Why Partisans Don’t Sort: The Constraints on Political Segregation

Jonathan Mummolo
Clayton Nall*

This Draft: March 15, 2016

Abstract

Social divisions between American partisans are growing, with Republicans and Democrats exhibiting partisan homophily in a range of seemingly non-political domains. It has been widely claimed that this partisan social divide extends to Americans’ decisions about where to live. In two original survey experiments, we show that Democrats are, indeed, more likely than Republicans to prefer living in dense, racially diverse, more Democratic places. Improving on previous studies, we test respondents’ stated preferences against their actual moving behavior, showing that even as partisans differ in their residential preferences in ways that should lead to sorting, on average they are not migrating to more politically different zip codes. Using zip-code-level Census and partisanship data on the places where respondents live, we provide a likely explanation for this null effect: by prioritizing common concerns when deciding where to live, Americans forgo the opportunity to move to more politically compatible communities.

*Corresponding Author: Clayton Nall is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Stanford University, 616 Serra Street Rm 100, Stanford CA 94305; Email: nall@stanford.edu. Jonathan Mummolo is a Ph.D. candidate in the department; Email: jmummolo@stanford.edu. Thanks to the Lab for the Study of American Values and Stanford Department of Political Science for financial support, and to Paul Sniderman, Ken Scheve, Justin Grimmer, Jonathan Rodden, Ryan Enos, and Morris Fiorina for helpful comments. Thanks to Mackenzie Israel-Trummel, Lauren Prather, Matt Chingos, Lauren Davenport, Kyle Handley, Michael Heaney, and Jonathan Wand for assistance with survey instruments and pretests.
Americans appear to be more socially divided along partisan lines than ever before. On surveys, partisans have expressed increasingly negative judgments towards members of the opposite party (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar and Westwood, 2014; Malhotra, Margalit and Levundusky, 2015). Partisanship now appears to be an important social identity, on par with race and gender, that shapes everything from media consumption preferences (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Levendusky, 2009; Prior, 2007) to selection of mates (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Alford et al., 2011; Huber and Malhotra, 2012). Both explicit and implicit discrimination measures indicate that disdain for the opposite party pervades Americans’ attitudes and social interactions. The strong form of such claims is that, given the opportunity, partisans can be expected to actively avoid or punish members of the other party in their day-to-day lives. The weaker, and more prevalent version of such claims suggests that an array of racial, socioeconomic, and cultural differences between the two parties lead them to adopt different behaviors, with partisanship lurking in the background. Regardless of the reason for their social divisions, the sorting of Americans into more homogeneous social networks is a special cause for concern. If Americans isolate themselves from the other party, they may end up living in homogeneous political milieus that breed political extremism (Klar, 2013; Sunstein, 2009).

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

Extant research on partisan residential sorting is marked by a contradiction: survey research shows
that partisans differ starkly in their preferences for community type, but studies of actual moving behavior find that Americans have not segregated all that much by partisanship or ideology (Abrams and Fiorina, 2012; Strickler, 2015). We offer one likely explanation of this inconsistency by conducting, for the first time, a study that examines both stated preferences and moving behavior of self-identified Republicans and Democrats. Using methods specifically designed to identify the marginal effect of community partisanship and related traits on residential choice, we show that partisans give different ratings to communities based on their partisan, urban, and racial composition. However, in a paired-comparison exercise designed to elicit how partisans prioritize different community traits, we find that crime, school quality, and commuting time rank much higher on both Democrats’ and Republicans’ “hierarchy of needs” (Maslow, 1943) than explicitly political concerns.

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

Finally, for all their differences in stated preferences, we show that partisans are not, on balance, moving to more compatible communities. While Republicans are moving to more Republican communities, on average, Democrats are as well. An analysis of the moving histories of our survey respondents shows that movers tend to relocate to communities similar to their current residences. Overall partisan residential migration is best described as regression to the mean, with both Democrats and Republicans in extremely co-partisan zip codes moving to more moderate neighborhoods, on average. Indeed, we find no evidence that even ideologically consistent partisans (liberal Democrats and conservative Re-
publicans), those who might be most likely to sort due to the strength of their political concerns, are more likely to sort. While partisans may express strong disdain or even hatred for the other party, their attitudes and preferences are insufficient to drive residential sorting.

