

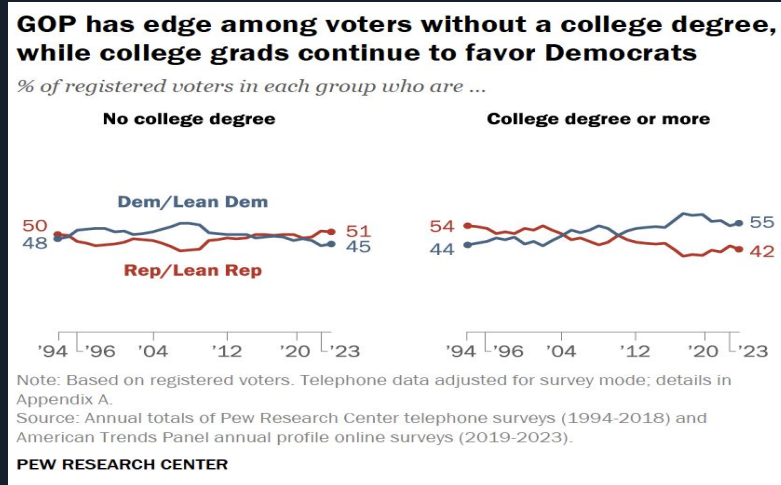
Education and Political Polarization

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Some Political History

It's now conventional wisdom that Democratic candidates do better amongst those with more educational attainment. But this is a new trend.

In 1994, voters with a college degree were notably more likely to be registered Republicans.



We decided to take a closer look at the data and see how, over time, education has correlated with political polarization and political affiliation.

Two Hypotheses

- **Ruffini Hypothesis:** college education is associated with *progressive* views. On this hypothesis, we'd expect to see (from more left-leaning to more right-leaning):
 - Democrats w/ BAs > Democrats w/o BAs > Republicans w/ BAs > Republicans w/o BAs
- **Elite Polarization Hypothesis:** being an “elite” member of society is polarizing, so we would expect people with college degrees (the “elites”) to be more politically extreme than people without college degrees. On this hypothesis, we'd expect to see (from more left-leaning to more right-leaning):
 - Democrats w/ BAs > Democrats w/o BAs > Republicans w/o BAs > Republicans w/ BAs

Our Method

- We used longitudinal data from the American National Election Studies
 - Surveys US-eligible voters both shortly before and shortly after presidential election years
 - We use primarily longitudinal data, including the years
 - 2012
 - 2016
 - 2020
 - 2024
- We sorted voters into broad ideological camps (self-ID Democratic vs. Republican) and broad educational attainment (BA or non-BA), and looked at attitudes on a variety of politically loaded issues, such as:
 - Abortion
 - LGBTQ rights
 - Policing
 - Healthcare

