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Polarisation and Cultural Realignment in Britain,  
2014-2019

David T. Caldwell  
Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
School of Government and International Affairs

November 2022



## Abstract

Following decades of reduced ideological competition, mainstream party policy diverged in Britain after the 2007-2008 financial crisis. This is motivating renewed interest in mass polarisation, yet that concept remains understudied relative to the American political science literature. Almost all existing research is based in the post-Thatcher era of left-right convergence, leaving gaps in our understanding of cultural realignment during the Brexit period. I consider three perspectives on polarisation in this thesis: (1) sociological accounts claim that polarisation reflects changes in distributional properties of public opinion; (2) party sorting accounts contend that public opinion is not necessarily polarising so much as partisanship is more organised around issue positions; (3) elite cue accounts argue that partisanship causes polarisation and thus limits attitude change to politically engaged voters.

These accounts are tested using cross-sectional and panel data from the British Election Study, 2014-2019. I operationalise aggregate outcomes and individual-level mechanisms contested in the American case, examining the extent to which citizens are dividing through different variables (attitude versus partisanship change), via different voters (partisans versus non-partisans), and on different issues (cultural versus economic).

Little evidence is found for elite cue accounts throughout the thesis. Despite strong left-right policy divergence among Labour-Conservative platforms, I observe depolarisation in the distributional properties and partisanship of mass economic preferences. More ambiguous elite disagreements surrounding European integration, immigration, and broader social values are associated with escalating social division, meanwhile. I find liberal attitude change suggesting socio-demographic culture shifts, yet this trend is unfolding in conjunction with party switching mechanisms. The product of these changes drives mass polarisation from 2014 to 2019, indicating an overarching account of cultural realignment based on sociological and party sorting processes.



*For my parents*



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## List of Abbreviations

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<b>ANES</b> American National Election Study . . . . .	39
<b>BES</b> British Election Study . . . . .	10
<b>BHPS</b> British Household Panel Survey . . . . .	88
<b>BSAS</b> British Social Attitudes Survey . . . . .	87
<b>CHES</b> Chapel Hill Expert Survey . . . . .	58
<b>DUP</b> Democratic Unionist Party . . . . .	97
<b>EEC</b> European Economic Community . . . . .	142
<b>MCMC</b> Markov chain Monte Carlo . . . . .	95
<b>NRS</b> National Readership Survey . . . . .	109
<b>RAS</b> Receive-Accept-Sample . . . . .	40
<b>SNP</b> Scottish National Party . . . . .	97
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## Statement of Copyright

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# 1

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## Introduction

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That the parameters of British politics changed following the 2007-2008 financial crisis seems clear. Labour rapidly reversed decades of redistributive policy moderation by shifting left under successive leaders, while Brexit forced unprecedented elite divergence over European integration, immigration, and broader social values onto mainstream party platforms. These developments and similar events abroad have invited analyses in terms of polarisation and emergent British culture wars. Many contemporary observers suggest that we are witnessing the consequences of sociological realignment, where voters are dividing over ideological positions that intersect and are breaking down mainstream party coalitions (e.g., Crouch, 2020; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). Such diagnoses contradict established accounts of the relationship between elite policy dynamics and public opinion in Britain, however, which are based on party sorting (Adams et al., 2012b,c; Evans and Neundorf, 2020; Evans and Tilley, 2017; Green, 2007; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Milazzo et al., 2012). In these accounts, changes in party competition cause electoral realignment by altering considerations involved in political choice. Elite polarisation more clearly links issue positions to partisanship and other political behaviour, leading to switching among those perceiving better representation on those issues elsewhere. In the present context, this perspective implies that Brexit and its aftermath exposed the mainstream party system to established cultural divisions, resulting in partisan realignment by allowing voters to attach more weight to positions on European integration, immigration, and broader social values (Evans and Menon, 2017).

There is thus a gap in claims surrounding partisan realignment in post-crisis British

politics. Despite consensus that the ideological structure of political competition is changing, there is so far no coherent understanding of what this outcome represents. *Are British voters developing more polarised and ideological issue preferences, or has elite policy divergence in this period destabilised established electoral coalitions?* That overarching question is addressed in this thesis through analyses of cultural realignment and attitude and partisanship change. I operationalise established conceptions of polarisation from the literature, using them to establish the extent to which the British public is polarising through different variables (attitude and partisanship change), among different voters (partisans and non-partisans), and on different issues (cultural and economic).

The principal contribution of the thesis is to provide a more complete picture of polarisation in the British case. The existing theoretical understanding of this subject comes mostly from American political science, where it is well established that ideological divides between elites have grown over many decades and involve long-standing economic debates but also cultural disputes over abortion, race, sexuality, and gender identity (e.g., Fleisher and Bond, 2004; McCarty et al., 1997, 2008; Poole and Rosenthal, 1984). Research into corresponding developments unfolding among the American public has inspired three main perspectives: (1) sociological accounts claim that polarisation reflects changes in distributional properties of public opinion, where parties pursue diverse ideological agendas because they are representing fundamentally different constituencies; (2) party sorting accounts contend that public opinion is not necessarily polarising so much as partisanship is more structured by issue positions, with elite policy divergence facilitating greater spatial voting behaviour; (3) elite cue accounts argue that partisans adopt the policy positions advocated by trusted elites, meanwhile, leading to polarising attitude change among politically engaged voters but not the wider mass public.

Attempts to test these explanations on the British case are mostly limited to the post-Thatcher period of Labour-Conservative convergence. Unlike intensifying disagreements characterising American party competition since at least the 1980s, recent decades of European politics are punctuated by periods of depolarisation and repolarisation. Party movements in Britain are often described as particularly dramatic (Adams et al., 2012b, Cohen and Cohen (2021); Schmitt and Thomassen, 2000). After a divisive

general election in 1983, Labour and Conservatives converged on what was being called ‘cosy consensus’ by the time of the 2007-2008 crisis (Campbell, 2007). First, Labour moderated its redistributive platform and reversed positions on European integration, setting up as a centrist, culturally modern government in waiting (Hindmoor, 2004). The same approach was then mirrored in the Conservative Party following internecine conflict over Europe and a decade out of power. In particular, the modernising leadership of David Cameron combined market orthodoxy and socially liberal policies on racial issues and gay rights (Bale, 2016).

It is in this context of party convergence that much existing British polarisation literature is based. Many studies document sharp declines in the ideological gap separating Labour-Conservative supporters from the late 1980s to mid-2000s (Adams et al., 2012b,c; Curtice, 2010; Green, 2007; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Perrett, 2021; Sanders, 1999; SurrIDGE, 2018a; Webb and Farrell, 1999). However, the search for corresponding depolarisation in public opinion has proved controversial. Adams, Green, and Milazzo (Adams et al., 2012b,c) find little cross-sectional evidence of attitude convergence between 1987 and 2001, concluding that left-right dealignment in the structure of mainstream voting behaviour must result mainly from switching mechanisms. This party sorting conclusion is supported by cross-lagged panel models showing that individuals’ ideological preferences are more stable than and exogenous to changes in their partisanship, especially when Labour-Conservative platforms are less converged in earlier stages of the post-Thatcher period (Evans and Neundorf, 2020; Milazzo et al., 2012). It is also compatible with long-standing claims that the underlying value principles informing political choice in Britain are stable, consistent, and enduring at the individual and aggregate level (Bartle, 2000; Evans et al., 1996; Heath et al., 1994).

Yet recent research challenges the dominant party sorting account of Labour-Conservative dealignment in this period. Analysing much more data than Adams, Green, and Milazzo, Cohen and Cohen (2021) show clear cross-sectional evidence of depolarisation in distributional properties of left-right public opinion (see also Perrett, 2021; SurrIDGE, 2012). They also challenge cross-lagged findings used to support switching mechanisms. After taking initial population conditions into account, the same panel data and model employed by Evans and Neundorf (2020) is interpreted in favour of attitude change conclusions. Since this change in redistributive preferences

affects non-partisans as well, it suggests sociological accounts of post-Thatcher convergence. Yet there is also new evidence of elite cue processes, with Cavallé and Neundorf (2022) documenting a spike in centrism among initially left-wing Labour identifiers during 1997, when the party returned to power under Tony Blair (see also Curtice and Fisher, 2003). Lively debate is thus opening up around the mechanisms driving political change in Britain, but almost all of it is based in an era where elites actively minimised their ideological differences.

Mainstream party policy diverged along multiple dimensions following the financial crisis.<sup>1</sup> Labour shifted left and Conservatives reaffirmed a certain Thatcherite lineage in the context of increasingly salient debates surrounding redistribution, fiscal policy, and the welfare state. At the same time, however, the United Kingdom Independence Party ([UKIP](#)) and other radical right parties were gaining traction advocating Euroscepticism, restrictive border policies, and otherwise socially conservative values (Evans and Mellon, 2016; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 5; Ford and Goodwin, 2010; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Ford and Goodwin, 2016; Ford et al., 2012; Webb and Bale, 2014). The latter eventually forced a referendum on EU membership, which was held in 2016 and concluded with the UK leaving at the beginning of 2020. Unlike the United States and elsewhere in Western Europe, British politics did not undergo durable cultural realignment in later decades of the twentieth century (Cohen and Cohen, 2019). Hence, this Brexit period witnessed awkward patterns of competition in a party system structured mainly by non-ideological matters and the legacy of class cleavages (see Green, 2007; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Green and Jennings, 2017). Labour continued its left-liberal trajectory but minimised cultural fragmentation with an ambiguous stance on European integration and immigration. Conservatives moved more forcefully in favour of hard-line Brexit positions, meanwhile, albeit attempting to sustain the modernising reputation established under David Cameron.

Despite these dramatic party movements, American perspectives on polarisation remain understudied in the British case. Cohen and Cohen (2021) do outline developments affecting left-right public opinion from 2007 to 2016, finding evidence of ideological change consistent with sociological mechanisms. Their findings exclude much of the Brexit period, however, revealing little about the relationship between mainstream party

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<sup>1</sup>These patterns of elite policy divergence are described in more detail during Section 3.2.

platforms and mass polarisation in this context. By focussing more specifically on elite policy divergence combining economic *and* cultural issues, I thus add to comparative understanding of the mechanisms driving polarisation under different conditions.

As Adams et al. (2012b, p. 510) point out, ‘American and British political systems differ sharply in terms of institutions (presidential vs. parliamentary democracy), party organisational features (the parties are far more centralised in Britain), electoral participation, and mass media communications’. Party sorting and sociological perspectives are well-established in the post-Thatcher era of Labour-Conservative convergence. Evidence that such mechanisms are related to repolarisation among these parties following the financial crisis might therefore suggest general patterns to be expected in other institutional contexts. Conversely, findings against elite cue accounts—the least supported in Britain—could indicate processes more specific to the American case, where stronger conceptions of party identification are predominant (e.g., Achen and Bartels, 2016; Campbell et al., 1960; Green et al., 2002).

It is not just that much of the existing British polarisation literature takes place during post-Thatcher convergence. It is also focussed almost exclusively on economic issues. This has become a serious limitation given the increasing salience of cultural disagreements. Many suggest that electoral division over Brexit reflects long-term realignment in the ideological structure of party competition (Curtice, 2017a; Curtice, 2020; Cutts et al., 2020; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 9; Heath and Goodwin, 2017; Jennings and Stoker, 2017; Mellon et al., 2018; Scotto et al., 2018; SurrIDGE, 2020). Yet it is not clear what is driving this outcome or if cultural issues are displacing left-right conflict, unlike the encompassing partisanship observed in studies of American politics (Abramowitz, 2013b; Layman and Carsey, 2002a). Those that do test different polarisation mechanisms exclude issues central to elite policy divergence. Cohen and Cohen (2019) find more evidence of redistributive than cultural ideological polarisation between 2007 and 2016 but do not consider attitudes towards European integration or immigration. The latter are also largely absent in Perrett’s (2021) analysis of similar trends. I thus update these findings using a broader range of cultural and economic issues.

This is important because emphasis on recent developments in British politics has so far largely focused on the existence of cultural divisions. Much research highlights po-

larisation between the cosmopolitan residents of prosperous cities and university towns, on the one hand, and communitarian priorities characterising market towns, coastal and rural regions, and former industrial heartlands, on the other (e.g., Goodhart, 2017; Jennings and Stoker, 2016; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Sobolewska and Ford (2020) provide the most detailed account of this cultural bifurcation, showing sweeping demographic change in Britain over many decades. Increasing ethnic diversity and expansions in higher education are linked with decline among constituencies formerly predominant in the electorate. As Sobolewska and Ford (2019, p. 142) put it, ‘over six out of every ten English residents were white and left school with GCSEs or less’ when ‘Tony Blair was elected in 1997’, whereas ‘less than four out of ten were in this category’ at the time of the 2017 general election. This tilting demographic axis is liberalising social values and norms, yet stark generational, educational, and ethnic cleavages remain between those growing up during and benefitting from cultural modernisation and the more ethnocentric, authoritarian preferences of older, less educated, white voters (see also Goodhart, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Disputes surrounding European integration and immigration mobilised these ‘identity liberals’ and ‘identity conservatives’ into opposing partisan camps, causing dramatic political change during the Brexit period.

There is thus a gap in what is being written about polarisation in post-crisis Britain, where scholarly attention remains fixed on documenting cultural realignment, and concepts discussed in American political science. To the extent that mass polarisation is disputed in the US, the debate is largely semantic. On one hand are those arguing that American public opinion is becoming more dispersed, extreme, multimodal, and ideological, either because of elite cues (Layman and Carsey, 2002a,b; Layman et al., 2006), or via sociological stratification (Abramowitz, 2018; Bishop and Cushing, 2009; Campbell, 2016). On the other hand are those arguing that public opinion is not changing so much as its relationship with voting behaviour (Fiorina et al., 2011; Hetherington and Weiler, 2009; Levendusky, 2009). Elite policy divergence makes it easier to connect issue positions to choices available in elections, giving partisan realignment the impression of mass attitude change when it is really just vote switching. Some use the term party sorting to distinguish this perspective from other forms of polarisation (see Fiorina and Abrams, 2008). Yet it is describing the same outcome as sociological and elite cue accounts. All three agree that Democrat and Republican coalitions are dividing

over political issues. However, what this partisan polarisation represents is the subject of far-reaching debates.

In sociological accounts, partisan polarisation mirrors broader demographic shifts. People develop political preferences in response to the structural conditions they face, and vote-seeking parties adopt platforms appealing to different constituencies accordingly. Elite policy divergence thus indicates democratic responsiveness and may even enhance political participation (Abramowitz, 2006, 2010a). Indeed, that argument was made by the American Political Science Association's Committee on Political Parties when it called for principled competition (American Political Science Association, 1950). Proponents of party sorting are similarly optimistic, albeit from the opposite causal direction. The relevance of social cleavages is partly determined by their salience in party platforms (Milazzo et al., 2012). However, this does not mean that elites can control public preferences. Parties may establish clearer positions on issues of the day, leading to more ideologically consistent voting behaviour. But policy latitude is subject to the decision-making calculus of voters, who may punish extremism and excessive partisanship. Public opinion therefore acts as a bottom-up constraint on elite polarisation (Evans and Neundorf, 2020).

Whereas sociological and party sorting mechanisms yield accounts compatible with representative democratic ideals, those ideals are inverted by elite cue perspectives. The latter acknowledge that issue positions themselves—not just their application in voters' decision rules—are endogenous to party appeals. Elite policy divergence cues attitude change among passive citizens, primarily concerned with maintaining consistent identities. This implies political competition that is to some extent unaccountable. Top-down preference formation is not in itself undemocratic. In fact, a major branch of elite cue literature argues that partisanship and other heuristics help the uninformed reach political decisions (e.g., Lenz, 2009; Levendusky, 2010; Petersen et al., 2010). Yet accounts based on identity-defensive mechanisms also claim that mass polarisation is limited to partisans with a certain level of political engagement (Layman and Carsey, 2002a; Zaller, 1992). Since politicians are in turn more responsive to these active voters, elite cues cause reciprocal alignment among party leaders and activists excluding potentially large sections of the wider electorate (Layman et al., 2010; Zaller, 2012). The debate between sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts thus holds consider-

able normative importance, with academic disagreements over the mechanisms affecting polarisation being intimately connected to broader themes of democratic representation and integration.

This debate is nonetheless lacking in the British case. Although Sobolewska and Ford's (2020) account of demographic culture shifts is broadly sociological, some points in their analysis support alternative mechanisms. Different chapters show how Labour was able to consolidate support among white graduates after the Liberal Democrats' collapse in coalition government (Ch. 7), while Conservatives claimed ethnocentric voters from Labour and the radical right, namely, those previously lost to UKIP (Chs. 6, 8, 10). These patterns of switching suggest that cultural realignment involves party sorting. Yet elite cue effects are also implied in the argument that Enoch Powell framed partisan divisions in his 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech, which is associated with increased support for restrictive immigration policies (Ch. 4). The evidence in other accounts is even more agnostic. Norris and Inglehart (2019, Ch. 11), two of the main proponents of sociological culture shift theory,<sup>2</sup> find that authoritarianism structures UKIP and Brexit voting far more than left-right positions. That does not imply changes in the ideological contents of public opinion, however. Similarly, Crouch (2016; 2017a; 2019; 2020) outlines economic insecurity stimulating xenophobic populism in democratic societies following the erosion of religious and traditional class cleavages but presents no rigorous empirical material supporting this claim.

The most explicit party sorting account of emerging British culture wars is from Evans and Menon (2017). They argue that Brexit and the surging popularity of UKIP forced long-standing cultural perspectives onto mainstream party platforms, disrupting the established electoral equilibrium. Schonfeld and Winter-Levy (2021) also examine changes in attitudes and identity affecting the Conservative Party after its 'almost overnight' reversal in Leave-Remain position, finding more switching by pre-referendum attitudes than Eurosceptic attitude conversion among pre-referendum Conservatives. The theoretical basis of cultural realignment in Britain remains otherwise remarkably understudied. Although advancing party sorting arguments, Evans and Menon (2017) do not directly test partisanship change against other polarisation mechanisms, whereas

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<sup>2</sup>see Inglehart (1977); Inglehart (1990); Inglehart (1997); Inglehart and Norris (2003); Inglehart and Welzel (2005); Norris and Inglehart (2004)

Schonfeld and Winter-Levy (2021) focus on dynamics surrounding Conservatism and responses to a single European integration question collected during a two-month period. Despite increasing emphasis on culture wars, it is thus not clearly established that voters are polarising along with elites and, if so, whether this outcome results from attitude or partisanship change, whether it is limited to partisans or involves those not subject to elite cues, and whether it encompasses cultural *and* economic issues.

The following thesis addresses these gaps. I examine three conceptions of mass polarisation derived from American political science literature: (1) attitude partisanship—the association between issue positions and political identity; (2) attitude divergence—the dispersion, extremism, and multimodality surrounding issue positions; and (3) attitude alignment—the ideological constraint connecting different issue positions.

Sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts describe partisan polarisation unfolding in relation to elite policy competition. All three therefore anticipate attitude partisanship trends in the British case. Partisan polarisation increases the association between issue positions and political identity, whether caused by attitude or partisanship change.<sup>3</sup> Emphasis on these variables leads to contrasting expectations vis-à-vis attitude divergence and alignment, however, trends in which require ideological change. Sociological and elite cue accounts describe partisans becoming more polarised as a function of greater dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint in public opinion. The difference is that such changes are caused by partisan motivated reasoning and limited to politically engaged voters under an elite cue framework, whereas sociological processes are exogenous to electoral processes. Party sorting is *not* based on attitude change, meanwhile. ‘Pure’ sorting accounts go so far as to reject the argument that mass belief systems vary fundamentally over time (e.g., Fiorina et al., 2011). But the core claim is that partisan polarisation does not imply social change. Ideological electoral appeals cause ideological sorting among voters yet leave the underlying structure of public preferences untouched. Hence, sociological or elite cue accounts are supported by evidence of increasing attitude divergence and alignment, while stable aggregate distributional parameters of public opinion are consistent with party sorting.<sup>4</sup>

In the first instance, polarisation trends are outlined using cross-sectional data from

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<sup>3</sup>I use attitude partisanship to indicate partisan polarisation throughout the thesis.

<sup>4</sup>Overall ideological stability does not rule out elite cues affecting small numbers of engaged partisans, a point which I discuss throughout the thesis.

the British Election Study ([BES](#)). I analyse dynamics related to 40 attitude items asking voters about European integration, immigration, social values, and economic issues between 2014 and 2019. The [BES](#) data also includes a panel component, allowing me to go further than previous research. Most studies establish if trends in attitude partisanship are related to trends in attitude divergence and alignment (Adams et al., 2012b; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; DiMaggio et al., 1996). Yet this only partially distinguishes sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts.

In addition to outlining cross-sectional evidence of polarisation, I follow accessible panel designs developed by Cohen and Cohen (2021) and only so far applied to economic preferences during post-Thatcher convergence. First, attitude partisanship is broken down into individual-level dynamics by holding attitudes and partisanship constant, respectively. This creates two counterfactual datasets in addition to the observed panel data: one where each individual respondent's issue positions are fixed at initial values and another where their political identity is fixed at its initial value. Comparing counterfactual attitude partisanship trends with covariation in these variables over time reveals whether partisan polarisation is a function of individual-level attitude or partisanship change, distinguishing sorting mechanisms from ideological developments described in sociological and elite cue accounts. I then disaggregate those ideological developments among fixed partisan, non-partisan subpopulations, further distinguishing attitude dynamics caused by identity-defensive mechanisms from trends affecting voters more generally. This allows me to assess the elite cue claim that political engagement mediates polarisation, with non-partisan dynamics suggesting bottom-up processes consistent with sociological accounts. The combination of cross-sectional and panel data analysis thus facilitates a full test of theoretical perspectives on mass polarisation in the British case.

Little evidence is found for elite cue effects throughout the thesis. Despite strong left-right polarisation between Labour-Conservative party platforms, I observe convergence and dealignment in the distributional properties and partisanship of mass economic preferences. Panel data further reveals that mass depolarisation on these issues is related to attitude *and* partisanship change, with attitude change also reducing disagreement among non-partisan voters. This is consistent with sociological and party sorting accounts, some of which argue that culture wars displace left-right political

conflict. More ambiguous elite cultural differences are associated with clear mass polarisation, meanwhile. Labour *and* Conservative *and* non-partisan voters adopt less Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, and otherwise traditionalist attitudes. This supports sociological perspectives, indicating that public divisions are tilting on a non-economic axis. Yet that trend is unfolding in conjunction with party switching. The latter pushes Conservatives in the opposite direction of liberal ideological developments, reducing or completely offsetting changes in their aggregate position. However, the Labour coalition converges more decisively on cosmopolitan preferences through attitude and partisanship change, thereby increasing partisan polarisation from 2014 to 2019. Such results indicate sociological *and* party sorting accounts of cultural realignment in Britain.

## 1.1 | Chapter outline

Chapter 2 reviews the polarisation literature in more detail. I argue that sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts are three potential components in an overarching explanation of political realignment. Sociological mechanisms describe demographic shifts occurring in advanced industrial societies, where expansions in higher education, class fragmentation, immigration, and other structural changes are generating liberal value change and conservative backlash among the left behind. I summarise the application of these arguments in the British case, establishing a baseline explanation of cultural realignment following the financial crisis. Party sorting mechanisms are outlined using three strands of literature: a critique of US culture wars, distinguishing partisan polarisation caused by attitude and partisanship change; supply-side perspectives on cleavage politics, highlighting the limits of socio-demographic theories of political realignment; and accounts describing post-Thatcher convergence, contrasting conceptions of mass partisanship and ideology characterising American and British political science. This identifies party sorting as a second layer in the explanation of polarisation, emphasising how elites engage with exogenous structural conditions. Identity-defensive mechanisms are thus introduced on top of the former two perspectives. I outline survey research leading to elite cue accounts of attitude change, the argument that they facilitate electoral conflict on cross-cutting dimensions, the conceptions of mass partisanship supporting them, and their relationship with other explanations of political realignment.

The concluding section highlights three debates structuring the polarisation literature: (1) polarisation through which variables—attitude and partisanship change; (2) polarisation among which voters—partisans and non-partisans; (3) polarisation on which issues—cultural and economic.

These debates distinguish sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts of polarisation, but discussion surrounding them has developed mostly with the American case in mind. Chapter 3 therefore establishes key empirical expectations to test on the British case. It begins by outlining elite polarisation in more detail. I show economic and cultural divergence in Labour-Conservative platforms following the financial crisis, although trends are less clear on European integration and immigration. The remainder of the chapter then separates empirical expectations according to the three debates outlined above. *Polarisation through which variables* distinguishes party sorting from sociological and elite cue accounts, both of which are based on attitude change. *Polarisation among which voters* separates top-down from bottom-up mechanisms, testing the elite cue claim that attitude change is limited to partisans. *Polarisation on which issues* establishes if cultural realignment displaces left-right conflict, as described in some sociological and party sorting accounts.

Chapter 4 operationalises the research design and methodology used to test these expectations. I outline an overarching multilevel modelling framework grounded in previous research, taking full advantage of 40 attitude items available in 2014-2019 waves of the British Election Study. The major distinction in aggregate outcomes is between trends in attitude partisanship that are or are not related to trends in attitude divergence and alignment. I define these concepts and a cross-sectional design leveraging full survey-wave samples from the BES data, before identifying a smaller panel component comprising individual-level dynamics. Two aspects of an overall panel design are summarised, with the first separating partisan polarisation into attitude and partisanship change and the second disaggregating ideological developments affecting fixed partisan, non-partisan subpopulations. What follows is three empirical chapters testing sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts of recent developments in British politics.

Chapter 5 explores cross-sectional trends in attitude partisanship, divergence, and alignment. The results are organised around two questions establishing if (1) elite trends

are related to partisan polarisation and (2) if partisan polarisation is related to attitude change. I find increased attitude partisanship on cultural issues but dealignment in the correlation between economic positions and Labour-Conservative identity. This immediately highlights gaps separating elite policy divergence and mass trends from 2014 to 2019. Inverse cultural and economic polarisation dynamics are also mirrored by changing distributional properties of public opinion, with liberal shifts in attitudes towards European integration, immigration, and social values causing polarisation while economic issues remain associated with convergence and dealignment. Cross-sectional evidence thus supports sociological accounts of recent developments in British politics, showing polarisation trends that are inconsistent with elite cues and not limited to party sorting mechanisms.

The following two chapters use panel data to establish if cultural realignment also involves party sorting or elite cue effects. Chapter 6 asks if changes in attitude partisanship are caused by attitude or partisanship change. I generate counterfactual scenarios by fixing individual's issue positions and partisanship at initial values, respectively, comparing partisan polarisation with the association between attitudes and partisanship when one of these variables are held constant. Results confirm that attitude changes observed in Chapter 5 are unfolding among mainstream partisans. Wave 1 Labour *and* Conservative identifiers adopt less Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, and traditionalist preferences, further challenging elite cue accounts. Fixed attitude trends also demonstrate clear party switching, however, limiting (contributing to) the liberal trajectory of Conservatives (Labour). It is the combination of these dynamics that polarises mainstream electoral coalitions from 2014 to 2019, while both attitude and partisanship change are subject to left-right dealignment. Party sorting mechanisms thus add to the sociological interpretation of findings from Chapter 5.

Limited support for elite cue mechanisms emerges in Chapter 7, meanwhile, which asks if polarisation is associated with political engagement. First, I disaggregate trends in attitude divergence and alignment, comparing wave 1 Labour-Conservative identifiers with other voters and then the engaged partisans and independents among them. In neither case is polarisation any stronger in mainstream party coalitions. I then use matching methods to compare the ideological trajectory of initially similar partisan, non-partisan subpopulations. I find left-right convergence and liberal shifts on European

integration, immigration, and social values unfolding regardless of political engagement, suggesting that elite cue effects are not causing cultural realignment. The best evidence for these mechanisms in the entire thesis is less prominently declining Euroscepticism among initial Conservatives.

Chapter 8 thus concludes by rejecting elite cue accounts. Identity-defensive mechanisms add very little to polarisation between 2014 and 2019, which seems to result primarily from sociological attitude change and party switching. I contextualise evidence against elite cue accounts using literature on party system fragmentation and increasing voter volatility in Britain, but also highlight potential limits in the claims surrounding partisan motivated reasoning more generally. The British case supports sociological and party sorting processes, suggesting a combined explanation of cultural realignment. I speculate on cultural realignment following the Brexit period, before concluding that future research needs to reconcile my findings with trends observed during earlier stages of elite policy divergence following the financial crisis.

## 2

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# Three Perspectives on Polarisation

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### 2.1 | Introduction

Are British voters polarising? Criteria against which to answer that question are established in this chapter through a review of polarisation literature. I outline the theoretical and empirical basis of different perspectives on mass polarisation, highlighting three important debates to address in the following analyses: polarisation on which variables, through which voters, and among which issues.

Much of the discussion surrounding polarisation stems from studies of American politics, where elite ideological divides are well established (e.g., Bond and Fleisher, 2000; Fleisher and Bond, 2004; Layman, 2001; McCarty et al., 1997, 2008; Poole and Rosenthal, 1984, 1997; Rohde, 1991). Despite widespread consensus that US political parties have polarised over many decades, the attempt to study similar divergence in public opinion is controversial (for reviews of the controversy, see Egan and Mullin, 2017; Fiorina and Abrams, 2008; Hetherington, 2009; Iyengar et al., 2019; Layman et al., 2006; Lee, 2015). Long-standing debates over the extent to which American voters are divided by party or ideology are characterised by acerbic exchanges between the proponents of different perspectives (see the polemics in Abramowitz and Saunders, 2005; Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Fiorina et al., 2008; or Bishop and Cushing, 2004; Klinkner, 2004a; Klinkner, 2004b; Klinkner and Hapanowicz, 2005). Three broad positions emerge from these debates.

Proponents of *sociological* mechanisms argue that American society is aligning along geographic, racial, cultural, and economic divides, generating polarised communities of

voters with divergent political preferences (Abramowitz, 2010a, 2013b, 2018; Bishop and Cushing, 2009; Campbell, 2016). This in turn motivates extreme, ideological, and partisan behaviour among parties appealing to these communities, resulting in political dysfunction in combination with institutional features of the United States (Abramowitz, 2010b, 2013a, 2015; Abramowitz and McCoy, 2019). The sociological account thus provides a bottom-up perspective on polarisation, whereby elite policy divergence reflects changes in the social cleavages dividing voters.

*Party sorting* accounts challenge the argument that American citizens are polarising, at least in the terms just outlined. Diverging elite positions are clearer to voters, providing an ideological anchor to political choice (Levendusky, 2009; Smidt, 2017). Yet there has been no widespread shift in the distributional properties of public opinion and the proportion of partisans and liberal-conservative identifiers remains essentially unchanged (Abrams and Fiorina, 2015; Hill and Tausanovitch, 2015). Mass polarisation is simply party sorting: citizens updating voting behaviour using clearer policy signals—although some contend that even this process is exaggerated (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008; Fiorina and Levendusky, 2006; Park, 2018). Proponents of party sorting thus view polarisation as an elite phenomenon, and the ‘red state-blue state’ narrative as a largely media-driven myth (Fiorina et al., 2011; Fiorina, 2017; Gelman et al., 2010; Levendusky and Pope, 2011).

Somewhere between these two perspectives is the *elite cue* position, which restricts mass polarisation to politically engaged partisans. Elite cue accounts argue that public preferences are endogenous to electoral processes (Gerber and Jackson, 1993). Citizens adjust issue positions to maintain consistent party identities (Achen and Bartels, 2016). Top-down policy divergence therefore cues partisan polarisation, but only among those perceiving shifts in the competition between elites (Layman and Carsey, 2002a; Zaller, 1992). Many accounts specify additional limits to the endogeneity of public preferences, including the political and informational context (Dancey and Goren, 2010), material self-interest (Cavallé and Neundorf, 2022; Henderson and Hillygus, 2011), and other forms of issue importance (Carsey and Layman, 2006; Zaller, 2012). The aggregate result is intensifying partisan division through potentially narrow changes in mass belief systems (Egan and Mullin, 2017; Lelkes, 2016).

The intensity of exchanges among proponents of these perspectives belie what are

actually quite subtle differences between them. The core sociological claim is that the cleavage structure underpinning party competition is changing, whereas party sorting and elite cue accounts simply emphasise how that relationship is further contingent on top-down policy signals and other political communication. Shifts in the way elites engage with social cleavages can affect partisan realignment even when the structural division of society remains unchanged, making it difficult to discern what evidence constitutes support for different polarisation mechanisms. This has become a problem in the British case, where greater association between cultural values and political behaviour is being used to imply broader social change (e.g., Norris and Inglehart, 2019, Ch. 11). The same outcome could just as plausibly indicate party sorting or elite cue processes, however, because all three accounts describe partisan polarisation unfolding in relation to elite policy divergence.

The interpretation of recent developments in British politics requires a clearer understanding of concepts discussed in the polarisation literature. Hence, this chapter reviews sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts in more detail. Section 2.2 outlines the sociological perspective. I highlight structural factors identified in accounts of cultural modernisation and the backlash against it among the left behind, before comparing sociological descriptions of culture wars emerging in Britain following the 2007-2008 financial crisis. The party sorting position is developed in Section 2.3, which summarises supply-side explanations of cultural realignment, the decline of class politics, and post-Thatcher convergence. Section 2.4 then considers the account of attitude change and critique of party sorting facilitated by elite cue effects, including discussions of the heuristic and psychological properties underpinning party identification and its implications for top-down perspectives. Section 2.5 thus concludes by uniting these three sets of mechanisms into a broader account of polarisation, establishing principal questions to address in the British case.

## 2.2 | The sociological account

Sociological mechanisms provide perhaps the most intuitive account of polarisation. Ideological differences between elites reflect growing divergence in the social characteristics and attitudes of the constituencies they represent. Put differently, elite policy diver-

gence is rooted in mass polarisation. Electoral divisions shift following demographic change and may be aggravated by exogenous political shocks. Since these social forces uniquely effect specific geographic regions and social groups, they manifest in growing ideological alignment within and disagreement between communities of citizens. The result is polarised parties, offering increasingly extreme policies to satisfy polarising voters (Abramowitz, 2013b, 2018; Bishop and Cushing, 2009; Campbell, 2016).