The Missing Link Between Partisan Preferences and Behavior

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

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

Partisan discrimination is a stronger claim, suggesting that people seek out or use political information to socially and economically discriminate against members of the opposite party. Individuals may avoid social interaction with known members of the other party, or penalize them in other ways in social and economic interactions. One test of this phenomenon is whether, when given information about the partisanship of a social interlocutor, partisans act on those preferences. Huber and Malhotra (2012), for
example, find evidence that individuals use political cues when identifying potential mates on online
dating sites, though the effect size is modest.\(^1\) Iyengar and Westwood (2014) present a survey experi-
ment in which individuals were asked to evaluate hypothetical high-school scholarship candidates whose
composite profiles were randomized to include information on their participation in “Young Democrats”
or “Young Republicans” groups. In this experiment, partisans granted more scholarship money to their
co-partisans. In another study involving a prisoner’s dilemma experiment with real cash payouts, par-
tisans are shown to be willing to leave money on the table rather than cooperate with a member of the
opposite party to share winnings (Malhotra, Margalit and Levundusky, 2015). Here, in contrast to the
weaker homophily claim, partisanship is a direct cause of discriminatory behavior.

Scholars of partisan geographic sorting have advanced both the homophily hypothesis and the much
stronger partisan discrimination hypothesis. Partisans more favorably rate metropolitan areas that happen
to be dominated by co-partisans (Public Policy Polling, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2008) and Pew Re-
search Center (2014) reports that 50\% of Republicans and 35\% of Democrats say it is, “important to live
in a place where people share their political views” (Pew Research Center, 2014, 11-12). Such explicitly
political preferences are consistent with partisan discrimination. However, the balance of studies argue
for a partisan homophily mechanism (e.g. Cho, Gimpel and Hui (2013)). Bishop and Cushing (2008)
argues that partisans differ on a set of social, cultural, and geographic preferences which have fueled a
broader phenomenon of Democrats and Republicans moving into different communities since the 1970s.
In a host of subsequent studies, Democrats and Republicans each say that they prefer places whose
population characteristics are correlated with their partisan composition. Lewis and Baldassare (2010),
for example, find that liberals are more likely to support local policies associated with “smart growth,”
but acknowledge that inferring residential choice from such preferences requires a “heroic leap” (223).
Democrats and self-identified liberals are more likely to state a preference for higher population density,
“traditional” (non-sprawling) neighborhood design, and racial diversity than Republicans or conserva-
tives (Cho, Gimpel and Hui, 2013; Hui, 2013; Lewis and Baldassare, 2010; Gimpel and Hui, 2015; Pew
\(^1\)(Alford et al., 2011) find that partisanship influences marriage pairings, though, like online dating, this selection may
result more from the availability of co-partisans in our social networks than conscious selection of fellow partisans (369).
One way to address this question is to look at a contemporary cross-section of attitudes and behavior. Studies of partisan sorting have not validated respondents’ expressed preferences by measuring their moving behavior, a research design choice that is responsible for conflicting and seemingly paradoxical claims in this literature.\(^2\) In addition, extant observational studies face a fundamental challenge: they are often used to suggest a psychological model of residential preferences that cannot be discerned from observed sorting. Such studies, which often use voter-file data, seek to estimate the effect of individual-level partisanship on residential choice after controlling for various correlates of partisanship, either among individuals, or using covariates from aggregate data (McDonald, 2011; Cho, Gimpel and Hui, 2013). This approach has several flaws. First, studies based on voter file archives accurately capture

\(^2\)In one study that uses convenience samples to judge partisan differences in residential preferences, there is no evidence that migration behavior matches preferences (Motyl et al., 2014).
where partisans move, but do not explain why they move where they do.\textsuperscript{3} Second, multiple regression, the primary method used in these studies, obscures the actual quantity of interest—the degree to which partisans are actually moving to more politically compatible communities—replacing it with a quantity akin to a conditional correlation with an unclear substantive interpretation. Controlling for a range of factors that are correlated with partisanship and residential choice does not, as such studies imply, yield a conditionally independent effect of partisanship on an individual’s residential choice.\textsuperscript{4}

A more serious threat to the validity of existing studies is that preferences for neighborhood quality and affordability inhibit sorting. The same issues that make highly correlated regressors a problem for statistical modeling of residential preference confront movers when they are deciding where to live. Urbanism, racial composition, the proportion of home owners, and neighborhood home prices are related in ways that constrain household choices. An individual hoping to live in a zip code with publicly available indicators of quality, such as low crime, high proportions of adult residents with a college degree or high home ownership rates, will find few, and, in some metropolitan areas, no communities that satisfy either partisan extreme. Multiple regression, which potentially introduces counterfactuals that do not exist in the real world, does not solve this fundamental problem, and substantial correlation among regressors leaves findings based on multivariate models highly sensitive to researcher choices and model functional form (Schrodt, 2014; Ho et al., 2007; King and Zeng, 2006). Previous scholarship on residential sorting has noted that household economics, proximity to work, housing affordability, and concerns over neighborhood quality limit opportunities for individuals to engage in partisan residential sorting (Cho, Gimpel and Hui, 2013). However, this work has not attempted to quantify the likely scope of such constraints or incorporate them into statistical analyses.\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{3}For example, in one such study, UK Labour and Conservative Party members have been found to be more likely to migrate to or remain in more co-partisan constituencies over the course of 18 years, but the study does not ascertain why people moved (Gallego et al., 2014).