Broad Trends



NBA's and BA's
have polarized on
Political Views



NBA's are more
conservative on
sociocultural issues



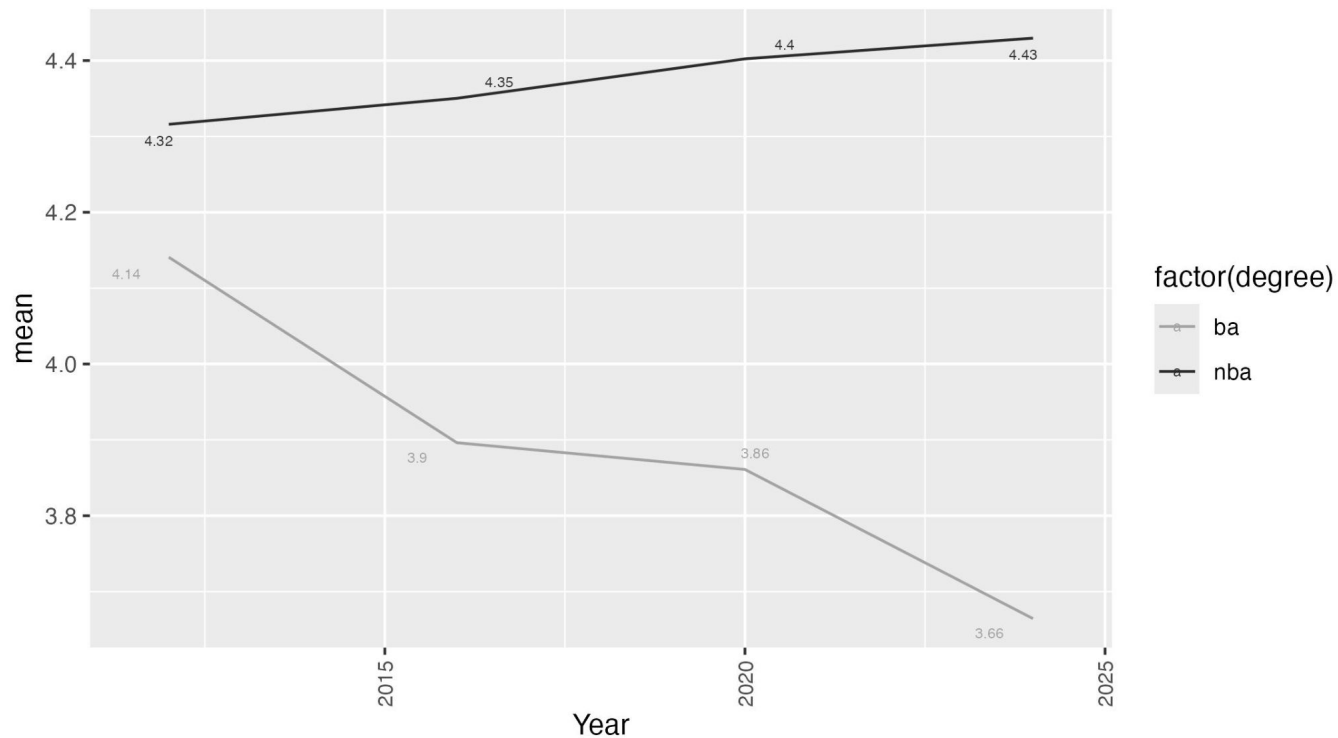
NBA's and BA's
have become more
liberal on both
sociocultural and
economic variables



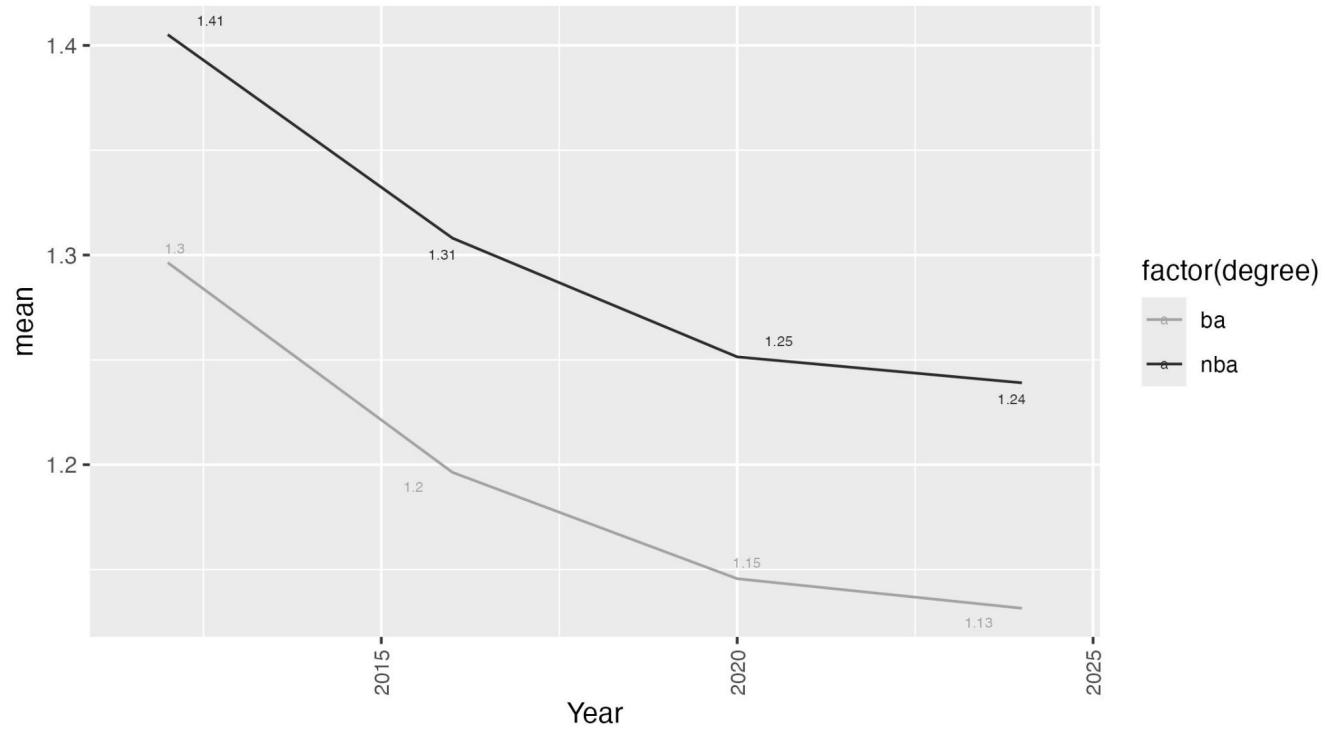
BAs drop more sharply in
the liberal direction than
NBA's on economic
issues