The theoretical and empirical basis of this perspective is reviewed here. Sociological mechanisms emerge most clearly in descriptions of demographic culture shifts affecting advanced industrial societies. That literature is used to develop a baseline account of recent developments in British politics, which many already argue reflect deepening cultural divisions (e.g., Crouch, 2016; Hobolt, 2016; Jennings and Stoker, 2016). I outline structural factors identified in accounts of cultural modernisation and backlashes against this trend, before comparing sociological interpretations of culture wars emerging in British politics after the 2007-2008 financial crisis.

### **Demographic culture shifts in advanced industrial society**

Much of the discussion of polarisation in American political science stems from arguments about culture wars. Wuthnow (1988; 1989) and Hunter (1991; 1994) popularised the notion of a deepening cultural schism during the closing decades of the twentieth century, claiming that the US is increasingly divided by morally opposed world views. In Wuthnow's accounts, corresponding elements from traditionally conflicting religious communities are restructured by state intervention in civil society. In particular, expansions in higher education liberalise a growing proportion of all religious groups, generating cross-denominational patterns of polarisation. Hunter's account is broader, but similarly relates emerging culture wars to social transformations following the Second World War. He argues that post-war developments undermined established class, racial, and religious cleavages, providing the social basis for electoral conflict over issues such as race, abortion, sexuality, gender identity, gun control and the environment (see also Himmelfarb, 2001). Some argue that moral questions now eclipse economic concerns, to the extent that conservative politicians convince poorer, white Americans to vote against their material interests (Frank, 2004; but see Ansolabehere et al., 2006;

Bartels, 2006; Gelman et al., 2007; Levendusky, 2009; Stonecash, 2005).<sup>1</sup>

The leading accounts of similar culture shifts outside the US are from Ronald Inglehart and Herbert Kitschelt. Inglehart (1971; 1977; 1990; 1997) describes a ‘silent revolution’ following prolonged economic security in the post-war period. He argues that individuals are socialised into durable value systems early in life, reflecting the prevailing socio-economic circumstances in which they are formed. When these circumstances are characterised by insecurity, people develop value systems centred on fulfilling basic material needs. Such material needs can be taken for granted during periods of prosperity, however, allowing priorities to shift towards values emphasising self-expression, autonomy, and quality of life. The post-war period provided large sections of the world’s population with the economic conditions conducive to ‘post-materialist’ value change. In Inglehart’s accounts, this explains the emergence of inter-generational value divides in advanced industrial societies. The young, having come of age under relative prosperity, prioritise social liberalism, as epitomised by counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The old remain materialist and socially conservative, meanwhile.

Kitschelt and colleagues argue that culture shifts emerge from class fragmentation (Kitschelt, 1988, 1993, 1994; Kitschelt and Hellemans, 1990; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997). These accounts point out how Western European party systems were built on left-right disputes between the redistributive preferences of once burgeoning industrial working classes, on the one hand, and the rest of society, on the other. The salience of these disputes is diminishing following transition to post-industrial modes of production, with the proportion of the electorate employed in primary and secondary occupations declining relative to the expanding middle classes. This leads to left-liberal, right-conservative polarisation because middle class occupations, in particular, are associated with diverse ideological positions.

Kitschelt and Rehm (2014) draw on the class map developed by Oesch (2006a; 2006b) to explain how work experience influences the formation of political preferences. In Oesch’s framework, people are stratified not only by location in a class hierarchy but by the types of tasks involved in different job roles. Occupations at the low end of class hierarchies are characterised by a lack of autonomy. Hence, while workers engaged

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<sup>1</sup>Similarly, it is argued that racial, not economic, anxieties drive more support for Donald Trump (Abramowitz and McCoy, 2019; Klein, 2020).

in these positions tend to favour economic redistribution because of class location, the routine nature of their work encourages dispositions towards authoritarian governance and exclusive conceptions of citizenship. The task structures defining middle class occupations are further differentiated by the organisational, technical, or interpersonal logic of the work, meanwhile. People in these jobs fall higher up in class hierarchies and therefore tend to hold equivocal economic stances relative to routine and semi-routine workers. However, interpersonal roles are associated with more culturally liberal, less pro-market attitudes, technical professions tend towards centre-right economic and liberal-leaning social values, whereas those engaged in senior administrative roles are typically strongly pro-market and hold qualified socially liberal views. According to Kitschelt and others, the expansion of these middle classes is responsible for left-liberal, right-conservative patterns of alignment observed increasingly in Western European party systems.

Culture shift theory thus describes value divides emerging from selective modernisation in advanced industrial society. The key structural factors highlighted are age, education, and occupational class. Expansions in higher education liberalise elements of formerly more homogeneous social groups, while increased economic security emphasises different political priorities. In Inglehart's accounts, inter-generational divides emerge from the individual-level stability of attitudes developed at an early age, while those associated with Kitschelt also highlight ideological disagreement resulting from fragmenting divisions of labour.

### **Cultural Backlash among the left behind**

Those left behind by cultural modernisation do not fade away silently, however. Wuthnow (1988) describes backlash among religious traditionalists in the United States, pointing out how theological education has grown more identifiably conservative since the 1950s. More recently, he examines motivations underpinning the conservative political behaviour of rural Americans, arguing that small towns are 'moral communities' defined by a mutual obligation to 'uphold the local ways of being that govern...expectations about ordinary life and support...feelings of being at home and doing the right thing' (Wuthnow, 2018, p. 4). Unemployment, drugs, teen pregnancy, human capital flight, and population decline are thus seen as community issues, not the

problem of individuals or particular social groups. Wuthnow thus draws a distinction between the liberal political culture concentrated in metropolitan cities and communitarian impulses still important elsewhere. Faced with cultural and economic decline, these left behind communities are mobilising against what is perceived as a broken bureaucracy run by distant, intrusive, and immoral elites.

Greater focus on the left behind also characterises recent contributions to the post-materialism thesis. The silent revolution is a variant of modernisation theory. According to Inglehart, inter-generational value shifts follow economic development and are an ineluctable stage in the social evolution of humanity (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). However, this is a generalisation of broad historical trends and is necessarily path dependent (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). Traditionalism persists among the materially vulnerable; pervasive secularisation occurs only in wealthy nations; extended economic breakdown can temporarily halt or reverse modernisation (Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Inglehart, 2018). Still, democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe, the rise of authoritarian-esque figures in liberal democratic bastions such as the United States and France, and the success of Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant rhetoric in the events surrounding the Brexit vote all motivate an update to Inglehart's account.

Such instances of 'authoritarian populism' are understood as a cultural backlash against modernising structural forces (Inglehart, 2018, Ch. 9; Inglehart and Norris, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). The onset of post-materialism instantly provoked reaction among materialists, who according to Inglehart represent those that came of age or continue to live in insecurity. This reaction gained momentum from the 1980s, as the benefits derived from globalisation and economic growth are consolidated within an increasingly thin stratum of elites (Piketty, 2014). Pushed by rising immigration, financial crises, and the deflationary economic policies pursued by governing institutions, 'economic have-nots' are growing more receptive to authoritarian populist figures. This 'authoritarian reflex' is strongest for elderly, less educated, white, religious, non-metropolitan citizens, that is, those left behind by modernisation and threatened with cultural and economic decline.

Kitschelt and McGann (1997) describe a similar profile of the radical right in Western Europe, arguing that globalisation and reduced welfarism establish the basis for political coalitions comprising previously antagonistic social elements (see also Arzheimer

and Carter, 2006; Ignazi, 2003; Lubbers et al., 2002). Facing unemployment and an over-burdened welfare state, or otherwise disconnected from emerging global markets, interests aligned among the traditional working classes, small business owners, and the agricultural sector. Some of these groups hold opposing economic preferences and supported different parties when redistributive disputes marked post-war political competition. Left-right policy convergence in the late-twentieth century de-emphasised historical differences, however, more closely connecting the structural location occupied by such voters. Put another way, globalisation in the absence of an effective welfare state merged fortunes among various left behind groups, whose occupations already encouraged socially conservative outlooks. This created the political space necessary for radical right discourse, combining ‘free’ market positions with right-wing authoritarian opposition to globalisation or its cultural implications. Hence, Kitschelt highlights the success of these parties during the 1980s and 1990s, despite overall modernisation in West European party systems.

Slightly different interpretations of cultural backlash thus emerge in each of these accounts. Wuthnow places emphasis on the communitarian sentiments disconnecting rural America from cosmopolitan cities and regions, while Inglehart and Kitschelt describe the authoritarian impulses of social groups left behind in advanced industrial society more generally. In accounts associated with Inglehart, long-term trends in wealth inequality, immigration, and other exogenous shocks are intensifying inter-generational divides, mobilising reactionary populism among economic have-nots and the otherwise socially conservative. Kitschelt similarly stresses economic consequences of globalisation and decline of the Keynesian welfare state but notes how a coalition of disconnected working- and middle-class voters are driving radical right support in Western Europe. However, these accounts all argue that culture wars result from uneven social development. Demographic shifts create stark ideological cleavages across age, education, class, ethnicity, region, and religion, providing the social basis for cultural backlash following various antagonising developments.

### **Brexit and emergent British culture wars**

Unlike the United States and elsewhere in Western Europe, the British party system did not undergo durable cultural realignment during the latter half of the twentieth

century. Cultural issues were not entirely absent from elite debates in this period: the ‘New Left’ were politically active in the late 1950s and early 1960s before tapering off into a predominately intellectual agenda (Davis, 2008); Commonwealth immigration and the 1968 Race Relations Act prompted cultural backlash, as exemplified by Enoch Powell’s controversial ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Ch. 4); and the 1983 general election featured inflammatory debates surrounding immigration and ‘Victorian values’ (Butler and Kavanagh, 1984). Such outbursts were sporadic, however, never clearly penetrating mainstream politics. The prerequisite demographic changes emphasised by culture shift theorists occurred (Cohen and Cohen, 2019), yet Labour and the Conservative Party continued to campaign primarily in left-right terms before converging on competence-based appeals following Thatcher (Green, 2007; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Green and Jennings, 2017).<sup>2</sup> To the extent that political behaviour remained structured by ideology in this context, economic issues overshadowed potential cultural disputes (Evans et al., 1996; Heath et al., 1994, 1990).

References to British culture wars are increasingly common in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, meanwhile. Politically cross-cutting divides between young and old, graduates and school leavers, and the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of globalisation dominate accounts of support for UKIP and other radical right parties (Cutts et al., 2019; Evans and Mellon, 2016; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 5; Ford and Goodwin, 2010; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Ford and Goodwin, 2016; Ford et al., 2012; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015; Webb and Bale, 2014), Brexit votes (Becker et al., 2017; Clarke et al., 2017a,b; Curtice, 2016, 2017b; Colantone and Stanig, 2018b; Coyle, 2016; Fetzer, 2019; Ford and Goodwin, 2017; Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017; Hobolt, 2016; O’Rourke, 2016; Vasilopoulou, 2016), and behaviour in subsequent general elections (Curtice, 2017a; Curtice, 2020; Cutts et al., 2020; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 9; Heath and Goodwin, 2017; Mellon et al., 2018; Surridge, 2020). Many now assert that suddenly emerging culture wars reflect the delayed backlash of those left behind by modernising social political developments.

This is the kind of account presented by Crouch (2016; 2017a; 2019; 2020), for example, who argues that the 2007-2008 financial crisis created political space for a

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<sup>2</sup>The absence of a cultural realignment in Britain’s party system is attributed to the first past the post system and a lack of effective minor party flanking (e.g., Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997).

populist reaction against ‘post-democracy’. Crouch (2004) introduced the term post-democracy to describe a gradual hollowing out of liberal democratic institutions, such that public debate, elections and rule of law remain a visible but impotent part of political decision-making processes increasingly consolidated within overlapping circles of elites (see also Mair, 2013). The social and political conditions leading to post-democracy—secularisation, universal enfranchisement, and the changing composition of class structures—stripped citizens of a framework through which to interpret their experiences under what Crouch (2009; 2011; 2013) terms ‘privatised Keynesianism’: government propped-up systems of deregulated markets, stimulated by low- to medium-income consumer debt. Hence, when that system collapsed in 2007-2008, reactions to the crisis became entangled in nationalist sentiments ‘left lying around in popular consciousness’ (Crouch, 2017a, p.103). Rather than a return to class politics, backlash against post-democracy took the form of ‘xenophobic populism’, fuelled by the real or perceived consequences of globalisation, immigration, refugee crises, and international assertions of Islamic identity.

Since religious cleavages eroded along with traditional class boundaries across much of Western Europe, emergent British culture wars do not feature the moral panic highlighted in American accounts (e.g., Wuthnow, 2018), instead revolving around supra-national threats presented by the EU. The latter is associated with a loss of control, leaving society vulnerable to alarming numbers of unfamiliar and difficult to distinguish immigrants, asylum seekers, and terrorists. As implied by Kitschelt and Rehm (2014), this loss of control is perceived most strongly among those whose occupation involves little autonomy, namely, the routine and semi-routine working classes. Since these voters also hold the strongest redistributive preferences, Crouch (2017b) argues that we are witnessing the resurgence of ‘egalitarian conservative’ (left-authoritarian) political traditions, historically neglected by ‘neoliberal’ elites.

Related arguments emerge in a series of popular defences of the ‘white working class’. Goodhart (2013; 2017) points out that the British welfare state was built on a shared sense of national community within which post-war immigrants successfully integrated, while framing divides surrounding Brexit in terms of cosmopolitan ‘people from Anywhere’ and marginalised ‘people from Somewhere’. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) claim that immigration and rising economic inequalities are leading alienated

heartland voters to revolt against elitist liberal democracy. Kaufmann (2018) views anti-immigrant sentiments as an initial stage in the incorporation of migrant populations into the white majority. And Lind (2020) contends that economics, culture, and politics are now all part of a new ‘Hobbesian class war’. These accounts criticise condescending liberal elites for excluding the social concerns of ordinary voters. As Kaufmann (2018, p. 372) puts it, ‘[a] critical demarcation across all Western countries is between the 63-80 per cent of whites who believe there is such a thing as a legitimate white self-interest on immigration and the 20-36 per cent of whites who think this is racist’.

This framing is challenged in other sociological accounts of British culture wars, however. Sobolewska and Ford (2020) argue that Brexit is rooted in ethnocentric identity divides that have been politicised following decades of demographic change. Almost all British voters were white school leavers at the beginning of the 1950s, yet this social group now comprises less than half of the electorate. Ethnic minority and graduate populations have grown through successive waves of immigration and the expansion of higher education. The latter motivates ideological commitment to open borders and multiculturalism (Bobo and Licari, 1989; Stubager, 2009; Surridge, 2016; Van De Werfhorst and De Graaf, 2004; Van Der Waal et al., 2007; Weakliem, 2002), whereas black and ethnic minority voters also benefit personally from policies related to liberal cultural outlooks. Job opportunities and migration patterns lead both groups to prosperous cities and university towns, but Jennings and Stoker (2016; 2017) warn against reducing them to a metropolitan elite. Younger, better educated, more ethnically diverse voters face falling standards of living, increased debt, rising house prices, and reduced job security while nonetheless holding cosmopolitan political priorities.

Similarly, characterising cultural backlashes as the natural reflex of economically marginalised social groups ignores the fact that some typically socially conservative groups are relatively prosperous.<sup>3</sup> Sobolewska and Ford (2020) show that ethnocentric sentiments have been more prevalent among white school leavers since the first waves of Commonwealth immigration in the 1950s. These ‘identity conservatives’ view immigrants and their descendants as threatening outgroups, hold negative stereotypes against people of colour, and reject the existence of racism and policies aimed at cor-

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<sup>3</sup>A related finding is that the pre-referendum social support basis for UKIP involved a coalition of economically marginalised voters and more affluent middle-class groups (Evans and Mellon, 2016; Ford et al., 2012).

recting it. Expansions in higher education, immigration, and middle-class occupations has left such attitudes built up in former manufacturing hubs and non-metropolitan areas, yet it is controversial to overlook the complex social ecology of the left behind. Jennings and Stoker (2016; 2017) therefore suggest that cultural realignment in Britain is not so much a confrontation between individual winners and losers of globalisation, but a geographical bifurcation of regions that are connected to the global economy and those that are not.<sup>4</sup> This is compatible with the emphasis on communitarianism in Wuthnow's (2018) account of the rural American left behind.

It is also consistent with quasi-experimental findings from the economics literature leveraging exogenous consequences of the 'China trade shock'. Comparative disadvantages in the global economy have long been associated with the potential for protectionist backlashes and a need to embed markets within an effective welfare state (Polanyi, 1944; see also Rodrik, 1997; Rodrik, 1998; Ruggie, 1982; Ruggie, 1994; Scheve and Slaughter, 2007). Support-opposition for international trade is typically modelled via industry-level cleavages in import competition exposure. Those working in industries or firms that are non-tradeable (Frieden and Rogowski, 1996; Hays, 2009; Hays et al., 2005), competitive (Helpman et al., 2010; Melitz, 2003), or have access to large factor endowments (Rogowski, 1989) benefit from globalisation and are more likely to support trade openness, whereas individuals whose job security is threatened by import competition demonstrate stronger preferences for redistribution and opposition to the cultural and economic consequences of freer trade (Margalit, 2012; Mayda and Rodrik, 2005; Rehm, 2009; Walter, 2010).

However, evidence from the China trade shock suggests that these consequences are felt at a regional level. Rising Chinese exports after its 2001 accession to the World Trade Organisation resulted in a large-scale displacement of manufacturing activities in parts of the United States and Western Europe (Acemoglu et al., 2016; Autor et al., 2013; Autor et al., 2014; Bernard et al., 2006; Bloom et al., 2016; Dauth et al., 2014; Khandelwal, 2010; see Autor et al., 2016, for a review). The resulting economic consequences are linked to substantial changes in political behaviour across affected regions. In the US, local exposure to Chinese import competition is associated with higher

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<sup>4</sup>Local economic contexts are also related to perceptions of community representation, with those from left behind places feeling more political discontent regardless of personal financial circumstances (McKay, 2019).

turnout and larger Democratic vote shares in House elections (Che et al., 2016), lower levels of incumbent presidential voting (Jensen et al., 2017; see also Margalit, 2011), and the appointment of more extreme representatives in both Democratic and Republican congressional districts (Autor et al., 2016). Areas witnessing a deeper penetration of Eastern imports across Western Europe exhibit greater support for far-right political parties (Colantone and Stanig, 2018a; Dippel et al., 2015), while the British residents of such regions are more likely to support Leaving the European Union (Colantone and Stanig, 2018b) and hold aggressive authoritarian social values (Ballard-Rosa et al., 2021).

There is thus a considerable theoretical and empirical basis for sociological explanations of recent developments in British politics. Although the accounts outlined here present different interpretations of cultural realignment, all argue that it results from underlying social change. An increasing proportion of society is liberal because of secular demographic changes, leaving culturally conservative sentiments concentrated in communities left behind by socio-economic modernisation. Provoked by rising immigration, economic inequality, and various other political shocks, the latter are leading a backlash against disconnected elites. Different normative assessments of either side of this divide emerge from the proponents of sociological mechanisms, but all ultimately agree that it is providing the structural basis for elite policy divergence over European integration, immigration, and other British culture wars following the financial crisis.

### **Summary**

Sociological accounts are summarised by the perspective that structural change drives elite policy divergence. Partisan polarisation reflects broader developments in the ideological division of voters. Specifically, this section outlined demographic culture shifts undermining party systems constructed on left-right cleavages. Access to university, class fragmentation, immigration, and economic security increase the emphasis placed on liberal values in mass belief systems. Younger, better educated, ethnically diverse voters cluster in and modernise prosperous cities and university towns, separating them from the culturally conservative attitudes and priorities still prevalent elsewhere. In the British case, these divisions remained latent until exposed by Brexit and the surging popularity of [UKIP](#). Increased economic inequality, immigration, and exogenous shocks

surrounding the financial crisis, the refugee crisis, and Islamic terrorism are antagonising left behind people in left behind places. Previously ignored by a professionalised and ideologically converged political class, these voters are forcing painful cultural realignment onto mainstream political parties.

There is a tension in this explanation of recent developments in British politics, however. The demographic changes associated with cultural realignment go back 70 years but are only penetrating mainstream political discourse following the Brexit vote, decades later than similar developments in the United States and other Western European countries. The commonly held explanation is that liberal elites actively suppressed ideological divisions bubbling up among the electorate (e.g., Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Chs. 4 and 5), thus suggesting that supply-side mechanisms are required to explain the sudden emergence of British culture wars. The following sections thus outline top-down accounts of polarisation, beginning with party sorting mechanisms in Section 2.3.

## 2.3 | The party sorting account

The party sorting account rejects explanations of polarisation based purely on sociological mechanisms. Elite policy divergence makes it easier to connect social groups and related issue positions to the choice between parties, leading to adjustments in political behaviour that are independent of demographic change. Indeed, some challenge the idea that demographic shifts have fundamentally altered social cleavages (e.g., Evans and Tilley, 2017). Partisan polarisation gives the impression of mass ideological disagreement whether caused by attitude or partisanship change. It does not imply changes in the social structure underpinning party competition, as such, even though providing the empirical basis of many sociological arguments (see Abramowitz, 2010b, 2013a, 2015; Abramowitz and McCoy, 2019; Abramowitz and Saunders, 2005, 2008). The term party sorting is thus proposed to distinguish elite polarisation from a subsequent, more prosaic updating of political information occurring in the electorate (Abrams and Fiorina, 2015; Fiorina, 2017; Fiorina and Abrams, 2008; Fiorina et al., 2011, 2008; Fiorina and Levendusky, 2006; Levendusky, 2009).

This section reviews literature supporting party sorting perspectives on polarisation. Beginning with a critique of culture wars advanced in the American case, I outline

theoretical and empirical claims surrounding party sorting and discuss its wider implications. In particular, I consider supply-side explanations of cleavage politics before outlining the predominance of partisanship change mechanisms in British political science, especially in relation to de-sorting observed during the post-Thatcher period of Labour-Conservative convergence. The section concludes by summarising a reversal of these trends implied by recent political developments.

### **Culture wars and the myth of polarisation**

Party sorting is most prominent in its proponents' critique of demographic culture shifts. The deepening schism identified in largely qualitative initial discussions of American culture wars has proved elusive to rigorous empirical study. DiMaggio et al. (1996) find limited evidence of polarisation in US public opinion, with the primary exception being among attitudes towards abortion (but see Mouw and Sobel, 2001). Davis and Robinson (1996) similarly argue that culture war claims are exaggerated after observing weak opposition between the issue positions associated with different social groups and religious denominations. Evans (1997) discovers irreconcilable world views in less than half of the 1993 General Social Survey sample. And, detecting little of the secularisation predicted by culture shift theorists like Inglehart, Baker (2005) concludes that contemporary American voters are no more polarised by social values than previous generations.

None of this is to say cultural differences are unimportant in American Society or have not become a more salient feature of party competition. Layman and Carmines (1997) demonstrate that they increasingly structure Republican and Democratic voting behaviour. Disagreements over abortion were strong enough to motivate massive party switching following elite policy divergence on this issue (Adams, 1997; Killian and Wilcox, 2008). And Hetherington and Weiler (2009; 2015) show how such developments are related to pervasive yet stable authoritarian personality divides (see also Cizmar et al., 2014). It is not the claim that cultural cleavages are gaining importance that is controversial, but the sociological perspective that explains this trend via demographic mechanisms. Proponents of party sorting challenge the argument that political realignment requires mass ideological change.

In *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarised America*, Fiorina and colleagues (2005;

2006; 2011) outline the party sorting case against this claim. They contend that twenty-first century American voters are like those described by Converse (1964) sixty years ago: disengaged, non-ideological, and ambivalent. Parties and politicians ‘hang out on the extremes’, whereas voters divide evenly in pursuit of the centre. It is a misreading of this evidence on which Fiorina et al. argue much of the culture wars thesis is built. The ideological difference between parties is less clearly defined when elite policy disagreements are ambiguous. Hence, liberal-leaning Republicans and conservative-leaning Democrats were prevalent during less polarised periods in American politics. Elite policy divergence reduces the overlap involved in political choice and, with it, the costs necessary to arrive at policy-informed decisions, meanwhile. We thus observe stark partisan gaps opening up in political behaviour across racial, cultural, economic, and geographic lines (Jacobson, 2005, 2006, 2007).<sup>5</sup> It is not Democrat-Republican voters that are becoming more liberal or conservative, however; moderate and narrowly liberal-conservative voters are becoming more Democrat and Republican.

How moderate and narrowly liberal or conservative is debatable. Fiorina and colleagues argue that polarisation is an elite-level phenomenon. Ordinary voters are largely disengaged. They have weakly formed positions on most issues and will use them in political decisions where possible, but this is primarily a heuristic technique and not indicative of widespread disagreement. Such perspectives follow Converse’s (1964) argument that mass belief systems are generally ‘innocent of ideology’, which is to say, unconstrained by core values forming the basis of elite competition (see also Jennings, 1992; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017; McClosky, 1964). As McClosky et al. (1960, p. 426) conclude in their seminal comparison of party leaders and followers,

Little support was found for the belief that deep cleavages exist among the electorate but are ignored by the leaders. One might, indeed more accurately assert the contrary, to wit: that the natural cleavages between the leaders are largely ignored by the voters.

This contrasts with other claims advanced in the party sorting literature. Hetherington and Weiler (2009; 2015) argue that culture wars provoke deeply rooted authoritarian divides in American society. Evans and Menon (2017) contend that the 2016 EU referendum exposed mainstream British politics to long-neglected cultural cleavages. Hobolt

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<sup>5</sup>Similar partisan behaviour also characterises apparently ‘independent’ voters (Smidt, 2017).

and Rodon (2020) find that the cross-cutting impact of Brexit voting might have been stronger if Labour-Conservative differences were clearer in the 2017 general election (see also de Vries, 2007; Tillman, 2004; van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004). Similar survey experiments indicate that UK citizens are most polarised by and likely to punish deviations from preferences on issues such as the death penalty, which has not featured in mainstream party platforms since its abolition in 1969 (Hanretty et al., 2020; see also Heath et al., 1985; Heath et al., 1991). While comparisons of Labour-Conservative leaders and followers show that MPs in both parties hold substantially more liberal social values than their own supporters and the average voter (Bale et al., 2020). In other words, mass belief systems are seemingly deeply divided by issues only partially addressed in elite competition.

However, the fundamental point is that voters are not growing *more* divided, at least in terms outlined through demographic culture shifts. The ideological structure of political choice is endogenous to changes in elite policy divergence, but the latter engages with enduring social cleavages that likely remain unchanged. Fiorina et al. thus propose the term party sorting to distinguish it from mass ideological realignment diagnosed in sociological accounts, yet both are describing partisan polarisation emerging through different mechanisms. In accounts based purely on party sorting, mass polarisation involves partisanship change caused by top-down policy appeals, not bottom-up structural developments causing attitude change.

### **The supply-side of cleavage politics**

Party sorting explains massive political realignment without corresponding demographic transformation. This makes it useful in situations lacking clear value shifts. For example, Carmines and Stimson (1980; 1981; 1986; 1989) trace the evolution of racial issues from relative obscurity in New Deal era to a central dividing line of American politics during the 1960s. Although public preferences in either direction of desegregation were already well-established by the time of *Brown v. Board of Education*, they remained inconsistently distributed among Democrats and Republicans until becoming the subject of mainstream party appeals (see Pomper, 1972). Carmines and Stimson point to the 1964 presidential election as a critical juncture in this process, with Democratic incumbent Lyndon Johnson campaigning on his administration's passage of the

Civil Rights Act earlier that year while portraying Republican nominee Barry Goldwater as a conservative extremist. Along with other instances of parties and politicians adopting increasingly unambiguous stances on desegregation, 1964 initiated a period of partisanship change, as racially liberal and conservative citizens aligned with new party platforms. The major bottom-up development motivating this realignment was expanding black suffrage (Stonecash et al., 2003). Yet party sorting mechanisms are what organised established ideological divisions over desegregation into recognisable partisan cleavages, including mobilisation among the newly enfranchised but also a rapid conversion of formerly Republican and independent black partisans and southern, white, conservative, male flight from the Democratic Party (Abramowitz, 1994; Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998; Carmines and Stanley, 1990, 1992; Erikson et al., 1989; Levine et al., 1997; Stanley and Niemi, 1991).

Many argue that similar supply-side mechanisms explain the breakdown of cleavage politics in Western democratic societies following the 1970s (e.g., Evans and de Graaf, 2013; Franklin, 1992; Jansen et al., 2013; Oskarson, 2005). Whereas Lipset and Rokkan (1967) present the sociological view that contemporary party systems reflect historical social conflicts—with, for example, social democratic parties emerging from a crystallisation of the class conditions faced by workers during the period of industrialisation—party sorting inverts this perspective. ‘The party is not a “consequence” of the class’, as Sartori (1969, p. 84) puts it. ‘Rather, and before, it is the class that receives its identity from the party’. As with issue voting, more generally, citizens can only act on social identities that are organised and represented in political competition (Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Przeworski, 1985; Przeworski and Sprague, 1986; Sartori, 1969). In Przeworski and Sprague’s (1986, pp. 7-8) words,

Collective identity, group solidarity, and political commitment are continually transformed—shaped, destroyed, and molded anew—as a result of conflicts in the course of which political parties, schools, unions, churches, newspapers, armies, and corporations strive to impose a particular form of organisation upon the life of society.

This is a rejection of the structuralist assumption that collective action follows spontaneously from objective social conditions. ‘Class conditions are only a facilitating condition’ (Sartori, 1969). ‘Political acts reflect immediate preoccupations and respond to ephemeral appeals’ (Przeworski and Sprague, 1986, p.52). The immediate preoccupa-

tions of a social group thus reflect something other than its shared experience if not consistently interpellated as such. For instance, capitalist relations of production put workers and employers in competition not only with each other but also other workers and employers (Poulantzas, 1973). Hence, actions that are harmful to the collective interests of either side of class conflicts are otherwise rational, including predatory pricing practices between competing firms or workers accepting wage cuts to maintain employment. This top-down understanding of political identity allows Przeworski and Sprague (1986) to interpret the decline in industrial working-class support experienced by European socialist parties whenever extending group appeals more widely.<sup>6</sup>

The collapse of traditional class-party alliances in Britain provides a well-documented example of this process. Whereas Butler and Stokes (1969) could describe a stable and dominant alignment, the strength and class structure of partisanship diminished following the 1960s (Clarke and Stewart, 1984; Crewe, 1986; Crewe et al., 1977; Franklin, 1985; Franklin et al., 1992; Rose and McAllister, 1986). British voters are now increasingly detached from and likely to switch support between parties in elections (Dalton et al., 2003; Farrell et al., 1994; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 4; Johnston, 1987). If anything, class structures political engagement rather than party support, with higher rates of abstention at the lower end of occupation hierarchies (Evans and Tilley, 2017, Ch. 8; Goldberg, 2020; Heath, 2016). Party sorting proponents challenge sociological explanations of this dealignment, which include the fragmentation, diminishing size, and increasing affluence and security of the working classes (see Best, 2011; Clark et al., 1993; De Graaf et al., 2001; Dunleavy and Husbands, 1985). As Evans and Tilley (2017) demonstrate, occupational inequalities in labour market security, health, educational attainment, and ideological outlook remain as wide or wider today as they were some fifty years ago. It is thus not class structures that have eroded so much as class politics. Specifically, the electoral salience of these cleavages declined following Labour's shift from 'mass membership' to 'catch-all' recruitment strategies (see Duverger, 1954; Kirchheimer, 1966).

Labour's connection to the manual working class was always contested, with a 1918 constitution that declared for 'workers by hand or by brain' (Webb, 1918). Yet a clear

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<sup>6</sup>Similarly, Morgan-Collins (2021) demonstrates how the mobilisation of newly enfranchised female voters in the United States was conditional the existence and strength of a suffrage movement.

break from its traditional social base occurred following landslide defeat in the 1983 general election. Beginning with Neil Kinnock and culminating in the ‘New Labour’ rebranding introduced by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, the party moderated its redistributive platform and—notably, through alterations to the 1918 constitution’s Clause IV—extended group appeals beyond ‘handworkers’ and ‘brainworkers’ to ‘the many, not the few’. It also reversed positions on Europe, going from recommending complete withdrawal in 1983 to firmly supporting integration by 1989 (Evans, 1999; George and Rosamond, 1992).

Labour’s 1983-1997 transformation is associated with an overall decline in class voting. The 1997 general election doubled its share of the middle-class vote while the party retained similar levels of support among skilled and unskilled workers (Evans et al., 1999). Yet, by 2015, Labour claimed more middle-class voters than it did traditional workers. According to party sorting proponents, this dealignment reflects more than just increasing class heterogeneity. It is also contingent on several supply-side factors, including left-right policy competition (Evans and Tilley, 2011, 2012, 2017), the extent to which Labour cues historic ties to workers (Thau, 2021), and how much citizens can identify with the social background of political representatives (Heath, 2013, 2016).<sup>7</sup>

Party sorting thus addresses gaps left by sociological explanations of cleavage politics. The salience of social cleavages is partially framed by elite competition, which can lead to dramatic partisan polarisation without dramatic demographic change. Hence, policy divergence facilitated Democrat-Republican realignment around racial issues in 1960s America, while declining class politics involves less structural fragmentation than often assumed. This property makes party sorting useful in the American case, since culture wars unfolding among partisans are not clearly linked to trends in public opinion (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003). It is also particularly prominent in accounts of post-Thatcher convergence, where doubts over the erosion of class cleavages are associated with similar claims surrounding the left-right structure of public opinion more broadly.

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<sup>7</sup>Similar factors are linked to the decline of cleavage voting in other Western countries (e.g., De Graaf et al., 2001; Elff, 2007; Elff and Roßteutscher, 2017; Goldberg, 2017; Van Der Waal et al., 2007)

### Policy convergence and party de-sorting in post-Thatcher Britain

Party sorting is the established perspective on polarisation in British political science. Unlike in the US, where a conception of partisanship as the ‘unmoved mover’ has been prevalent since *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960), the extent to which UK citizens identify with party labels is more uncertain. Butler and Stokes (1969) question whether partisanship carries the same significance in Britain as American politics. Although recording large numbers of Labour-Conservative identifiers in the original British Election Study, 1963-1970, they suspect that voters do not distinguish partisanship from current electoral choice (see also Brynin and Sanders, 1997; Heath and Pierce, 1992). Some argue that a direct psychological attachment to parties is less important given the prevalence of class or religious consciousness in Western Europe (Shively, 1979; see also Thomassen, 1976; Thomassen, 2005; Westholm and Niemi, 1992). Others reject the idea that partisanship is a social identity at all (Clarke et al., 2004; Clarke et al., 2009; Dalton, 2020, Ch. 9; Whiteley et al., 2013). Moreover, whereas American mass partisanship is stronger and more aligned with ideological preferences than it was in the 1970s (Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009; Bartels, 2000, 2002; Brewer, 2005; Hetherington, 2001; Lupu, 2015), essentially the opposite trend has prevailed across Western Europe, where the number of partisans and the strength and stability of partisanship declined with the breakdown of cleavage politics (Berglund et al., 2005; Dalton, 1984; Dassonneville and Hooghe, 2016; Scarrow, 2004). Partisan dealignment in the UK provides a well-documented example of this trend (see Abramson, 1992; Clarke and Stewart, 1998; Crewe et al., 1977; Denver, 2007; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 4; Särilvik and Crewe, 1983).