\textsuperscript{4}Such studies, which also tend to rely on cross-sectional data, may also introduce post-treatment bias by adjusting for factors causally dependent on partisanship (Rosenbaum, 1984).

\textsuperscript{5}For example, Cho, Gimpel and Hui (2013) write that their observational “models indicate that partisanship is significant even after other neighborhood characteristics are taken into account, suggesting that partisan sorting does occur for apparently
Combining Experimental and Observational Evidence

To avoid the aforementioned pitfalls, we conducted an original survey designed to capture partisan differences in state residential preferences and moving behavior. We surveyed approximately 4,800 self-identified Democrats and Republicans, using a quota-sampled panel provided by Survey Sampling International. The survey captures both stated preferences and self-reported behavior, allowing us to assess whether partisan homophily or discrimination are sufficient to lead to sorting.

Our survey contained two survey experiments designed to estimate the marginal effect of community traits on residential preferences. These experiments randomly vary traits of the hypothetical neighborhoods to which partisans might move, with the purpose of assessing which factors are most important, and which contribute the most, in individuals’ selection of a neighborhood. The first study presents hypothetical neighborhoods, and asks respondents to evaluate them. The second asks respondents to rank-order the factors that play into their residential choices. Unlike survey experiments on residential political reasons,” They acknowledge that “partisan preference is regularly trumped by economic concerns. At the same time, our analysis indicates that partisan sorting is significant for both Republicans and Democrats even after a whole host of neighborhood characteristics have been taken into account” (12). Such conclusions do not incorporate the hard constraints on residential choice that may eliminate choices entirely. Similar critiques have been leveled against hedonic pricing models in studies of housing markets. Linear regression models that predict the price of real estate as a function of property-level and community-level factors, whose contribution to demand (and marginal utility) can then more easily be inferred (Rosen, 1974). The advantage of such models is that home sales are frequent, price is a continuous measure of underlying demand, and the data large enough to reduce the correlated regressors problem. Existing work on partisan residential sorting has not capitalized on the hedonic pricing approach because the individual mover, rather than the target community, has been the unit of analysis.

6The survey ran from June 4-14, 2013. The sampling design aimed for a target of 50% Republicans and 50% Democrats, using Census targets for age, race, and gender. Since our sample is non-random, we assess selection bias by comparing unweighted summary statistics of key variables to comparable unweighted statistics for Democratic and Republican identifiers in the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES). See Online Appendix.

7Our study surveys all individuals, and not only self-identified “heads of household” who might make decisions for the household as a whole. We assume that the preferences and moving behavior stated on our survey represent collective household decisions.
preference that manipulate only one neighborhood attribute such as partisanship (Hui, 2013) or race (Farley et al., 1978, 1994), our experiments allow us to isolate multiple attributes’ marginal effect on community preferences.

In both experimental designs, we account for factors that have been considered widely in the residential sorting and segregation literature. One class of explanatory variables, which we call *valence* considerations, consist of cost, distance to work, neighborhood crime rates, school quality, and similar factors that appear elsewhere in residential choice research (Pew Research Center, 2008; Rossi, 1980). Of these, accessibility of a location to work is typically the number one consideration facing movers. A series of additional factors are plausible causes of *partisan homophily* in residential choice. The link between preferences over neighborhood racial composition and their link to racial segregation, for example, has been a topic of considerable research (e.g., Schelling 1971, Farley et al. 1978, Farley et al. 1994, Ellen 2000). Black-white segregation in particular is highly correlated with partisan segregation, since black voters are almost entirely Democratic regardless of their socioeconomic status (Dawson, 1995; Hersh and Nall, 2014). Similarly, liberals tend to prefer more urban areas, while conservatives prefer more rural areas, which may lead to differences in partisan context (Lewis and Baldassare, 2010). Finally, in both the fully randomized conjoint and paired-comparison designs, we operationalize partisanship and potentially related cultural factors related to sorting. While in the conjoint design we account for information about partisanship and closely associated demographic correlates (neighborhood race and urbanism), in the paired comparison design we include a range of additional variables more explicitly associated with “culture war” preferences.