- NBA's used to be most liberal, BA's are most liberal now

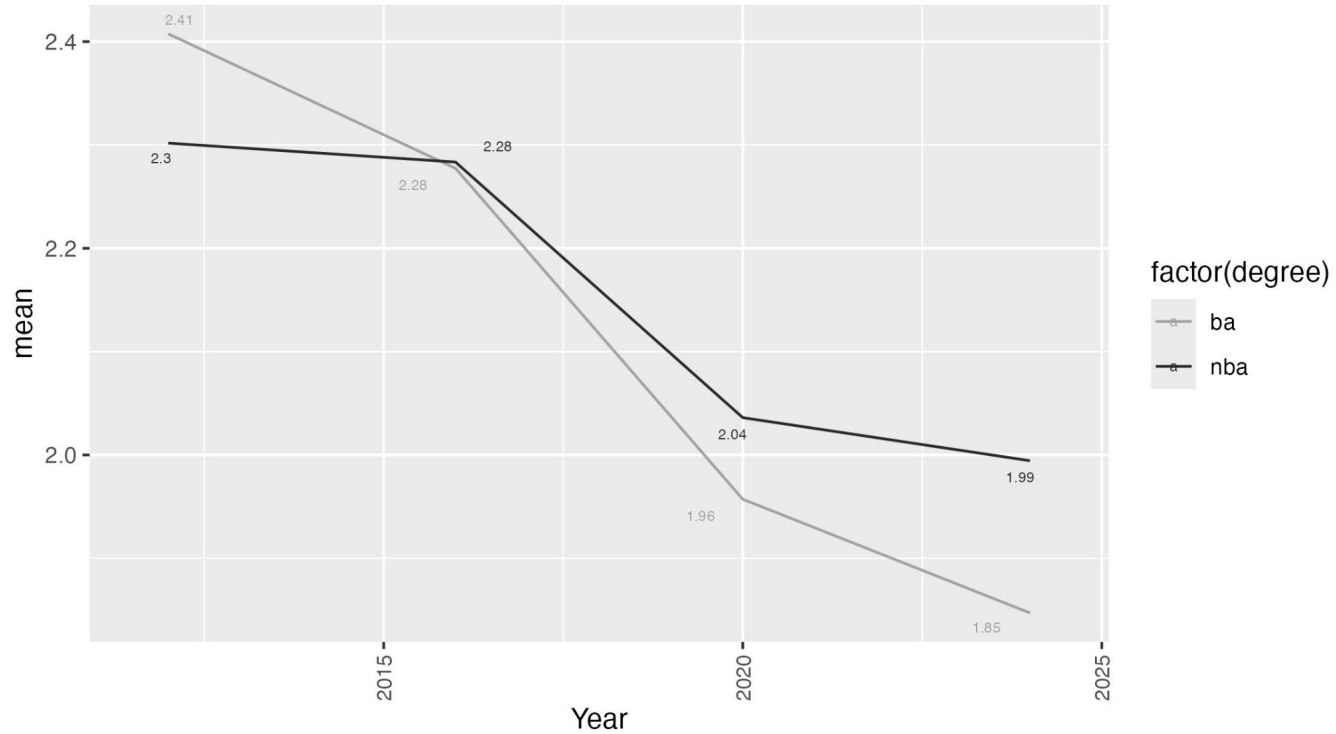
Comparing Respondents' Placement on Political Views Across Years by Education Level and Party



