among college students have changed on these issues between 2005 and 2020.

Participants

Following IRB approval, participants were recruited from the same introductory communication course at a large public university in the eastern United States. Students were recruited by earning credit for their course in exchange for participation. Data was collected on paper in 2005 and manually uploaded to a spreadsheet for storage. In 2020, data was collected using Qualtrics and downloaded into a spreadsheet for analysis. All analyses

were conducted in SPSS and visualizations were completed using R. Participants were offered extra credit to participate in an online survey if they were enrolled in a specific course at a university in the spring of 2005 and in the fall of 2020, they were offered included course credit for their participation. Participants completed the informed consent and answered demographic questions and questions about party affiliation, ideology, and issue opinion agreement.

The overall participant sample included 228 undergraduate students in 2005 (57% female) and 507 undergraduate students in 2020 (49.9% female). Participants in both samples ranged from 18 and 25 in 2005 and 17 to 30 in 2020, with an average age of 19.5 in 2005 and 19.4 in 2020. Of the total sample in 2005, 83% self-identified as White, 4.8% as Asian, 3.9% as Black, 7.4% as other, and .9% as Native or Pacific Islander. Of the total sample in 2020, 64.1% self-identified as White, 21.6% as Asian, 6.5% as Black, 3.6% as multiple races, 3.6% as other, and .6% as Native or Pacific Islander.

Measurement Instruments

The same scales were used in both 2005 and 2020 for all variables below, with small differences noted. Frequencies for gender differences in party identification by year are located in Table 1. Means and standard deviations across party identification and gender are listed for all dependent variables for both 2005 and 2020 in Tables 2 and 3, respectively.

Gender Identity

Gender identity was gathered via self-identification on a binary, where (1 = male) and (2 = female). Because gender was gathered on a binary in 2005, only those who indicated male or female were analyzed for this research paper. Participants (5 in total) who entered nonbinary, other, or refuse to answer were omitted from analysis.

Table 1: Gender Differences in Party Identification by Year

	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
2005						
Republican	30	31%	24	19%	54	24%
Democrat	22	22%	52	40%	74	33%
No affiliation	46	47%	54	42%	100	44%
Total	98	100%	130	100%	228	100%
2020						
Republican	85	34%	34	13%	119	24%
Democrat	94	37%	168	66%	262	52%
No affiliation	75	30%	51	20%	126	25%
Total	254	100%	253	100%	507	100%

Political Party Identification (Party ID)

Party ID was measured using a one item scale (strong Republican, lean Republican, Independent/libertarian [1],

other/don't know, lean Democrat, strong Democrat). The variable was recoded for analysis (0 = Republican, 2 = Democrat, 4 = No affiliation), where "No affiliation" included anyone who did not identify as either a Democrat

or a Republican. Because the key research questions explore group identification differences over time, each variable was recoded from continuous to categorical. This allows for the ability to explore whether group identification as a whole has shifted when compared with gender identification.

Political Ideology or Philosophy

Ideology was measured by asking “Do you generally consider yourself to be...” with a one item scale on a 5-point metric: Very liberal, somewhat liberal, middle of the road/don’t know, somewhat conservative, very conservative.

Party Issue Agreement

Party issue agreement was measured by asking participants if they agreed more with Democrats or Republicans (1 = Strongly agree with Democrats, 7 = Strongly agree with Republicans) on the following 9 issues: Economic Policies, Environmental Policies, Education Policies, Morals and Values, Social Security and Medicare Policies, Abortion Policies, Gun Control Policies, Foreign Policies, and National Security Policies. A composite scale ($\alpha = .95$) was created by summing these responses into a 9-item Likert-type scale with a 7-point metric.

Results

Because data was collected from a predominantly white and educated sample, this paper focuses on the salience of gender as a secondary demographic identity to further support the growing role of social identity in political polarization. Results of the hypothesis tests are discussed below.

H1 predicted that polarization would lead to increased identification with a political party in 2020 than in 2005. We tested this first in terms of overall identification in terms of whether people identified with one of the two political parties or not. We tested this second in terms of the strength of their party identification, and H2 predicted that this would be different for men than women. These predictions were supported. A chi-square test of independence found the relationship between gender of participant by party ID and year was significant, $X^2(5, N = 731) = 40.09, p = .000$, with a moderate effect size $V = .23$. As can be seen in Table 1, just over 25% of participants did not identify with one of the political parties in 2020, compared with 43% in 2005. This analysis also supports the prediction that college students overall are more likely to identify with the Democratic Party in 2020 than in 2005, especially women.

Also shown in Table 1, more participants identified as Democrats than as Republicans in the college population in both samples, but this was especially true in 2020 than in 2005, as predicted by H2. In further

support of H1 and H2, two separate chi-square tests of independence were run for men and women. Results show the relationship between political party ID and year was significant for both men, $X^2(2, N = 348) = 9.41, p = .009$ and women, $X^2(2, N = 383) = 26.17, p = .000$. The Cramer’s V effect size for men was weak, $V = .16$, but was moderate for women, $V = .26$. More than 50% of participants identified with the Democratic Party in 2020, reflecting a 20% increase from 2005 (15% for men; 26% for women). There was a parallel 20% decrease in those who did not identify with one of the major political parties in the US (17% decrease for men; 22% decrease for women). However, the percentage with a Republican Party ID stayed around 20% overall (men increased by 3%; women decreased by 6%).

The results also support H3’s prediction that party ID has a stronger influence on political ideology and that the relationship is different for men than women. This was tested with a univariate general linear model test examining the main effects and 3-way interactions of year, gender and party ID to explain differences as they relate to political ideology by year.

The 3-way interaction was not significant $F(2, 734) = 1.37, p = .254$, nor was the 2-way interaction between year and party ID $F(2, 734) = 1.91, p = .148$ or the main effect for year $F(1, 734) = .33, p = .568$. However, the 2-way interaction between gender and party ID $F(2, 734) = 5.23, p = .006$ and the 2-way interaction between gender and year $F(1, 734) = 7.10, p = .008$ were significant, as well as the main effect for party ID $F(2, 734) = 230.91, p = .000$ and gender $F(1, 734) = 12.93, p = .000$.

O 1 shows the change in ideology for men and women over time. Men, even those who identified as Democrats, were overall more conservative than women in 2005, but that disappears in 2020, where the main effect for gender is not significant. This is mostly explained by the male Democrats becoming more liberal, but showing little change for other groups or overall over time. This analysis shows that party ID is a stronger predictor of ideology in 2020 than in 2005 and that it more strongly predicts ideology than gender.