We then assess whether partisans, who express preferences consistent with the weak and strong forms of sorting, are actually engaging in residential sorting. We begin by highlighting the difficulty of partisan sorting. Using respondents’ current residential data, we show that when individuals first screen on neighborhood quality and affordability, they have few remaining options to move to more co-partisan neighborhoods. We demonstrate that Democrats and Republican movers are moving to more Republican places in about equal proportions. Examining respondents’ average net shift in zip-code-level partisan context, we show that both Democrats and Republicans, as well as numerous subgroups within the two
parties, tend to preserve the status quo. For most partisan subgroups, migration behavior runs counter to the hypothesis of a “Big Sort” driven directly or indirectly by partisan differences. While our observational results do not directly validate the experimental results (as the translation of stated preferences into action may take different forms), we demonstrate that there is little evidence that preferences stated on surveys are leading to partisan sorting.

**Experiments on Partisanship and Residential Preference**

**Conjoint Design**

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

Our design prompts respondents to choose between two randomly generated communities labeled “Community A” and “Community B”. Each of the \(N\) respondents were presented \(K = 5\) “choice tasks” in which they were asked to select one of \(J = 2\) alternatives. For each community, respondents viewed \(L = 7\) traits with \(D_L\) levels of the variable in question, per trait. The design includes “valence” characteristics that both Democrats and Republicans prefer when choosing neighborhoods, as well as neighborhood traits that are more clearly associated with partisanship. We chose as traits those that

\(^8\)Conjoint designs have elsewhere appeared in real estate and residential preference research (Molin, Oppewal and Timmermans, 1999; Molin, 2011), and in sociology (as “vignettes”) (Alves and Rossi, 1978; Faia, 1980). The design is used to assess how consumers make tradeoffs when evaluating products. In political science, the design is used to assess support for multi-faceted policies or decisions (Bechtel and Scheve, 2013; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014; Bechtel, Hainmueller and Margalit, 2015).
people most frequently mention as reasons for moving to a new neighborhood.\footnote{See, e.g., Los Angeles Times (1999).} We include community partisanship to capture the extent of partisan discrimination. Housing cost, one of the top concerns arising in studies of residential choice, is randomized across three levels: 15\%, 25\%, and 40\% of respondent pre-tax income. On surveys, people regularly cite neighborhood crime as a major factor governing their residential choice (Los Angeles Times, 1999). We represent crime rates in relative terms: 20\% above the national average or 20\% below the national average. A “school quality score” similar to those that appear on real-estate search sites takes on one of two values: 5 out of 10 or 9 out of 10. Separately, we account for partisans’ attitudes towards urbanism, which appears in previous scholarship (Pew Research Center, 2014). Community “type of place” is randomized across 6 levels that appear in other survey research: city downtown with a mix of shops, businesses, and homes; city residential area; mixed-use suburban neighborhood; suburban neighborhood with houses only; small town; and rural area (Belden, Russonello & Stewart, 2011). One means by which partisans may sort without relying on partisan information is by engaging in racial sorting (Schelling, 1971; Farley et al., 1994). Racial composition is expressed in terms of the white/nonwhite racial composition of the neighborhood, and takes on four levels: 50\% white/50\% nonwhite, 75\% white/25\% nonwhite, 90\% white/10\% nonwhite, and 96\% white/4\% nonwhite. The partisanship of the community is expressed in terms of the 2012 presidential vote, randomized across three levels: 30\% Democratic/70\% Republican, 50\% Democrat/50\% Republican, and 70\% Democrat/30\% Republican. Any combination of levels of the above traits may appear in each pair of profiles. A single conjoint exercise from the survey appears in Figure 1.\footnote{Since our sampling was not done at the household level, we did not identify whether the respondent was primarily responsible for household moving decisions or shared those responsibilities with another person. However, to partially address this concern, we separately analyze data for married (or partnered) households and single-person households.}

We used responses to the 5 pairs of profiles to estimate via least-squares regression the \textit{average marginal component-specific effect (AMCE)}, or the average effect of each trait-level on selection of a community (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014). In the regressions, the residential choice is expressed as a binary dependent variable and attribute levels enter into the regression as categorical
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMUNITY TRAIT</th>
<th>COMMUNITY A</th>
<th>COMMUNITY B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Daily Driving Time for Commuting and Errands</td>
<td>25 min</td>
<td>45 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Place</td>
<td>Suburban neighborhood with mix of shops, houses, businesses</td>
<td>Small town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Cost</td>
<td>15 percent of pre-tax income</td>
<td>30 percent of pre-tax income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>90% White, 10% Nonwhite</td>
<td>50% White, 50% Nonwhite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent Crime Rate (Vs National Rate)</td>
<td>20% More Crime Than National Average</td>
<td>20% Less Crime Than National Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Vote in 2012</td>
<td>30% Democrat, 70% Republican</td>
<td>70% Democrat, 30% Republican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Quality Rating (1=Worst, 10=Best)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

variables. The coefficient on each attribute level represents its effect on the respondent’s probability of selecting a community relative to the omitted category, after controlling for combinations of other traits (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014, 11).