The American and British political science literatures also developed around different ontologies of public opinion. Although many argue that the American voter is largely innocent of elite ideological conflict (e.g., Converse, 1964; Jennings, 1992; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017; McClosky, 1964), the established view in Britain is that citizens possess consistent and stable core values (Bartle, 2000; Evans et al., 1996; Heath et al., 1994). This is apparent at both the individual and aggregate level, across various political contexts, and among the young and old and more and less educated, affluent, and politically engaged (Adams et al., 2012b,c; Evans and Neundorf, 2020; Milazzo et al., 2012).

Such research suggests that the left-right principles of British citizens are more stable than and have a greater impact on Labour-Conservative identity than vice versa, especially when these parties are polarised (Evans and Neundorf, 2020; Milazzo et al., 2012; but see Cohen and Cohen, 2021). While there is also evidence that individuals' issue positions structure Democrat-Republican identification (e.g., Jackson, 1975; Killian and Wilcox, 2008; Niemi and Jennings, 1991), American political science is far more divided over the relative endogeneity-exogeneity of attitudes versus partisanship. For instance, measuring ideology in terms of core political values and employing similar methods to those supporting the British perspective (i.e., Evans and Neundorf, 2020; Milazzo et al., 2012), Goren (2005) finds that party identity constrains and is more stable than the economic and cultural principles of US citizens. This division has encouraged quite harsh exchanges between sociological and party sorting proponents in the American case (see Abramowitz and Saunders, 2005; Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Fiorina et al., 2008; or Bishop and Cushing, 2004; Klinkner, 2004a; Klinkner, 2004b; Klinkner and Hapanowicz, 2005). There is less room for disagreement in Britain, meanwhile. With existing research supporting a conception of partisanship grounded in current voting behaviour and a view of ideology that is exogeneous to electoral processes, UK political science is more uniformly centred on party sorting mechanisms.

As noted in Chapter 1, the existing British polarisation literature is focussed almost exclusively on the post-Thatcher era of Labour-Conservative convergence. Studying left-right preferences from 1987 to 2001, Adams et al. (2012b; 2012c) observe no fundamental change in the distributional properties of public opinion, with this finding extending across differing levels of education, income, and political engagement. Voters did notice dramatic changes in elite policy messaging during this period, as indicated by sharp declines in the average distance separating evaluations of party positions and in the association between attitudes and partisanship (see also Curtice, 2010; Perrett, 2021; Sanders, 1999; SurrIDGE, 2018a; Webb and Farrell, 1999). However, evidence of the broader ideological shifts that precede and underpin elite competition in sociological accounts is sparse (but see Cohen and Cohen, 2021). Related research shows how Labour-Conservative partisanship became less structured by left-right principles as these parties converged yet limited corresponding indication that those principles converged along with elites (Milazzo et al., 2012; Evans and Neundorf, 2020; but see Cohen

and Cohen, 2021). Voters simply decreased the weight attached to issue positions in political decision rules, apparently suggesting party de-sorting. Hence, several studies document increased competence voting in British politics during this period (Green, 2007; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Green and Jennings, 2017).<sup>8</sup>

Party sorting is thus uniquely placed to explain political change in Britain. Previous research suggests conceptions of partisanship with limited strength and influence, whereas it has long been argued that ideological beliefs are consistent and enduring ‘at the individual as well as . . . aggregate level’ (Heath et al., 1994, p. 120). De-sorting mechanisms therefore emerged as the dominant explanation of post-Thatcher elite policy convergence. The left-right gap separating partisans declined despite limited corresponding change in the distributional properties or individual-level dynamics associated with these attitudes. Combined with increasingly non-ideological voting behaviour observed during the same period, such findings outline the importance of partisanship change in the British case.

### Summary

Party sorting supplements sociological mechanisms with an emphasis on switching mechanisms. Partisan polarisation might reflect changes in the structural conditions underpinning elite competition, but it can also result from changes in the recruitment strategies defining elite competition itself. Such top-down mechanisms emerge most forcefully in cases where there is a gap between elite and mass trends. Hence, this section reviewed party sorting literature on American culture wars, the decline of class politics, and Labour-Conservative convergence in post-Thatcher Britain. Each case warns against taking partisan polarisation at face value. Shifts in partisan division give the impression of mass ideological change when the latter is often not clearly observable. The British case, in particular, shows that post-Thatcher convergence unfolded with apparently little left-right dealignment in public or individual-level opinion. The declining ideological distance separating mainstream partisans in this period is thus consistent with party de-sorting, where voters change partisanship in line with other factors structuring elite competition while remaining divided over left-right matters.

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<sup>8</sup>Similar trends in the relationship between ideology and political behaviour are observed following party depolarisation in other European countries (e.g., Adams et al., 2012a; van der Eijk et al., 2005; Knutsen and Kumlin, 2005; Lachat, 2008).

Recent developments in British politics outline a reversal of this outcome. Mainstream parties are repolarising on economic issues but also previously minimised cultural conflicts surrounding European integration, immigration, and broader social values. Applied to this context, party sorting describes spatial reorganisation like that observed in the United States. Accounts based purely on these mechanisms would be supported if the association between attitudes and partisanship increases without underlying ideological changes required under a strictly sociological framework. Voters should notice divergence in party platforms but use this information to adjust political behaviour in a manner consistent with established issue positions. In other words, the party sorting account expects partisanship (not attitude) change.

## 2.4 | The elite cue account

Elite cue mechanisms extend top-down perspectives by removing additional bottom-up constraints on party latitude. Whereas mass belief systems remain exogenous to electoral processes under party sorting, the elite cue account contends that partisans update issue preferences in line with the positions associated with party platforms (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Campbell et al., 1960; Green et al., 2002). It thus amplifies the passive interpretation of political behaviour outlined last section, showing how public opinion—rather than just its application in voter decision rules—is to some extent conditioned by policy messaging (Gerber and Jackson, 1993). Elite cue effects thus describe attitude change, but not necessarily to the extent required in sociological accounts. Top-down processes are mediated by political engagement. Only relatively informed voters recognise changes in the political competition between parties, and only partisans are compelled to adjust issue positions accordingly (Layman and Carsey, 2002a). For the proponents of elite cue mechanisms, this limited and differentiated mass response reconciles seemingly contradictory findings from the polarisation literature. Aggregate trends, or the lack thereof, mask predictable patterns of political persuasion involved in the interaction between party elites and party followers (Carsey and Layman, 2006; Layman and Carsey, 2002b; Layman et al., 2010, 2006; Zaller, 1992, 2012).

This section describes the elite cue account of polarisation in more detail, beginning with its emergence in the debate between non-attitudes and measurement error inter-

pretations of survey response instability. I outline the model of attitude change derived from this debate, before proceeding to discuss its application to partisan polarisation in recent decades of American politics. Specifically, elite cue proponents emphasise partisanship-based attitude dynamics unfolding in addition to party sorting. I thus review the top-down influence ascribed to party identification in American political science, leading to a discussion of the implications and limits of these effects. The section concludes by summarising the relationship between elite cue mechanisms and party sorting, outlining a coherent top-down perspective on polarisation.

### **Non-attitudes, measurement error, and the elite cue account of attitude change**

The elite cue account emerges out of a debate between competing interpretations of survey response instability. Converse (1964; 1970) famously divided survey respondents into genuine attitude-holders and those who appeared to answer questions at random. Observing high instability and low test-retest correlations in the 1956-1960 American National Election Study (ANES), Converse claims that most voters have no real opinion on many issues forming the basis of elite political competition. This is the *non-attitudes* interpretation of response instability, which is complemented by a large body of research documenting consistently low and unevenly distributed levels of mass political awareness and ideological sophistication (Althaus, 1996; Bartle, 2000; Bennett, 1988, 1995a,b, 1996; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Hyman and Sheatsley, 1947; Sigelman and Yanarella, 1986).

Converse (1962) describes how this skew in political engagement generates non-monotonic patterns of attitude change. The informed are most likely to receive political communications but least likely to accept those contradicting established preferences. The reverse is true for the least informed, who are most likely to be persuaded by opposing messages but least likely to receive them. The moderately informed, meanwhile, who are attentive enough to register shifts in the policy environment but are less able to connect new information with established predispositions, are most likely to change minds on issues (see also McGuire, 1969; Zaller, 1993).

The *measurement error* interpretation of response instability contends that survey instruments are an imprecise gauge of individuals' issue positions. Developed in a

polemic with Converse and the concept of non-attitudes, proponents of this perspective argue that political preferences are more like intervals than fixed points on a scale (see Achen, 1975; Canon et al., 1976; Converse, 1974; Erikson, 1978, 1979; Pierce and Rose, 1974; Rose and Pierce, 1974). They are thus liable to change based on context or when framed in different ways by surveys and elites. Much research demonstrates how elite discourse can prime considerations in the public's assessment of salient issues, figures, and events (e.g., Berelson et al., 1954; Iyengar et al., 1984; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987), and findings that seemingly trivial survey questionnaire changes dramatically alter the responses received are well established (Schuman et al., 1981; Bishop et al., 1984; Tourangeau et al., 1989). The measurement error critique points out internal and external validity issues involved in attempting to attach the ambivalent considerations of survey participants to one side or another of active debates.

The non-attitudes and measurement error interpretations of response instability are synthesised into an elite cue account of political persuasion by Zaller (1992; see also Feldman, 1989; Feldman and Zaller, 1992; Zaller and Feldman, 1992). Combining the non-monotonic reception-acceptance process outlined by Converse (1962) with a recognition that voters do not necessarily walk around with fully formed positions on dynamic issues, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* defines attitudes recorded in surveys as an average of stored considerations available to respondents when asked for their opinion. The resulting Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model functions via four axioms: *reception*, where the most politically engaged are most likely to receive and comprehend persuasive messages; *resistance*, where the likelihood of accepting persuasive messages decreases with political engagement; *accessibility*, where considerations encountered or used recently are more readily available in memory; and *response*, where individuals derive issue positions by averaging across the considerations available at the 'top of their head'. In particular, the patterns of attitude change predicted by this model vary according to whether an informational context emphasises capacities for *reception* or *resistance*.

When the flow of information surrounding an issue is one-sided, meaning elites have converged on a particular policy or outcome, the RAS model anticipates a positive relationship between political engagement and support for the mainstream position. Its slope may be moderated by subjects' familiarity with different issues or the intensity

of the communications surrounding them, but the overall expectation is that exposure to mainstream messages increases with awareness and the basis for resisting them is limited without opposing ideological or partisan cues (Zaller, 1992, Ch. 8). In other words, one-sided information flows stress *reception*. This is useful when elites converge on issue positions for which there is popular opposition. In such situations, the politically engaged should depolarise along with elites while less informed voters maintain scepticism for the new consensus.

Awareness is associated with polarisation when elites are divided, by contrast. Policy disagreement generates two- or more-sided information flows, therefore engaging *resistance*. The better informed are more able to distinguish messages that are (in)consistent with partisan and ideological preferences, attach less weight to any given consideration at the top of their head, and internalise countervailing communications at lower intensities.<sup>9</sup> Hence, ideological party competition leads to non-monotonic patterns of reception-acceptance, where the gradient of attitude change at different levels of political engagement depends on the relative intensities of elite communications. The fundamental point, however, is that most people internalise dominant and countervailing considerations when the flow of information surrounding an issue is not one-sided, producing some degree of ambivalence in the way they think about those issues. This ambivalence is unimodally distributed across the range of political engagement, because the moderately aware receive more persuasive messages than the uninformed and accept more contradictory arguments than the well informed. Those with middling political awareness thus possess heterogeneous pools of considerations to draw from when thinking about an issue, making them the most susceptible to attitude change. The well-informed display greater constraint, meanwhile. As Zaller (1992, p. 101) puts it, ‘the ratio of ideologically consistent considerations to ideologically inconsistent ones should increase as political awareness increases’.

With this model of attitude conversion, Zaller establishes a third perspective on partisan polarisation. Interacting political engagement with the balance of attitudes citizens develop towards dynamic issues, the elite cue account identifies distinct empirical expectations for different informational contexts. One-sided information flows are associated with partisan convergence and a positive relationship between political

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<sup>9</sup>Zaller (1992) refers to these as predispositional, inertial, and countervailing resistance, respectively.

awareness and attitude change. Two- or more-sided policy debates cue partisan polarisation, specifically, among those paying attention and lacking ideological and other forms of resistance. The addition of such top-down mechanisms has proved useful in the American case, where some argue that party sorting alone cannot sustain the ideological scope of elite disagreement.

### **Conflict extension and the elite cue critique of party sorting**

*The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* considers isolated political issues, demonstrating how changes in the distribution of information surrounding them generate patterns of attitude conversion mediated by political engagement. It provides no empirical evidence that elite policy divergence encourages greater ideological consistency *across issues*, as such, although Zaller (1992, pp. 113-114) makes that claim in a discussion relating Converse's (1964) account of attitude constraint with implications of the RAS model. This point is picked up by Layman and Carsey (2002a; 2002b), who argue that Democrat-Republican polarisation across multiple lines of conflict is provoking a parallel realignment in mass policy preferences. Their argument follows research rejecting the 'ideological innocence' ascribed to partisanship in *The American Voter* and Converse's 1964 paper. In contrast to the placid Eisenhower years covered by these studies, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed partisan polarisation on many aspects of US foreign and domestic policy, including the civil rights movement and Vietnam War. The use of ideological concepts and unidimensional constraint increased among survey responses during this period, leading some to contend that ideological politicians cue enhanced ideological thinking in the electorate (Margolis, 1977; Nie and Andersen, 1974; Nie et al., 1976; Pierce, 1970; Stimson, 1975).

Layman and Carsey (2002a; 2002b) analyse associations in American's attitudes across multiple issues and dimensions, finding support for the notion that elite policy divergence is consolidating ideological divisions among politically engaged partisans. Party identifiers who recognise the difference separating party platforms increasingly unify diverse policy preferences using an overarching left-right dimension, a trend that is more pronounced for strong partisans and not clearly affecting pure independents. The term 'conflict extension' is thus introduced to describe unidimensional partisan polarisation unfolding in the US case. According to Layman and Carsey, the latter

is not possible under the traditional premise that electoral realignment occurs only through partisanship change. The individual rationality framework supporting party sorting means citizens are expected to favour parties or candidates closest to their own preferences (Downs, 1957). Yet the assumption that voters change sides not minds implies a succession of political cleavages, as elite divergence on emerging issues cross-pressures established partisan structures and prompts realignment among those with strong views on the new agenda. Hence, Layman and Carsey cite party sorting literature emphasising ‘conflict displacement’ (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Key, 1955; Riker, 1982; Schattschneider, 1960; Sundquist, 1983).

This is not a rejection of party switching mechanisms. Those with strong enough ideological predispositions should change sides to maintain representation on issues important to them, as implied by Zaller (1992) and stated more explicitly by Carsey and Layman (2006). Layman and Carsey nonetheless contend that attitude-based *partisanship change* is only half of a story that also involves considerable partisanship-based *attitude change*. Some aspect of partisan coalitions, even if only small but influential groups of strongly engaged partisans, must be updating attitudes along with elites to sustain party competition on cross-cutting dimensions. The defining feature distinguishing the elite cue account from party sorting is thus its emphasis on partisan versus ideological predispositions. This follows the long-standing importance attached to party identification in American political science.

### **Party identification and the endogeneity of political attitudes**

Elite cue accounts straddle a political science literature stressing party identification and its influence on the attitudes of partisans. One major branch of this literature focusses on heuristics available to individuals lacking the time, inclination, or ability to follow politics closely (e.g., Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Popkin, 1994; Sniderman et al., 1991). Many claim that voters use a variety of informational shortcuts to approximate political decisions they would otherwise make if more informed (Hobolt, 2007; Lupia, 1994; Mondak, 1993; Mondak, 1994; Smith and Squire, 1990; but see Althaus, 1998; Bartels, 1996; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Partisan elite cues are an important source of this ‘low information’ rationality.

Part of the heuristic function of parties stems from setting the parameters of political

choice. By deciding which candidates and policies to put forward in an election, parties structure the political decisions available to voters (Sniderman and Bullock, 2004). They also frame those decisions in a way that emphasises certain values, informing how citizens should think about complex political issues such as government spending (Jacoby, 2000). Beyond this, however, partisanship provides a basis for inferring wide-ranging policy positions with limited substantive knowledge of the issues involved. Parties acquire a brand or reputation over time (Sniderman and Stiglitz, 2012; Snyder and Ting, 2002). They are founded by and become associated with the interests of different social groups and political ideals (Brady and Sniderman, 1985; Nicholson and Segura, 2012; Petersen et al., 2010; Stubager and Slothuus, 2013), establishing ‘ownership’ over favourable issue domains (Iyengar and Valentino, 2000; Kuklinski and Hurley, 1994; Petrocik, 1996). Broad knowledge of the people and things represented by party labels thus allows citizens to navigate political decisions without scrutinising policy proposals, creating shortcuts via which to develop and update rational preferences.

This preserved emphasis on individual rationality contrasts with the other major account of party identification, meanwhile, highlighting the emotional mechanisms underpinning decision-making processes. Based in the University of Michigan tradition, it contends that most political behaviour is informed not by rational policy preferences or ideological principles, but the identities citizens inherit from their parents and social background (Campbell et al., 1960; see also Achen and Bartels, 2016; Green et al., 2002). Specifically, a durable psychological attachment to one party group over another is claimed to bias political assessments (Cohen, 2003; Jacoby, 1988; Van Boven et al., 2018). While people may strive for accuracy in their perception of the world, this goal is often subordinated by a motivation to arrive at desired conclusions. Party identification, as *The American Voter* describes it, ‘raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favourable to his partisan orientation’ (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 133). This partisan motivated reasoning is apparent in psychological work documenting how individuals often seek out and prioritise information consistent with preconceived notions while remaining automatically sceptical towards that which is contradictory (Druckman et al., 2012; Fischle, 2000; Kruglanski and Webster, 1996; Kunda, 1990; Lodge and Taber, 2005, 2013; Lord et al., 1979; Taber and Lodge, 2006). Many also argue that it has grown stronger because of elite polarisation.

Campbell et al. (1960) impart a vision of mass partisanship largely ‘innocent of ideology’, probably reflecting the depolarised political context in which they were writing. However, current discussions in American political science diverge sharply from this perspective. Following dealignment in the 1960s and 1970s (see Broder, 1971; Niemi and Weisberg, 1976; Norpoth and Rusk, 1982), several studies document the growing pervasiveness of party attachments in the US (Bartels, 2000; Hetherington, 2001; Lupu, 2015). Reagan and post-Reagan era elite policy divergence is associated with increases in the importance, salience, and strength of mass party identification, including not only resurgence in the partisan structuring of voting behaviour but also an extension of the relationship between party labels and ideological positions. As Bafumi and Shapiro (2009, p. 1) put it, ‘partisanship has returned in a form that is both more ideological and more issue based along liberal-conservative lines than it has been in more than 30 years’ (see also Brewer, 2005).

Armed with emotional conceptions of political identity, the ideological penetration of partisan division provides a strong case for polarising elite cue effects. Conflict extension into previously detached or bipartisan issue domains generates tension in the desire to support one’s social group, on the one hand, and elite cues that now more often contradict ideological predispositions, on the other. Partisans must reason their way out of this ‘cognitive dissonance’ one way or another (see Festinger, 1957), and the path of least psychological resistance involves attitude and perceptual change. In other words, citizens are more likely to update political assessments than identities organised under strong partisan attachments.<sup>10</sup> This is borne out by survey experiments finding that citizens are more reliant on and polarised by divergent party messaging (Bolsen et al., 2014; Druckman et al., 2013; Mullinix, 2016; Nicholson, 2012; Slothuus and De Vreese, 2010; but see Peterson, 2019). It is also consistent with wide-ranging literature documenting the endogeneity of political attitudes and perceptions.

It is not just that public opinion is responsive to the information and arguments presented by elites (Page and Shapiro, 1992), or that partisans mirror party leaders on novel or emerging political issues (Brooks and Manza, 2013; Gerber and Jackson,

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<sup>10</sup>Essentially the opposite outcome is anticipated by the proponents of party sorting, who favour more instrumental conceptions of party identification (e.g., Fiorina, 1978, 1981). Indeed, Fiorina and Abrams (2008, p. 581) suggest that evidence of resurgent partisanship may be spurious, since both party identification and voting behaviour are increasingly collinear with political preferences because of party sorting.

1993). Some find that citizens are often prepared to go along with the shifting positions adopted by legislators, both uncritically with regard to their previous positions and despite minimal persuasion (Broockman and Butler, 2017; see also Minozzi et al., 2015). Support for core values central to American political culture is highly sensitive to partisan source cues (Goren et al., 2009). Even on salient issues related to fundamental social cleavages, elite policy changes are associated with awkward U-turns in established partisan perspectives (Slothuus and Bisgaard, 2021). A large body of research documents similar endogeneity in how party identifiers perceive political figures and developments, not just in the United States but also—notably, for a country where the University of Michigan conception of partisanship is less well established—the United Kingdom (Anderson et al., 2004; Bartels, 2002; Berinsky, 2009; Chzhen et al., 2014; Evans and Andersen, 2006; Evans and Chzhen, 2016; Gaines et al., 2007; Gerber and Huber, 2010; Lavine et al., 2012, Ch. 5). Moreover, there is even evidence that partisans avoid cognitive dissonance by projecting convenient preferences onto political actors with which they do and do not identify (Achen and Bartels, 2016, Ch. 10; Berelson et al., 1954; Evans and Andersen, 2004).

The elite cue account is thus supported by a strong conception of party identification, particularly in the American political science literature. One branch of this literature interprets partisan decision-making as rational; another highlights its psychological basis. This distinction does not alter the overarching point, however: partisans follow party leaders. Many political attitudes are subordinate to political identities, and partisanship is often considered ‘the most important political identity of all’ (Achen and Bartels, 2016, p. 267). Whether rational or not, this implies massive top-down influence, far beyond the organisational changes anticipated in party sorting accounts.

### **The structure and sequence of top-down polarisation**

The highly passive view of voters implied by elite cue effects raises far-reaching implications. At a broad level, it challenges the normative foundations of democracy. From its nineteenth and early-twentieth century critics to more recent accounts of the ‘shambles’ of democratic theory (Achen and Bartels, 2016), scholars question expectations placed on citizens by even representative forms of governance. As Schattschneider (1960, p. 134) puts it, ‘[w]e become cynical about democracy because the public does

not act the way the simplistic definition of democracy says that it should act, or we try to whip the public into doing things it does not want to do, is unable to do, and has too much sense to do'. This cynicism is not confined to the uninformed either, with several studies documenting stronger partisan motivated reasoning among the most politically engaged (Achen and Bartels, 2016, Ch. 10; Shani, 2006; Wagner et al., 2014). If partisans simply mirror issue positions associated with their party group, no matter how well-informed, then the idea that governments are accountable to and act on the basis of public opinion is 'folk theory' (Achen and Bartels, 2016).

Why would elites polarise, then? In sociological accounts, elite policy divergence reflects shifts in the social structures underpinning party competition. Demographic developments stratify voters into ideologically distinct communities, which responsive politicians represent with correspondingly distinct policy agendas. Party sorting similarly regards public preferences as exogenous to political processes. Although furnishing elites with more agency and emphasising the top-down implications of policy and recruitment strategies, these mechanisms ultimately rely on a framework in which party latitude is constrained by electoral viability. Under this framework, elite policy divergence occurs because elites perceive some strategic advantage in highlighting groups and attitudes associated with enduring social cleavages. This explanation seems insufficient given the premise of elite cue effects, however. Since partisans follow party leaders 'rather blindly' (Lenz, 2012, p. 3), they would presumably do so regardless of the ideological penetration of party competition.

Stronger parameters for partisan polarisation are established by two updates in the elite cue account. The first acknowledges that certain issue positions are beyond the influence of elites. Whereas 'top of the head phenomena' imply that citizens 'do not attempt to think for themselves about the communication they receive' (Zaller, 1996, p. 49; see also Taylor and Fiske, 1978), Zaller (2012) more recently concedes that political attitudes are unevenly sensitive to salient stimuli. He does so via reference to what Converse (1964) terms 'issue publics'—voters with strong attitudes towards a narrow range of issues related to specific group interests or the nature of the times. Considering clear cases of party sorting in the American case, such as on abortion and the issues surrounding civil rights, Zaller (2012, p. 584) admits 'that some issue publics not only resist elite cues on their issue, but change parties because of the cues'. Sim-

ilarly, Carsey and Layman (2006) outline the structures underpinning party sorting versus elite cue effects. For voters that recognise party differences on an issue, attitude-based partisanship change is anticipated among those viewing the issue as important and partisanship-based attitude change should occur otherwise. Increased attention to issue importance is consistent with evidence that citizens engage critically with the content and ideological implications of political communication (Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2014; Brewer, 2001; Bullock, 2011; Ciuk and Yost, 2016; Feldman et al., 2012; Kam, 2005; Peterson, 2019). Many also document cases in which personal issue importance leads partisans to resist top-down policy change, for instance, when it contradicts their material interests (Cavallé and Neundorf, 2022; Henderson and Hillygus, 2011; see also Krosnick, 1990; Leeper and Slothuus, 2014; Mullinix, 2016; Mummolo et al., 2019; Ray, 1999). Combined with the increasing incidence of attitude-based partisanship change relative to partisanship-based attitude change during the polarising Reagan and post-Reagan years (Highton and Kam, 2011), this suggests that personal issue importance does indeed limit policy latitude through party sorting. It also suggests that those limits remain inactive until exposed by elite competition.

Zaller (2012) makes a similar point discussing how ‘latent opinion’ structures top-down mechanisms. Latent opinion is ‘opinion that might exist at some point in the future in response to the decision-makers actions and may therefore result in political damage or even the defeat at the polls’ (Zaller, 2003, p. 311; see also Key, 1961). US political history provides various examples of politicians pursuing policies that are not clearly grounded in current popular opinion.<sup>11</sup> Zaller (2003, pp. 586-587) argues that these decisions shape public preferences but also reflect expectations of how citizens are likely to respond and will be encouraged to respond by opposition party cues, ‘after the dust of current controversy has settled’. ‘More often than is allowed in *Nature and Origins*, politicians follow latent opinion rather than lead it’ (Zaller, 2012, p. 571). For example, evidence that mainstream British parties do not compete on certain divisive issues may reflect the latent importance citizens attach to deviations from preferred positions on such issues (Hanretty et al., 2020; Hobolt and Rodon, 2020).

The structure of top-down polarisation is developed into a specific sequence by the

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<sup>11</sup>The main examples discussed by Zaller (2003; 2012) are the Kennedy administration’s decision to intervene in Vietnam, despite believing the war would be unsuccessful, and President Clinton by-passing Congress to authorise unpopular loans to the Mexican government in 1995.

second major intellectual update to elite cue mechanisms. Building on the first, it outlines how a coordination of various issue publics shapes the policy agenda pursued by parties. Whereas traditional accounts of political parties focus on the strategic concerns of elected politicians (e.g., Aldrich, 2011; Cox and McCubbins, 2005, 2007), a revised perspective contends that policy direction is better understood through processes of coalition management (Bawn et al., 2012; see also Baylor, 2018; Cohen, 2019; Karol, 2009; Noel, 2013). Instead of the monolithic top-down actors described by spatial models, this account recognises that groups with various policy goals compete for control of party machinery, forming coalitions based on and campaigning to elect candidates friendly to mutually acceptable issue agendas. As Zaller (2012, p. 573) puts it, ‘[m]ajorities obtained through any means consistent with the agendas of policy demanders are what parties care about’. This coalition theory implies feedback between party sorting and elite cue mechanisms. The presence of ideological candidates encourages activism among issue publics, as citizens with strong attitudes in different areas engage with parties to promote their cause (see Saunders and Abramowitz, 2004).<sup>12</sup> This in turn generates conflict extension among elites, incentivised to adopt extreme positions on a wider range of issues by the increasingly diverse activist base. Partisan polarisation thus proceeds sequentially, both because of the incorporation of new issue publics into party coalitions and the conversion of continuing activists in line with extended party platforms (Karol, 2015; Layman et al., 2010; see also Carsey and Layman, 1999; Layman, 1999; Layman and Carsey, 1998).

The American case provides several historical case studies consistent with this top-down account of party realignment. Baylor (2013) locates the Democratic party’s shifting position on civil rights in a compromise between African American pressure groups and labour unions formerly hostile to desegregation. Through control of national and state party conventions, this black-blue alliance consciously alienated southern Democrats to push the party in a racially liberal direction (see also Baylor, 2018; Feinstein and Schickler, 2008). Additionally, Noel (2012) shows that political intellectuals were promoting the left-liberal alignment of economic and racial positions decades

<sup>12</sup>The presence of ideological candidates is itself encouraged by party activism, facilitated in the US context by reforms to procedures surrounding party nominations (Cohen et al., 2008). Increased intra-party democracy is also arguably what pushed Labour left following the financial crisis, in particular, facilitating the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader in 2015 (see Dorey and Denham, 2016).

before it appeared in congressional voting behaviour. This evidence forms part of a broader account of how unified liberal-conservative ideologies emerged independently of and transformed established political parties (Noel, 2013). Cohen (2019) similarly documents how conservative Christian organisations seized control of the Republican Party during the 1980s and 1990s. Asserting moral traditionalism in congressional elections throughout the country, these groups subordinated fiscally orientated Republicanism to a House caucus dominated by cultural concerns. Along with more general evidence that elites respond to politically engaged voters rather than the broader public (Adams and Ezrow, 2009; Green and Guth, 1989; Griffin and Newman, 2005), these examples show that issue activism and party sorting remain important in elite cue interpretations of polarisation.

Hence, although massively amplifying top-down political persuasion, elite cues are limited by two related bottom-up constraints. One is that certain attitudes are beyond the influence of and structure electoral processes. Social conditions generate ideological commitments that are exogenous to policy and recruitment strategies, which must be formulated with a view to managing the often-latent priorities of existing and potential supporters. The second bottom-up constraint thus acknowledges that polarisation unfolds via a sequence of party sorting and elite cue effects. Issue publics join partisan coalitions to achieve policy goals, thus incentivising conflict extension among candidates seeking to manage an increasingly diverse activist base.

## Summary

Just as party sorting supplements sociological developments with an emphasis on partisanship change, elite cue effects extend this top-down perspective via identity-defensive mechanisms. Recognising that many voters care only about specific issues related to personal circumstances, the elite cue account outlines informational shortcuts and psychological properties underpinning political behaviour. In particular, this section reviewed literature on top-down attitude conversion, showing how elite policy divergence interacts with political engagement to intensify partisan division. The central contribution of these mechanisms is that they facilitate conflict extension in the American case. Cross-cutting political competition causes switching among weaker partisans with strongly affected issue positions, yet those remaining in or joining electoral coalitions

update attitudes in line with the new and old party agenda, respectively. Elite cue effects thus sustain policy divergence on cultural *and* economic issues without corresponding sociological developments, untying top-down perspectives from patterns of conflict displacement suggested by party sorting alone. The defining characteristic of the elite cue account is its emphasis on partisanship, specifically, identity-defensive mechanisms motivating perceptual and ideological adjustment in different political contexts. This partisan motivated reasoning distinguishes it from party sorting and broader demographic shifts, since the former is based on partisanship change and the latter describe ideological realignment not mediated by political engagement. Elite cue accounts are thus supported if mass polarisation is caused by attitude change limited to party identifiers.

## 2.5 | Conclusion

This chapter outlined three distinct perspectives emerging from the polarisation literature. Sociological accounts are based on the view that partisan polarisation reflects broader demographic shifts. Uneven socio-economic development alters cleavage structures, leading to policy divergence among parties seeking to maintain or expand social support bases. Section 2.2 outlined this perspective through accounts of culture wars emerging in advanced industrial society. In these accounts, expansions in higher education, class fragmentation, immigration, and differential standards of living generate social division between those benefitting from and left behind by modernisation. Aggravated and exposed by rising economic inequality and exogenous political shocks, value divides across age, education, occupation, geography, and ethnicity create space for ideological confrontation on cultural issues. Many argue that the bottom-up consequences such culture shifts are implied by Brexit and other recent developments in British politics.

The party sorting account qualifies this argument. Rather than sociological developments, it emphasises the way elites compete on them. Societies may grow no more structurally polarised yet still undergo political realignment if electoral processes engage cleavages previously untapped by elite policy division. This perspective was developed in Section 2.3, which reviewed supply-side perspectives on American culture

wars, declining class politics, and left-right convergence in post-Thatcher Britain. Party sorting proponents argue that demographic shifts are outpaced by the rate of political change observed in each case, suggesting that it is not only bottom-up mechanisms involved. The salience of a social cleavage in party appeals partially determines its electoral importance. Hence, top-down changes in parties' electoral strategies can produce partisanship change without implying broader sociological developments. Cultural realignment in British politics is thus not strictly evidence of the latter; it could just as plausibly result from party sorting.

Yet another form of partisan polarisation is possible via elite cue effects, however, since there is precedent for top-down attitude conversion associated with stronger conceptions of partisanship. Section 2.4 outlined the elite cue account featuring party sorting, with its proponents arguing that both are required to explain patterns of polarisation observed in the American case. Elite policy divergence leads to switching among those perceiving better representation on important issues in another party's platform, but partisanship change alone implies conflict displacement when new divisions emerge in political discourse. Elite cue effects therefore fill in gaps either side of the party sorting process, describing how new and established partisans incorporate the broadening issue agenda associated with their new or established identity when party appeals extend across dimensions. This is a function of the heuristic and psychological properties underpinning party identification, which many claim motivates political perceptions and attitudes. In addition to demographic value shifts and party switching, elite cue effects explain polarising attitude change mediated by political engagement.