H4 predicted that polarization would lead people to have more issue opinions that were consistent with those advocated by their party ID in 2020 than in 2005 and that there would be differences between men and women. This was partially supported by a series univariate general linear modeling tests of 3-way between groups ANOVAs testing the main effects and interactions of year, gender and party ID to examine differences in the way they relate to agreement with the political parties (1 = Strongly agree with Democrats, 7 = Strongly agree with Republicans) on each of the 9 issues described above combined in the composite item. See Tables 2 and 3 in the supplemental material for means and standard deviations of issue agreement across party identification and gender during 2005 and 2020.



Note: Conservative views are at the higher end of the 7-point scale, liberal views are at the lower end

Fig. 1: Gender and Party ID Differences in Political Ideology over Time

Table 2: Issue Agreement, Party Identification, and Gender Differences in 2005

		Male		Female		Total	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Economic Policies	Republican	4.83	1.23	5.46	0.93	5.11	1.14
	Democrat	3.45	1.22	2.73	1.24	2.95	1.27
	No Affiliation	3.93	1.35	3.79	0.96	3.85	1.15
Environmental Policies	Republican	4.48	1.21	5.37	1.10	4.89	1.24
	Democrat	3.00	1.31	2.46	1.38	2.62	1.37
	No Affiliation	3.50	1.25	3.67	1.15	3.59	1.19
Education Policies	Republican	4.59	1.27	5.46	1.10	4.98	1.26
	Democrat	3.18	1.33	2.52	1.44	2.72	1.43
	No Affiliation	3.61	1.40	3.63	0.99	3.62	1.19
Morals & Values	Republican	5.21	1.35	5.54	1.50	5.36	1.42
	Democrat	3.05	1.36	2.38	1.39	2.58	1.41
	No Affiliation	3.70	1.62	3.48	1.26	3.58	1.43
Social Security & Medicare Policies	Republican	4.86	1.06	5.08	1.25	4.96	1.14
	Democrat	3.05	1.25	2.60	1.45	2.73	1.40
	No Affiliation	4.02	1.39	3.77	0.92	3.89	1.16
Abortion Policies	Republican	4.62	1.72	4.25	2.01	4.45	1.85
	Democrat	2.91	1.41	2.00	1.63	2.27	1.62
	No Affiliation	3.23	1.61	3.04	1.43	3.13	1.51
Gun Control Policies	Republican	5.34	1.32	4.71	1.43	5.06	1.39
	Democrat	3.41	1.53	2.56	1.34	2.81	1.44
	No Affiliation	4.02	1.59	3.69	1.02	3.84	1.32
War & Foreign Policies	Republican	5.10	1.37	5.29	1.20	5.19	1.29
	Democrat	3.18	1.33	2.27	1.37	2.54	1.42
	No Affiliation	3.73	1.48	3.52	1.18	3.61	1.33
National Security Policies	Republican	5.31	1.37	5.21	1.10	5.26	1.24
	Democrat	3.73	1.52	2.69	1.48	3.00	1.55
	No Affiliation	4.20	1.32	3.60	1.13	3.88	1.25
Composite - All Issues	Republican	4.93	0.93	5.15	0.83	5.03	0.89
	Democrat	3.22	1.08	2.47	1.09	2.69	1.13
	No Affiliation	3.77	1.10	3.58	0.88	3.67	0.98

Table 3: Issue Agreement, Party Identification, and Gender Differences in 2020

		Male		Female		Total	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Economic Policies	Republican	6.04	0.96	5.68	1.32	5.93	1.08
	Democrat	3.07	1.58	2.85	1.53	2.93	1.55
	No Affiliation	4.38	1.17	4.33	1.16	4.36	1.16
Environmental Policies	Republican	3.66	1.56	4.26	1.62	3.84	1.59
	Democrat	1.67	0.94	1.68	0.89	1.68	0.91
	No Affiliation	3.25	1.30	3.24	1.03	3.24	1.19
Education Policies	Republican	4.73	1.50	5.12	1.15	4.85	1.41
	Democrat	2.12	1.11	1.95	1.00	2.01	1.04
	No Affiliation	3.67	1.21	3.47	0.95	3.59	1.11
Morals & Values	Republican	4.83	1.55	4.82	1.73	4.83	1.60
	Democrat	2.11	1.09	1.68	0.92	1.83	1.01
	No Affiliation	3.88	1.20	3.39	1.04	3.67	1.16
Social Security & Medicare Policies	Republican	5.14	1.30	5.15	1.48	5.15	1.35
	Democrat	2.24	1.04	2.17	1.21	2.20	1.15
	No Affiliation	3.85	1.17	3.98	1.16	3.90	1.16
Abortion Policies	Republican	3.82	1.94	4.15	1.97	3.91	1.95
	Democrat	1.84	1.14	1.43	0.89	1.57	1.01
	No Affiliation	3.46	1.41	2.96	1.44	3.25	1.44
Gun Control Policies	Republican	5.42	1.54	5.12	1.65	5.33	1.57
	Democrat	2.28	1.33	1.92	1.38	2.05	1.37
	No Affiliation	4.08	1.34	3.67	1.29	3.91	1.33
War & Foreign Policies	Republican	5.41	1.19	5.24	1.56	5.36	1.30
	Democrat	2.71	1.25	2.33	1.36	2.46	1.33
	No Affiliation	4.13	0.98	3.65	0.96	3.93	0.99
National Security Policies	Republican	5.45	1.23	5.38	1.58	5.43	1.34
	Democrat	2.73	1.29	2.36	1.32	2.49	1.32
	No Affiliation	4.25	1.03	3.76	0.91	4.05	1.01
Composite - All Issues	Republican	4.94	1.01	4.99	1.22	4.95	1.07
	Democrat	2.31	0.79	2.04	0.89	2.13	0.86
	No Affiliation	3.88	0.86	3.61	0.72	3.77	0.82

Most notably, there is a significant interaction between year and party ID on economic policies, environmental policies, education policies, morals and values, social security and Medicare policies, abortion policies, gun control policies, national security policies, as well as the overall composite variable. Only war and foreign policy was not significant by year and party ID. Additionally, while gender had a significant main effect for morals & values, abortion policies, gun control policies, war & foreign policy, national security policies, and the overall composite variable, it was not significant when combined with year for any issue. This supports the prediction that party ID is becoming a better predictor of attitudes than gender over time. Tables 2 and 3 for overall means, Table

4 ANOVA output for main and interaction effects by predictor variables, and Figures 2-11 for a visualization of these differences over time, which consistently indicate the statistical disappearance of significance differences between men and women by 2020. The results of the ten univariate GLM tests of 3-way interactions show a pattern that is consistent with increased polarization and salience of party ID as a social identity. While the only significant 3-way interaction was on economic policy, many of the other relationships reveal interesting patterns. The overall means and trends show movement towards a liberal ideology and agreement with the Democratic Party on issues, with the strongest movement for men who identify as Democrats.