Results from the conjoint design appear in Figure 2. They show that Democrats and Republicans have similar preferences on several neighborhood indicators, including housing costs, school quality, crime levels, and long commutes. On the remaining traits in the conjoint design, however, partisan preferences diverge. Respondents of both parties were about 12 points less likely to select a community with 30% copartisans versus one with 70% copartisans, all else equal. This is a large divide, but not as significant as both parties’ responsiveness to more basic considerations. However, there was a larger partisan difference in response to community racial composition. Republicans were, in comparing com-

11Specifically, the coefficients are estimated by combining the $J \cdot K$ choices for each respondent into a panel data set, then running a categorical regression using least squares regression with standard errors clustered by respondent (Arai, 2011). The outcome variable, $Y_{jk}$ is coded 1 if the community described in profile $jk$ was selected, zero otherwise. The explanatory variables included in each row, $jk$, are the randomized values of the $L$ categorical variables used as traits for community option $jk$. 

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

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

**Paired-Comparison Tests on Significant Factors in Residential Sorting**

While the conjoint experiment examined the joint effect of a limited set of variables, a second experiment is designed to assess the relative importance of community political composition and related community characteristics when deciding where to live. In a set of paired comparisons, individuals viewed pairs of community traits and were asked which general neighborhood trait was more important to their decision about where to live. From the responses, we establish both an overall ranking based on the proportion of time each community trait is picked (conditional on being offered), and the proportion of time each

---

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

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

14 Conjoint results broken down by partisanship, ideology, and strength of partisan identification appear in the Online Appendix.
Conjoint Results: Partisans Agree on Community Quality, Disagree On Racial/Political Composition, Type of Place

Figure 2: Average marginal component-specific effects of community traits on residential selection, among self-identified Democrats and Republicans.
type of community trait (grouped into substantive categories) is picked over other types of traits in a head-to-head comparison.

Respondents viewed pairs of community traits that may be used in residential choice. They then chose which of the two was more significant to their residential choice (Thurstone, 1927; David, 1969; Salganik and Levy, 2015). Under paired comparison tests, respondents are presented \( k \) pairs of attribute labels, each drawn randomly from a set of \( t \) predefined traits \((i, j) \in \{(i = 1, \ldots, t) \times (j = 1, \ldots, t), i \neq j\}\)

In our design, individuals viewed \( k = 9 \) randomly generated pairs of community traits drawn from a list of \( t = 62 \) characteristics chosen by referring to prior survey research and conventional wisdom. For each pair, we asked, “Which of the following is a more significant factor when you are deciding where to live?”

Our list of traits is drawn or adapted from previously published work, including scholarship on public choice and on attitudes towards sprawl. Because the paired comparison design has substantial statistical power, we included additional community traits that have rarely been mentioned in other studies. A great advantage of the paired comparison design mentioned by Salganik and Levy (2015) is that additional traits, and even slight wording variations, can be adopted without jeopardizing statistical power or the relative rank ordering. As a result, we canvassed the literature to generate an inclusive list of traits, arriving at a list of 62, which we group into the following general categories:

- **Disorder:** Community problems, including crime, gang activity, and public drug use.
- **Geography/Location:** Region of the country, proximity to a major metropolitan area, climate.
- **Friends/Family:** Nearness of friends and family.

---

15 This phrasing is theoretically susceptible to multiple interpretations. For example, an atheist might consider the proportion of a community that is religious to be both “significant” in their decision-making process but undesirable, while a religious person might view that attribute as both significant and desirable. However, the results below indicate that most of our respondents interpreted the question to mean “desirable,” as the selection rates correspond to well-known preferences within each party (e.g. Republicans consistently chose neighborhood traits associated with social conservatism at higher rates than did Democrats).

16 We referred to past studies to generate our list of traits. These included Cho, Gimpel and Hui (2013), Hui (2013), Los Angeles Times (1999), Belden, Russonello & Stewart (2004), and Belden, Russonello & Stewart (2011).
• **Neighborhood Income:** Home values and community wealth.

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

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

• **“Smart Growth” vs. Sprawl:** Privacy, housing size and density, walkability, parking.

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

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

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

• **Neighborhood Race:** White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian composition.