Hence, it is useful to think of these three perspectives as components in an overarching account of polarisation. The sociological component explains partisan polarisation in terms of broad demographic shifts, where developments in social cleavages alter the structural basis underpinning party competition. This baseline interpretation is challenged by party sorting proponents because it does not explain political realignment caused by switching mechanisms. Party sorting thus adds a top-down component to the account of partisan polarisation, showing that it does not necessarily require bottom-up social change. This top-down component is then extended further via identity-defensive mechanisms, the proponents of which contend that partisanship change is not the only mass response to elite policy divergence. In addition to party sorting, elite cue ef-

fects describe how partisan coalitions are constructed on cross-cutting cleavages by partisanship-based attitude conversion.

Three principal questions then follow from the polarisation literature reviewed in this chapter. *Polarisation through which variables?* Cultural realignment requires either attitude or partisanship change, distinguishing switching mechanisms described by party sorting from ideological developments in sociological and elite cue accounts. *Polarisation among which voters?* Cultural realignment is either bottom-up or top-down, separating sociological processes that are independent of political engagement from party sorting and elite cue effects mediated by it. And *polarisation on which issues?* Cultural realignment will extend from or displace coalitions built on left-right divides, differentiating identity-defensive mechanisms leading to elite cue effects from outcomes consistent with sociological and party sorting accounts. These questions thus structure analyses of the British case in subsequent chapters.



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## Empirical Expectations in the British Case

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### 3.1 | Introduction

Chapter 2 established three principal questions structuring the polarisation literature. Polarisation through which variables? Polarisation among which voters? Polarisation on which issues? These questions are key to distinguishing mechanisms described by sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts, each of which imply different interpretations of recent developments in British politics. The present chapter consolidates these differences into a theoretical framework of mass polarisation, identifying empirical expectations to test on the British case in subsequent chapters.

This task is necessary given substantial ambiguity apparent in the polarisation literature. A large part of the problem is the lack of consensus surrounding what constitutes mass polarisation. DiMaggio et al. (1996, p. 693) define it as the extent of disagreement on political issues, ‘reducing the probability of group formation at the center of the opinion distribution and...increasing the likelihood of the formation of groups with distinctive, irreconcilable policy preferences’. Understood as such, the polarisation literature has developed around three broad conceptions of disagreement: attitude divergence, attitude alignment, and attitude partisanship. *Attitude divergence* is most intuitive. It defines disagreement in relation to opposite poles on an axis, with political consensus less likely the more dispersed, extreme, and multimodal the distribution of public opinion. Such parameters are thus widely used in studies of mass polarisation

(Adams et al., 2012a,b,c; Cohen and Cohen, 2021; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003; Park, 2018; Perrett, 2021).

Whereas divergence refers to the distribution of opinions surrounding single issues, *attitude alignment* conceptualises disagreement as a property of the relationship between individuals' positions across issues. Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) demonstrate how average opinion scores combining four standard normal distributions diverge when these dimensions are aligned, even though the distribution of each variable is the same. Similarly, Park (2018) shows that increasing the correlation between two equally diverged axes arranges them along a unidimensional continuum, transforming fragmented disagreement into ideological differences. It is not so much the intensity of disagreement but the extent to which it overlaps across multiple lines of conflict that attitude alignment constitutes polarisation. Political compromise becomes unsustainable the less common ground there is among issues, since voters disagreeing in one area are less likely to agree in another. Such ideological constraint is an important aspect of elite cue accounts described last chapter, specifically claims surrounding conflict extension in the American case (Layman and Carsey, 2002a,b; Layman et al., 2010, 2006). It is also implied by the structural realignment underpinning sociological mechanisms, therefore appearing in many studies of mass polarisation (Adams et al., 2012a,b; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Cohen and Cohen, 2019, 2021; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Munzert and Bauer, 2013a; Park, 2018; Perrett, 2021; Zhou, 2019).

Attitude divergence and alignment are linked to partisan disagreement via *attitude partisanship*, with the probability of social conflict increasing to the extent that demographic cleavages are politicised (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). This is uncontroversial in the sense that sociological, party sorting, and elite cue proponents all describe the association between issue positions and political identity changing in relation to elite policy divergence. Yet the interpretation of attitude partisanship is what fundamentally structures the polarisation literature. As outlined in previous chapters and stated formally below, partisan realignment might involve attitude or partisanship change, be caused by demographic shifts or top-down political persuasion, and incorporate or displace coalitions built on other issues. Attitude partisanship is thus a special case of mass polarisation. Although a common expectation of all three accounts reviewed during Chapter 2, its meaning varies dramatically according

to sociological, party sorting, and elite cue mechanisms.

Given multiple concepts supporting different perspectives on polarisation, this chapter establishes empirical expectations to test on the British case. Sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts either describe parties following voters or voters following parties. Hence, Section 3.2 outlines elite policy divergence after the 2007-2008 financial crisis. I examine changes in Labour-Conservative policy across economic and cultural dimensions, showing clear evidence of repolarisation. Expert and voter survey measures and manifesto data consistently document Labour shifting left and away from Conservatives on economic issues. Results are more mixed for the cultural dimension, however. Despite consensus that the cultural gap in party platforms increased, trends related to specific issues are ambiguous. In particular, significant differences emerge in the way experts and voters evaluate elite policy divergence on European integration and immigration. I discuss sources of this ambiguity and highlight awkward patterns of political competition unfolding in relation to Brexit. This contextualises sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts in remaining sections of the chapter, where I establish through which variables, among which voters, and on which issues to anticipate polarisation in the British case.

Partisan realignment is a common expectation shared by all three perspectives, but Section 3.3 defines a key distinction between changes in attitude partisanship caused by attitude or partisanship change. This facilitates a simple test for distinguishing party sorting from sociological and elite cue accounts, with one of the latter required to explain partisan polarisation mirroring broader trends in attitude divergence and alignment. The difference in subgroup dynamics implied by these perspectives is then defined in Section 3.4. Attitude change may result from top-down or bottom-up mechanisms that are either endogenous or exogenous to political engagement, clearly separating partisanship-based attitude conversion from non-partisan trends that are also consistent with sociological developments. The debate on conflict extension versus conflict displacement is applied to the British case by Section 3.5, outlining mass trends implied by elite repolarisation on cultural and economic issues after the financial crisis. While sociological and party sorting accounts are compatible with cultural realignment that displaces left-right divides, I argue that mass polarisation should include both dimensions if partisans are following elite cues. Section 3.6 thus concludes by summarising

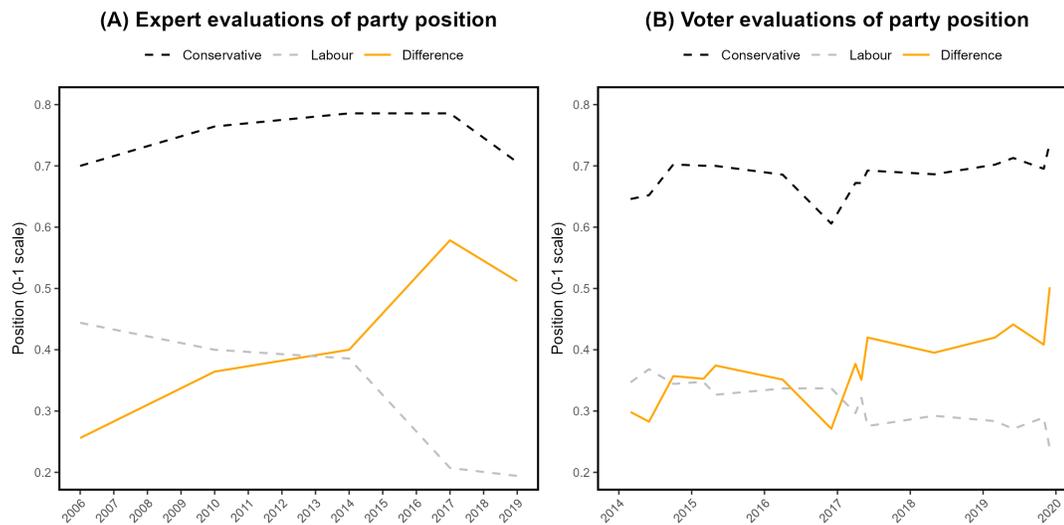
these differences in a table of empirical expectations, establishing parameters through which to interpret sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts of recent developments in British politics.

## 3.2 | The British case

It is well-documented that parties' policy strategies converged in various European countries during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Huber and Inglehart, 1995; Kitschelt, 1994; Klingemann, 2005). The British case is usually singled out as an extreme example of this trend, with mainstream parties developing less ideological forms of political competition over many years (Adams et al., 2012b; Cohen and Cohen, 2021). The 1983 general election saw Labour lose by landslide under divisive left-winger Michael Foot, after which it moderated redistributive positions, played down working-class appeals, and embraced culturally liberal perspectives on European integration, immigration, and broader social values (Bara, 2006; Bara and Budge, 2001; Budge, 1999; Evans and Tilley, 2017, Ch. 6; Hindmoor, 2004; Laver, 1998). The Conservative Party also reformed its image following Thatcher, over a decade out of power, and internecine struggles over Europe (see Baker et al., 1993; Berrington and Hague, 1998; Sowemimo, 1996). In particular, the modernising leadership of David Cameron is associated with 'One Nation' messaging, more positive engagement in the European Union, and progressive policies on gay marriage and racial equality (Bale, 2016).

European politics repolarised after the 2007-2008 financial crisis, however, with British party movements again proving especially dramatic. The Conservative Party reaffirmed a commitment to market orthodoxy and emphasised fiscal austerity once back in power from 2010, while Labour distinguished itself even more clearly by shifting rapidly back to the left. [Figure 3.1a](#) thus shows clear elite policy divergence using Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) measures of mainstream party economic positions (Jolly et al., 2022; Polk et al., 2017). In particular, we see Labour drive a spike in polarisation following 2014, possibly reflecting the leadership of veteran backbench left-winger Jeremy Corbyn (but see Manwaring and Smith, 2020). This change in policy environment is reflected by manifesto data from the 2010, 2015, 2017, and 2019 general elections (Allen and Bara, 2017, 2019, 2021). It also seems to be registered by vot-

ers in [Figure 3.1b](#), which plots mass perceptions of the difference between Labour and the Conservatives on income redistribution using [BES](#) data (Fieldhouse et al., 2020a). Indeed, each of these sources reveal large increases in elite repolarisation after 2016, confirming that left-right political competition intensifies throughout the Brexit period.

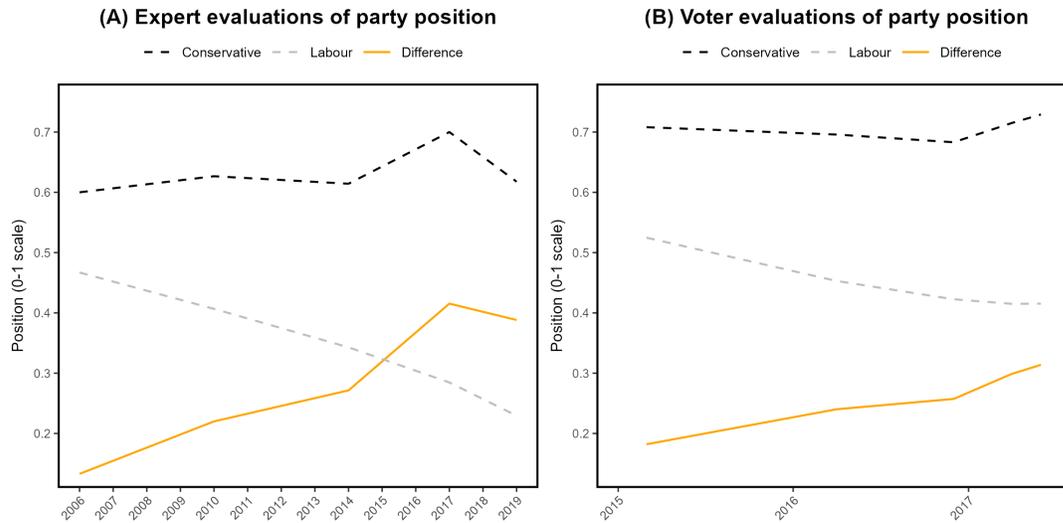


**Figure 3.1:** Elite policy divergence on economic issues.

*Notes:* Part A displays mean positions ascribed to Labour and Conservatives in Chapel Hill Expert Surveys, 2006-2019. Part B displays corresponding evaluations using data from the British Election Study, 2014-2019. Experts are asked to place parties in terms of ideological stance on economic issues. Voters are placing parties in response to an item about income redistribution. Higher values indicate more right-wing positions.

Culture wars also gained mainstream prominence during this time, yet [Figure 3.2a](#) indicates elite policy divergence on these issues immediately following the financial crisis. Specifically, Labour’s liberal trajectory proceeds consistently from 2006 to 2019 in the [CHES](#) data, driving elite repolarisation despite limited change in Conservative Party positioning. That is again consistent with manifesto research, which shows Labour advancing a more cosmopolitan platform in 2015, 2017, and 2019 but no clear Conservative trend (Allen and Bara, 2021). There is a lack of survey data measuring British voters’ perception of these developments, although the [BES](#) does field an item asking about relative priorities for civil liberties versus national security. Despite covering only a few years, [Figure 3.2b](#) suggests similar increases in elite policy divergence driven mainly by Labour shifting in a liberal direction.

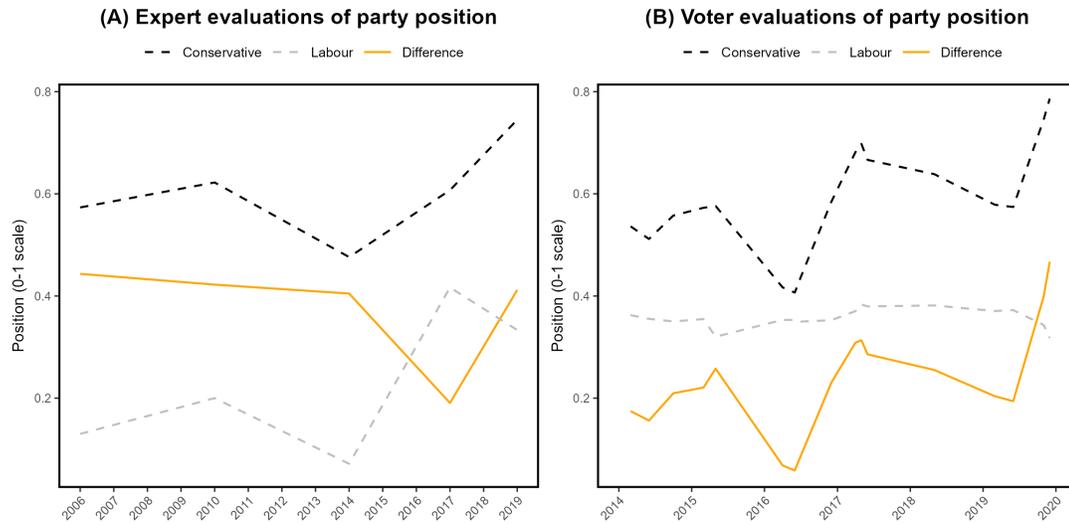
Brexit is at the centre of culture wars emerging in British politics, however, on



**Figure 3.2:** Elite policy divergence on cultural issues.

*Notes:* Part A displays mean positions ascribed to Labour and Conservatives in Chapel Hill Expert Surveys, 2006-2019. Part B displays corresponding evaluations using data from the British Election Study, 2015-2017. Experts are asked to place parties in terms of their views on social and cultural values. Voters are placing parties in response to an item about civil liberties versus national security. Higher values indicate more traditionalist-authoritarian positions.

which Labour can hardly be said to demonstrate the clearest party movements. Existing research shows that mainstream electoral coalitions but especially the left were badly exposed to cultural fragmentation and shedding radical right support prior to the 2016 referendum (Evans and Mellon, 2016; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 5; Ford and Goodwin, 2010; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Ford and Goodwin, 2016; Ford et al., 2012; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Ch. 6; SurrIDGE, 2018b; Webb and Bale, 2014). Hence, while Conservatives aligned with hard-line positions in the immediate aftermath and increasingly as withdrawal negotiations progressed, Labour maintained strategic ambiguity in an attempt to reconcile its Remain- and Leave-voting supporters (Curtice, 2020; Prosser, 2020; Schonfeld and Winter-Levy, 2021). Figure 3.3a thus shows Conservative policy shifting decisively against European integration in 2017 and 2019 waves of the CHES data, whereas Labour’s originally strongly pro-EU position becomes more neutral. No clear polarisation trend emerges because both parties move simultaneously in the same direction. The difference between them even briefly declined following the 2017 general election, in which Labour and the Conservative



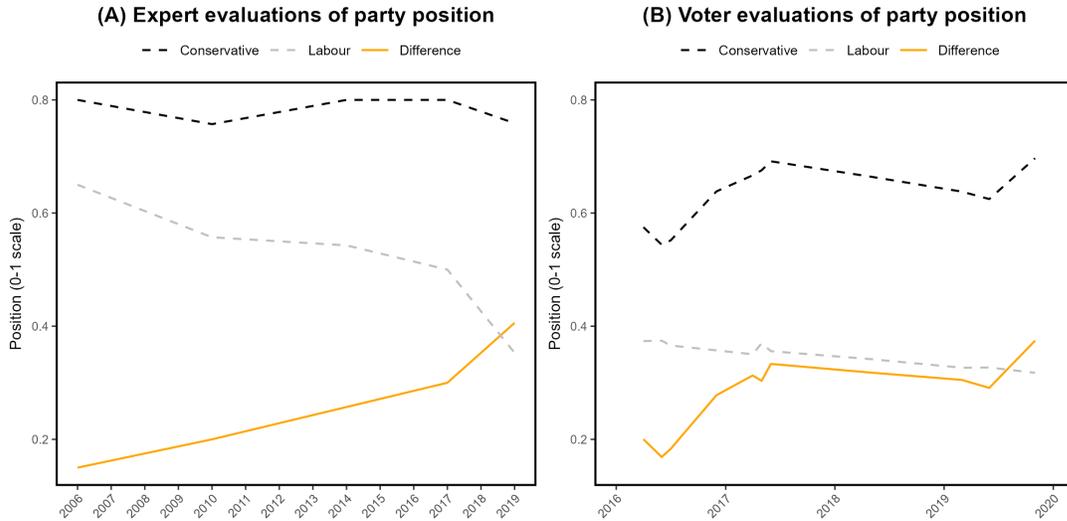
**Figure 3.3:** Elite policy divergence on European integration.

*Notes:* Part A displays mean positions ascribed to Labour and Conservatives in Chapel Hill Expert Surveys, 2006-2019. Part B displays corresponding evaluations using data from the British Election Study, 2014-2019. Experts are asked to place parties in terms of overall orientation towards European integration. Voters are placing parties in response to an item about uniting fully with or protecting independence from the European Union. Higher values indicate more Eurosceptic positions.

Party pledged to accept the referendum result. [Figure 3.3b](#) tells a slightly different story using [BES](#) data from 2014 to 2019. After the referendum, voters perceived increased Euroscepticism among the Conservatives and therefore elite policy divergence in combination with the moderately pro-EU stance consistently ascribed to Labour.<sup>1</sup> The latter suggests that Labour successfully obscured its position but was nonetheless still ‘widely perceived to be softer than the Conservatives’ (see also Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, p. 170).

Similar confusion characterises elite polarisation on immigration, the other major set of issues involved in Brexit debates. Despite increasing after the financial crisis, expert survey measures displayed in [Figure 3.4a](#) attribute this to Labour shifting in a liberal direction. This is surprising given strategic ambiguity underpinning the party’s long-term approach to such issues. Since at least 2005, Labour has advocated tighter border control while emphasising the economic and cultural benefits of migration. The ‘Windrush’ scandal did create more space to criticise government policy without com-

<sup>1</sup>Declines in Conservative Euroscepticism correspond to waves immediately preceding the 2016 referendum and the period between the 2017 general election and 2019 European Parliament election.



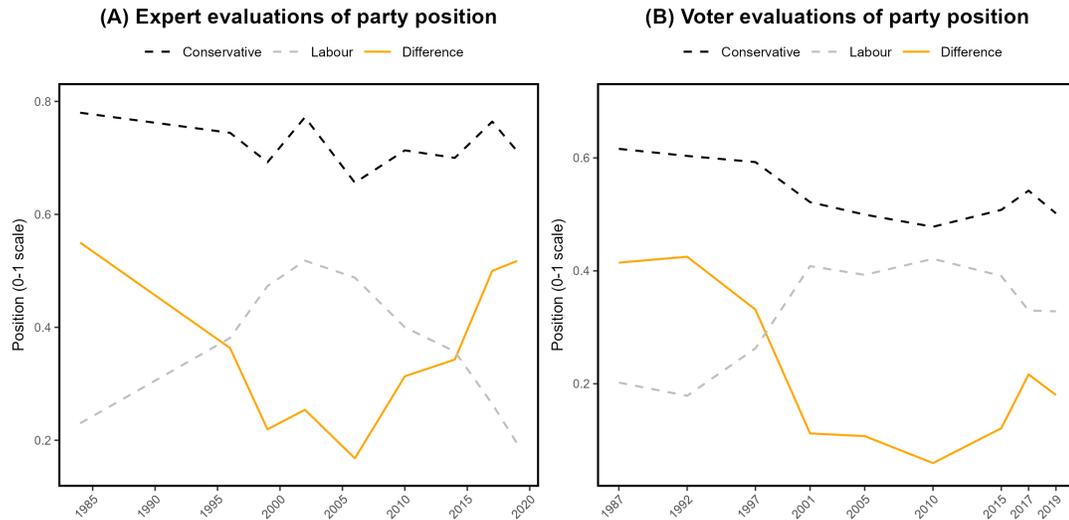
**Figure 3.4:** Elite policy divergence on immigration.

*Notes:* Part A displays mean positions ascribed to Labour and Conservatives in Chapel Hill Expert Surveys, 2006-2019. Part B displays corresponding evaluations using data from the British Election Study, 2016-2019. Experts are asked to place parties in terms of position on immigration policy. Voters are placing parties in response to an item about allowing many more or fewer immigrants to live in the UK. Higher values indicate more anti-immigration positions.

mitting to post-Brexit arrangements, which might be why the party's position becomes sharply more liberal in 2019. But this still contrasts with Conservative Party strategy, where even Cameron's modernising agenda stopped short of immigration. The Conservatives regained power promising to reduce net migration to 1990s levels in the 2010 general election, forcing severe restrictions on people coming from outside the EU. The party has been free to target EU citizens following the 2016 referendum, moreover, notably through Theresa May pledging to leave the Single Market and more explicit appeals to 'take back control' under Boris Johnson. Yet border policies ascribed to the Conservatives do not fundamentally change in [Figure 3.4a](#), perhaps because its position was never in doubt among [CHES](#) respondents. A stronger reaction is evident in [Figure 3.4b](#) though, where voters perceive increased Tory opposition to immigration relative to consistently ambivalent interpretations of the Labour platform.

Such confusion is symptomatic of awkward political competition unfolding in relation to Brexit. Culture wars suddenly become much more salient features of British politics following the financial crisis. However, both mainstream parties struggle to define

coherent positions while maintaining established electoral coalitions. This period thus involves elite repolarisation combining two dimensions, with relatively clear left-right divergence and messier disputes around the specifics of Brexit and other non-economic issues.



**Figure 3.5:** Elite policy divergence over the long run

*Notes:* Part A displays mean positions ascribed to Labour and Conservatives in Chapel Hill Expert Surveys, 1984-2019. Part B displays corresponding evaluations using data from the British Election Study, 1987-2019. Experts are asked to place parties in terms of their overall ideological stance. Voters are placing parties in response to an item about increasing or cutting taxes and spending.

Figure 3.5 contextualises these developments using long-term trends in elite policy divergence. Chapel Hill Expert Surveys have measured parties' overall ideological stance since 1984. These evaluations, displayed in panel A, show symmetrical depolarisation and repolarisation in British politics between 1984 and 2019. Both parties but mainly Labour converge on the centre-ground until 2006 before returning to their earlier positions by 2019. This results in a distinct U-shape trend in elite policy divergence, with the same level of polarisation in 2019 as followed the highly divisive 1983 general election (see Butler and Kavanagh, 1984). The Brexit period is thus an important case study in which to study mass polarisation. Indeed, part of the reason why British studies have focussed so much on left-right dealignment during the post-Thatcher era is that these party movements were so dramatic. Voters showed a clear recognition that Labour and the Conservative Party represented increasingly similar policy proposals, making

it possible to test theories of polarisation discussed in Chapter 2 (e.g., Adams et al., 2012b). Expert survey measures suggest that years following the 2007-2008 financial crisis, especially those in which Brexit antagonised mainstream party divisions, might feature comparable cut through.

Figure 3.5b provides some indication of this. There is no sufficiently long-term measure of parties' general ideological position at the voter level, yet the BES has asked a question on tax-spend priorities since 1987.<sup>2</sup> Consistent with the argument that voters received convergent elite cues during the post-Thatcher period (Adams et al., 2012b, Adams et al. (2012c); Milazzo et al., 2012), we see sharp depolarisation between Labour and the Conservative Party from 1987 to 2010. This is driven mainly by Labour moderating its high tax-spend platform, although voters also recognise decreasing commitment to market orthodoxy among Conservatives. The reverse is apparent from 2010. The public sees Labour becoming more left-wing between 2010 and 2019, especially after Jeremy Corbyn becomes leader in 2015. The trajectory of Conservative policy is complicated by the 2019 general election, where the party de-emphasised economic issues in an appeal to Leave-voting, traditional working-class constituencies. Voters nonetheless perceive accelerating fiscal conservatism from 2010 to 2017, contributing to a marked rise in polarisation.

This increase never reaches levels of disagreement observed prior to Thatcher's resignation, yet it confirms that mainstream party platforms diverged following the financial crisis, that this process accelerated during the Brexit period and, crucially, affected voters' perception of the political choices available in the 2015, 2017, and 2019 general elections. The same conclusion is also supported by long-term trends in manifesto data. Using the established Manifesto Project left-right index,<sup>3</sup> Allen and Bara (2021) find that the difference between Labour and Conservatives increased to its highest level in 2019 since 1992. Such party movements thus have implications for theories of polarisation outlined by Chapter 2. Just as previous research tests different perspectives on post-Thatcher convergence (e.g., Adams et al., 2012b), I apply empirical expectations from sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts to the Brexit period. The following sections establish through which variables, among which voters, and on which

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<sup>2</sup>The same question was also asked in 1983 but with a different response type.

<sup>3</sup>The 'RILE' scale is a measure of ideological location combining economic and non-economic policy categories (Volkens et al., 2013).

issues each account anticipates mass polarisation in the British case.

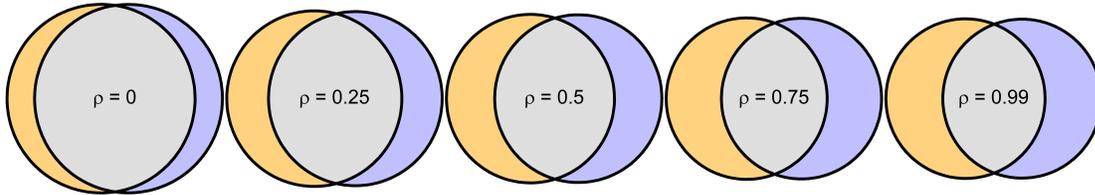
### 3.3 | Polarisation through which variables?

Chapter 2 described different perspectives on how issue positions become the foci of political conflict. Sociological mechanisms create demographic value shifts, with uneven development across key social groups and geographic regions changing the structural division of public preferences. The party sorting account describes vote switching caused by top-down political appeals, obviating what some consider unrealistic bottom-up requirements. And elite cue effects introduce identity-defensive mechanisms, outlining how certain partisans also update issue positions in line with those appeals. The emphasis on attitude or partisanship change in these accounts is thus associated with divergent interpretations of political realignment, implying distinct empirical expectations.

*Sociological* mechanisms cause trends in attitude divergence, attitude alignment, and attitude partisanship. Each changes with the relative size and geographic concentration of different social groups. Expansions in higher education, immigration, and professional middle-class occupations modernise a growing proportion of society and direct it towards prosperous cities and university towns, leaving culturally conservative impulses consolidated among older, less educated, more ethnically homogeneous communities. The difference in values separating these voters and regions gains salience as the demographic axis tilts towards formerly minority liberal groups, creating distributions of opinion more spread out, extreme, bimodal, and aligned along multiple issues. Those divisions are then exploited by politicians and parties, who can draw on long-term socio-economic trends and unending electoral shocks to mobilise opposing worldviews concentrated in distinct constituencies. It is thus the combination of attitude divergence and alignment that generates partisan polarisation in the sociological account.

Political pluralism and social integration are based on the idea that overt conflict and the dominance of particular interests is reduced by the structural intersection and heterogeneity of complex societies (e.g., Blau, 1977; Blau and Schwartz, 1984; Coser, 1956). Social cleavages may be associated with polarised attitudes on some issue or domain, but consensus remains possible because political values and allegiances are

spread across segmented demographic groups. The probability of social conflict increases when the structural division of society overlaps, however, with less common ground over a combined issue space.



**Figure 3.6:** Ideological polarisation at different levels of correlation within multivariate normal distributions.

*Notes:*  $\rho$  is the correlation between four normally distributed variables, each with  $\mu = 0$  and  $\sigma = 1$ . Grey regions represent ‘non-ideological’ combinations of opinion across issues, which I define as average opinion scores between -0.5 and 0.5.

Figure 3.6 demonstrates this property of attitude alignment. I simulate five multivariate normal distributions. Each simulation comprises four variables with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1, but I increase the covariance between variables using correlations of 0, 0.25, 0.5, 0.75, and 0.99, respectively.<sup>4</sup> The mean across variables gives an average opinion score, which is itself normally distributed but increasingly dispersed at higher levels of correlation. Average opinion scores close to 0 reflect heterogeneous opinions across issues. Hence, classifying scores between -0.5 and 0.5 as ‘non-ideological’, the figure shows that ‘ideological’ values in either direction of this interval become more prevalent when variables are correlated. It is not that attitudes on any given dimension are less moderate. The only thing changing is covariance in the multivariate normal distribution, making proximate and directionally consistent preferences across issues more likely. Attitude alignment then organises attitude divergence into ideological polarisation, where the propensity for agreement within and between clusters of issue positions increases and decreases, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

Correlation does not imply polarisation without attitude divergence.<sup>6</sup> The distri-

<sup>4</sup>Multivariate standard normal distributions are generated using the R package `faux` (DeBruine, 2021).

<sup>5</sup>Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) make a similar point using the distance within and between clusters defined by the sign of an equivalent synthetic opinion score.

<sup>6</sup>This point has limited practical relevance though, since disagreement among voters defines the ‘position’ issues involved in elite policy divergence (see Stokes, 1963, 1985, 1992). Even the standard

bution of average opinion scores in the previous example would change much less if I reduced the standard deviation among variables. Conversely, attitude divergence is not *ideological* polarisation without constraint. Park (2018) demonstrates that highly polarised yet orthogonal distributions of opinion are fragmented in quadrants of two-dimensional space. Although there are examples of intense political conflict over hot-button issues, such as abortion in the United States or European integration, cross-cutting cleavages form no ‘foci’ around which to organise party activity (Feld, 1981). Indeed, social division on European integration only became politically potent once linked to immigration and broader social values in the British case (Evans and Mellon, 2019; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Chs. 5 and 9).

Sociological accounts therefore describe attitude partisanship increasing because of attitude divergence and alignment. Demographic shifts polarise the distribution and constraint of issue positions across social groups and geographic regions. Party identification consolidates group membership and value orientations (Campbell et al., 1960). Hence, changes in the structural division of society penetrate the ideological division between elites. Dispersed, extreme, multimodal, and constrained public preferences create encompassing factions concentrated in constituencies represented by different parties. Partisan polarisation is then a symptom of broader ideological developments, implying trends in attitude partisanship, divergence, and alignment. This contrasts sharply with the interpretation facilitated by party sorting.

*Party sorting* mechanisms are associated with more instrumental conceptions of partisanship. Political identities do not emerge spontaneously from structural conditions but are interpellated according to the policy and group appeals implemented by elites. Only social groups and issue positions salient in party competition structure electoral coalitions. The ideological basis of Labour-Conservative identity thus diminished following post-Thatcher convergence, with the weight attached to class and related left-right principles declining in voter decision rules (Evans and Neundorf, 2020; Evans and Tilley, 2017; Milazzo et al., 2012). Party sorting proponents show that these social divisions remain salient in British society, yet their importance nonetheless decreased relative to competence-based forms of political behaviour (Adams et al., 2012b; Green, 2007;

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normal distributions used to construct [Figure 3.6](#) demonstrate clear ideological polarisation through constraint.

Green and Hobolt, 2008). Rather than just socially inherited identity, partisanship is therefore also contingent on the political choices made available in elections.

This instrumental conception of political identity introduces another interpretation of partisan polarisation. Whereas attitude partisanship is reorganised following demographic shifts in the sociological account, similar outcomes may emerge independently of ideological change via sorting mechanisms. Party support is endogenous to social group membership and value orientations, as it is under a sociological framework. Yet that also makes it liable to change when those structural conditions become more or less relevant to parties' electoral strategies. Top-down appeals can mobilise different issues and groups without implying major demographic realignment. Clearer ideological signals indicate which positions are represented by the competition between elites, allowing voters to connect political choice with potentially long-held opinions. In other words, party sorting is a function of partisanship (not attitude) change. Accounts based purely on these mechanisms expect partisan polarisation without trends in attitude divergence or alignment.

The same findings are plausible through *elite cue* effects, even though they share an emphasis on attitude change with sociological perspectives. The psychological and heuristic properties underpinning partisanship activate identity-defensive mechanisms when elite policy divergence extends to new issues or positions not consistent with an individual's ideological predispositions. The latter cross-pressures attitude partisanship structures, leading to sorting among those perceiving better representation on issues important to them. Yet attitude change must also take place at either end of this process for electoral coalitions to encompass heterogeneous social cleavages, as claimed in the American case (Carsey and Layman, 2006; Layman and Carsey, 2002a,b; Layman et al., 2010). Strong or ideologically unaffected party identifiers remain and incorporate new issue positions along with elites, while those joining from elsewhere adapt other issue positions in a manner consistent with their new political identity. Elite cue effects thus describe attitude divergence and alignment unfolding between partisans, which may alter the dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint of public preferences more broadly. However, unlike sociological mechanisms top-down attitude change does not imply *aggregate* trends if the population of voters reacting to party competition in this way is relatively small (see Section 3.4).