Table 4: ANOVA Results of Gender, Party Identification, and Year with Party Issue Agreement: Main and Interaction Effects

Predictor	Sum f Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	partial η ²
Economic Policies						
(Intercept)	9394.167	1	9394.167	5515.838	0.000	0.884
gender	2.289	1	2.289	1.344	0.247	0.002
year	14.587	1	14.587	8.565	0.004	0.012
party ID	495.174	2	247.587	145.372	0.000	0.287
gender * year	0.229	1	0.229	0.135	0.714	0
gender * party ID	8.44	2	4.22	2.478	0.085	0.007

Table 4: Continued						
year * party ID	15.55	2	7.775	4.565	0.011	0.012
gender * year * party ID	10.234	2	5.117	3.004	0.050	0.008
Error	1229.657	722	1.703			
Environmental Policies						
(Intercept)	5973.211	1	5973.211	4246.525	0.000	0.855
gender	4.965	1	4.965	3.53	0.061	0.005
year	80.757	1	80.757	57.412	0.000	0.074
party ID	414.331	2	207.165	147.28	0.000	0.29
gender * year	0	1	0	0	0.992	0
gender * party ID	21.85	2	10.925	7.767	0.000	0.021
year * party ID	14.134	2	7.067	5.024	0.007	0.014
gender * year * party ID	5.162	2	2.581	1.835	0.160	0.005
Error	1014.167	721	1.407			
Education Policies						
(Intercept)	7141.986	1	7141.986	5101.936	0.000	0.876
gender	0.253	1	0.253	0.18	0.671	0
year	14.486	1	14.486	10.348	0.001	0.014
party ID	520.858	2	260.429	186.04	0.000	0.341
gender * year	0.145	1	0.145	0.104	0.748	0
gender * party ID	22.465	2	11.232	8.024	0.000	0.022
year * party ID	17.193	2	8.596	6.141	0.002	0.017
gender * year * party ID	5.448	2	2.724	1.946	0.144	0.005
Error	1006.498	719	1.4			
Morals and Values						
(Intercept)	7156.274	1	7156.274	4503.803	0.000	0.862
gender	8.352	1	8.352	5.257	0.022	0.007
year	25.523	1	25.523	16.063	0.000	0.022
party ID	635.455	2	317.728	199.962	0.000	0.357
gender * year	0.506	1	0.506	0.319	0.573	0
gender * party ID	10.712	2	5.356	3.371	0.035	0.009
year * party ID	19.403	2	9.701	6.106	0.002	0.017
gender * year * party ID	1.92	2	0.96	0.604	0.547	0.002
Error	1145.626	721	1.589			
Social Security and Medicare						
(Intercept)	7762.178	1	7762.178	5302.889	0.000	0.88
gender	0.513	1	0.513	0.351	0.554	0
year	3.037	1	3.037	2.074	0.150	0.003
party ID	540.784	2	270.392	184.724	0.000	0.338
gender * year	1.245	1	1.245	0.851	0.357	0.001
gender * party ID	2.969	2	1.484	1.014	0.363	0.003
year * party ID	15.432	2	7.716	5.271	0.005	0.014
gender * year * party ID	2.246	2	1.123	0.767	0.465	0.002
Error	1056.838	722	1.464			
Abortion Policies						
(Intercept)	5235.174	1	5235.174	2489.113	0.000	0.775
gender	16.26	1	16.26	7.731	0.006	0.011
year	21.426	1	21.426	10.187	0.001	0.014
party ID	385.635	2	192.818	91.677	0.000	0.203
gender * year	3.22	1	3.22	1.531	0.216	0.002
gender * party ID	8.657	2	4.328	2.058	0.128	0.006
year * party ID	20.314	2	10.157	4.829	0.008	0.013
gender * year * party ID	5.912	2	2.956	1.405	0.246	0.004
Error	1516.428	721	2.103			
Gun Control Policies						

Table 4: Continued

(Intercept)	7816.925	1	7816.925	4047.27	0.000	0.849
gender	28.839	1	28.839	14.931	0.000	0.02
year	5.995	1	5.995	3.104	0.079	0.004
party ID	550.282	2	275.141	142.456	0.000	0.283
gender * year	2.359	1	2.359	1.221	0.269	0.002
gender * party ID	1.614	2	0.807	0.418	0.659	0.001
year * party ID	32.142	2	16.071	8.321	0.000	0.023
gender * year * party ID	1.716	2	0.858	0.444	0.641	0.001
Error	1392.545	721	1.931			
War & Foreign Policies						
(Intercept)	7932.311	1	7932.311	4958.864	0.000	0.873
gender	13.93	1	13.93	8.708	0.003	0.012
year	0.401	1	0.401	0.251	0.617	0
party ID	558.292	2	279.146	174.507	0.000	0.326
gender * year	0.004	1	0.004	0.002	0.960	0
gender * party ID	8.975	2	4.487	2.805	0.061	0.008
year * party ID	6.022	2	3.011	1.882	0.153	0.005
gender * year * party ID	5.263	2	2.632	1.645	0.194	0.005
Error	1151.728	720	1.6			
National Security Policy						
(Intercept)	8715.984	1	8715.984	5466.156	0.000	0.883
gender	25.417	1	25.417	15.94	0.000	0.022
year	2.472	1	2.472	1.551	0.213	0.002
party ID	486.221	2	243.11	152.465	0.000	0.297
gender * year	2.47	1	2.47	1.549	0.214	0.002
gender * party ID	8.689	2	4.344	2.725	0.066	0.008
year * party ID	19.197	2	9.598	6.02	0.003	0.016
gender * year * party ID	2.452	2	1.226	0.769	0.464	0.002
Error	1149.661	721	1.595			
Composite Variable						
(Intercept)	7342.276	1	7342.276	8472.174	0.000	0.922
gender	5.324	1	5.324	6.144	0.013	0.009
year	6.686	1	6.686	7.715	0.006	0.011
party ID	504.034	2	252.017	290.8	0.000	0.45
gender * year	0.194	1	0.194	0.223	0.637	0
gender * party ID	8.45	2	4.225	4.875	0.008	0.014
year * party ID	15.02	2	7.51	8.666	0.000	0.024
gender * year * party ID	2.853	2	1.427	1.646	0.194	0.005
Error	617.044	712	0.867			

Note: Results indicate significance where $p < .05$

Discussion

Results are consistent with predictions based on SIT that polarization occurs when an identity becomes more salient. Overall, the data show that party ID is a stronger predictor of agreement with issues than gender in 2020, which was not the case in 2005. Fewer college students identified as independent and more identified with one of the two major political parties in the United States. This exhibits not only polarization within both parties, but also a clear trend towards Democratic identification and away from “the middle”. Findings are in line with current reports that young voters are flocking towards Democratic identification in large numbers, especially young women.