Using two different methods, we find that Republicans and Democrats agree on the importance of higher-priority issues and disagree on the importance of lower-priority issues. To demonstrate this, we first calculate the proportion of the time each community trait was chosen by respondents of each party in head-to-head matchups. These estimates, with 95% confidence intervals, appear in Figure 3. Democrats and Republicans both identify region of the country, home prices and values, property tax rates, crime levels, and personal privacy as important considerations. While a large minority list “having a lot in common with neighbors” as a consideration, when they are asked to prioritize specific ways in which they may have much in common with their neighbors, the two parties tend to diverge. Both Democrats and Republicans identify having neighbors who share their politics as an important factor only 30% of the time. However, partisans are quite divided on religious composition and indicators of social attitudes, such as how “gay-friendly” a community is. Republicans identify “How Christian the community is” as an important factor 46% the time, Democrats only 29% of the time. Both white and non-white Democrats are more likely than Republicans to identify racial diversity as an important consideration. Republicans identified “The share of the community that is white” as a significant factor.

\[17\] Confidence intervals were constructed using simple random sampling assumptions for each mean.
40% of the time, Democrats do only 28% of the time. In line with findings elsewhere in the sorting and polarization literature, on almost every point of partisan disagreement, ideologically consistent partisans explain the inter-party difference. (See the Online Appendix.)

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

**Prioritizing Quality and Affordability Limits Sorting**

Given the real but limited role of partisanship and closely related factors in partisans’ stated residential preferences, we now turn to observational data to explain why, even if partisans were able to directly or indirectly sort, they have limited latitude to migrate to more politically compatible neighborhoods. Our goal in presenting these results is less to offer a direct individual-level validation of the experimental results than to show how real-world limits can inhibit even the limited sorting that could be anticipated from our experimental findings. We collected respondents’ moving history, allowing us to determine if, in fact, they move to communities that are more partisan. We operationalize communities using zip

---

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

19 For any given individual, validation is infeasible, because the fundamental problem of causal inference (Holland, 1986) prevents us from measuring results under all experimental conditions for all respondents.
Partisans Agree on Community Traits Ranked Most Important, Disagree On Low–Importance Social Indicators

Figure 3: Relative ranking of factors used in residential choice by Democrats and Republicans. Proportion of pairwise comparisons in which a community trait was identified as more important than a second randomly chosen trait.
Figure 4: Ranking of factors used in community selection by Democrats and Republicans. Proportion of pairwise matchups in which an item from the row category was identified as more significant than an item from the column category.
codes, which are widely used as a proxy for communities into which people consider moving.\textsuperscript{20} We collect all respondents’ current zip codes, as well as the most recent previous zip code of individuals who moved in the last five years. These zip codes were merged with precinct-level presidential election returns data from 2008 using ArcGIS (Ansolabehere and Rodden, 2012).\textsuperscript{21} Using these data, we show that it is infeasible for partisans to move to more politically compatible places. These constraints exist regardless of the strength of factors driving partisan homophily or partisans’ underlying motivations.

To determine the feasibility of moves, we create a set of potential choices, then progressively apply a set of reasonable constraints that movers might apply when engaged in a home search. We begin by treating every zip code in the United States as a potential place of residence, thereby allowing potential movers a much larger set of options than they would typically consider. We then apply a set of resource and quality constraints. To begin, we apply the widely accepted rule that individuals should spend no more than three times their annual pre-tax income on a house (Schwartz and Wilson, 2008). For each respondent, we consider a zip code affordable if the 25th percentile home value as captured in the 2008-2012 combined five-year American Community Survey (ACS) is at most three times the respondent’s self-reported income (Fitch and Ruggles, 2003).\textsuperscript{22} While there are many indicators of community quality, including crime levels and school performance, few of these are reliably publicly reported at the zip-code level. We adopt one indicator of neighborhood quality: whether the proportion of home owners is at least as high as in the respondent’s current zip code.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{20}For a discussion of alternate approaches to measuring community, see Wong et al. (2012). Zip codes tend to be larger than areas that most people would consider “neighborhoods,” but they are often used as a proxy for communities of interest, especially in major cities. Any choice of fixed geography requires a large degree of researcher choice and acceptance of tradeoffs. See, e.g., Wong et al. (2012).

\textsuperscript{21}The precinct shapefiles were converted into centroids, then spatially joined with a polygon layer of zip-code tabulation areas, and the results aggregated within each zip code.

\textsuperscript{22}The ACS reports only the median and interquartile range of home values for each zip code. We assume throughout that rent and ownership costs are comparable.