Comparing Respondents' Placement on Adoption by Gay/Lesbian Couples Across Years by Education Level and Party



Comparing Respondents' Placement on Federal Welfare Spending Across Years by Education Level and Party

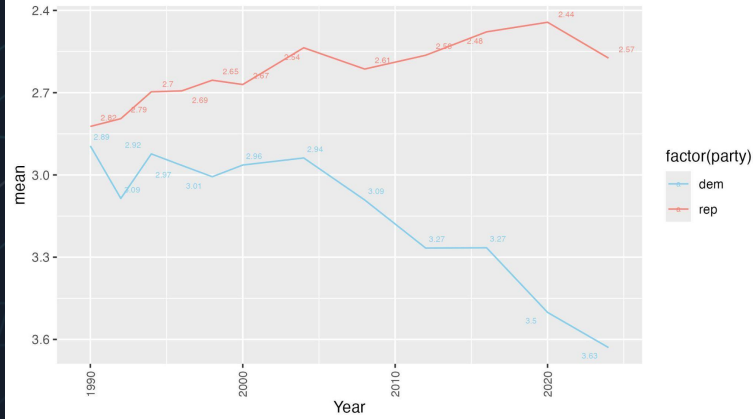


Crossover Points

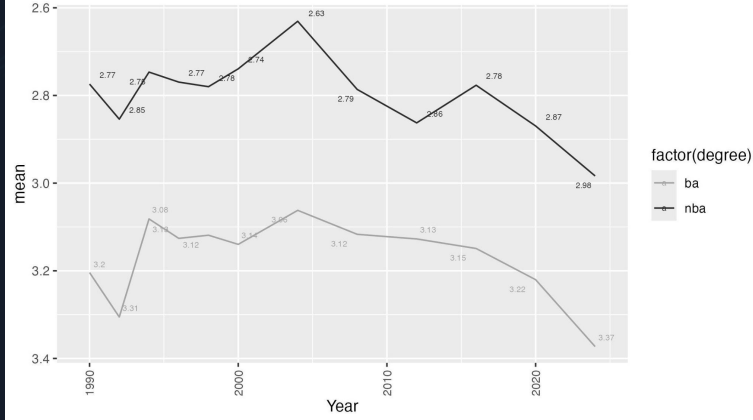
Guiding questions:

1. When do the *differences* between the ideological leanings of groups change dramatically? When do *orderings* of ideological opinions (progressive to conservative) change?
2. Why then?
3. Why in that order?