Our data support this, calling attention to the growing political gender divide among Gen Z voters in particular (Deckman, 2024). Because there is a noted push towards the left among young people, it is plausible that the salience of party ID is now also tied to gender identity thanks to social sorting (Mason, 2018b).

Most notably, a majority of this sample identified with the Democratic Party in 2020, which is a 20% increase from 2005. This move toward Democrats is largely made up of those who previously identified as independents, as the percentage of Republicans remained unchanged over time. The strength of party ID also increased as independent identification decreased, with the largest

shift towards leans Democrat and strong Democrat. Strong Republican identification grew slightly and only among men. This is consistent with political polarization and shows that ideology and identity are deeply linked among this population, specifically because people's

political opinions on most issues were predicted by party ID. It is possible that this finding is unique to the end of the Biden vs. Trump election in 2020, and that voters will return to an independent ID if and when the Republican Party is led by a less polarizing figure.

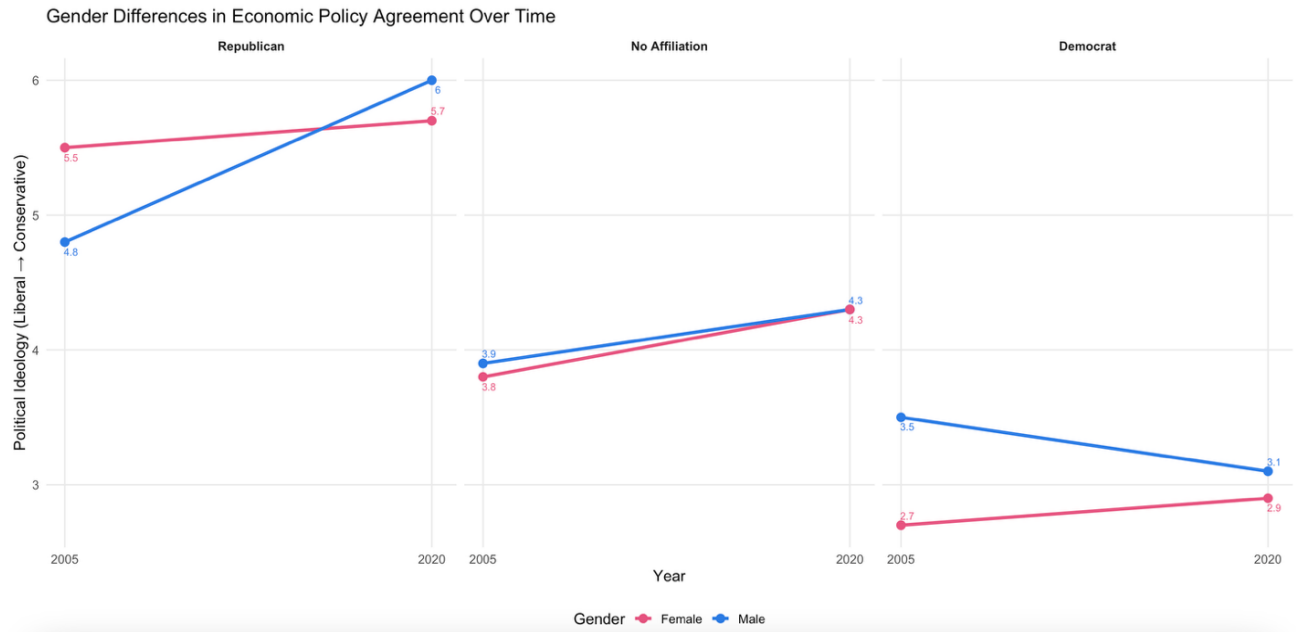


Fig. 2: Gender Differences in Economic Policy Agreement over Time

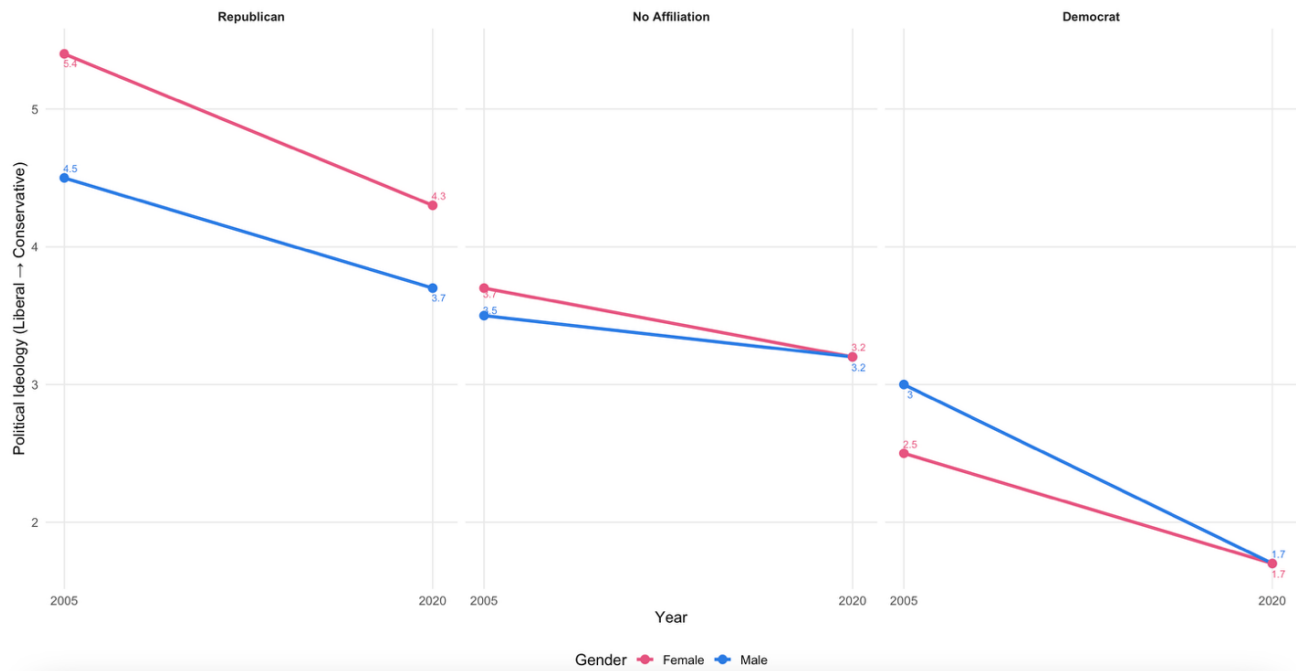


Fig. 3: Gender Differences in Environmental Policy Agreement over Time

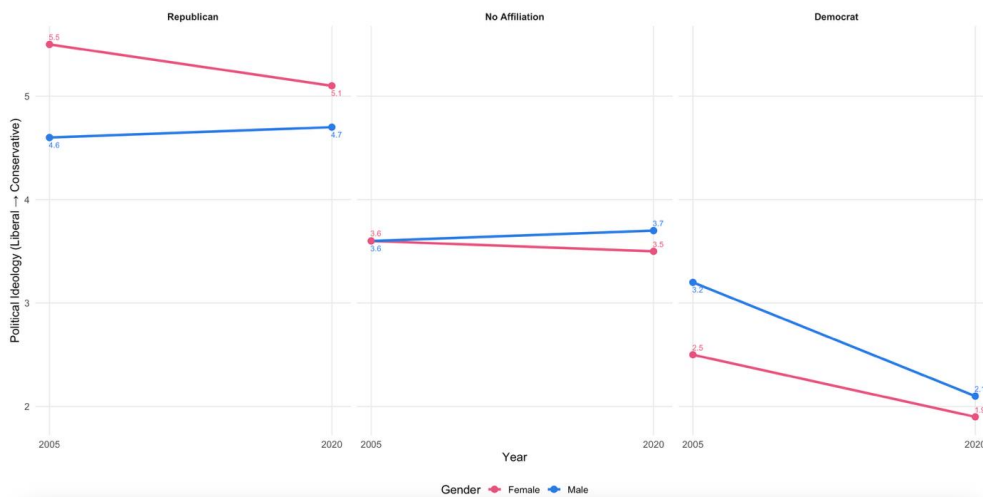


Fig. 4: Gender Differences in Education Policy Agreement over Time

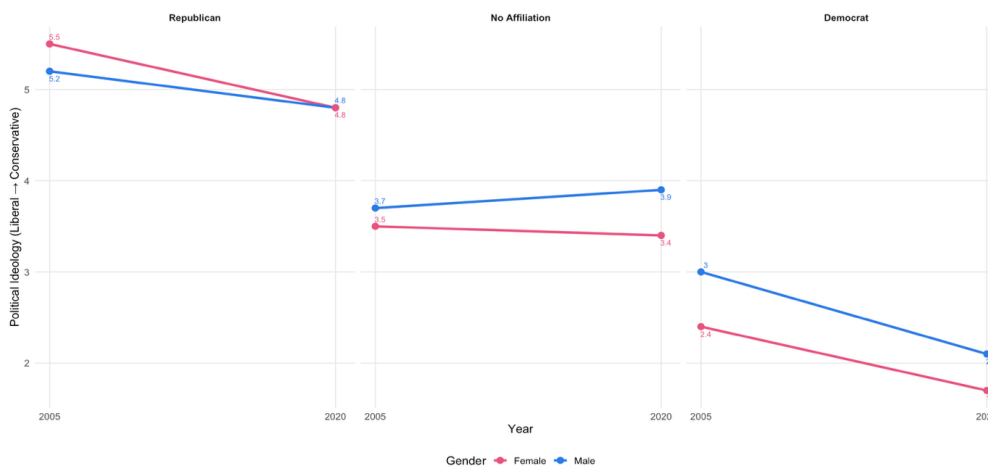


Fig. 5: Gender Differences in Morals and Values Agreement over Time

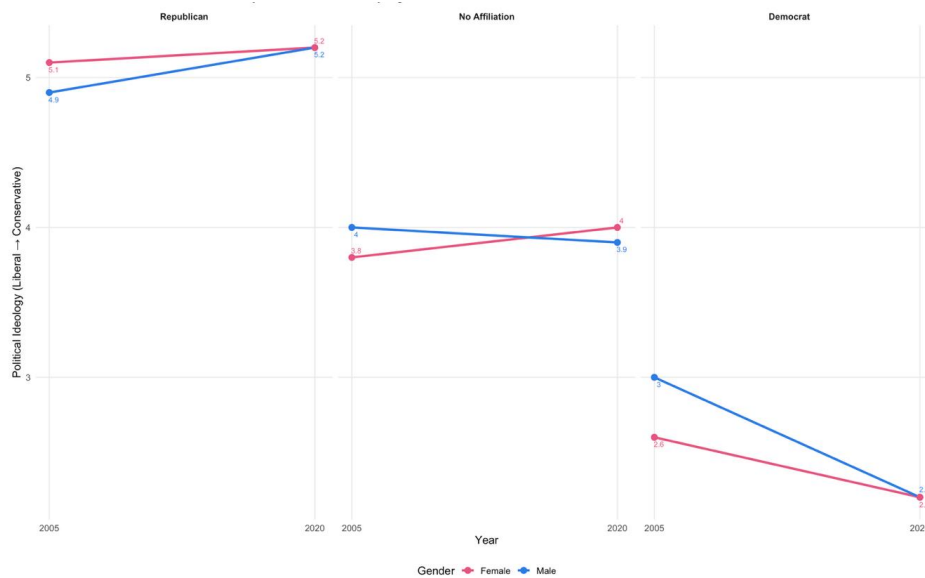


Fig. 6: Gender Differences in Social Security and Medicare Policy Agreement over Time