The empirical implications of elite cue theory are therefore difficult to distinguish from other accounts. If a sufficiently small number of partisans are affected by elite policy divergence, then attitude partisanship could plausibly increase without altering public preferences fundamentally. Indeed, some argue that the overall stability of mass opinion masks top-down ideological polarisation between partisans, leading to controversy in the American political science literature (Layman et al., 2006). As Layman and Carsey (2002a, p. 789) put it, ‘the only citizens we expect to respond to the developments observed among party elites by bringing their own views on different issue dimensions closer together are party identifiers, particularly strong partisans, who are aware of party polarisation on all of those dimensions’. This ‘limited mass response’ means that we might only observe aggregate trends in attitude partisanship, even if the latter is caused by increasing divergence and alignment in the issue positions of partisans.

The aggregate expectations of sociological and party sorting mechanisms are thus also potentially consistent with elite cue effects. Partisan polarisation reflects broader ideological developments in the sociological account, where demographic shifts intensify value divides between social groups concentrated in constituencies represented by different parties. This implies trends in attitude partisanship, divergence, and alignment, which is empirically indistinct from an elite cue account involving many party identifiers. Roughly 60 per cent of voters identify as Labour or Conservative, averaging across 2014-2019 waves of the BES. If most of them updated issue positions following elite trends reported in Section 3.2, it would presumably change the dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint of public preferences. At the same time, however, elite cue effects might be limited to potentially small groups of politically engaged partisans. Hence, although party sorting implies trends in attitude partisanship but not attitude divergence or alignment, trends in attitude partisanship alone do *not* imply party sorting. An elite cue account could claim that partisan polarisation is increasing via attitude change that remains nonetheless concealed at the aggregate level.

Ultimately, clearly separating elite cue effects from other mechanisms will require more than the cross-sectional evidence typically used to study mass polarisation (e.g., Adams et al., 2012b; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Munzert and Bauer, 2013a). Attitude partisanship trends that are not associated with trends in attitude divergence

or alignment suggest party sorting or elite cue effects, which can be distinguished further by disaggregating changes in attitude partisanship into attitude and partisanship change. Conversely, trends in attitude partisanship that *are* associated with attitude divergence and alignment indicate sociological or elite cue mechanisms. The empirical difference between these perspectives on attitude change is addressed next section, which outlines the voters driving polarisation in top-down and bottom-up accounts.

### 3.4 | Polarisation among which voters?

The distinction between attitude and partisanship change separates party sorting from sociological and elite cue mechanisms, while the difference in dynamics implied by top-down and bottom-up perspectives remains unclear. In both sociological and elite cue accounts, partisan polarisation reflects attitude change. The sociological account expects trends in attitude partisanship to the extent that public opinion is polarising. But it is to the extent that partisans are polarising that elite cue effects imply wider trends in attitude divergence and alignment. These processes are not separated by the question of polarisation through which variables so much as among which voters.

In *sociological* accounts, elite policy divergence adapts to changing cleavage structures. A common approach to testing this perspective thus disaggregates polarisation trends among salient social groups (e.g., Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003). The demographic basis of culture wars is not what distinguishes top-down from bottom-up perspectives, however. *Party sorting* challenges the sociological claim that society is more divided today than in previous decades yet remains consistent with structural accounts of politics. Political conflict may be related to age, education, or any other social cleavage highlighted in the polarisation literature; not necessarily because of changes in the distributional properties surrounding them but their salience in parties' electoral strategies. Party sorting describes a reorganisation of voting behaviour resulting from changes in top-down appeals, thus demonstrating how elite policy divergence can lead to political realignment without shifting population structures.

Similarly, although emphasising the influence party identification has on political preference formation, that influence derives from the social consciousness evoked by top-

down appeals in *elite cue* accounts. The latter are following claims made in sociological accounts of partisanship, such as the ‘funnel of causality’ linking demographic divisions with vote choice via identity-defensive mechanisms (Campbell et al., 1960). Partisanship consolidates socially inherited group loyalties and value orientations, generating political identities that structure otherwise unconstrained voters (Converse, 1964). Elite cues influence how partisans think about politics because they indicate which issue positions are associated with the social groups and communities represented by different parties.

It is important to stress that, at a certain level, all three perspectives on polarisation are ‘sociological’. Party sorting and elite cue effects are simply political mechanisms overlaying the structural basis of voters’ behaviour (see Bartels and Brady, 2003; Sartori, 1969). One outlines partisanship change caused by realignment in electoral appeals, which alters the relationship between social cleavages and political identity even when those cleavages remain the same. Elite cue effects just add some degree of partisanship-based attitude conversion to sorting processes, explaining how heterogeneous subpopulations are united in partisan coalitions. It is not then the social structure of polarisation contested by top-down accounts, but an exclusive emphasis on bottom-up developments. Partisan polarisation is related to structural divisions that change over time. Yet the association between those divisions and partisanship is also conditioned by the way elites engage with them, potentially causing dynamics not immediately explained by sociological mechanisms.

*The principal characteristic distinguishing bottom-up from top-down polarisation dynamics is that the latter are mediated by political engagement.* For its part, the *elite cue* account explicitly limits attitude change to partisans, moreover, anticipating the bulk of movement among strong partisans that are aware of elite policy divergence (Layman and Carsey, 2002a; Zaller, 1992). Similar information effects are involved in *party sorting*. Although some observe switching only among the well informed (Claassen and Highton, 2009; Ensley, 2007) and others report mixed or equivalent trends across the more and less sophisticated, educated, politically knowledgeable or interested (Evans and Neundorf, 2020; Milazzo et al., 2012; Putz, 2002), most find that party sorting develops earlier or is stronger among the better engaged. This pattern is apparent in accounts from the US (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Fiorina and Levendusky, 2006; Gillion et al., 2018), the UK (Adams et al., 2012c; Andersen et al., 2005), and other

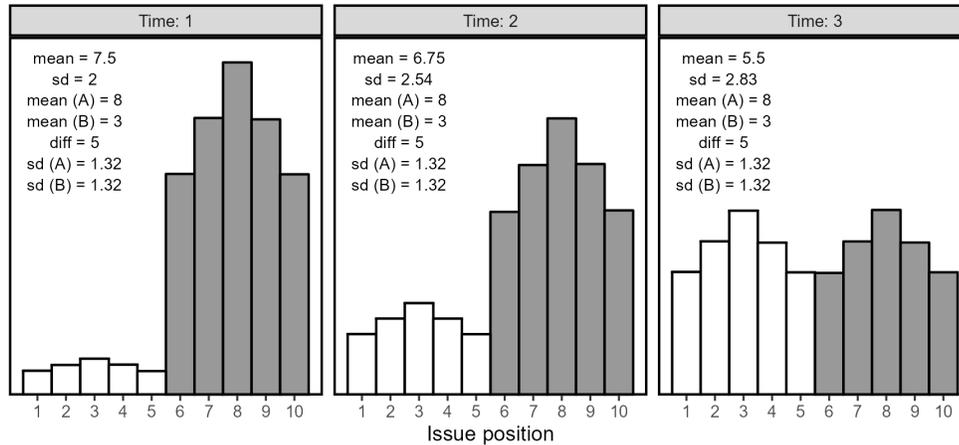
West European countries (Adams et al., 2012a; Lachat, 2008). Top-down perspectives thus restrict polarisation to voters who are following elite policy divergence.

A fundamentally different position is implied by bottom-up frameworks, meanwhile, which describe political realignment emerging from changes in the structural division of society. Demographic shifts alter the distributional properties of public opinion, which are exploited by parties seeking to maintain and expand electoral support. Hence, *sociological* mechanisms result in, but are not limited to, partisan polarisation. The ideological difference separating partisan groups increases because they comprise socio-demographic coalitions with divergent preferences. Yet attitude change is independent of political engagement and could also affect other voters.

Many studies of mass polarisation compare salient social groups (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003; Munzert and Bauer, 2013a; Perrett, 2021). For example, DiMaggio et al. (1996) analyse dissensus between and consensus within paired American subpopulations across age, education, gender, race, religion, region, self-identified ideology, and partisanship. Finding clear divergence only among Democrat-Republican identifiers, with other between-group differences declining over time, they conclude that mass polarisation must be driven by top-down mechanisms (see also Evans, 2003). Yet sociological developments do not necessarily affect the difference in means between or internal cohesion of specific social groups.

Consider some bottom-up mechanisms proposed in the polarisation literature. Inglehart's (1977) 'silent revolution' develops between generations socialised under different material circumstances. Sobolewska and Ford (2020) locate emergent British culture wars in changing demographics, specifically the rising proportion of graduate and ethnic minority voters. Kitschelt (1994) outlines the recomposition of class structures generating ideological realignment in West European party systems. These accounts all describe polarisation through population replacement. Higher education expansion, growth among the professional middle classes, increasing ethnic diversity, and many other *sociological developments liberalise the distribution of public preferences without necessarily altering within- or between-group disagreement.*

An analytical example demonstrates this point. Imagine a hypothetical population divided in two groups, each falling on opposite sides of the distribution in opinion on a 10-point scale. The mean of group A and B is 8 and 3, respectively, and both are



**Figure 3.7:** Polarisation without change in the difference within or between groups.

*Notes:* Group A is shaded grey and group B is blank.

dispersed with a standard deviation of roughly 1.3. Suppose that 90 per cent of the population belongs to group A and the other 10 per cent is group B. In this hypothetical population, the mean overall issue position is 7.5 and the standard deviation is 2. Now suppose that population structures change, and the size of group B increases relative to group A. Figure 3.7 displays what happens when the ratio of group A to B decreases from 9:1, to 3:1, and then 1:1. Within- and between-group differences remain the same at each time point, yet the aggregate effect of demographic shifts is dramatic attitude change. The 1:1 population has an overall mean reduced to 5.5, dispersion is almost one standard deviation higher, and the distribution of opinion is now distinctly bimodal.

It is not the issue positions associated with social groups that are changing so much as the social groups associated with issue positions. This is not to say sociological mechanisms are incompatible with changes in the disagreement between subpopulations. Many accounts describe bottom-up forces provoking backlash among voters and regions left behind by modernisation, who face higher stakes when formerly acceptable positions become less prevalent, and numerous real or perceived threats to their material security and way of life (e.g., Crouch, 2020; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020; Wuthnow, 2018). As Sobolewska and Ford (2020, pp. 7-8) put it, ‘the politics of identity is in part a tug-of-war over social norms’. The distribution of public opinion might shift in one direction over time, but the social changes driving it affect voters unevenly and alter the nature of conflict between them. The fundamental

point, however, is that such mechanisms result in aggregate attitude change. Whereas Evans and Nunn (2005, p. 7) challenge top-down accounts to ‘look for polarisation at a more limited level than the nation’, proponents of these accounts can therefore assert the contrary: limited polarisation at the level of the nation is evidence against a strictly bottom-up framework. Partisan polarisation without broader trends in the distributional properties of public opinion implies party sorting or elite cue effects.

A simple test distinguishing top-down from bottom-up polarisation dynamics thus follows. Top-down mechanisms restrict mass polarisation to politically engaged voters, specifically party supporters who are aware of elite policy divergence. While relevant to party sorting, this test primarily separates elite cue from sociological accounts of attitude change. The latter is caused by identity-defensive mechanisms under a top-down framework, with the association between issue positions and political identity increasing because elite polarisation motivates corresponding trends among partisans. This might lead to broader attitude divergence and alignment, depending on the number of voters following elite cues. Yet such dynamics will be limited to (or at least be stronger and develop earlier among) partisans after disaggregating evidence of attitude change. Partisan polarisation is a symptom of broader divisions caused by sociological mechanisms, meanwhile. Socio-demographic developments alter the relative size and geographic concentration of groups with divergent outlooks, creating space for ideological conflict over political issues. Attitude partisanship thus mirrors changes in the distributional properties of public opinion affecting voters independently of political engagement.

Which voters are polarising, then? The top-down answer is partisans who are aware of elite policy divergence. Polarisation should involve attitude change limited to partisans, and not necessarily associated with aggregate trends in attitude divergence or alignment. Bottom-up polarisation is not mediated by political engagement, on the other hand. Changes in attitude partisanship require aggregate attitude dynamics that can also involve non-partisans.

### 3.5 | Polarisation on which issues?

Sociological, party sorting, and elite cue mechanisms produce divergent expectations in terms of the variables and voters driving polarisation. Partisan polarisation without

aggregate trends in attitude divergence and alignment suggests party sorting or elite cue effects, which can be distinguished further by disaggregating attitude partisanship dynamics into attitude and partisanship change. Partisan polarisation *with* aggregate trends in attitude divergence and alignment indicate sociological or elite cue mechanisms, depending on the partisan, non-partisan dynamics involved. Elite cue effects thus have implications compatible with aggregate outcomes described in sociological or party sorting accounts and are, ultimately, only identified by individual-level dynamics. Yet proponents of these mechanisms also introduce a third debate to the polarisation literature, potentially leading to different perspectives on the issues driving polarisation in Britain.

Layman and Carsey (2002a) draw a distinction between cultural realignment that extends from or displaces left-right cleavages, defining ‘conflict extension’ to explain unidimensional party competition observed in the US. Economic and cultural issues engage different philosophical questions concerning the role of government and do not necessarily line up neatly on a left-liberal, right-conservative continuum. Hence, New Deal electoral coalitions were partially broken down by the civil rights movement and in turn cross-pressured by further moral disagreements during the Reagan and post-Reagan era. Partisan realignment on these issues did not lead to conflict displacement, however; economic, racial, and other cultural phases of elite policy divergence were subsumed into an overarching liberal-conservative political divide. Identity-defensive mechanisms are what facilitates this conflict extension in elite cue accounts. Elite polarisation cross-pressures established electoral equilibrium, leading to sorting among those perceiving more proximate representation of their issue positions elsewhere. Yet, whether maintaining or switching partisanship, voters must also convert contradicting attitudes to avoid identity dissonance within broader party agendas. Remaining partisans incorporate the new issue positions advocated by trusted elites, whereas switchers incorporate the older issue positions associated with their new partisanship (see also Carsey and Layman, 2006; Layman and Carsey, 2002b; Layman et al., 2010, 2006). It is through this combination of attitude-based partisanship and partisanship-based attitude change that elite cue accounts describe party leaders building and maintaining heterogeneous electoral coalitions. The social cleavages involved remain cross-cutting but are nonetheless organised under unidimensional ideological conflict in the minds of

partisans, if only the more politically engaged among them.

These arguments are relevant in the British case, which includes elite policy divergence combining multiple dimensions. After decades of converged political competition, Labour and the Conservative Party repolarised on economic issues while also developing cultural disagreements in relation to European integration, immigration, and broader social values. Applied to this context, conflict extension processes imply partisan polarisation across cultural *and* economic issues. We should see the association between these attitudes and partisanship increasing following elite cues, as Labour-Conservative identifiers and switchers adjust ideology in line with expanding party platforms. Indeed, the clearest elite policy divergence in Section 3.2 was on economic issues, suggesting corresponding mass trends even without claims surrounding conflict extension. Economic policy repolarisation is documented in expert and voter survey measures of party positions and in manifesto data from the post-crisis period. Emerging British culture wars are more ambiguous, meanwhile. Although this dimension gained importance in elections after the 2016 referendum (Curtice, 2017a; Curtice, 2020; Cutts et al., 2020; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 9; Jennings and Stoker, 2017), changes in Labour-Conservative platforms and the difference between these parties are inconsistent across cultural issues, expert and voter survey measures, and my own qualitative assessments. Brexit led to protracted crisis in mainstream British politics, including fractious internal disagreements in both dominant parties. It is only by the 2019 general election that this crisis is partially resolved into a relatively clear political choice, with the Conservatives promising to ‘Get Brexit Done’ and Labour talking about holding a second referendum (Allen and Bara, 2021). Hence, to the extent that voters are following elite cues in this period, we might even observe stronger left-right polarisation trends than on cultural issues.

This could set elite cue effects apart from mass polarisation described in other accounts. Partisan motivated reasoning should lead to mass polarisation on all issues subject to elite policy divergence, but sociological and party sorting accounts are ambivalent on whether cultural realignment expands or minimises left-right division. In particular, Layman and Carsey (2002a) argue that conflict extension is incompatible with party sorting. Since issue positions are exogenous to electoral processes under this framework, political realignment can occur only through partisanship change. Cross-

pressured party identifiers must switch sides to achieve representation on new issues emerging in the competition between elites. This is consistent with the instrumental conception of political identity associated with sorting mechanisms (see Section 3.3). Partisanship is essentially electoral support, which can be updated in response to top-down appeals. Hence, even if voters follow elite policy divergence by switching partisanship, these mechanisms do not imply mass polarisation on cultural *and* economic issues. Cultural realignment cross-pressures left-right attitude partisanship structures, possibly leading to conflict displacement in the absence of partisanship-based attitude change.

Yet Layman and Carsey's account of conflict extension does not map neatly on to the British case, where historic class-party alignment is already greatly diminished. Post-Thatcher convergence reduced the left-right difference between Labour and Conservatives, which party sorting proponents argue led to a reduction in the weight voters' attach to their issue positions relative to non-ideological concerns (Green, 2007; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Milazzo et al., 2012). Only in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 financial crisis did mainstream elites begin separating themselves again on economic policy, with Labour in particular shifting rapidly back to the left under successive leaders. Similarly, although cultural issues were never a cornerstone in Labour-Conservative competition, the 'liberal consensus' developing between these parties prior to Brexit is associated with mainstream partisanship dealignment and defection to the radical right (Evans and Mellon, 2016; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 5; Ford and Goodwin, 2010; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Ford and Goodwin, 2016; Ford et al., 2012; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Ch. 6; Webb and Bale, 2014). Unlike elite policy divergence that has proceeded relatively linearly, over many decades, and from issue to issue in America, the British case is punctuated by periods of depolarisation and repolarisation encompassing cultural and economic issues.

It is not clear what to expect from party sorting mechanisms in this context. Many suggest that Brexit reflects social divisions with the potential to displace left-right political competition, an outcome that is consistent with the depiction of party sorting in Layman and Carsey (2002a). Indeed, Evans and Menon (2017) argue that disagreements surrounding Brexit were already well established in public opinion long before the 2016 referendum, remaining marginalised until forced onto mainstream party agen-

das by the surging popularity of UKIP. In this account, renewed Euroscepticism in the Conservative leadership connected cultural cleavages with the choices available in subsequent elections, dramatically degrading the established equilibrium of British politics. Yet that equilibrium was not based completely on left-right values. Less ideological competition prior to the financial crisis makes party sorting on cross-cutting dimensions plausible since voters can develop political identities in response to newly salient cultural *and* economic elite positions. Conflict displacement or extension is thus compatible with sorting mechanisms in the British case.

Sociological accounts are also ambivalent on the issues driving polarisation. Although Layman and Carsey imply that cross-cutting social cleavages remain so outside unidimensional partisan coalitions, some argue that emergence of the latter reflects a broad ideological division unfolding in American society. Namely, Abramowitz (e.g., Abramowitz, 2013b, 2018) documents alignment in the economic, racial, cultural, religious, and geographic division of US voters, increasingly polarised into encompassing, mutually opposed political blocs. As he puts it, ‘one of the most important features of American politics today is not just the intensity of the partisan divisions over hot button issues... but the range of issues on which these divisions exist and the consistency of opinions across these issues’ (Abramowitz, 2013b, p. 12). Similarly, Campbell (2016) outlines how New Deal coalitions were subsumed into an overarching ideological struggle following the 1950s. Voters identifying as liberal or conservative became more likely to adopt left-liberal, right-conservative attitudes on economic *and* cultural issues, creating the structural basis for conflict extension observed in Democrat-Republican competition.

Cultural realignment displaces traditional left-right divides in many sociological accounts, however, especially those looking beyond the American case. For instance, Kitschelt (1994) outlines (economic) cultural (de)polarisation unfolding as the number of people employed in (working) middle class roles (decreases) increases in advanced industrial society. Inglehart (1977; 1997; 2018) documents post-material value shifts between generations socialised under relative material prosperity. And Sobolewska and Ford (2020) show that liberal graduate and ethnic minority populations are beginning to outnumber ethnocentric white school leavers in Britain, polarising and shifting racial social norms. Economic anxieties remain prevalent in these accounts, and partly

drive cultural backlash among the left behind (e.g., Crouch, 2020; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Yet formerly encompassing left-right cleavages are intersected by non-economic attitude divergence and alignment. Routine working- and interpersonal middle-class occupations are associated with more left-wing economic preferences but opposite social values (Kitschelt and Rehm, 2014). Core historical constituencies supporting the British Labour Party include northern heartland voters and ethnic minority populations, both of which feel threatened by the other's identity politics (Sobolewska, 2005; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). Whereas the political geography of England unites potentially conflicting social ecologies, such as the precariat growing alongside professional middle classes in cosmopolitan cities (Jennings and Stoker, 2017). Indeed, it is because age, education, ethnicity, occupational class, and region fragment left-right coalitions while aligning diverse cultural issues that these cleavages are becoming more politically potent in many sociological accounts.

There is thus a gap separating recent developments in British politics from claims surrounding sociological and party sorting mechanisms. The British case involves elite repolarisation on cultural *and* economic issues following the financial crisis, with clear left-right disagreements unfolding alongside intense yet more ambiguous Brexit debates. That clashes with sociological and party sorting accounts arguing that cultural realignment displaces redistributive partisan conflict, suggesting that elite trends observed in Section 3.2 could be unsustainable. Left-right coalitions are intersected by cultural differences that structure attitudes towards European integration, immigration, and broader social values. These differences are evident in Brexit votes (Hobolt, 2016; Swales, 2016), disrupted two-party voting behaviour in subsequent elections (Evans et al., 2021; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 9; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Ch. 10), remain relatively unrepresented in Labour-Conservative platforms (Bale et al., 2020; Hanretty et al., 2020; Hobolt and Rodon, 2020), and seem to be growing more cross-cutting over time (SurrIDGE, 2012, 2018b). Parties might then have to decide whether to build coalitions on economic *or* cultural issues.

It is precisely this kind of gap in the top-down understanding of mass polarisation that elite cue proponents seek to address. Unidimensional political competition is sustainable because it motivates corresponding developments among the politically engaged. Partisans respond to elite conflict extension by bringing heterogeneous is-

sue positions closer together, even those switching political identity in line with newly salient issues. These identity-defensive mechanisms do not apply to non-partisans or the otherwise politically disengaged, however, who remain fragmented by cross-cutting social cleavages as a result. We should therefore observe partisan polarisation on cultural *and* economic issues following recent developments in British politics, especially since left-right policy divergence is arguably much clearer than debates involving Brexit. Although the same outcome is not precluded by sociological or party sorting processes, the latter are also consistent with conflict displacement. Elite cue effects then potentially lead to different accounts of the issues driving partisan polarisation. Identity-defensive mechanisms imply polarisation on all issues subject to elite policy divergence, whereas sociological and party sorting accounts can explain mass trends limited to the cultural dimension.

### 3.6 | Conclusion

This chapter established a theoretical framework separating the empirical expectations of different polarisation mechanisms. Following debates reviewed in Chapter 2, it outlined sociological, party sorting, and elite cue interpretations of the variables, voters, and issues involved in the British case. Section 3.2 described patterns of elite policy divergence emerging after the financial crisis. Expert and voter survey measures of party positions and existing manifesto data research shows clear Labour-Conservative polarisation. This includes left-right political disagreements reversing decades of converged party competition on economic issues, but also various cultural disputes encompassing European integration, immigration, and broader social values. The latter became increasingly salient in the context of Brexit, leading to unusual policy strategies combining two ideological axes. Labour minimised internal division with ambiguous positions on European integration and immigration while continuing its otherwise left-liberal trajectory. The opposite approach characterised Conservative Party policy, meanwhile, which aimed to preserve liberal elements of its coalition yet moved more clearly in favour of hard-line Brexit positions. Section 3.2 thus found evidence of unidimensional elite polarisation, with relatively clear left-right party divergence and more inconsistent cultural disputes across European integration, immigration, and other non-economic

issues. Subsequent sections then contextualised empirical expectations implied by sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts of this development in British politics.

Section 3.3 discussed differences between polarisation mechanisms based on attitude and partisanship change. Sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts describe realignment in the relationship between issue positions and political identity but disagree on what this outcome represents. In accounts based on attitude change, partisan polarisation mirrors shifts in issue positions held by the voters comprising partisan coalitions. Sociological developments affect the dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint of public preferences, creating ideological blocs consolidated in constituencies represented by different political parties. These mechanisms imply trends in attitude partisanship, attitude divergence, and attitude alignment, as such. Although elite cue effects lead to similar ideological polarisation among partisans, the extent to which this alters aggregate distributional parameters of mass opinion depends on how many voters respond to top-down appeals. The latter might be quite small and elite cue effects indistinguishable from aggregate trends caused by party sorting. Party sorting processes imply no corresponding shift in attitudes. It is the partisan coalitions surrounding issue positions that is changing rather than the issue positions associated with partisan coalitions. Hence, party sorting requires trends in attitude partisanship but not attitude divergence or alignment.

The empirical expectations implied by sociological and party sorting mechanisms are clearly different. Partisan polarisation that is associated with trends in attitude divergence and alignment could suggest sociological developments, whereas partisan polarisation that is *not* associated with trends in attitude divergence or alignment is consistent with party sorting. The problem is that either of these aggregate outcomes are also compatible with elite cue effects. If enough voters update attitudes in line with elite policy divergence, then trends in attitude partisanship should mirror shifting distributional properties of public opinion. This mass response is quite limited in some accounts, however, suggesting that attitude change causing partisan polarisation might remain concealed at the aggregate level. Separating this outcome from party sorting will take an individual-level view of the changes in attitudes or partisanship driving attitude partisanship change. The top-down or bottom-up dynamics involved in attitude change are what distinguishes elite cue from sociological mechanisms, meanwhile.

Section 3.4 outlined the distinction between polarisation that is mediated by political engagement, on the one hand, and reflects socio-demographic trends, on the other. Bottom-up mechanisms realign the constituencies represented by competing parties. Expansions in higher education, the professional middle class, and ethnic minority populations increase the number of voters with liberal cultural positions and concentrate them in prosperous cities and university towns. Non-metropolitan areas thus become the foci of authoritarian, ethnocentric, communitarian impulses, which are also further stoked by various long-term trends and exogenous shocks—rising economic inequality, financial crises, import competition, terrorism, and so on. The coalitions supporting different parties then polarise because they are consolidated in constituencies with divergent ideologies. This separates sociological polarisation from elite cue effects. The former is independent of partisanship, whereas partisanship causes polarisation in elite cue accounts. Socio-demographic processes affect partisans and non-partisans and suggest aggregate trends in attitude divergence and alignment. Elite cues activate identity-defensive mechanisms, prompting attitude change that is limited to partisans and potentially only the politically engaged among them.

The variables and voters driving polarisation distinguish sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts, yet those differences are only partially addressed by aggregate trends. Section 3.5 highlighted a third debate in the polarisation literature, however, which might further identify outcomes observed in the British case specifically. To the extent that voters are following elite cues, party policy divergence on cultural and economic issues implies corresponding mass trends. This is a key point in elite cue accounts of conflict extension, which argue that partisan motivated reasoning sustains political competition on cross-cutting cleavages. Partisans update attitudes in line with overarching policy platforms advocated by elites, leading to unidimensional polarisation as newly salient issues emerge. Sociological and party sorting processes are strongly associated with conflict displacement, on the other hand. Indeed, some left-right fragmentation is implicit in demographic culture shifts, with industrial heartland voters sharing similar redistributive preferences to elements of the professional middle class, precariat, and ethnic minority communities based in cosmopolitan cities. Other middle-class occupations likewise encourage pro-market positions commonly found among culturally conservative groups, such as small business owners. Elite policy divergence on one

**Table 3.1:** The empirical expectations associated with sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts of polarisation in the Brexit period.

	Sociological	Party sorting	Elite cue
<b>Polarisation through which variables?</b>			
Attitude change	✓	×	✓
Partisanship change	×	✓	×
<b>Polarisation among which voters?</b>			
Partisans	✓	—	✓
Non-partisans	✓	—	×
<b>Polarisation on which issues?</b>			
Cultural issues	✓	✓	✓
Economic issues	?	?	✓

dimension therefore cross-pressures partisan coalitions constructed on the other. This could lead to different expectations vis-à-vis the issues driving polarisation in the British case. Namely, elite cue accounts suggest mass polarisation on all dimensions subject to elite policy divergence, which is arguably more relevant for economic issues than debates surrounding Brexit, whereas sociological and party sorting mechanisms are also compatible with cultural realignment that displaces left-right conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Table 3.1 summarises empirical differences between sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts. *Sociological* attitude change leads to cultural realignment that can affect partisans and non-partisans and extend from or displace economic cleavages. Such mechanisms imply aggregate trends in attitude partisanship, divergence, and alignment, contradicting the empirical expectations associated with *party sorting*. Partisanship change drives political realignment without altering public opinion. Hence, accounts based purely on party sorting expect partisan polarisation without trends in attitude divergence or alignment. Along with sociological perspectives, these accounts also do not require polarisation on left-right issues. The latter is implied by *elite cue* effects, however, which describe attitude change limited to partisans and encompassing all issues subject to growing elite policy competition. These mechanisms might produce

<sup>7</sup>Section 3.5 did not tie sociological or party sorting mechanisms to conflict displacement, since the left-right structure of partisanship was already reduced in pre-crisis British politics.

aggregate outcomes similar to sociological or party sorting expectations, depending on the number of partisans reacting to top-down appeals. Therefore, evidence of polarisation in attitude partisanship alone can support party sorting or elite cue effects, whereas corresponding trends in attitude divergence and alignment require either sociological processes or elite cue processes. Aggregate *and* individual-level dynamics are thus needed to test these accounts. Attitude partisanship trends must be broken down into attitude and partisanship change to clearly identify party sorting, while attitude dynamics disaggregated by political engagement separate sociological and elite cue expectations. This requires a research design combining cross-sectional and panel data, which I develop in the following chapter.

# 4

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## Research Design and Methodology

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### 4.1 | Introduction

Sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts describe similar outcomes emerging through different individual-level mechanisms. All three link partisan polarisation (the degree to which supporters of different parties hold different issue positions) to elite policy divergence. The latter combines two dimensions in the British case, with left-right and cultural disputes increasing between Labour-Conservative platforms following the financial crisis. This should be associated with an increase in the association between attitudes and partisanship among voters, although not necessarily on cultural *and* economic issues. Whether partisan polarisation is related to broader divisions unfolding in public opinion depends on the variables (attitude or partisanship change) and voters (partisan and non-partisans) involved, however.

Sociological mechanisms expect corresponding trends in attitude partisanship, attitude divergence, and attitude alignment, because polarisation reflects demographic culture shifts affecting the distributional properties of public opinion. Only attitude partisanship should vary in a pure party sorting account, where vote switching drives electoral realignment without social change. Either outcome is compatible with elite cue effects, meanwhile, which alter ideological division among specific partisan subpopulations. This account implies polarisation on all issues subject to elite policy divergence, whereas other mechanisms could lead cultural realignment to displace left-right conflict. More generally, however, trends in mass polarisation must be disaggregated into individual-level dynamics to identify sociological and party sorting outcomes against

elite cue effects.

A research design combining cross-sectional and panel data thus follows, which I develop in this chapter. Section 4.2 establishes the data and overall approach used to examine the British case. I outline a multilevel modelling framework grounded in previous research, taking full advantage of attitude items available in 2014-2019 waves of the British Election Study. The major distinction in aggregate outcomes is between attitude partisanship trends that are or are not related to trends in attitude divergence and alignment. Section 4.3 operationalises these concepts and a cross-sectional design to test on the full weighted BES sample. I define a panel component of this data in Section 4.4, which allows me to identify individual-level mechanisms associated with sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts. I summarise two aspects of a panel design, with the first breaking partisan polarisation down into attitude and partisanship change and the second disaggregating attitude dynamics among fixed partisan, non-partisan subpopulations. Section 4.5 concludes by summarising the application of this research design and methodology in subsequent chapters.

## 4.2 | Data and overall approach

I analyse polarisation trends using data from 2014-2019 waves of the BES, which are part of its ongoing internet panel series (Fieldhouse et al., 2020a). This dataset is chosen because it covers the Brexit period with unusually high frequency. Nineteen waves are administered between 2014 and 2019, most of which ask about wide-ranging political issues central to elite policy divergence. The clear drawback is that 2014-2019 is a relatively short interval over which to estimate trends, especially considering that ideological party competition started to increase again after the 2007-2008 financial crisis. Yet Section 3.2 showed the latter intensifying following 2014. Labour shifted rapidly to the left in the 2015 general election and under Jeremy Corbyn's subsequent leadership, 2015-2019 (see also Allen and Bara, 2021; Manwaring and Smith, 2020). Moreover, UKIP made major inroads into mainstream British politics during 2014-2015, leading to the 2016 Brexit referendum and unprecedented cultural conflict among Labour-Conservative elites (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). The basic idea is that a lot changes politically from 2014 to 2019, making this period an interesting case study.

Indeed, most existing research adopts a longer-term perspective. This has the obvious advantage of contextualising polarisation. For instance, Perrett (2021) analyses trends from 1986 to 2018, finding that left-right public opinion is diverging but remains less dispersed than it was in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yet ‘[p]olarization is both a state and a process’ (DiMaggio et al., 1996, p. 693). More years of data identify states of polarisation relative to long-term trends while potentially obscuring the processes involved. The last two chapters showed that sociological, party sorting, and elite cue mechanisms are associated with similar outcomes. Not only do all three expect partisan polarisation; elite cue effects are compatible with aggregate trends implied by either of its alternatives. A major point motivating top-down perspectives is that political change often happens more abruptly than secular demographic developments. Party sorting and elite cues are mechanisms with potentially immediate effects, describing how voters react to divisive electoral processes. The latter become particularly intense during years covered by the [BES](#) data, which is thus well-suited to testing sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts of recent developments in British politics.

Longer time frames might establish long-term polarisation trends, yet long-term trends obscure the polarisation mechanisms involved. Conversely, a short enough time frame will not identify bottom-up developments, but that is just the same point justifying top-down perspectives again. Party sorting and elite cue effects interact with social cleavages that are also changing, however slowly. Electoral processes line up with structural conditions sooner or later, meaning that there is no long-term difference between sociological, party sorting, or elite cue mechanisms. Each converges on the same structural account of politics in the end, while facilitating radically different interpretations of what goes on in the meantime. The question is then whether a given period of political realignment implies demographic value shifts or requires some degree of attitude-based partisanship or partisanship-based attitude change. More than long-running survey data, it is the individual-level dynamics described in sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts that answer this question.