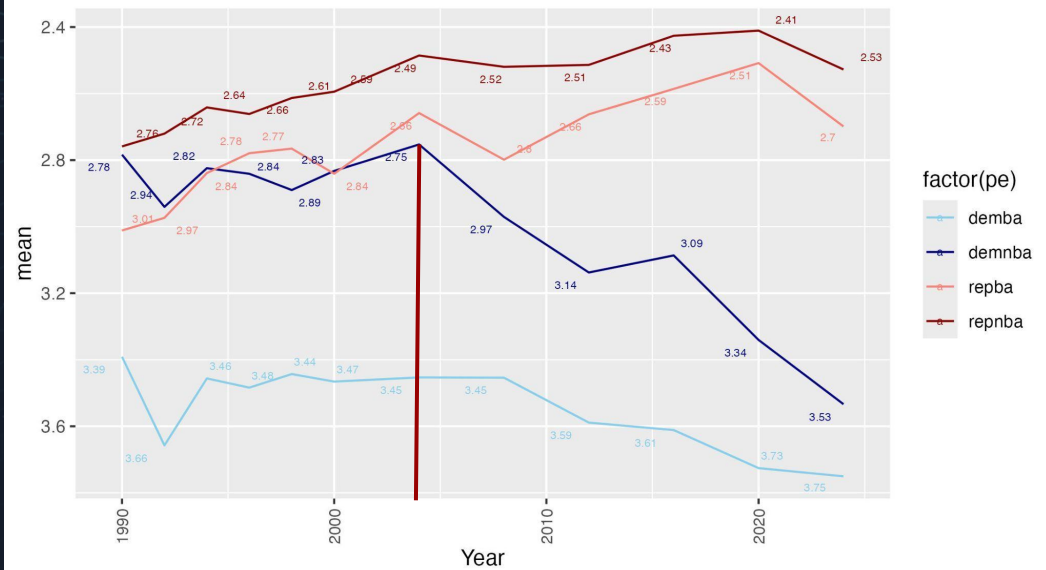
Comparing Respondents' Placement on Abortion Across Years by Party



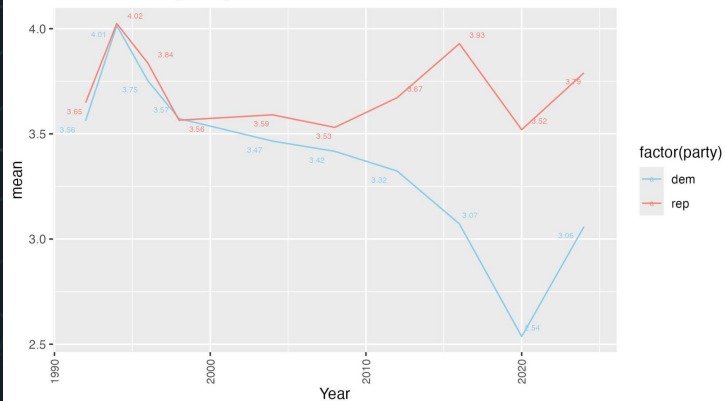
Comparing Respondents' Placement on Abortion Across Years by Education Level and Party



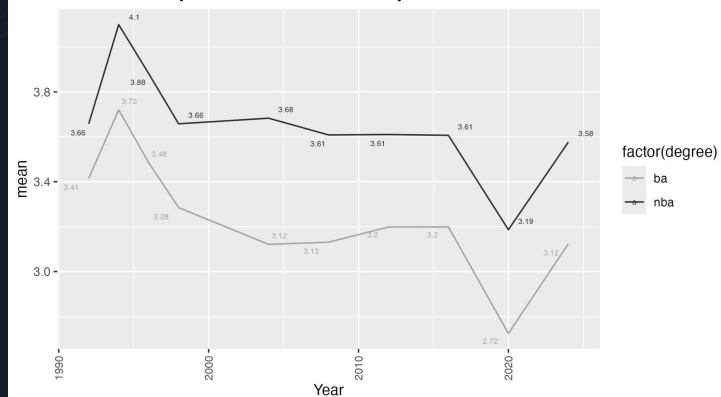
Comparing Respondents' Placement on Abortion Across Years by Education Level and Party