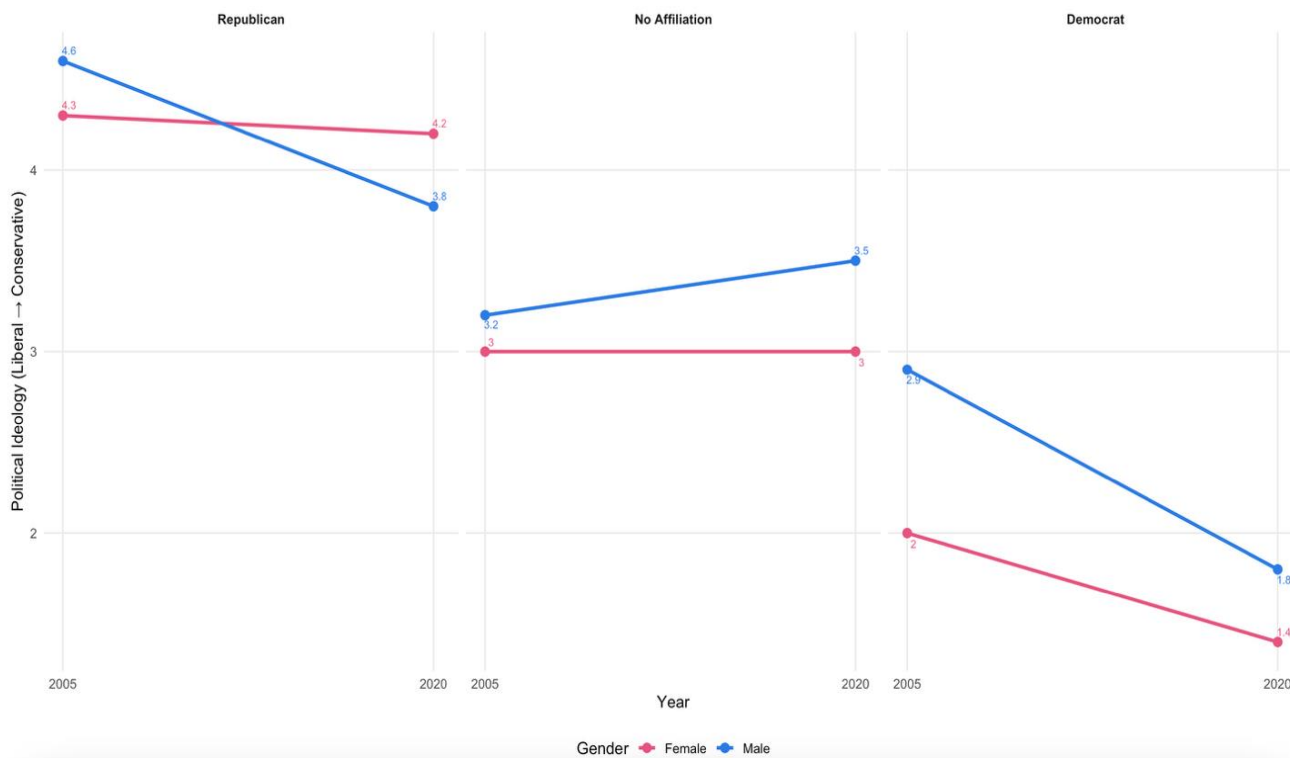


Fig. 7: Gender Differences in Abortion Policy Agreement over Time

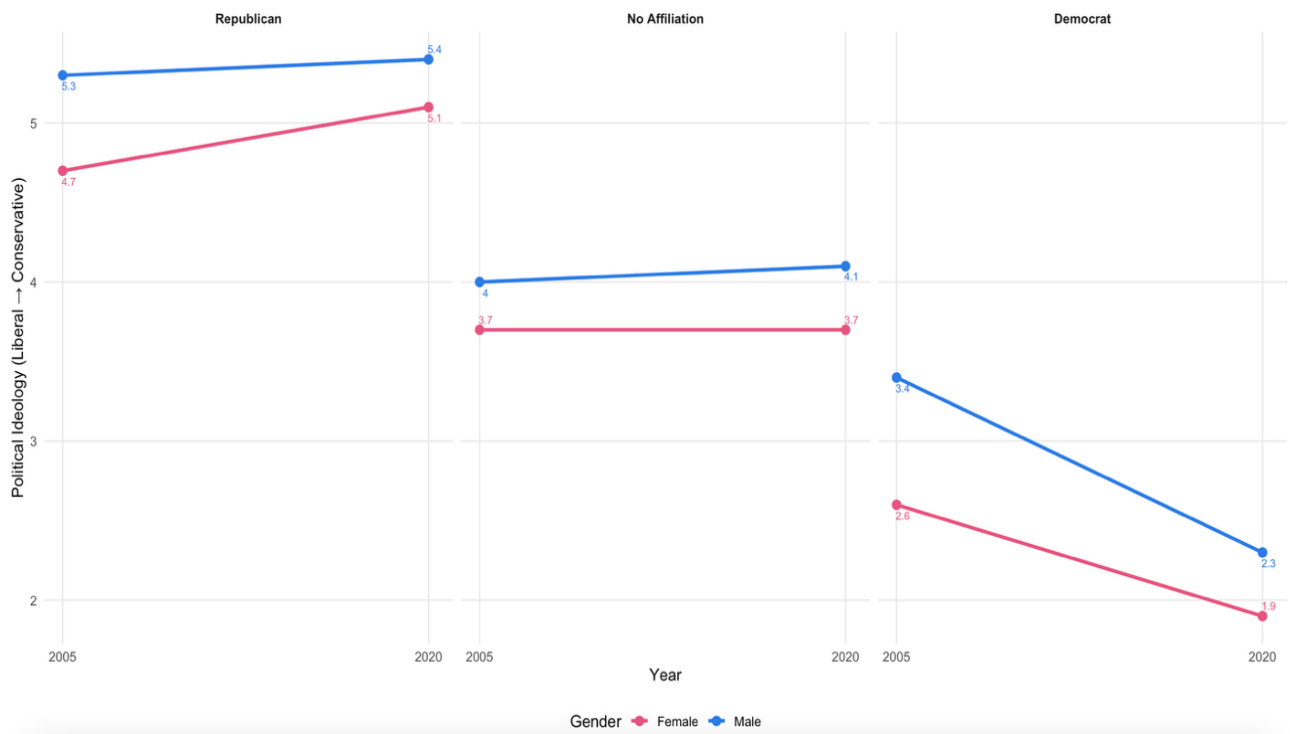


Fig. 8: Gender Differences in Gun Control Policy Agreement over Time

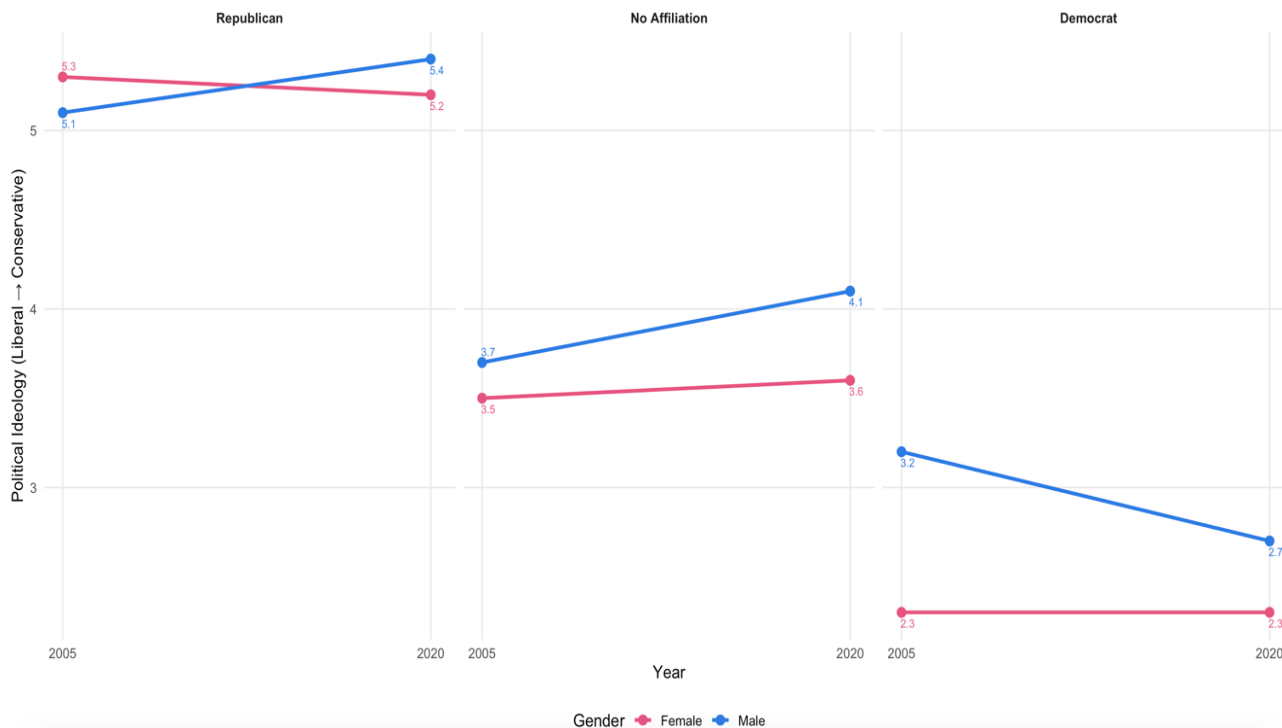


Fig. 9: Gender Differences in War & Foreign Policy Agreement over Time

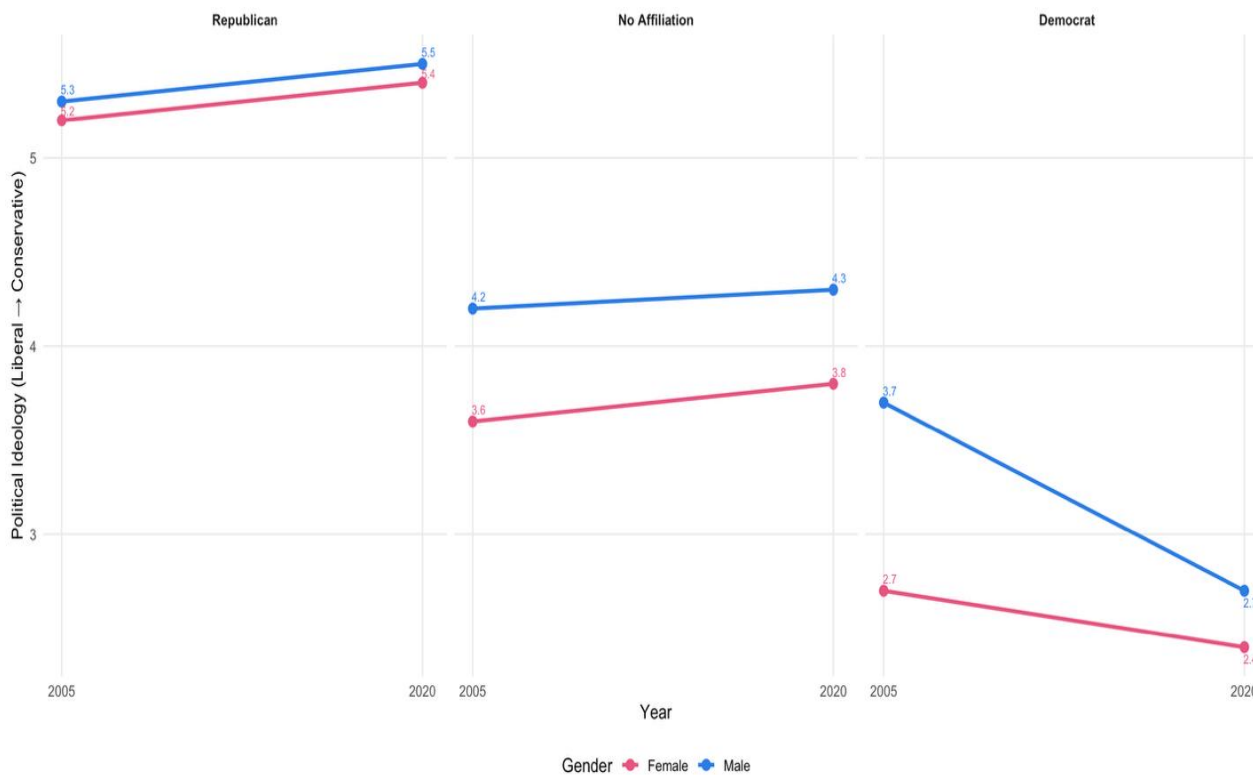


Fig. 10: Gender Differences in National Security Policy Agreement over Time

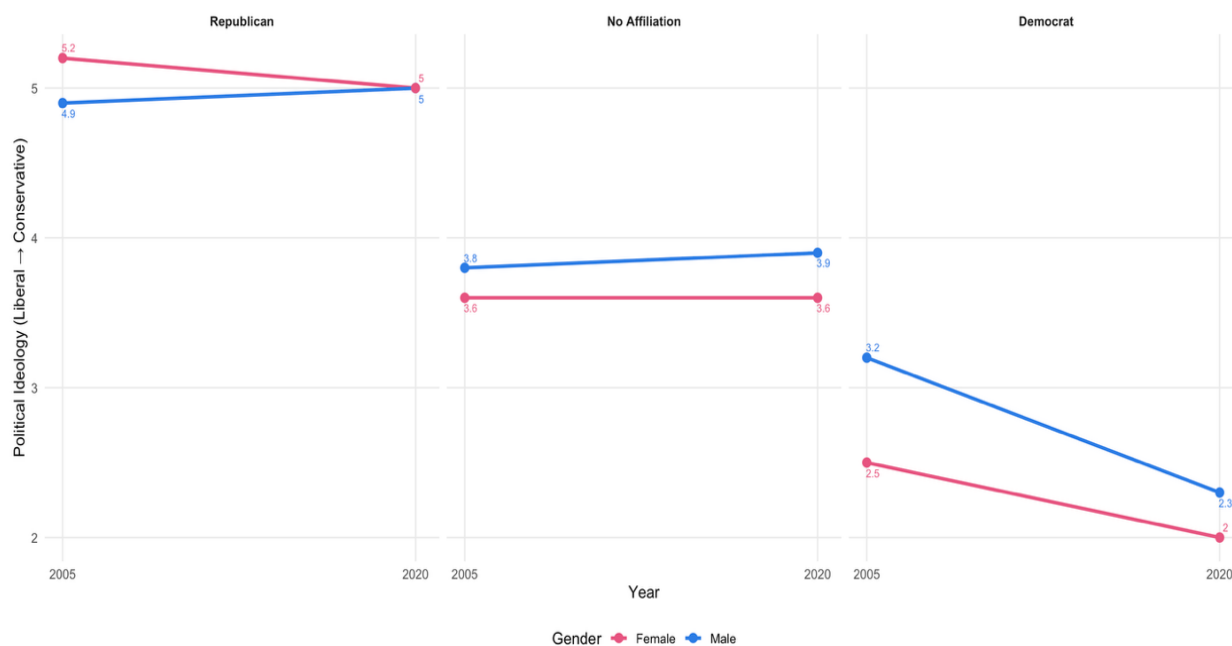


Fig. 11: Gender Differences across All Issues (Composite Variable) over Time

Furthermore, gender trends are a key area to explore. Where women have moved even further towards agreement on issues with Democrats, men have also moved from the political middle towards agreement with Democrats even though their stated party ID did not change. This finding points to the importance of exploring gender as a moderating variable and other important individual differences including race in a more diverse sample and socioeconomic status that influence identity and political attitudes. It is clear that the population is shifting, but that shift becomes especially apparent when examining that men have largely left the middle to meet women where they are. This finding is in line with current reports that the women of Gen Z are particularly liberal and identify with Democrats more than ever.

Shifts in individual issue agreement strength also tell an interesting story. The biggest takeaway is that attitudes are shifting away from neutral. Environmental policy, education, morals & values, social security & Medicare, abortion, and gun control policy issue positions all show a shift away from neutral and towards agreement with Democrats. Views towards economic policy are the only issue where the population moved in agreement with Republicans over time. War and foreign policy, and national security attitudes remained relatively stable over this 15-year period. This may be because these are not highly prevalent issues at this time, but more data is needed to support this conclusion. There was also a move away from the middle within issue agreement on nearly all issues, again in line with party ID and gender differences noted above.