\textsuperscript{23}Home owners maintain their properties and add to neighborhood home values (see, e.g., Glaeser and Shapiro 2003). Home ownership is also correlated negatively with crime rates. Crime statistics are reliably reported at the county level. Violent crimes per capita are negatively correlated with the percentage of owner-occupied housing units as reported in the
In Figure 5, we report the feasibility of moving to a zip code with a greater share of copartisans as constraints are progressively applied, then plot the share of national housing units (as measured in the ACS) that satisfy the listed constraints requirement. This number represents partisans’ capacity for sorting. We plot a histogram of the distribution of this feasibility value, using histograms binned into five-percentage-point intervals. In each graph, some individuals already live in maximally co-partisan neighborhoods, and appear on the far left of the histogram, since they have no opportunity to move to more partisan places. Others live at the opposite extreme, in precincts dominated by the other party, and have nearly limitless options to move into more politically compatible neighborhoods. From left to right, we present the effects of incremental resource and quality constraints. First, in Column 1, we show the proportion of housing units that satisfy the neighborhood partisanship requirement. Without constraints, large majorities of both parties have an abundance of zip codes to choose from. In Column 2, we apply only the affordability constraint. Doing so shifts the density in the histogram substantially to the left for both parties, indicating that sorting is increasingly difficult. Approximately 37% of Democrats and 28% of Republicans (shown in the left bin) would have almost no housing options (less than 5% of total national housing stock), or would have to risk housing-related financial hardship by moving to a zip code with more co-partisans. In Column 3, we add the quality constraint (percentage of units owner-occupied), which results in large majorities of Democrats and Republicans having a choice of at most 10% of the national housing stock if they simultaneously seek to maintain or improve zip-code-level quality, affordability, and co-partisan percentage. Finally, for illustration we present a loose geographic constraint: a requirement to live in the West census region. In practice, such a constraint is weaker than the geographic constraint most Americans have to deal with: moving to or remaining in a specific metropolitan area for familial or employment reasons. When these constraints are applied, more than 90% of both Democrats and Republicans have, at most, 5% of the nation’s housing stock to choose from.

Another potential proxy for neighborhood quality, percentage of individuals with a BA, is uncorrelated with crime rates at the county level ($r=-0.01$).

Because we are analyzing feasibility, this “requirement” need not be explicitly adopted by movers.
while still migrating to a more co-partisan place. Incorporating additional constraints monotonically reduces housing options. While people do not have zero housing choices, many desirable combinations of zip-code-level traits simply do not exist.

Of course, Americans rarely search nationally for housing, but by making this choice we are stacking the deck against our argument. Limiting a housing search to a metropolitan area first, then applying the same constraints, only shrinks the choice set further, and rules out a home search in some metropolitan areas entirely. In the Online Appendix, we show that a handful of metropolitan areas have zero zip codes that are landslide (greater than 60% Democratic or Republican) while passing cost and quality criteria.

Who Sorts?

The preceding analysis outlines examples (among many) of the deterministic bounds on residential sorting. The final test of the experimental and observational results presented above is whether individuals’ moving behavior is consistent with stated preferences: on the margins, partisans express different preferences. While we cannot directly validate each respondent’s experimental findings, we can examine whether behavior indicates any kind of partisan differences. We might expect key subgroups to be more likely to sort on partisanship. Liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans, who drive the partisan differences in stated preferences, should be most likely to act on their preferences. Similarly, the young, who are not bound by the same set of quality concerns as the middle class, may be more receptive to “low quality” neighborhoods, allowing them to choose places that match their political preferences, in contrast to the middle-aged and parents with children who appear to take more seriously “pocketbook” household issues such as school quality. Finally, ex ante, we expected that higher-income partisans would be more likely to move to places that match their partisanship for several reasons: housing cost is a lower constraint, and they may have resources to substitute private for public goods in areas such as policing and schooling (Gans, 1991, 54-56). To test these hypotheses, we again use respondents’ self-reported current zip code and the most recent previous zip code if they moved in the last five years.²⁵ For both

²⁵We omit respondents who moved within the same zip code. For purposes of zip-code-level sorting, this is equivalent to not moving at all, and including these moves could bias results against the sorting hypothesis. See Online Appendix for
Figure 5: Feasibility of partisan migration. Histograms display the proportion of Democrats and Republicans by the proportion of national housing units that are in zip codes more Democratic or Republican than the current zip code. First column: no constraints. Second column: Affordable zip codes only. Third panel: Affordable zip codes with a greater than or equal proportion of housing units owner-occupied than respondents’ present zip code. Fourth column: exclusion of zip codes outside the U.S. Census West region.
the current and previous zip codes of movers (and non-movers) we calculate the average change in the political composition of zip codes of Democrats and Republicans in subgroups hypothesized to have either strong preferences or an easy ability to move.