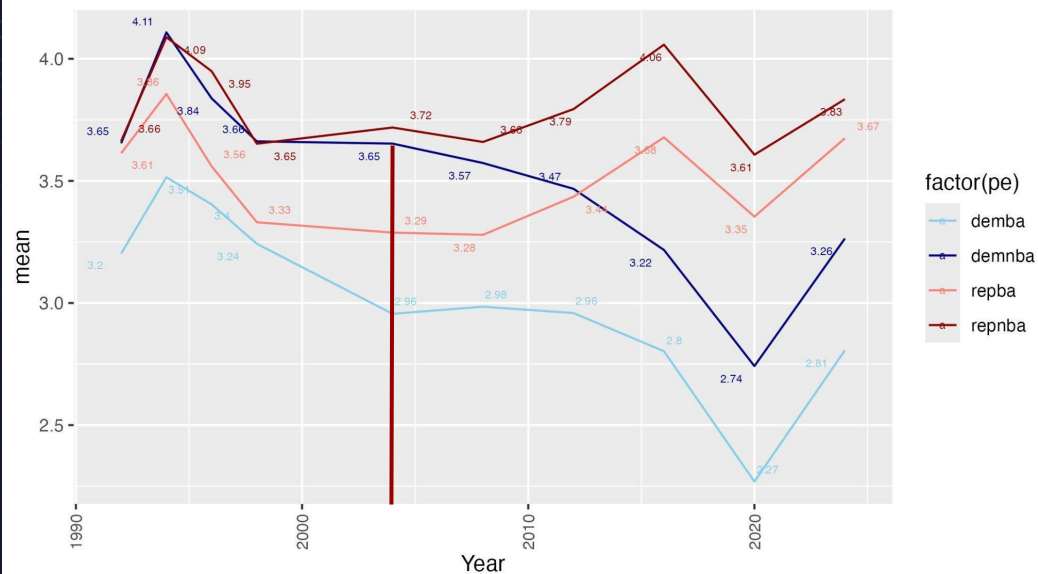
Comparing Respondents' Placement on immigration
Across Years by Party



Comparing Respondents' Placement on immigration
Across Years by Education Level and Party



Comparing Respondents' Placement on immigration
Across Years by Education Level and Party

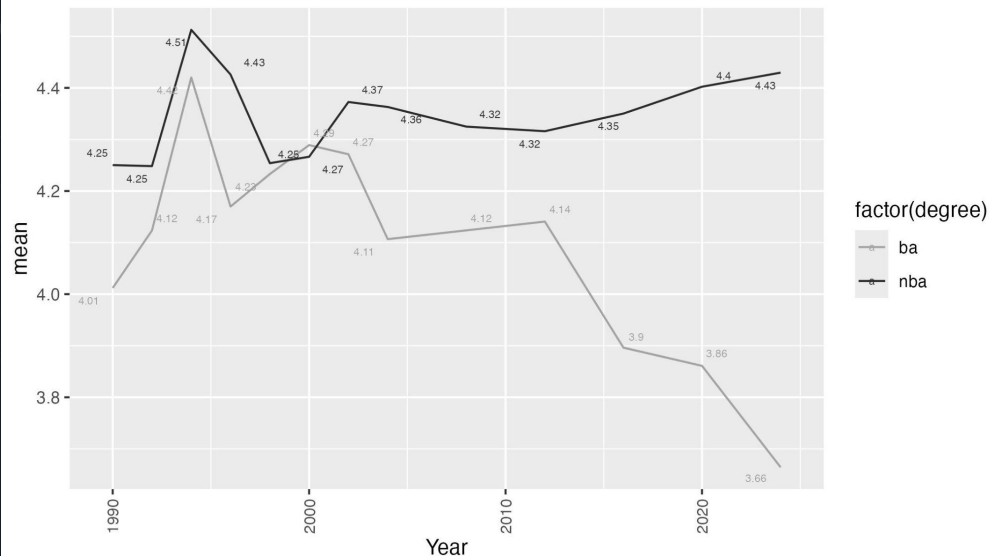


Party Vs. Educational/Class Identity: Conflict and Resolution/Supersession

- **Main crossovers: Republicans with Bachelors & Democrats without Bachelors**
- **Facets of identities pulling political leanings in different directions:**
 - **Republicans are more conservative; Democrats are more progressive**
 - **Those without Bachelor's degrees tend to be more conservative; those with Bachelor's degrees tend to be more progressive**
- **Party potentially superseding class identity**