Results support predictions of increased polarization and salience of political party ID as an identity. This is especially true for college-aged Democrats. This aligns with current voting trends that suggest that young people more than ever are turning out for the Democratic Party in high numbers (Pew Research Center, 2022e). Though increased participation yields positive change like engagement with the democratic process (e.g. student voting, engagement with the democratic process), it can also result in additional polarization and “identity politics,” or the idea that people make decisions based exclusively on group membership. In turn, this could lead to an echo-chamber effect, where interpersonal networks, social media, and even news organizations espouse extreme positions. When these views go unchallenged, it becomes nearly impossible to hear facts or opinions outside what is already believed (Iyengar et al., 2019). Because research suggests that polarization may be partially due to digital media and/or social media use (Törnberg, 2022), it is important to explore whether increased political divisions are a result of sorting on social media. Future research should continue to examine these different possible outcomes and determine ways to ensure polarization brings about positive changes that enhance civil conversations and behaviors.

These results should not be interpreted beyond this limited sample of predominantly White undergraduates at a university, as this process may be quite different for other demographic groups with different backgrounds and life experiences, like differences between Black and White Americans (Junn and Masuoka, 2020). Those with no college education are also a critical demographic to

consider, as there may be different trends within a more representative sample. Furthermore, the broader college student population has fundamentally shifted over the duration of data collection from 2005 to 2020, a panel study would better control for changes over time. Still, such a large difference over time is indicative of broad societal shifts that future research should continue to explore with more diverse samples and identities. Finally, data collection in 2020 was beholden to data collection phrasing used in 2005. This was especially implicative of the use of a gender binary in 2020, which was not an option for participants in 2005. To balance this, we excluded the 5 participants who did not identify on a gender binary in 2020 to match 2005. Future research should continue to update these questions to reflect more inclusive and supportive methods for measuring identity accurately.

Conclusion