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

Individuals who were expected, ex ante, to be more likely to act on their partisanship do not, in fact, do so. Both poorer (household income less than $40,000 per year) and richer (household income greater than $80,000 per year) individuals maintain the status quo, on average, contrary to our expectations regarding resource effects. Having children in schools coincides with both parties moving to more Republican places. Giving strongly positive feeling thermometer ratings to “urban people” or “rural people,” for example, appears to have no bearing on one’s sorting behavior, regardless of party. The only group in which there is a weak indication of sorting is among the middle-aged (those 35-60 years old). In this group, Republicans moved to places that were on average 4 points more Republican, while Democrats moved to places that were only 2 points more Republican.26

A number of factors may be explaining the Republican lean of both Democrats and Republicans in our sample. One is that migration from the North to the Sunbelt may lead both Democrats and

---

26 Movers between metropolitan areas will have a different set of concerns than individuals within metropolitan areas. Inter-metropolitan moves account for only 20% of the moves in our data, and we are not able to detect a difference in sorting behavior between intercity and local movers. The Online Appendix contains results for between-MSA and within-MSA moves.
Figure 6: Average difference between origin and destination zip codes in the Democratic proportion of the 2008 two-party presidential vote, for the full sample and for subgroups believed more or less likely sort geographically by partisanship. Sample: individuals who reported moving to a different zip code in the last five years.
Republicans to move to more Republican communities. For example, a software worker who moves from Silicon Valley (a landslide Democratic area) even to reputationally liberal (but actually politically balanced) Austin—would help to explain results such as these. More generally, both Democrats and Republicans have been suburbanizing for some time, and may be drawn to more rural and affordable real estate in more Republican areas. Our feasibility analysis provides some insight into these macro-trends, and suggests why partisan differences have not been larger.\footnote{We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.}

Of course, over a long time period, serious partisan geographic sorting could occur, but if it does it is unlikely to be a result of the moving of Democrats and Republicans. On average, Democrats and Republicans are about equally likely to migrate, and the partisan shift associated with their moves has, at least recently, been nearly identical, so that there is practically zero difference in migration (about 0.02 percentage points).\footnote{Our results do not rule out the possibility that sorting could be occurring within specific regions.} If we extrapolated linearly from our results, and if members of each party continued moving at the same rate for the next 50 years, Democrats’ and Republicans’ zip code contexts would have partisan composition that are only negligibly different.\footnote{To be sure, large confidence intervals on some estimates mean that we cannot reject a range of possible outcomes, or project with any certainty into the future.} Major sorting has occurred over time, and in the past, but our data do not support the idea that strong partisan attitudinal differences are at the heart of continuing partisan geographic sorting.

**Conclusion**

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

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

Our findings do not deny the existence of other forms of segregation, especially on income. While overall racial segregation has been persistent but declining, income segregation has worsened (Rardon and Bischoff, 2011, 2013). In fact, one reason partisan sorting has not been worse is that more affluent Democrats and Republicans are converging on the same types of neighborhoods in “purple,” non-landslide areas. If there is a cause for concern, it is that class segregation of communities could have implications for policy attitudes (Newman, Johnston and Lown, 2015) or that the segregation of the rich has implications for the distribution of goods. Our results can help to explain why recent scholarship has demonstrated that “purple” areas can be internally polarized (McCarty et al., 2014). If wealthier, educated, and ideologically consistent partisans converge on the same suburban districts, significant
polarization within those areas can occur without respect to geography. The politically engaged, ideological, and affluent—those with the highest degree of engagement in politics and the means to act on their political preferences—are not, more than any other partisans, moving to neighborhoods more dominated by their copartisans, even though on average their neighborhood preferences are more consistent with partisan homophily.

Our findings can also be situated in a broader literature tracking historical sources of local political change. Scholarship on such long-term changes focus on changes that occur much earlier in the “funnel of causality,” in Converse’s language (Campbell et al., 1960, 24–37). Numerous historical factors have contributed to the evolution of political geography over time. We offer an account of preferences and behavior closer to the end of the funnel to the beginning, by examining whether stated preferences, which have been the crux of studies of partisan affect, translate into real-world behavior in the context. As part of a larger set of instances of affective polarization between the two parties (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012), we find some reassuring evidence that there are dimensions of behavior on which partisan preference differences have minimal effect.

Partisan identity may be growing in strength and salience across numerous facets of daily life, and may be an increasingly useful indicator of a set of shared behaviors. However, as our study shows, neither partisan affect nor its correlates are sufficient to overcome the substantial material concerns that inform a decision as weighty as residential choice. When it comes to one extremely important household decision, politics remains, in Robert Dahl’s words (Dahl, 2005), a “sideshow in the great circus of life.”

References


---

30Similarly, campaign donors for both parties emerge from the same wealthy communities in metropolitan areas (Cho and Gimpel, 2007).


**URL:** http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/eda


**URL:** [http://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR35019.v1](http://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR35019.v1)