Ideological and Political Self-Identification

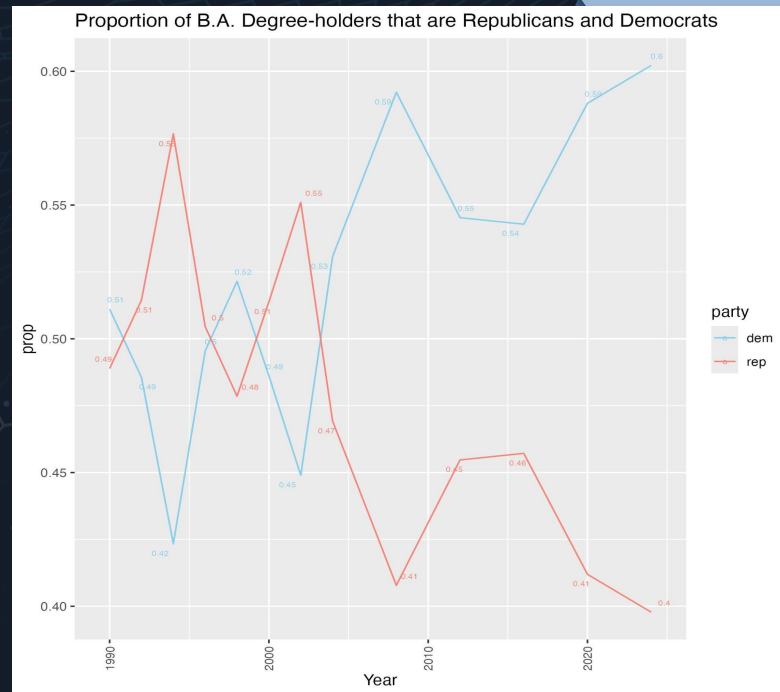
Comparing Respondents' Placement on Political Views Across Years by Education Level and Party



1. Ideological self-identification by education begins to **diverge dramatically in 2000–2004**.

(You do not see this by party, which exhibits steady polarization.)

2. Starting in 2004, the proportion of **Bachelors-holders that identify as Democrats overtakes Republicans**.



Why Does This Matter?

- **Educational vs. party conflict is increasingly resolved by sortedness.**
 - When presented with conflicting pulls between what party affiliation and what educational affiliation dictates, people increasingly choose their party affiliation.
 - Educational affiliation and party affiliation are increasingly correlated, so conflict is not as common.
- **Divergences begin in early 2000s: explanations?**
 - Share of national wealth held by middle vs. upper class crosses over around 2008 (Pew)
 - Great Recession
 - Rise of populism post-Bush

Bonus: Implications for Class vs. Party Identities

- Aligns with common narrative of Democrats being the “party of the wealthy elite”
- At their most sorted, there’s a 60-40 split between Republicans and Democrats for educational attainment
 - 45% of non-Bachelors-holders are Democrats; 40% of Bachelors-holders are Republicans
- So for a pretty significant portion of the population, there’s this latent educational/class identity—what happens if it resurfaces?

Data Transparency



Multi-Longitudinal Survey Variable Weighting

- a. Weighted before 2020 and before vs. 2024 by separate ANES documented variables



Data Implications

- a. Although variable topics and ranges matched between 2020 and before vs. 2024, question wording can be slightly different with newest ANES data
- b. Framed data post 1990 and post 2012 to examine recent trend changes



Found Similar Trends Within GSS

- a. Tested ANES trends against another dataset and found similarities in GSS

Accessibility

If you would like to recreate, you can easily find our research through our Github!

- Graphs
- Data cleaning
- Reference Tables
- Downloaded ANES files
- Code to simultaneously clean and graph variables, and simplify/automate the process