That sets the [BES](#) data apart from its main alternatives. Namely, the British Social Attitudes Survey ([BSAS](#)) has been administered every year since the financial crisis. It also asks a nationally representative sample ( $n \approx 2,000 - 4,000$ ) questions on wide-ranging political issues relevant to elite policy divergence and is widely used

in studies of mass polarisation (e.g., Cohen and Cohen, 2019, 2021; Perrett, 2021). Unlike the [BES](#) data, though, its time series is constructed from independent cross-sectional samples. The [BSAS](#) cannot fully distinguish aggregate outcomes caused by different individual-level mechanisms, as a result, no matter how many years it covers. Attitude partisanship trends related to changes in attitude divergence and alignment might indicate top-down or bottom-up ideological developments. Meanwhile, attitude partisanship trends that are *not* related to changes in attitude divergence or alignment could result from party switching, or ideological realignment concentrated among small groups of politically engaged voters. Unless cross-sectional trends contradict elite cues, we cannot exclude partisan motivated reasoning from outcomes caused by sociological or party sorting processes. Hence, Cohen and Cohen (2021) must focus on British Household Panel Survey ([BHPS](#)) data to establish individual-level dynamics during the post-Thatcher period. That study ended in 2008, and while succeeded by the Understanding Society survey from 2009 onwards, the latter includes relatively few attitude items and observations. Notably, it is lacking core value scales central to the [BHPS](#)'s use in existing polarisation literature (Cavallé and Neundorf, 2022; Cohen and Cohen, 2021; Evans and Neundorf, 2020).

### **The structure of the [BES](#) data**

Each wave of the [BES](#) data has a sample of around 30,000, all of which are invited back in subsequent waves of the survey. This results in a nationally representative dataset subsetted by dynamic panel components, where respondents are free to drop out and rejoin later. The main advantage to this structure is that it limits panel attrition while providing individual-level measurement of polarisation dynamics. Even though the [BES](#) field an unusually large number of waves over what is a relatively long-running panel segment, participant retention is higher across smaller subsets of waves (see British Election Study, 2020, pp. 5-6). The [BES](#) data is thus ideal for present purposes. It provides rich coverage of wide-ranging and dynamic political issues combining nationally representative and fixed composition samples, allowing me to analyse aggregate outcomes and individual-level mechanisms using the same attitude items asked over the same period of elite policy divergence.

I select all attitude items implying cultural or economic positions that are admin-

istered at least three times in three separate years and have a minimum scale length of five. Although three-point and even dichotomous response categories provide information on issue preferences, such items are inappropriate for certain conceptions of polarisation (DiMaggio et al., 1996). Namely, attitude divergence requires measures of dispersion, extremism, and multimodality (see Section 4.3). This implies a centre, two extremes, and at least two moderately directional response categories. I exclude survey questions not meeting these criteria to maintain a consistent sample of issues across polarisation trends. To my knowledge, the only attitude item with fewer than five response categories fielded at least three times in three separate years between 2014 and 2019 is a question on belief in anthropogenic climate change.<sup>1</sup>

There are 40 remaining cultural and economic attitude items over which to estimate polarisation trends. I further organise these dimensions into issue domains. The main reason for doing this is to highlight polarisation trends related to different aspects of elite policy divergence. Section 3.2 describes complex cultural developments in mainstream party competition after the 2007-2008 financial crisis. Labour maintained strategic ambiguity on European integration and immigration during the Brexit period but otherwise developed increasingly cosmopolitan positions, especially under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. This contrasts with Conservative-Leave alignment in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum, which took place alongside attempts to sustain the modernising reputation established by David Cameron. I thus maintain separate domains for European integration, immigration, and broader social values, testing the argument that these issues are linked in an overarching cultural dimension (see Kriesi et al., 2008).

This leads to a four-part division of attitude items. Questions asking about redistribution, fiscal policy, welfarism, and other left-right values are grouped together as economic issues ( $n = 16$ ). An item on EU involvement is put with those asking about the effects of Brexit ( $n = 11$ ). Preferences for immigration are linked with positions

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<sup>1</sup>In addition to the anthropogenic climate change question, I also exclude two items asking about environmental protection. One is an economic growth trade-off question and the other asks if environmental protection has gone too far. Although a major US culture war and important to accounts of post-material value change (Inglehart, 1971, 1977), climate change is not clearly contested in mainstream British politics. Environmental protection was the fifth most salient category in Labour and Conservative party manifestos during the 2019 general election (Allen and Bara, 2021). Moreover, public concern is rising among all age groups in this area (see <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/education/trackers/the-most-important-issues-facing-the-country>). I thus leave environmental issues to future research.

**Table 4.1:** Attitude items in four issue domains from 2014-2019 waves of the British Election Study.

BES code	Label	Survey wording	Length	Waves (n)
<b>Economic issues</b>				
cutsTooFarLocal	lr.lcl.cts	Do you think that each of these has gone too far or not far enough? Cuts to local services in my area	5	9
cutsTooFarNational	lr.gen.cts	Do you think that each of these has gone too far or not far enough? Cuts to public spending in general	5	9
cutsTooFarNHS	lr.nhs.cts	Do you think that each of these has gone too far or not far enough? Cuts to NHS spending	5	9
govtHandouts	lr.hndouts	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Too many people these days like to rely on government handouts	5	5
howToReduceDeficit	lr.deficit	If the government does cut the deficit over the next 3 years, should it do so mainly by increasing taxes, by cutting public spending, or by a mixture of both?	5	6
lr1	lr.inc.rdst	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off	5	8
lr2	lr.big.biz	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Big business takes advantage of ordinary people	5	8
lr3	lr.fr.shre	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth	5	8
lr4	lr.one.lw	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? There is one law for the rich and one for the poor	5	8
lr5	lr.mngmnt	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance	5	8
polForTheRich	lr.pol.mny	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Politicians only care about people with money	5	5
privatTooFar	lr.prvtstn	Do you think that each of these has gone too far or not far enough? Private companies running public services	5	8
reasonForUnemployment	lr.unempl	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? When someone is unemployed, it's usually through no fault of their own	5	5

redistSelf	lr.inc.eq1	Some people feel that government should make much greater efforts to make people's incomes more equal. Other people feel that government should be much less concerned about how equal people's incomes are. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	11	16
renationaliseRail	lr.railwys	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Britain should renationalise the railways	5	4
welfarePreference	lr.welfre	Do you think that the amount of money families on welfare receive is too high or too low?	5	4
<b>European integration</b>				
effectsEUEcon	eu.bx.econ	Do you think the following would be better, worse or about the same if/after the UK leaves the European Union? The general economic situation in the UK	5	9
effectsEUFinance	eu.bx.fin	Do you think the following would be better, worse or about the same if/after the UK leaves the European Union? My personal financial situation	5	9
effectsEUNHS	eu.bx.nhs	Do you think the following would be better, worse or about the same if/after the UK leaves the European Union? The NHS	5	8
effectsEUTerror	eu.bx.terr	Do you think the following would be higher, lower or about the same if/after the UK leaves the European Union? The risk of terrorism	5	9
effectsEUTrade	eu.bx.trde	Do you think the following would be higher, lower or about the same if/after the UK leaves the European Union? International Trade	5	9
effectsEUUnemployment	eu.bx.empl	Do you think the following would be higher, lower or about the same if/after the UK leaves the European Union? Unemployment	5	9
effectsEUWorkers	eu.bx.wrkr	Do you think the following would be better, worse or about the same if/after the UK leaves the European Union? Working conditions for British workers	5	9
EUIntegrationSelf	eu.uk.unif	Some people feel that Britain should do all it can to unite fully with the European Union. Other people feel that Britain should do all it can to protect its independence from the European Union. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	11	18
euLeaveBigBusiness	eu.bx.biz	If the UK leaves/As a result of the UK leaving the European Union, how much more likely is it that big companies would leave the UK?	5	9
euLeaveVoice	eu.bx.infl	Do you think the following would be higher, lower or about the same if/after the UK leaves the European Union? Britain's influence in the world	5	9

UKsovereigntyPost	eu.svrgnty	If the UK leaves/As a result of the UK leaving the European Union, how much more likely is it that the UK parliament will have more power?	5	7
<b>Immigration</b>				
immigEcon	im.ecnmy	Do you think immigration is good or bad for Britain's economy?	7	7
immigCultural	im.cultre	And do you think that immigration undermines or enriches Britain's cultural life?	7	7
immigSelf	im.mre.lss	Some people think that the UK should allow many more immigrants to come to the UK to live and others think that the UK should allow many fewer immigrants. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	11	11
immigrantsWelfareState	im.wlfre	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Immigrants are a burden on the welfare state	5	5
<b>Social values</b>				
al1	al.yng.ppl	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values	5	8
al2	al.dth.pen	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence	5	8
al3	al.tch.oby	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Schools should teach children to obey authority	5	8
al4	al.cnsrshp	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards	5	8
al5	al.stff.sn	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences	5	8
blackEquality	al.bame.eq	Please say whether you think these things have gone too far or have not gone far enough in Britain. Attempts to give equal opportunities to ethnic minorities	5	5
femaleEquality	al.gend.eq	Please say whether you think these things have gone too far or have not gone far enough in Britain. Attempts to give equal opportunities to women	5	5
gayEquality	al.gay.eq	Please say whether you think these things have gone too far or have not gone far enough in Britain. Attempts to give equal opportunities to gays and lesbians	5	5
overseasAid	al.fn.aid	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Britain should stop all government spending on overseas aid	5	5

on its economic and cultural consequences ( $n = 4$ ). And I create a domain of social values not related explicitly to European integration or immigration. This includes batteries measuring authoritarian-liberal predispositions, attitudes towards affirmative action, and a question on foreign aid ( $n = 9$ ). [Table 4.1](#) provides the full survey question wording and other details for each item. Responses are rescaled so that higher values indicate conservative-right positions. ‘Don’t know’ responses are coded as missing, which is recommended over treating them as moderate or centrist (DiMaggio et al., 1996).

### Modelling the BES data

[Table 4.1](#) shows substantial variability in the number of times that attitude items are administered between 2014 and 2019. Some appear in nearly every wave, such as a question on Britain’s EU involvement. Many others are fielded much more infrequently, however, typical of survey research that is adapting to changing political contexts. Inconsistently asked attitude items make it difficult to estimate changes in public opinion, not least because the scale length used to record responses is different on certain items. For instance, the EU involvement question also happens to have far more response categories than any question asking about Brexit, in addition to being administered twice as often. The interpretation of points on a scale is sensitive to its length, leading to qualitative differences in answers that cannot be rescaled away (see Groves et al., 2009, Ch. 7; Krosnick and Fabrigar, Leandre, 1997). Hence, subsequent chapters show that this item elicits more Eurosceptic responses, leading to dramatic fluctuation in European integration attitudes during waves when it is the only item present.

A simple approach to this problem is to analyse issue positions one at a time (e.g., Abrams and Fiorina, 2015; Adams et al., 2012b; Fiorina et al., 2008). Yet it is well established that any given attitude item is associated with substantial measurement error (Achen, 1975; Erikson, 1978, 1979; Pierce and Rose, 1974). Measurement error is reduced by averaging across instruments tapping into the same underlying construct (Ansolabehere et al., 2008), especially when survey questions are framed in terms of ‘core values’ rather issues of the day (Evans et al., 1996; Evans and Neundorf, 2020; Feldman, 1988; Heath et al., 1994; McClosky and Zaller, 1984). Many studies thus combine (take the sum or mean of) attitude items co-occurring in survey data (e.g., Adams et al., 2012a,c; DiMaggio et al., 1996). This approach is limited by the number of related

questions asked in a wave, which often is not large. Indeed, Adams et al. (2012b; 2012c) rely on four BES items administered in four years between 1987 and 2001, meaning that much of the evidence supporting party sorting arguments in Britain is based on 16 data points collected over more than a decade (see also Milazzo et al., 2012). Cohen and Cohen (2021) show that this small number of observations underestimates left-right convergence and dealignment taking place in public opinion during the post-Thatcher period.

We need a statistically efficient approach that can flexibly incorporate information from inconsistently administered survey questions. I follow a multilevel modelling framework developed by Baldassarri and Gelman (2008; see also Cohen and Cohen, 2019; Cohen and Cohen, 2021; Munzert and Bauer, 2013a). Rather than fitting trends directly to the data, I estimate varying intercept, varying slope models where the dependent variable is a measurement of polarisation on issue  $i$  at time  $t$ . Section 4.3 operationalises these concepts in more detail but let us use the standard deviation in attitudes as an intuitive example. I estimate the standard deviation in responses on every attitude item in every survey wave that it appears, which is part of the basic strategy employed by Adams et al. (2012b; 2012c). The generic model structure used throughout this thesis then regresses these survey-wave standard deviations on an independent variable counting time. Time is a proxy for increasing elite policy divergence found in Section 3.2, so the model effectively predicts mass polarisation using elite polarisation between 2014 and 2019. This results in linear trends averaging across the variability in standard deviations estimated by attitude item, which can be further refined via ‘fixed effects’ for issue domains or other theoretically important interaction terms.<sup>2</sup>

The principal advantage to modelling polarisation in this way is that it combines information from inconsistently asked survey questions without discarding important variation between them. Gelman and Hill (2007) refer to this property as ‘partial pooling’. The multilevel model is a compromise between fitting trends to individual attitude items (no pooling), which is statistically inefficient, and composite scales (complete pooling), which ignore characteristics of the questions used to construct them. Heterogeneity in question wording, scale length, and many other vagaries of survey research

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<sup>2</sup>These effects are fixed, in the sense that they do not vary by unit of polarisation, as opposed to the ‘random effects’ (time trends) estimated for each attitude item.

biases composite scales constructed using different attitude items over time, which is why existing studies are often limited to so few observations. Multilevel models thus reduce measurement error concerns related to single survey questions while making ‘virtually complete use of the information on respondents’ political attitudes’ (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008, p. 421).

Varying time trends are estimated for each attitude item, balancing information specific to that unit and all others involved in partial pooling. The relative weight attached to each source of information depends on how much of it there is over time. Hence, (in)frequently administered attitude items converge on (complete) no pooling regression lines. The overall polarisation trend is then an average of varying intercepts and slopes estimated for each unit. In this way, even though a survey question might appear in relatively few waves and inconsistently over a period of elite policy divergence, responses to it can inform assessments of mass trends. Any attitude item administered more than once is potentially useful, although standard practice is to consider items with at least three measurements (e.g., Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Cohen and Cohen, 2021; Munzert and Bauer, 2013a). The multilevel modelling framework therefore estimates overall polarisation and variation in polarisation between the units used to estimate it, establishing whether trends reflect coherent changes across different political issues. Moreover, models are fit using Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) sampling in Stan (via `rstanarm`), providing fully Bayesian estimates of uncertainty (Goodrich et al., 2022; Stan Development Team, 2019). All specifications use weakly informative priors and typically sample from four independent chains with 2,000 iterations (minus 2,000 discarded as ‘warmup’), although the latter is increased ad hoc to obtain acceptable thresholds of convergence (Gelman et al., 2013). Overall polarisation trends then summarise the joint posterior distribution of varying unit-level trends.

We thus have data and an overall approach through which to study the British case. In this section, I outlined a multilevel modelling framework grounded in previous research, taking full advantage of inconsistently administered survey questions from 2014-2019 waves of the BES. The latter is selected for its unparalleled coverage of the Brexit period. Large, nationally representative, repeatedly and frequently surveyed samples are asked their opinion on a wide range of political issues, which I have organised into domains relevant to salient aspects of elite policy divergence after the financial

crisis. The following sections establish a research design combining cross-sectional and panel components of this data, operationalising aggregate outcomes and individual-level mechanisms in the British case. This begins in Section 4.3, where I describe the full weighted BES sample and measures of polarisation used throughout the thesis.

### 4.3 | Cross-sectional design

Individual-level mechanisms create different aggregate outcomes. Namely, attitude partisanship trends are consistent with sociological or elite cue processes when associated with changes in attitude divergence and alignment but otherwise imply party sorting or elite cue processes. Many studies employ a cross-sectional design testing these perspectives, which I follow using the full BES sample in Chapter 5 (e.g., Adams et al., 2012b; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Cohen and Cohen, 2021). 97,006 respondents took part in at least one of 19 waves collected between 2014 and 2019. The BES provides weights for 96,136 of them, accounting for different population values in England, Scotland, Wales, and London.<sup>3</sup> I analyse trends in attitude partisanship, attitude divergence, and attitude alignment among this sample, using the 40 attitude items and multilevel modelling framework outlined last section.<sup>4</sup>

#### Using attitude partisanship to measure partisan polarisation

The cross-sectional design comprises two questions distinguishing aggregate outcomes consistent with sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts. The first asks if elite policy divergence is related to partisan polarisation. I answer that question using trends in attitude partisanship, following previous research (Adams et al., 2012b; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Cohen and Cohen, 2021).

Attitude partisanship is the association between issue positions and political identity, which I measure using Pearson correlations among paired observations of attitudes and

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<sup>3</sup>Note that Northern Ireland is excluded from the BES, so subsequent references to Britain are limited to England, Scotland, and Wales.

<sup>4</sup>The BES includes ‘top-up’ observations on some of these items, where all respondents are asked their opinion upon entry into the survey (see British Election Study (2020), pp. 8-9). Those observations are combined with normally administered data under the assumption that attitudes are relatively stable over time, creating multiwave variables in some cases encompassing several years. This creates problems for my analysis, not least because attitude change is important to the theoretical framework under examination. I thus disaggregate attitude items into single-wave variables and discard top-up observations, which often have very small sample sizes leading to noisy estimates of polarisation.

Labour-Conservative identification (Adams et al., 2012b; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Cohen and Cohen, 2021).<sup>5</sup> Standard practice is to treat those who think of themselves as Labour, Conservative, etc., or closer to one party over others as partisan. Items measuring these values appear in all but wave 5 of the BES data, where the 40 attitude items are also excluded. This gives 328 observations of attitude partisanship from 2014 to 2019, comparable to much longer running studies (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Cohen and Cohen, 2019, 2021) and many times larger than the sample used by Adams et al. (2012a; 2012b; 2012c). Since attitude items are recoded so that higher values represent conservative-right issue positions, I code Conservatives as 1, Labour as 0, and set all other values to missing. Attitude partisanship correlations then approximate the gap in preferences separating voters identifying with these parties, where higher scores indicate that Conservative partisans are more likely to hold conservative-right positions relative to Labour partisans.

I am following previous research by focussing on *mainstream* partisan polarisation (Adams et al., 2012b; Cohen and Cohen, 2019, 2021). Yet this excludes dynamics central to the British case. Namely, a major development discussed in recent decades is long-term fragmentation in the two-party system, leading to electoral gains among various smaller parties (Awan-Scully, 2018; Fieldhouse et al., 2020a, Ch. 2; Prosser, 2018). The 2015 general election witnessed substantial increases the vote share of UKIP, the Scottish National Party (SNP), and Green Party. Four different parties won the most votes and seats in each nation of the UK for the first time in its history.<sup>6</sup> And support collapsed among Liberal Democrats—the traditional third party in British politics. This culmination of long-term trends was dramatically reversed only two years later, however, with the 2017 general election returning the largest two-party majority since 1970.

Electoral fragmentation and volatility are symptoms of dealignment detaching mainstream parties from their traditional social bases. Unlike during the early and mid-twentieth century, Labour and Conservatives can no longer rely on working- or middle-class support, respectively. Partisan dealignment has thus left British politics exposed to electoral shocks motivating large-scale vote switching (Fieldhouse et al., 2020a). That

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<sup>5</sup>Very similar results are obtained with other correlation-based measures. Moreover, Appendix A reports corresponding trends using the correlation between attitudes and general election vote choice or a 10-point left-right self-identification scale.

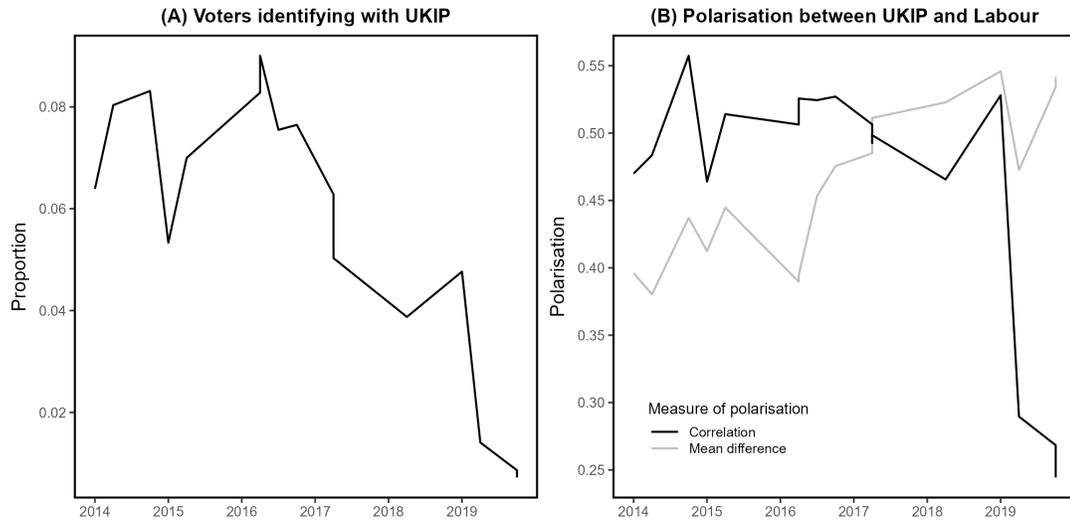
<sup>6</sup>Conservatives in England, Labour in Wales, the SNP in Scotland, and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Northern Ireland.

might be the reason why mainstream parties converged on economic policy and middle class appeals in the post-Thatcher period, reflecting voters that are increasingly sensitive to deviations from left-right preferences (see Adams et al., 2012b). This period is associated with an increase in the effective number of parties (Fieldhouse et al., 2020a, Ch. 2; Prosser, 2018), a trend which neither the 2010 nor 2015 general elections fundamentally altered despite growing elite policy divergence after the 2007-2008 financial crisis.

But dramatic changes had taken place in British politics by 2017. Labour elected Jeremy Corbyn as leader following the 2015 general election, signalling a radical shift to the left and the ascendance of internationalist and anti-war factions of the party. Even more dramatically, however, Brexit pushed long-neglected cultural issues violently onto mainstream party platforms, reversing some of the key trends driving party system fragmentation. The Conservative Party reclaimed radical right voters by aligning itself with Leave (Evans et al., 2021; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 9; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Ch. 10), whereas Labour benefitted from collapsing Liberal Democrat support, consolidating votes among white graduates (Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 7; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Ch. 7). Trends in the correlation between issue positions and Conservative (versus Labour) partisanship thus establish if such changes in mainstream party coalitions are associated with polarisation.

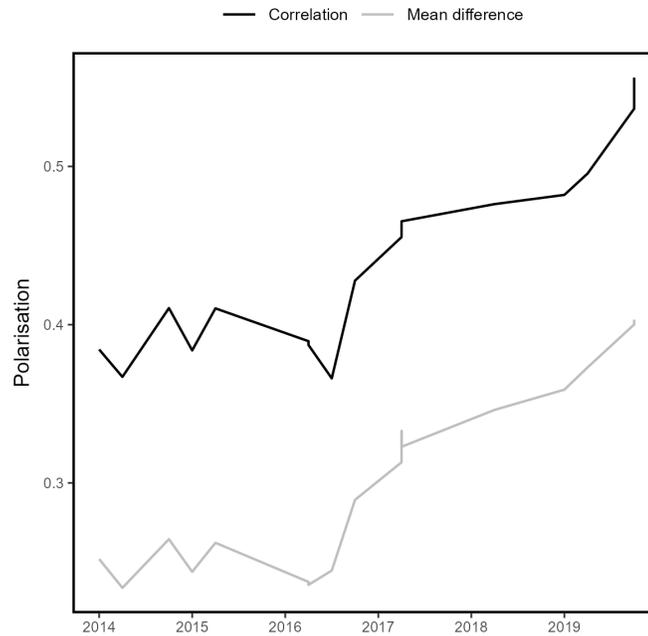
This also sets attitude-partisanship correlations apart from other measures of polarisation. For instance, many studies summarise partisan disagreement using differences in mean issue positions (e.g., DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003; Perrett, 2021). The central advantage of correlation coefficients is that they are sensitive to sample size, which is desirable since polarisation is a distributional property. Imagine that we were interested in the gap between Labour and UKIP identifiers. [Figure 4.1a](#) shows that the coalition supporting UKIP is unstable. Its size fluctuates prior to the 2016 referendum and subsequently declines sharply, effectively vanishing from the electorate during 2019. The implication is that most former UKIP identifiers became Conservative, some after supporting the Brexit Party in the 2019 European Parliament election (see Evans et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the proportion of voters identifying as Labour remains close to 0.3 throughout the 2014-2019 period (see [Figure 4.3](#)).

It thus makes sense that polarisation between these groups decreases as UKIP iden-



**Figure 4.1:** Group size and the measurement of polarisation.

*Notes:* Part A displays the proportion of voters identifying with UKIP. Part B displays UKIP-Labour polarisation on an item asking about European integration, using (1) the correlation between issue positions and partisanship and (2) the difference in mean positions (on a 0-1 scale) between these groups. Time is on the x-axis.



**Figure 4.2:** Labour-Conservative polarisation as a difference in mean issue positions and attitude-partisanship correlations.

*Notes:* Issue positions are responses to an item asking about European integration. Time is on the x-axis.

tifiers switch partisanship, with the shared distribution of opinion converging on the distribution of opinion among Labour identifiers. Such changes in population composition are not taken into account by differences in mean issue positions, which might increase only because the few hundred UKIP respondents remaining in the BES sample towards the end of 2019 are very extreme. Indeed, [Figure 4.1b](#) shows average opinion growing consistently more divided between Labour and UKIP on European integration, contrasting with the trend in partisan polarisation estimated using attitude-partisanship correlations.

This is less of a problem when estimating the gap separating Labour and Conservative coalitions, the size of which does not change fundamentally between 2014 and 2019. Hence, [Figure 4.2](#) displays corresponding increases in polarisation on European integration using correlation and differences in means. Yet it remains sensible to measure polarisation relative to the distribution of Labour-Conservative partisanship among voters.

### Using attitude divergence and alignment to measure attitude change

If attitude change causes polarisation, trends such as those displayed in [Figure 4.2](#) should mirror developments in public opinion. The second question asked by the cross-sectional design is therefore whether partisan polarisation is related to trends in attitude divergence and alignment.

I adopt multiple measures of *attitude divergence*, capturing the extent to which public opinion on political issues is becoming more dispersed, extreme, and multimodal. The standard deviation in attitudes summarises how far issue positions typically fall from the central tendency of a distribution (e.g., Adams et al., 2012a; Cohen and Cohen, 2021; Park, 2018).<sup>7</sup> I capture extremism using the proportion of attitudes in the highest and lowest response categories on a scale. This includes the second highest and lowest values for scales with a length above 9 (Adams et al., 2012b; Cohen and Cohen, 2021). Multimodality is measured via excess Pearson kurtosis (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Down and Wilson, 2008, 2010; Evans, 2002b, 2003; Hoffmann and Miller, 1998). Excess kurtosis summarises the density of attitudes, where negative values reflect tails that are ‘heavier’

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<sup>7</sup>Variance is also commonly used in the polarisation literature (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Perrett, 2021; Zhou, 2019).

(i.e., more polarised) than a normal distribution. I multiply it by  $-1$  so that positive trends correspond with polarisation. A distribution is thus flat with excess kurtosis around 1.3, whereas values approaching 2 indicate perfect bimodality (see DiMaggio et al., 1996, pp. 694-696).

The more robust polarisation is across these measures, the better the case for attitude divergence. In particular, we should be cautious about trends in extremism, which can increase through attitudes converging at one end of a scale. This is emphatic agreement, not disagreement, and would result in declining excess kurtosis as a distribution reaches unimodality. Attitude extremism rising in combination with dispersion or multimodality provides strong evidence of polarisation, however, suggesting intense conflict developing on political issues.

We can call this ideological polarisation *if there is also greater alignment between issue positions*. The association among responses to paired attitude items measures constraint (Converse, 1964; DiMaggio et al., 1996). 40 items have 780 potential pairs, although 763 are available in practice due to some not appearing in any of the same survey waves. This yields 3,713 observations of constraint from 2014 to 2019, which is large relative to previous research (Adams et al., 2012a,b; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Cohen and Cohen, 2019, 2021; Munzert and Bauer, 2013a). I follow these studies and others by using Pearson correlations to capture changes in attitude alignment (e.g., Park, 2018; Perrett, 2021; Zhou, 2019).<sup>8</sup>

The cross-sectional design only gets us so far, however. Trends in attitude partisanship without attitude divergence or alignment might indicate party sorting or elite cue effects, because identity-defensive mechanisms could be limited to small groups of politically engaged partisans. Meanwhile, aggregate outcomes do not identify attitude dynamics caused by top-down or bottom-up processes. Increases in attitude divergence and alignment are consistent with sociological or elite cue accounts and, unless clearly contradicting elite cues, cannot be distinguished using cross-sectional data. The following section therefore outlines a panel design testing individual-level polarisation mechanisms.

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<sup>8</sup>Very similar results are returned through rank correlation coefficients.

**Table 4.2:** Number of waves taken by respondents in the British Election Study panel component (wave 1 participants present in any 2019 wave).

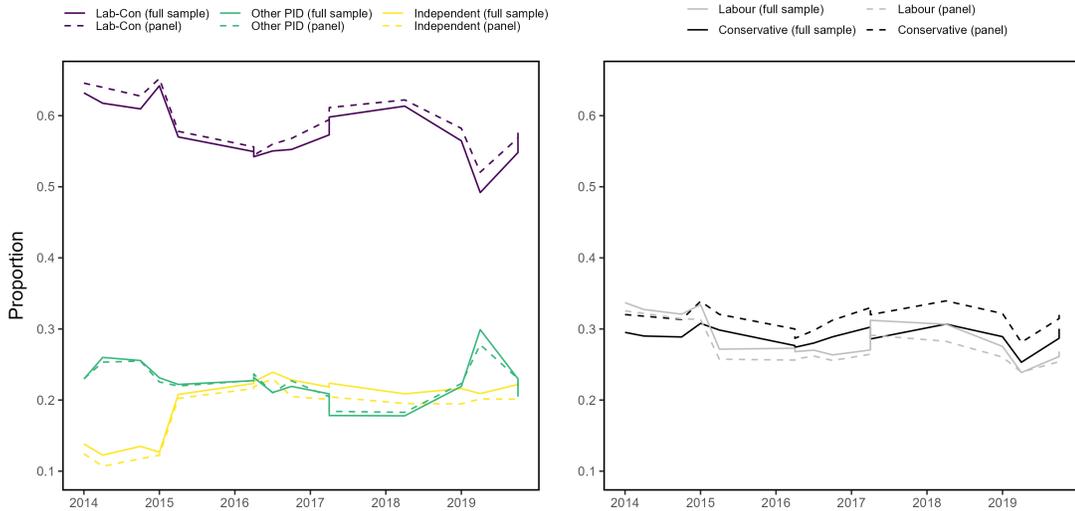
Number of waves	Number of respondents
> 1	15,375
> 2	15,355
> 3	15,282
> 4	15,185
> 5	15,029
> 6	14,798
> 7	14,428
> 8	13,927
> 9	13,372
> 10	12,695
> 11	11,878
> 12	10,891
> 13	9,827
> 14	8,473
> 15	6,914
> 16	5,141
> 17	3,236
> 18	1,394

#### 4.4 | Panel design

All [BES](#) respondents are invited back during subsequent waves. Only 1,394 out of 30,590 wave 1 participants complete all 19 waves, indicating serious panel attrition. The latter is associated with high uncertainty and potential selection effects (Winkels and Withers, 2000). Yet, relaxing the requirement that all respondents take all waves, it is possible to define less demanding panel components. I do this by selecting 15,375 initial participants that are also present in any wave collected during 2019 (15-19). All respondents provide at least two sets of observations at either end of the 2014-2019 period, while being free to drop in and out of intervening surveys.<sup>9</sup> [Table 4.2](#) shows that virtually everyone in the panel component takes more than two waves and an overwhelming majority are present in many more. It is only by the 16 wave mark that

<sup>9</sup>Note that I do not require a minimum number of observations on any given item, since this could underestimate attitude or partisanship dynamics. For example, imagine that a Eurosceptic voter has no partisanship in wave 1 because these preferences are unrepresented in mainstream British politics. Party sorting effects might drive that voter to become Conservative by 2019, yet such observations would be removed by filtering respondents with more than one valid response on party identification questions.