The finding that party ID salience is of growing importance compared to other identities like gender, coupled with the shift of identification away from the political middle, points to an electorate that continues to polarize and disagree based on party ID. And while there are noted benefits like increased engagement and political activity, the negative impact of this dynamic seems especially critical. Scholars should therefore not only continue to explore this relationship, but also move to understand how to depolarize an electorate that is increasingly separated. Overall, the data support predictions that Americans are growing more polarized, and that party ID is more salient, at least among college students over the past 15 years. Participants were more likely to identify with a party, and their party ID was more likely to predict their opinions on a variety of political issues. Though the consensus on polarization is nuanced, this research contributes to the literature by aiming to explain how political views are shifting over time in America.

Acknowledgment

Thank you to the publisher for their support in the publication of this research article. We are grateful for the resources and platform provided by the publisher, which have enabled us to share our findings with a wider audience. We appreciate the efforts of the editorial team in reviewing and editing our work, and we are thankful for the opportunity to contribute to the field of research through this publication.

Funding Information

The authors have not received any financial support or funding to report.

Author's Contributions

Sara Holland Levin: Responsible for data collection in 2020 of the study, conceptualizing the scope of the research, data analysis, data collection for study 2, and full responsibility of the written portion(s) of the manuscript.

Kristine Nowak: Supervised data collection during 2020 and in 2005. Also provided comprehensive edits, writing, and restructuring guidelines for the manuscript, as well as hypothesis writing. All authors reviewed the manuscript and provided recommended edited.

Christian Rauh: Responsible for data collection in 2005. All authors reviewed the manuscript and provided recommended edited.

Ethics

This article is original and contains unpublished material. The corresponding author confirms that all of the other authors have read and approved the manuscript and no ethical issues involved.

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