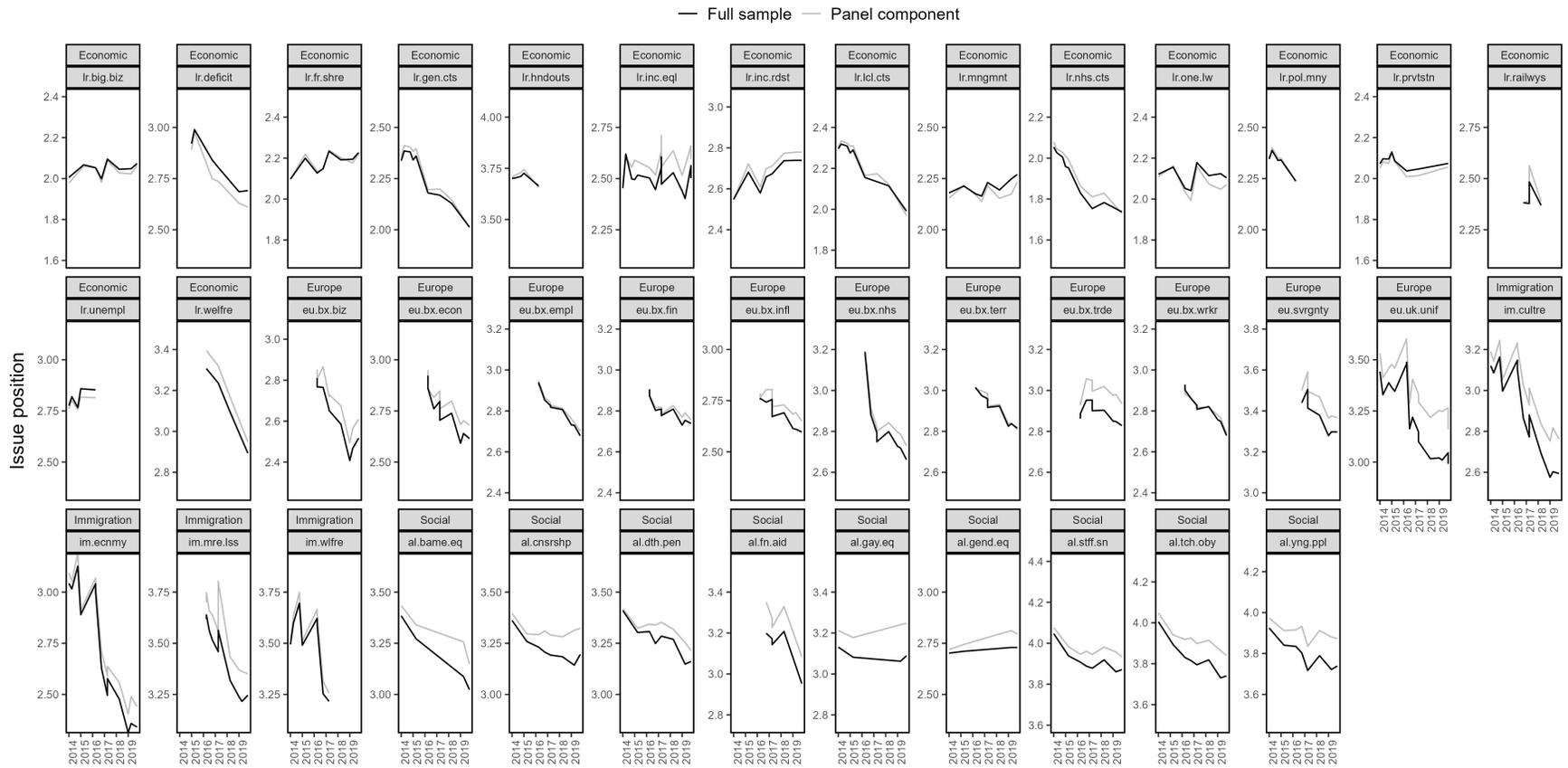
sample size drops below half its original size. This approach thus maximises panel retention while providing individual-level measurement of polarisation dynamics.



**Figure 4.3:** Party identification in full British Election Study samples and the panel component, 2014-2019.

*Notes:* Independents are individuals that claim no partisanship, including those responding ‘don’t know’. Time is on the x-axis.

The assumption is that variation in attitudes and partisanship is not systematically affected by respondents leaving and re-entering the panel between wave 1 and waves 15-19. Figures 4.3 and 4.4 provide evidence supporting that assumption. Figure 4.3 displays the proportion voters with different partisan, non-partisan identities in the full BES sample and panel component. The difference in estimates is generally very small and voters in both datasets follow similar trends. Corresponding consistency is apparent in Figure 4.4, where I plot average positions on European integration, immigration, social values, and economic issues. One potential cause for concern is the deviation in trends associated with social values. The full BES sample reveals a liberal trajectory that is considerably more modest among panellists. Contrast that with other domains, where differences in means are relatively stable over time, only noticeable on certain items, and follow parallel attitude dynamics. It is reassuring that these inconsistencies are limited to social values, indicating something to do with such attitudes rather than the panel component itself. I will come back to this in subsequent chapters, but for now note that survey-wave estimates of issue positions and party identity are otherwise



**Figure 4.4:** Mean issue positions in full British Election Study samples and the panel component, 2014-2019.

*Notes:* All attitude items are on a 1-5 scale. The y-axis is unfixed but has the same length across panels. Time is on the x-axis.

similar.

### Using panel data to separate attitude and partisanship change

The panel component is used to answer two questions unaddressed by the cross-sectional design. First, Chapter 6 asks if changes in attitudes or partisanship cause attitude partisanship change. A major claim in the party sorting literature is that mass polarisation takes place because individuals switch political allegiance while maintaining stable issue positions. For instance, Fiorina et al. (2011) have argued that the American voter remains disengaged, non-ideological, and ambivalent about politics, as documented in the first ANES surveys sixty years ago (see Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964). Voters with weakly formed policy preferences use elite policy divergence to arrive at political decisions. This results in partisan polarisation giving the impression of increased ideological thinking, but mass belief systems remain fundamentally unchanged. Adams et al. (2012b) find support for the ‘mirror image’ of party sorting perspectives in British case, using cross-sectional data to show that declining attitude partisanship is not associated with attitude convergence or dealignment during the post-Thatcher period. This is the cross-sectional design that I follow in Chapter 5.

Yet panel data allows us to establish what partisan polarisation would look like among a fixed composition of voters *if they held their issue positions perfectly stable and only switched party identity*. Comparing observed trends in attitude partisanship with this counterfactual thus provides a simple way of testing pure party sorting accounts. If the correlation between individuals’ *initial attitudes* and partisanship in each wave matches observed trends, it suggests that switching mechanisms explain partisan polarisation and attitude change is not required. Divergent *fixed attitude* counterfactual trends imply that switching mechanisms are insufficient, meanwhile, because partisan polarisation also requires attitude change.

We can extend this to test the reverse claim that partisanship is an enduring socio-psychological attachment, which is either becoming more entrenched because of or itself driving ideological realignment on political issues. These claims have been made in sociological and elite cue accounts, respectively (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Layman and Carsey, 2002a). The correlation between individuals’ *initial partisanship* and attitudes in each wave shows what polarisation looks like among panellists with

perfectly stable party identification. If this counterfactual matches observed trends in attitude partisanship, the implication is that attitude change alone is sufficient to explain partisan polarisation and switching mechanisms are not required. Divergent *fixed partisanship* counterfactual trends suggest that attitude change is insufficient and partisan polarisation also requires switching mechanisms.

The simplicity of this approach sets it apart from cross-lagged panel models, the established method for testing attitude and partisanship change (e.g., Carsey and Layman, 2006; Dancy and Goren, 2010; Evans and Neundorf, 2020; Goren, 2005; Highton and Kam, 2011; Layman and Carsey, 2002b; Milazzo et al., 2012). Cross-lagged panel parameters are useful for establishing whether issue positions cause party identification or vice versa, a debate that is relevant to the distinction between party sorting and elite cue processes but beyond present purposes. All I am doing is allowing partisan polarisation to emerge based on individual-level changes in attitudes or partisanship alone, and checking whether those trends match the one observed when both attitudes and partisanship change together. This tests empirical expectations in sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts without wading into broader arguments about the relative endogeneity-exogeneity of ideology and identity.

The principal methodological advantage of the counterfactual attitude partisanship approach is that it remains compatible with the Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) multi-level modelling framework. Recall that this framework is used to flexibly incorporate information from inconsistently administered survey questions. Cross-lagged panel regression is less flexible, comprising a series of structural equation models combining variables measured at synchronous time points. Hence, applications of this method in the British case have been limited to small numbers of observations (Evans and Neundorf, 2020; Milazzo et al., 2012). I have 328 observations of attitude partisanship across 40 questions asked in 2014-2019 waves of the [BES](#). The Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) multilevel modelling framework allows me to measure the effect of attitude and partisanship change on partisan polarisation without discarding any of this information.

One option would be to fit separate models to survey-wave data on (1) the observed correlation between issue positions and Labour-Conservative identity, (2) the correlation between observed partisanship and initial issue positions, and (3) the correlation between observed issue positions and initial partisanship. However, it will be easier to

compare the magnitude of polarisation across these outcomes using a single model. I thus follow the specification used by Cohen and Cohen (2021), stacking observed and counterfactual correlations in a dependent variable and introducing indicator variables to distinguish whether they result from ‘real’, fixed attitude, or fixed partisanship conditions. The model otherwise corresponds to the varying intercept, varying slope structure outlined in Section 4.2. The interaction between time and indicator variables then gives the trend in partisan polarisation when attitudes or partisanship change alone relative to when these variables change together.

### **Using panel data to separate top-down and bottom-up attitude change**

The counterfactual attitude partisanship model distinguishes party sorting from mechanisms based on ideological realignment, bottom-up or otherwise. Interpretations of attitude change are then broken down by a second question answered using the panel component. The cross-sectional design tells us if partisan polarisation is associated with trends in attitude divergence and alignment, yet it cannot generally separate attitude change caused by top-down or bottom-up processes. Aggregate trends in attitude partisanship, attitude divergence, and attitude alignment might reflect sociological developments affecting voters regardless of political engagement, where ideological divisions are increasingly consolidated in constituencies represented by different parties. Yet the same outcome could just as plausibly emerge from partisanship-based ideological conversion. Elite cue effects alter the distributional properties of public opinion to the extent that partisans follow political competition. Chapter 7 therefore asks if attitude change is limited to partisans or also extends among the less politically engaged.

The standard approach to this question disaggregates polarisation trends by subgroup (e.g., Adams et al., 2012a,c). I thus re-run attitude divergence and alignment models on split partisan, non-partisan samples. These models are the same used to assess aggregate attitude change in Chapter 5, where the survey-wave dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint in issue positions is regressed on time with varying unit-level intercepts and slopes. The only difference is that the standard deviation, proportion of extremism, excess kurtosis, and correlation among attitude items is estimated separately by initial political engagement. First, I compare trends between wave 1 Labour-Conservative partisans and all other voters. These groups are then dis-

aggregated further into engaged partisans and independents, based on the claim that strong party identifiers who are aware of elite policy differences are most likely to follow top-down cues (Layman and Carsey, 2002a).

Engaged partisans are defined using two additional variables in the [BES](#) data. A question asking if they call themselves ‘very strong, fairly strong, or not very strong’ party identifiers. Responses to this item are associated with increased Euroscepticism among pre-referendum Conservatives in the immediate aftermath of Brexit (Schonfeld and Winter-Levy, 2021). The second question asks how much attention voters’ pay to politics on a 10-point scale. Such items are highly stable over long periods and linked to stronger spikes in centrism among initially left-wing Labour identifiers during 1997 (Cavallé and Neundorf, 2022; see also Prior, 2010). I follow this research and operationalise engaged partisans as (fairly or very) strong wave 1 Labour-Conservative identifiers with average (across waves) political attentiveness above the median.<sup>10</sup> Independents are panellists who claim no initial partisanship, meanwhile. The basic idea is that third party identifiers might be subject to elite cue effects on some aspects of mainstream policy debates. Hence, I include those responding ‘don’t know’ to partisanship questions as independents, although removing the latter makes little difference in practice.

Yet simply splitting trends in attitude divergence and alignment into partisan, non-partisan dynamics ignores what might be important differences between these groups. Social group membership and value orientations motivate partisanship even in elite cue accounts, whereas moderation is arguably the defining feature of political independence. Differences in polarisation could thus reflect contrasting initial conditions rather than top-down persuasion effects. To make like comparisons across political engagement, I balance ideological characteristics among initial partisans and non-partisans using nearest neighbour matching with replacement, as described by Ho et al. (2007).<sup>11</sup> The matching procedure is a logistic regression model predicting partisanship from responses to attitude items and, where appropriate, demographic information. Every partisan is assigned to a non-partisan with the closest estimated partisanship propensity score, whether or not the latter is already matched with one of the former. Non-partisans left

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<sup>10</sup>The same results are found using only very strong partisans or measuring political attentiveness in other ways (e.g., Layman and Carsey, 2002a).

<sup>11</sup>Matching is implemented via the R package `MatchIt` (Ho et al., 2011)

without matches are then dropped, removing fundamentally dissimilar units from the comparison.

This process is performed separately by partisan group and ideological dimension. For instance, I match Conservative identifiers with other voters based on the 13 economic attitude items available in wave 1 and two demographic variables—National Readership Survey (NRS) social grade (AB, C1, C2, DE) and working status (retired, full-time employed, other).<sup>12</sup> Conservatives and Conservative matches are coded as 1 in a dummy variable indicating initially right-wing attitudes, on which Labour identifiers and matches are then assigned 0. The correlation between that dummy variable, which is fixed in wave 1, and economic positions, which are changing between survey waves, thus gives polarisation trends for initially similar partisan, non-partisan subsamples. Effectively, this is an extension of fixed partisanship dynamics in the counterfactual attitude partisanship model described above. Rather than just the correlation between initial partisanship and observed issue positions, it also provides counterfactual units representing non-partisan dynamics. I follow Cohen and Cohen (2021) in regressing this outcome on time using the same multilevel modelling framework. Partisan, non-partisan trends are distinguished by an indicator variable that equals 1 for wave 1 Labour-Conservative identifiers and 0 for other voters. Hence, its interaction with time gives the difference in fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship polarisation. Other things being equal, this is the effect of partisanship on attitude change.

Beyond facilitating like comparisons among potentially quite heterogeneous sub-populations, the matched polarisation model makes it easier to interpret partisan, non-partisan dynamics. Since the size of mainstream party coalitions is relatively stable, its dependent variable is essentially a rescaled difference in means. The correlation between observed issue positions and initial partisanship or matched non-partisanship summarises differences in the ideological trajectories of Labour-Conservative identifiers and other voters. I inspect this against the average survey-wave issue positions occupied by these groups, showing who is moving in what direction on which issues. Unlike split trends in attitude divergence and alignment, which only tell us whether polarisation is related to political engagement, fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship

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<sup>12</sup>Labour-Conservative identifiers are matched with other voters, but similar results are obtained using engaged partisans and independents (see Appendix D). There are only 1,967 independents in wave 1, however, leaving a small sample size and noisy estimates of polarisation after matching.

dynamics show the effect of party identity on attitude change more generally. Is Conservatism associated with increased Euroscepticism after the 2016 referendum? Do Labour partisans shift further to the left during the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn? Such findings would suggest elite cue effects, whereas corresponding developments among other voters provide clear evidence to the contrary.

Panel data from 2014-2019 waves of the [BES](#) therefore fills in gaps left open by the cross-sectional design. The counterfactual attitude partisanship model breaks partisan polarisation down into individual-level attitude and partisanship change, distinguishing the results of party sorting from sociological and elite cue processes. Disaggregating attitude change further by political engagement then differentiates sociological and elite cue processes, since polarisation should be limited to partisans following top-down mechanisms but can incorporate non-partisans under a bottom-up framework.

## 4.5 | Conclusion

This chapter established a research design and methodology testing sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts of the British case. Section [4.2](#) discussed the data and overall approach used throughout the thesis. I outline polarisation trends using 40 attitude items fielded in 2014-2019 waves of the [BES](#) data. This exceptionally wide evidence base samples exceptionally large numbers of voters surveyed exceptionally often and repeatedly during an exceptionally divisive period of British politics. It is thus highly appropriate for distinguishing aggregate outcomes and individual-level mechanisms described in the polarisation literature. I provided an overview of attitude items and organised them into four domains based on elite policy divergence in post-crisis Britain: European integration, immigration, social values, and economic issues.

This data is flexibly incorporated using a multilevel modelling framework introduced by Baldassarri and Gelman (2008). The generic approach estimates survey-wave states of polarisation on issues and regresses those statistics on time in a model with varying intercepts and varying slopes. The latter smooth out average trends that would otherwise be highly sensitive to characteristics of the attitude items available in a given survey wave. The basic idea is that the model uses information from individual items when it can and pools across all attitude items when it cannot. This results in an

overall regression line averaging varying unit-level trends, combining information from inconsistently asked survey questions without discarding important variation between them.

The remaining sections then explained how this data and overall approach are used in subsequent chapters. Section 4.3 established a cross-sectional design based on the full weighted BES sample. The major distinction in aggregate outcomes is between partisan polarisation that mirrors trends in attitude divergence and alignment, on the one hand, and partisan polarisation that does not mirror trends in attitude divergence and alignment, on the other. I operationalised these concepts following previous research. The correlation between issue positions and Labour-Conservative identity measures attitude partisanship. Attitude divergence is represented by the standard deviation, proportion of extremism, and excess kurtosis in survey item responses, capturing the extent to which public opinion is growing more dispersed, extreme, and multimodal. The correlation among paired attitudes then measures ideological constraint, which I use to assess alignment across political issues and domains.

Chapter 5 will outline trends in these outcomes via two questions. Partisan polarisation is expected in association with elite policy divergence, regardless of the theoretical mechanisms causing it. Hence, the first question asks whether elite trends are related to trends in attitude partisanship. Public opinion should also polarise following sociological developments, however, while remaining stable under a purely party sorting framework. The second question therefore asks if partisan polarisation is related to trends in attitude divergence and alignment. The cross-sectional design does not fully separate aggregate outcomes caused by different polarisation mechanisms, since elite cue effects are also compatible with the two scenarios structuring Chapter 5.

Section 4.4 thus set up a panel component comprising wave 1 BES respondents present in any 2019 waves. Two questions remain unanswered by cross-sectional evidence of polarisation. (1) Are changes in attitude partisanship caused by attitude or partisanship change? (2) Is polarisation associated with political engagement? The first question will be addressed through an extension of the attitude partisanship model in Chapter 6. I follow Cohen and Cohen (2021) in creating two counterfactual trends fixing individuals' issue positions and political identity at initial values, respectively. Survey-wave correlations resulting from these counterfactuals and observed attitude

partisanship provide the dependent variable in multilevel models, where I interact time with dummy variables indicating fixed attitude and fixed partisanship conditions. The value of these interactions is then the difference in observed and counterfactual trends, isolating the effect of partisanship change and attitude change on partisan polarisation.

Chapter 7 will answer the second question by disaggregating partisan, non-partisan dynamics. I re-apply attitude divergence and alignment models on split samples comparing Labour-Conservative identifiers with other voters and, within these two groups, engaged partisans and independents. The composition of partisan, non-partisan samples is fixed in wave 1, so stronger trends among politically engaged voters is consistent with elite cue mechanisms. Evidence of polarisation that extends to non-partisans supports sociological processes, meanwhile. I also follow Cohen and Cohen (2021) in balancing initial ideological characteristics between these groups, thereby facilitating like comparisons in an extension of the counterfactual attitude partisanship model. Wave 1 Labour identifiers and other voters with similar attitudes are coded as 0 in a dummy variable where Conservatives and Conservative matches are assigned 1. The survey-wave correlation between this variable and issue positions then provides fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship polarisation trends, which are distinguished in multilevel models with fixed effects separating Labour-Conservative identifiers from other voters. Provided that these groups are well-balanced, the difference in trends between them identifies political persuasion described in elite cue accounts.

# 5

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## Cross-Sectional Evidence of Polarisation

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### 5.1 | Introduction

Two main outcomes are discussed in the polarisation literature. Attitude partisanship trends that do and do not coincide with trends in attitude divergence and alignment. This follows a clear theoretical difference between sociological and party sorting processes, as outlined in previous chapters. Sociological processes emphasise value cleavages consolidated in ideologically distinct constituencies, leading to public preferences that are more dispersed, extreme, multimodal, and constrained across political issues. Partisan polarisation is then a symptom of broader social change, motivating policy disagreement among elites seeking to maintain and expand electoral coalitions. Political change does not require attitude divergence or alignment in party sorting accounts, meanwhile, which are based on vote switching mechanisms. Elites engage with social cleavages that are subject to secular structural development, yet this also causes electoral realignment that is independent of long-term social change. Elite policy divergence indicates which issue positions are represented in party platforms, allowing voters to adjust political identities in line with established preferences. Party sorting proponents thus reject sociological claims based on changes in attitude partisanship alone, which do not imply broader ideological developments (e.g., Fiorina et al., 2008).

The present chapter tests these competing perspectives on the British case. It analyses trends in attitude partisanship, attitude divergence, and attitude alignment using full cross-sectional samples from 2014-2019 waves of the [BES](#) data (Fieldhouse et al., 2020a). I ask if elite policy divergence is related to partisan polarisation, and whether

partisan polarisation is associated with attitude change. Answers to these questions outline outcomes consistent with sociological or party sorting accounts. Whether those outcomes support such accounts is complicated by potential elite cue effects, however. As noted in previous chapters, elite cue effects describe mechanisms with flexible empirical expectations. Like sociological developments, they affect ideological conflict between partisans. Yet this is a top-down process mediated by political engagement, similar to party sorting. Whatever outcome emerges is contingent on how many partisans respond to elite policy divergence by updating attitudes. Sufficiently strong elite cue effects alter distributional properties of public opinion in a manner also compatible with sociological accounts. But some claim that the mass response is limited to small groups of politically engaged partisans (e.g., Layman and Carsey, 2002a). Identity-defensive mechanisms might therefore produce outcomes that look like party sorting, with polarisation reflecting partisanship-based attitude divergence and alignment concealed by ideological stability at the aggregate level. In general, cross-sectional evidence does not distinguish elite cue effects from its alternatives.

However, in the recent British context, elite cue theory *does* generate expectations concerning aggregate trends that are distinct from those of sociological and party sorting accounts. One of the major claims surrounding partisan motivated reasoning is that it sustains unidimensional polarisation on cross-cutting issues (Layman and Carsey, 2002a; Layman et al., 2010, 2006). Partisans update attitudes in line with broader party platforms, leading to conflict extension when elite policy disagreement spreads across dimensions. Such claims have implications in the British case, where Labour-Conservative platforms diverged on cultural *and* economic issues following the financial crisis (see Section 3.2). Identity-defensive mechanisms should cause partisans to update issue positions in response to these cues, leading to corresponding trends in attitude partisanship.

The same is not necessarily true for party sorting, on the other hand. Although also describing voters' reaction to top-down appeals, cultural realignment cross-pressures attitude partisanship structures built on left-right cleavages. Labour might double down on redistributive positions under Jeremy Corbyn, but Conservative Brexit policy will attract Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, and otherwise socially traditional elements of the economic left, in addition to repelling liberal elements of its own coalition. To the extent

that mainstream partisanship is structured by left-right disagreements, cultural sorting implies reduced attitude partisanship on economic issues. Similarly, many sociological accounts describe left-right cleavages fragmenting because of cultural polarisation (e.g., Kitschelt, 1994; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997). Both perspectives are thus consistent with conflict displacement, since changes leading to cultural realignment cut across once encompassing economic disagreements.

Chapter 3 did not go so far as tying sociological or party sorting accounts to either outcome. The British case is punctuated by periods of elite depolarisation and repolarisation. Labour-Conservative platforms were converged on pro-market, more socially liberal positions prior to the financial crisis. Hence, subsequent elite policy divergence is emerging from a state of reduced ideological competition, which many argue had already undermined the traditional left-right structure of mainstream British politics (e.g., Adams et al., 2012b; Evans and Tilley, 2017; Green, 2007). Yet sociological and party sorting processes *can* explain declining partisan conflict on economic issues, setting them apart from trends implied by identity-defensive mechanisms. Sociological and party sorting accounts are essentially agnostic on whether cultural realignment extends from or displaces left-right polarisation. Elite cue accounts require mass trends corresponding to elite policy divergence, meanwhile, which is taking place on cultural *and* economic issues in the British case.

A series of hypotheses thus follow from aggregate outcomes consistent with sociological, party sorting, and elite cue processes. Either way, I expect partisan polarisation in association with elite policy divergence:

**Hypothesis 1a**—Elite policy divergence is associated with partisan polarisation, *as measured by changes in attitude partisanship*.

Whether this applies to all elite trends is an open question, however:

**Hypothesis 1b**—Elite policy divergence is associated with partisan polarisation on cultural *and* economic issues.

H1a is a baseline expectation, evidence against which suggests that recent developments in British politics cannot be understood in terms outlined by existing polarisation literature. Outcomes contradicting H1b identify problems with elite cue perspectives, specifically, offering support to sociological or party sorting accounts. Putting the distinction

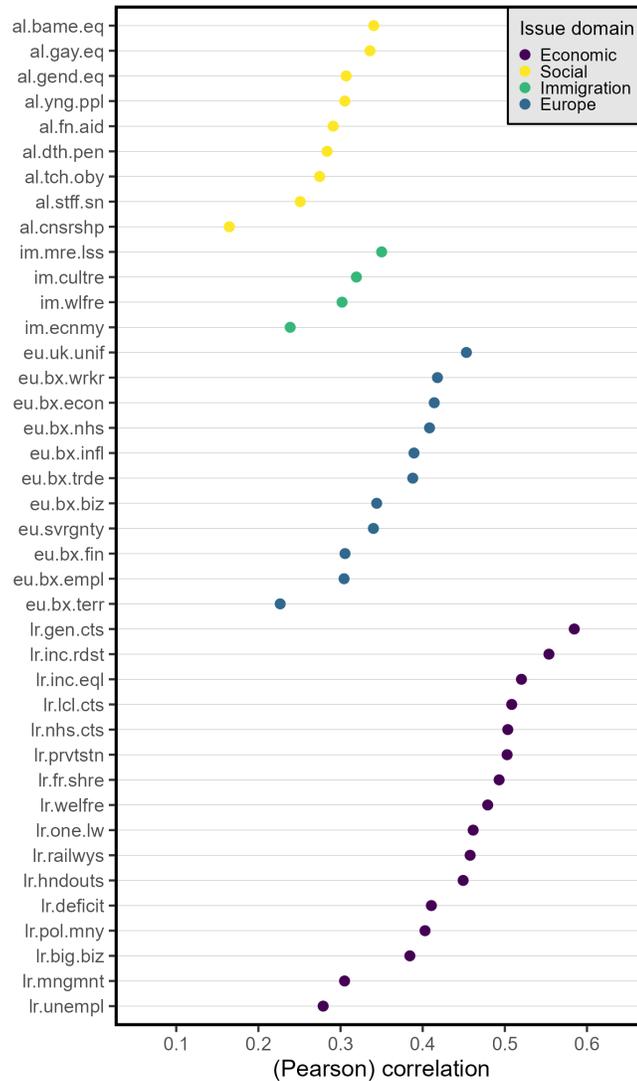
between cultural and economic issues to one side, partisan polarisation is caused by increased attitude divergence and alignment through sociological and elite cue mechanisms, and it is independent of attitude change in accounts based purely on party sorting. That leads to another hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2**—Partisan polarisation is associated with attitude change, *as measured by changes in attitude divergence and alignment.*

Support for H2 is compatible with sociological or elite cue accounts. But, because identity-defensive mechanisms affect potentially small numbers of partisans, evidence to the contrary can also indicate elite cue or party sorting effects. That being said, attitude divergence and alignment trends limited to cultural issues present problems for the argument that these changes are caused by elite cues, which are arguably stronger on economic issues (see Section 3.2).

I test these hypotheses over two substantive sections of the chapter. Section 5.2 assesses the link between elite policy divergence and partisan polarisation through trends in attitude partisanship. I observe partisan polarisation only in cultural domains, with attitude partisanship increasing on European integration, immigration, and social values while declining on economic issues. These inverse trends challenge Hypothesis 1b, immediately weakening elite cue interpretations of recent developments in British politics. Perhaps the clearest aspect of mainstream political competition after the financial crisis is associated with depolarisation among Labour-Conservative identifiers.

Section 5.3 outlines the relationship between partisan polarisation and attitude change. First, trends in the dispersion, extremism, and multimodality of mass preferences establish whether partisan polarisation is associated with changing attitude divergence. Second, the extent to which attitude divergence is growing more aligned across multiple lines of conflict is assessed using ideological constraint. Partisan polarisation clearly mirrors attitude change. The distributional properties of cultural ideology are polarising while left-right positions converge and dealign. This is consistent with Hypothesis 2, revealing findings unexplained by party sorting. Results from this chapter thus point to sociological accounts of the British case. Partisan polarisation is related to changes in the distribution and alignment of public opinion, but not in a way that suggests voters are taking cues from elites.



**Figure 5.1:** Attitude partisanship over time.

*Notes:* Issues are grouped by domain and displayed in descending order of correlation with Conservative (versus Labour) identity. Attitude items have been recoded so that higher values correspond with conservative-right positions.

## 5.2 | Are elite trends related to partisan polarisation?

Figure 5.1 displays average correlations between issue positions and Labour-Conservative identity over all waves of the BES data, 2014-2019. The overall correlation is 0.27, but attitude partisanship ranges from 0.16 to 0.58 across issues. Economic preferences are most strongly associated with mainstream political identity (0.37), consistent with the historical left-right basis of British politics. This is followed

by coefficients of 0.26 and 0.25 for positions on European integration and both immigration, and social values, respectively. The figure thus shows varied attitude partisanship structure. A considerable values gap separates the economic preferences of Labour-Conservative identifiers, whose cultural differences are more muted. Is the relationship between political attitudes and partisanship changing over time, however, as anticipated by sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts?

Hypothesis 1a states that elite policy divergence is associated with partisan polarisation. I test this hypothesis by fitting linear trends to survey-wave correlations among issue positions and Labour-Conservative identity ( $\rho_{it}$ ), following the varying intercept, varying slope multilevel modelling framework established last chapter.<sup>1</sup> Formally,

$$\rho_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta_i t + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (5.1)$$

where  $\alpha_i$  is the average attitude partisanship correlation on issue  $i$  in wave 1 and  $\beta_i$  represents changes in that parameter over time. The multilevel modelling framework uses time as a proxy for elite policy divergence, which increases from 2014 to 2019. Hence, the primary parameter of interest is the overall slope  $\beta$ , estimated by averaging across the joint posterior distribution of  $\beta_i$ . A positive  $\beta$  indicates that attitude partisanship increases in association with elite policy divergence, on average, supporting Hypothesis 1a. Time is measured by counting years and quarters since 2014 and dividing by 10, giving trends in decades. The main reason for that is to facilitate comparison with previous research (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Cohen and Cohen, 2021; Munzert and Bauer, 2013a). Multiplying  $\beta$  by 0.575 (decades) approximates average change between the first quarter of 2014 and last quarter of 2019, the period covered in the BES data.

Table 5.1 summarises evidence from this model. The average correlation between issue positions and Labour-Conservative identity was 0.34 (SE = 0.02) at the beginning of 2014, when wave 1 was collected. With a standard deviation among attitude partisanship pairs of 0.13, roughly 90 per cent of the joint posterior distribution of  $\alpha_i$  is between 0.13 and 0.55. It is the coefficient on time that is of central interest here, however. The average time trend is 0.10 (SE = 0.03), suggesting substantial partisan polarisation. In effect, the model estimates an overall increase of 0.06 in attitude partisanship during 0.575 decades from 2014 to 2019. This is even larger than the trend

<sup>1</sup>Appendix A reports similar results using the correlation between attitudes and general election vote choice or a 10-point left-right self-identification scale.

**Table 5.1:** Trends in attitude partisanship.

	attitude x partisanship
Intercept	0.34 (0.02)
Time (decades)	0.10 (0.03)
Residual SD:	
Intercepts	0.13
Trends	0.17
Data	0.03
N	328
Groups	40

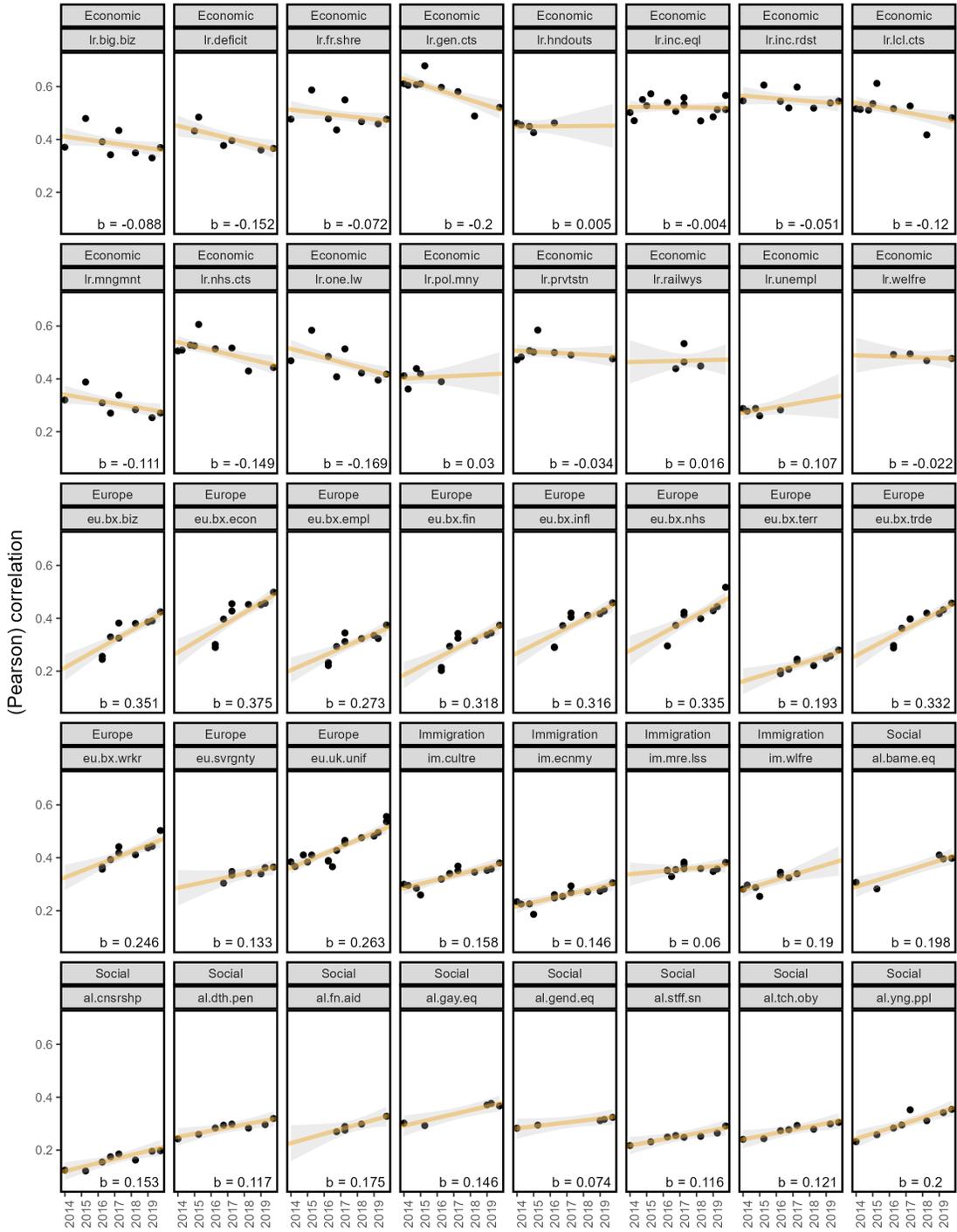
*Notes:* Posterior statistics from a multilevel model with the correlation between issue positions and Conservative (versus Labour) identity as dependent variable. The intercept is the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Standard errors are in parentheses.

reported by Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) per decade:  $\beta = 0.05$ . The [BES](#) data thus documents clear ideological division unfolding among Labour-Conservative identifiers over a relatively short time frame.

The *mean* slope in attitude partisanship has a 0.9 credible interval of 0.05 to 0.15, indicating that partisan polarisation increases across issues, on average. Yet there is also substantial variability in slopes. The residual standards deviation among attitude partisanship pairs is 0.17, so around 90 per cent of draws from the joint posterior distribution of  $\beta_i$  fall between -0.18 and 0.38. In other words, partisan polarisation does not cover all issues sampled in the [BES](#) data. A large portion of unit-level trends must be negative, suggesting declines in the correlation between positions on these issues and Labour-Conservative identity. This has implications for Hypothesis 1a, since it implies that only certain aspects of elite policy divergence are associated with increasing attitude partisanship. I thus follow Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) and investigate the overall estimates contained in [Table 5.1](#) against observed partisan polarisation data (see also Cohen and Cohen, 2019, 2021).

[Figure 5.2](#) plots 40 panels, one for every [BES](#) attitude item. The data points in a panel represent average survey-wave correlations of issue positions and Labour-Conservative identity, with  $n$  reflecting how often questions are administered between 2014 and 2019.<sup>2</sup> Regression lines comprising the mean posterior intercept and slope are displayed for each issue, along with the associated 0.9 credible interval and  $\beta_i$  coeffi-

<sup>2</sup>Excluding ‘top-up’ observations (see [Section 4.3](#)).



**Figure 5.2:** Trends in attitude partisanship by political issue.

*Notes:* Each panel displays the average regression line for an attitude partisanship pair, along with its 0.9 credible interval and slope. Time is on the x-axis.

cient. The figure shows that heterogeneity surrounding the generic attitude partisanship model is consistent with important features of the data. Namely, whereas positions on European integration, immigration, and social values become more closely related with mainstream party identity over time, the reverse trend is apparent among economic attitude partisanship units. This suggests that a better fit would be obtained by distinguishing partisan polarisation in different policy domains.

According to Hypothesis 1b, elite policy divergence should be associated with partisan polarisation on cultural *and* economic issues. Yet positive trends in attitude partisanship appear limited to cultural positions, despite arguably clearer left-right elite cues from 2014 to 2019. To explore this further, I specify a second model with fixed effects separating partisan polarisation on different types of issue:

$$\rho_{it} = \alpha_1 + \alpha_2 \cdot \text{immigration} + \alpha_3 \cdot \text{social values} + \alpha_4 \cdot \text{economic issues} + \alpha_{5i} + \beta_1 t \quad (5.2) \\ + \beta_2 t \cdot \text{immigration} + \beta_3 t \cdot \text{social values} + \beta_4 t \cdot \text{economic issues} + \beta_{5i} t + \epsilon_{it}.$$

In this model, dummy variables indicate whether an item relates to European integration (the baseline) or immigration, social values, and economic issues. Coefficients with subscripts 1 through 4 capture the mean intercept and slope in these domains—the average correlation between issue positions and Labour-Conservative identity at the beginning of 2014 and the average change in correlation per decade, respectively. The interaction between dummy variables and time then gives the difference in trends separating preferences for European integration from immigration, social values, and economic issues. This contrasts with the previous no-grouping model, which estimates intercepts and slopes by averaging across all attitude partisanship data. Fixed effects restrict partial pooling to issues in the same area of elite policy divergence.

Results from this model are summarised in [Table 5.2](#). On average, the initial correlation among attitudes and Labour-Conservative identity is 0.48 for economic issues, 0.27 for immigration, and 0.24 for both European integration and social values. Economic issues are therefore associated with considerably more partisan division than cultural preferences. Yet temporal variation across domains points to a rotation in the relationship between issue positions and mainstream partisanship. The model estimates positive time trends for cultural attitude items:  $\beta = 0.33, 0.15, \text{ and } 0.14$  for European integration, immigration, and social values, respectively. The correlation among economic preferences and Labour-Conservative identity declines by roughly -0.11 per

**Table 5.2:** Trends in attitude partisanship by issue domain.

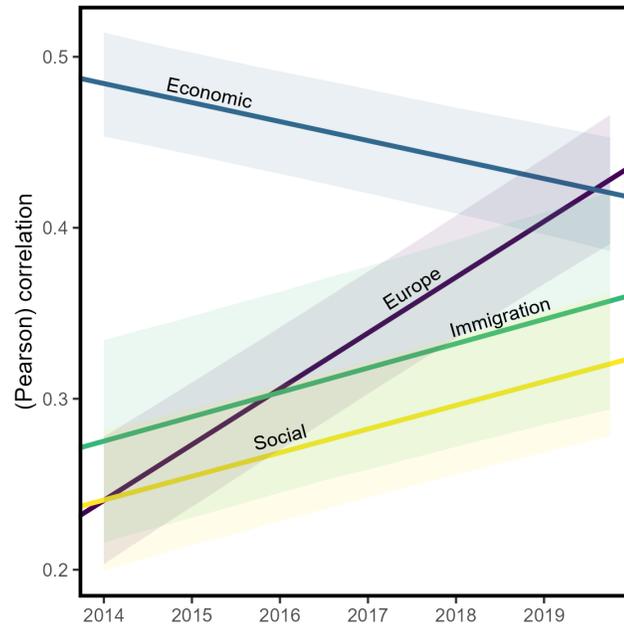
	attitude x partisanship
Intercept	0.24 (0.02)
European integration	baseline
Immigration	0.03 (0.04)
Social values	0.00 (0.03)
Economic issues	0.24 (0.03)
Time (decades)	0.33 (0.03)
Time x European integration	baseline
Time x immigration	-0.18 (0.04)
Time x social values	-0.19 (0.04)
Time x economic issues	-0.44 (0.03)
Residual SD:	
Intercepts	0.07
Trends	0.04
Data	0.03
N	328
Groups	40

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from a multilevel model with the correlation between issue positions and Conservative (versus Labour) identity as dependent variable. The intercept is the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Standard errors are in parentheses.

decade during the 2014-2019 period, meanwhile. These are dramatic changes relative to previous research. For instance, the largest increase in attitude partisanship reported by Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) is on moral issues ( $\beta = 0.08$  per decade).

Figure 5.3 displays regression lines reflecting the mean posterior intercept and slope for issue domains, with the correlation between attitudes and partisanship on the y-axis and time on the x-axis. It also outlines the 0.9 credible interval of these regression lines, summarising heterogeneity in the intercepts and slopes for European integration, immigration, social values, and economic issues. For instance, only four questions on immigration are available in the BES data, so the 0.9 credible interval of the mean regression line across these attitudes is far wider than domains covered more extensively. In each case, however, the credible interval indicates a greater than 90 per cent probability that the mean slope in attitude partisanship is non-zero.

The figure shows that economic preferences are initially by far the most partisan but depolarise over time. The reverse pattern is apparent across cultural issues, with the association between Labour-Conservative partisanship and attitudes towards Euro-



**Figure 5.3:** Trends in attitude partisanship by issue domain.

*Notes:* Shaded areas are 0.9 credible intervals of the mean regression line for each issue domain. Time is on the x-axis.

pean integration, immigration, and social values increasing substantially. In particular, although quite weakly correlated with mainstream political identity at the beginning of 2014, dramatic partisan polarisation on European integration brings these positions level with left-right divides by the end of 2019. The overall increase in attitude partisanship observed above is thus driven exclusively by cultural issues, making the latter more salient features of Labour-Conservative conflict during the Brexit period.

These findings bring us closer to distinguishing sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts. That the issues surrounding Brexit are subject to rapid partisan polarisation is not surprising. Along with debates on immigration and social values, Britain's relationship with the European Union becomes an increasingly divisive aspect of mainstream politics from 2014 to 2019. Whether guided by top-down or bottom-up mechanisms, the theoretical framework laid out in Chapter 3 expects corresponding attitude partisanship trends, that is, growth in the correlation between Labour-Conservative identity and cultural ideology. Indeed, much existing research shows the latter permeating voting behaviour during the 2016 referendum and subsequent elections (e.g., Curtice, 2017a; Evans et al., 2021; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 9; Hobolt, 2016; Mellon

et al., 2018; Swales, 2016). What is harder square with elite trends is partisan depolarisation on economic issues. Left-right elite policy divergence accelerates throughout the post-crisis and Brexit period, yet the ideological structure of party identification declines on this axis.

The short-term consequence is convergence in the partisanship of voters' economic and cultural positions. Labour-Conservative identifiers are more uniformly divided by political issues across dimensions in 2019 than 2014. Unlike conflict extension observed in the American case, however, where moral attitude partisanship is increasing fast enough to catch up with partisan polarisation on other issues (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008), cultural realignment in Britain is associated with left-right dealignment. Mainstream electoral coalitions become more ideologically divided by European integration, immigration, and social values and less so on economic issues. These findings contribute to claims that we are witnessing consequences of long-term cultural displacement of the traditional left-right axis of British politics (e.g., Cutts et al., 2020; Jennings and Stoker, 2016, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

That arguably the clearest aspect of Labour-Conservative policy divergence is associated with partisan *depolarisation* is evidence against elite cue accounts of these developments. To the extent that attitude partisanship trends reflect ideological change, it is not in a manner suggesting that voters are mirroring mainstream party leaders. At least on economic issues, Labour-Conservative identifiers are moving in the opposite direction of polarising elite cues. This offers support to sociological or party sorting mechanisms, both of which are compatible with conflict displacement. There is a big difference in the variables driving attitude partisanship trends in these accounts, meanwhile. Partisan polarisation is a function of sociological developments causing attitude divergence and alignment, whereas party sorting describes the same outcome emerging through partisanship change. The following section thus considers whether partisan polarisation reflects broader shifts in public opinion.

### 5.3 | Is partisan polarisation related to attitude change?

The theoretical framework established in Chapter 3 supports different interpretations of partisan polarisation based on attitude or partisanship change. Sociological devel-

opments affect the size and geographic concentration of social groups with divergent value orientations, altering the ideological structure of political conflict. Hence, partisan polarisation requires systematic attitude change under this framework. The party sorting perspective is that partisan polarisation is incidental to switching mechanisms, meanwhile. Elite policy divergence adjusts the relationship between issue positions and political choice, motivating switching among those perceiving more proximate representation of their attitudes in a party other than the one they currently support. Accounts based purely on these mechanisms expect no change in the distributional properties of public opinion, since mass trends reflect partisanship (not attitude) dynamics.

Two forms of attitude change are described in the polarisation literature. One relates to disagreement on single issues: *attitude divergence*. For instance, demographic culture shifts provide an account of advanced industrial society becoming less conservative over time. If the growth of social groups with liberal preferences is driving recent developments in British politics, we should thus observe increased attitude dispersion, extremism, and multimodality as the central tendency of public opinion shifts in a liberal direction. At the same time, the mechanisms increasing the number of voters with liberal priorities—expansions in higher education, ethnic minority populations, professional middle class occupations, etc.—also concentrate these voters in prosperous cities and university towns. Individuals with ideologically consistent attitudes across a wider range of issues then become predominant in different constituencies, driving cultural backlash outside of metropolitan areas. Hence, the other form of attitude change is an increase in the association between disagreement across different issues: *attitude alignment*.

I outline the cross-sectional evidence for both developments in this section. First, the extent to which partisan polarisation is connected to changing attitude divergence is assessed via trends in the dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and central tendency of distributions surrounding political issues. Second, constraint among paired issue positions establishes whether attitude divergence is growing more ideological, that is, aligned on multiple aspects of elite policy divergence.

### Changes in the distribution of attitudes surrounding political issues

Hypothesis 2 states that partisan polarisation is associated with attitude change. I test for trends in attitude divergence using varying intercept, varying slope models like those outlined in Section 5.2. Namely, the survey-wave dispersion, extremism, and multimodality in public preferences is regressed on the interaction between time and dummy variables indicating European integration relative to other issue domains:

$$y_{it} = \alpha_1 + \alpha_2 \cdot \text{immigration} + \alpha_3 \cdot \text{social values} + \alpha_4 \cdot \text{economic issues} + \alpha_{5i} + \beta_1 t + \beta_2 t \cdot \text{immigration} + \beta_3 t \cdot \text{social values} + \beta_4 t \cdot \text{economic issues} + \beta_{5i} t + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (5.3)$$

The unit of analysis is thus attitude items rather than attitude partisanship pairs, with  $y_{it}$  representing the standard deviation, proportion of extremism, and excess kurtosis on issue  $i$  at time  $t$  in the model for dispersion, extremism, and multimodality, respectively.<sup>3</sup> The interpretation of attitude divergence models is otherwise similar. Intercepts correspond with the level of polarisation on domain-specific issues in the first quarter of 2014 while slopes provide average time trends in decades. Increases in standard deviation, proportion of extremism, and excess kurtosis then indicate greater public disagreement on political issues.<sup>4</sup> To help identify the dynamics associated with changes in attitude divergence, I also report results from a model with mean attitudes on issue  $i$  at time  $t$  as dependent variable. Since attitude items are coded so that higher values correspond with conservative-right positions, negative trends in central tendency indicate left-liberal shifts in public opinion, as described by demographic culture shift theory.

Results for each model are presented in Table 5.3. Preferences for *European integration* are initially the least dispersed, extreme, and multimodal but polarise rapidly between the first and last wave of BES data. The standard deviation, proportion of extremism, and excess kurtosis in this domain increases by an average of 0.26, 0.16, and 0.94 per decade, respectively. The model with mean issue positions as dependent variable shows a liberal trajectory in the central tendency of these attitudes, with public opinion moving from a more Eurosceptic initial average of 3.15 to 2.78 by the end of 2019. Substantial positive trends are also observed in the dispersion ( $\beta = 0.13$ ) and multimodality ( $\beta = 0.53$ ) of *social values*, although apparently without corresponding

<sup>3</sup>As described in Section 4.3, extreme attitudes are the highest and lowest values on scales with length  $< 10$  but includes the second highest and lowest values for scales with length  $> 9$ .

<sup>4</sup>Recall that excess kurtosis is multiplied by  $-1$ .

**Table 5.3:** Trends in attitude divergence by issue domain.

	Dispersion	Extremism	Multimodality	Central tendency
Intercept	0.87 (0.04)	0.10 (0.03)	-0.29 (0.19)	3.15 (0.12)
European integration	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline
Immigration	0.36 (0.08)	0.27 (0.05)	1.23 (0.35)	0.49 (0.24)
Social values	0.21 (0.06)	0.18 (0.04)	0.51 (0.27)	0.30 (0.19)
Economic issues	0.17 (0.05)	0.17 (0.04)	0.60 (0.24)	-0.62 (0.16)
Time (decades)	0.26 (0.04)	0.16 (0.03)	0.94 (0.23)	-0.65 (0.10)
Time x European integration	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline
Time x immigration	-0.29 (0.07)	-0.34 (0.06)	-1.12 (0.45)	-0.49 (0.18)
Time x social values	-0.13 (0.05)	-0.17 (0.05)	-0.41 (0.34)	0.31 (0.14)
Time x economic issues	-0.29 (0.05)	-0.13 (0.04)	-1.43 (0.31)	0.42 (0.13)
Residual SD:				
Intercepts	0.13	0.09	0.60	0.41
Trends	0.10	0.10	0.71	0.28
Data	0.03	0.02	0.13	0.06

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from multilevel models with dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and central tendency on 40 attitude items as dependent variables ( $N = 328$ ). Intercepts are the standard deviation, proportion of extremism, excess kurtosis, or mean among issue positions in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Excess kurtosis is multiplied by -1 so that positive trends indicate polarisation. Standard errors are in parentheses.

increases in extremism ( $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ , 90% CI [-0.07, 0.05]). Again, this is associated with liberal attitude dynamics, where the average position on social values shifts -0.2 points from 2014 to 2019.

Unlike other cultural issues, there is limited evidence of divergence in *immigration* preferences, despite this being by far the most polarised domain initially.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the only substantial polarisation trend is negative, with the proportion of voters holding extreme attitudes decreasing by roughly  $-0.18 \times 0.575 = -0.1$ .<sup>6</sup> This appears to be caused by dramatically declining opposition towards immigration, since the central tendency model estimates an average regression line of  $3.64 - 1.14$ . The predicted mean of issue positions in this domain is thus 2.98 by the end of 2019, reflecting more ambivalent public preferences.

Evidence of depolarisation also emerges on *economic issues*. In this case, the clearest negative trend is in the multimodality of public opinion. Excess kurtosis falls from

<sup>5</sup> $\alpha = 1.23, 0.37$ , and  $0.94$  in the model for dispersion, extremism, and multimodality, respectively, considerably larger than the average intercept associated with any other domain.

<sup>6</sup>The mean slope across immigration attitudes is not clearly different from zero in 90 per cent of draws from posterior trends in dispersion (CI [-0.13, 0.06]) or multimodality (CI [-0.82, 0.44]).

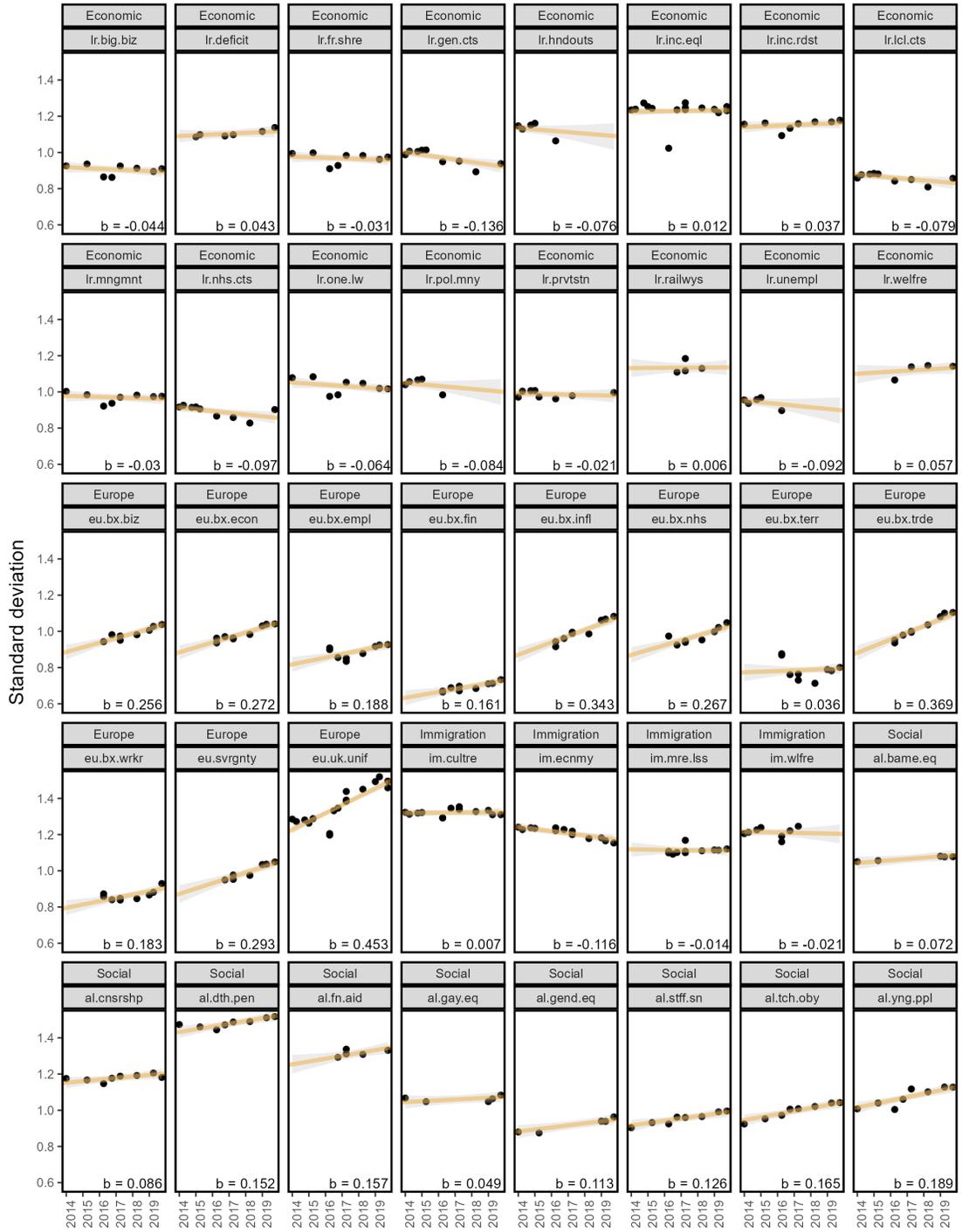
0.31 to 0.03 during the 2014-2019 period, essentially indicating overall convergence to a normal distribution.<sup>7</sup> Average reductions in the standard deviation of economic preferences are modest, meanwhile ( $\beta = -0.03$ , SE = 0.05, 90% CI [-0.09, 0.01]). And the aggregate trend in extremism is even positive, although also imprecisely estimated ( $\beta = 0.03$ , SE = 0.04, 90% CI [-0.01, 0.08]). Like cultural domains, the model with mean issue positions as dependent variable reveals a left-wing trajectory in attitudes. However, there is more uncertainty involved in this trend, which is considerably shallower than the slope corresponding with other domains ( $\beta = -0.23$ , SE = 0.13, 90% CI [-0.37, -0.1]).

To increase confidence in and otherwise interpret these results, I plot varying unit-level trends against observed attitude divergence data in figures 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, and 5.7. Panels related to *European integration* confirm consistent patterns. Namely, the standard deviation, proportion of extremism, and excess kurtosis in attitudes increases rapidly following substantial declines in mean Euroscepticism. More modest yet significant polarisation is apparent among *social values*, at least in panels displaying dispersion and multimodality. There is virtually no meaningful change in extremism across the same domain, despite clear shifts away from what are on average quite traditionalist issue positions. This reflects inverse trends at either end of attitude scales, with reduced social conservatism offset by increasing liberalism (see the raw distribution of responses displayed in Appendix B). Similar dynamics are apparent on *border policy*, but the proportion of extreme preferences declines unambiguously in this case because of asymmetric positive and negative pro- and anti-immigration trends (see Appendix B). The standard deviation and kurtosis in immigration attitudes does not change significantly or consistently over time, meanwhile, mirroring aggregate uncertainty in regression estimates reported above.

Figures 5.4 through 5.7 also show irregularity affecting *economic issues*. Left-wing dynamics on this dimension are driven mainly by central tendencies in five attitude items, hence imprecision in the overall time trend. The items ask about the level of benefits, approaches to reducing the deficit, and attitudes towards public spending cuts, appearing to tap into clustered positions on post-2010 austerity policies of the British government. Mean preferences on other left-right questions demonstrate a lack of clear

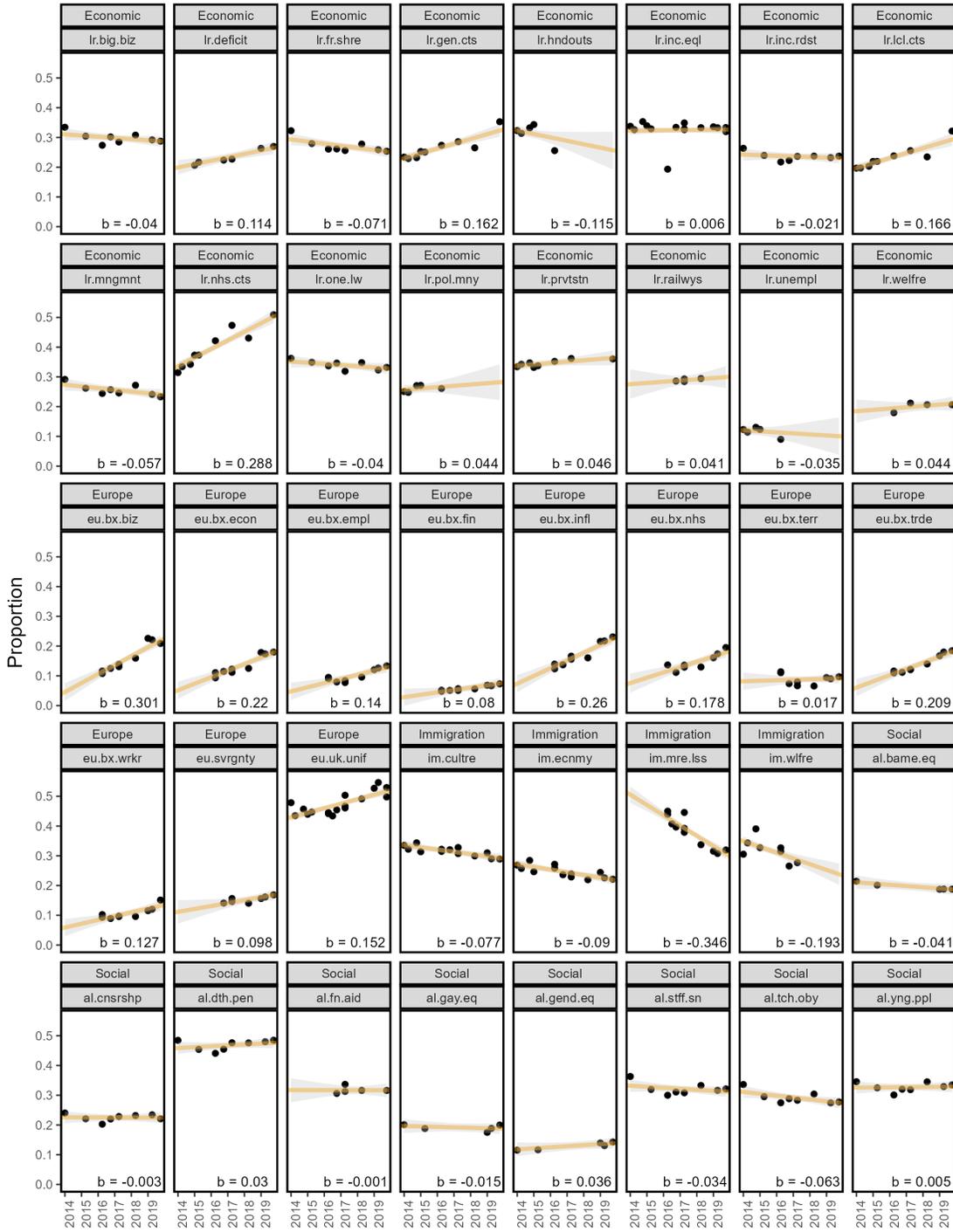
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<sup>7</sup>Recall that the value of kurtosis is inverted here, such that positive (negative) excess is consistent with heavier (lighter) tails than a normal distribution (see Section 4.3).



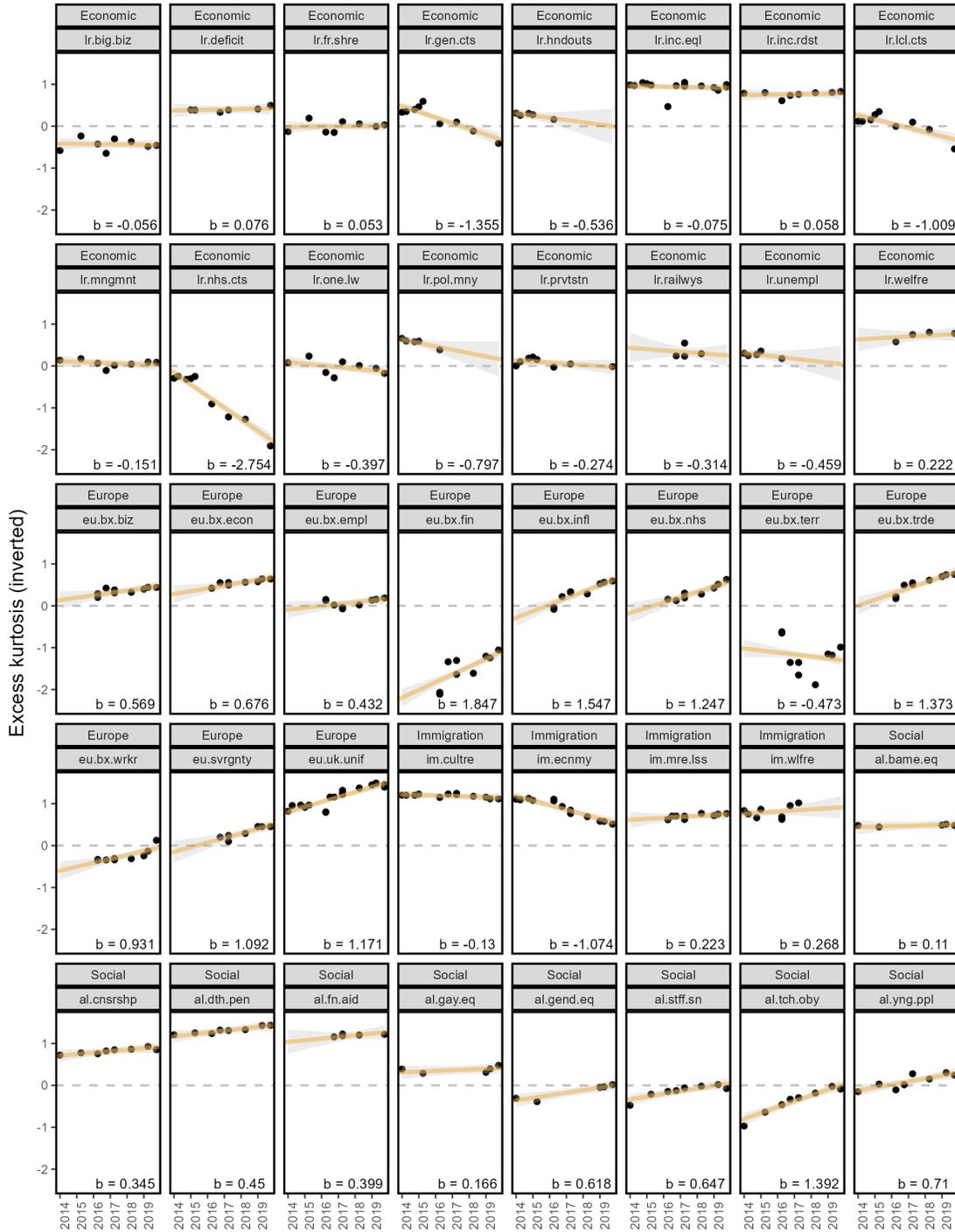
**Figure 5.4:** Trends in dispersion by political issue.

*Notes:* Each panel displays the average regression line for an attitude item, along with its 0.9 credible interval and slope. Time is on the x-axis.



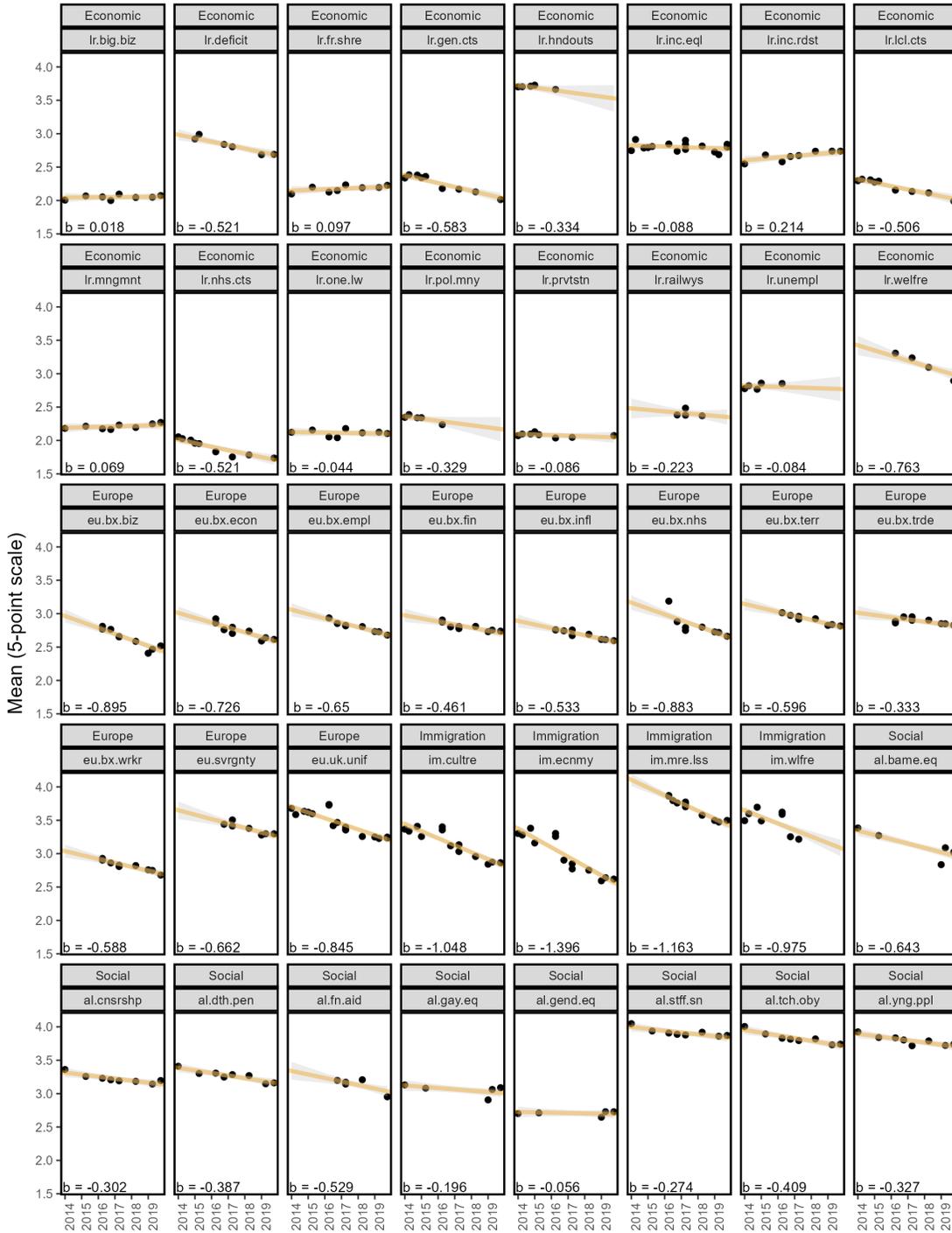
**Figure 5.5:** Trends in extremism by political issue.

*Notes:* Each panel displays the average regression line for an attitude item, along with its 0.9 credible interval and slope. Time is on the x-axis.



**Figure 5.6:** Trends in multimodality by political issue.

*Notes:* Each panel displays the average regression line for an attitude item, along with its 0.9 credible interval and slope. A dashed line marks 0 (the value of excess kurtosis in a normal distribution). Excess kurtosis is multiplied by -1 so that positive trends indicate polarisation. Time is on the x-axis.



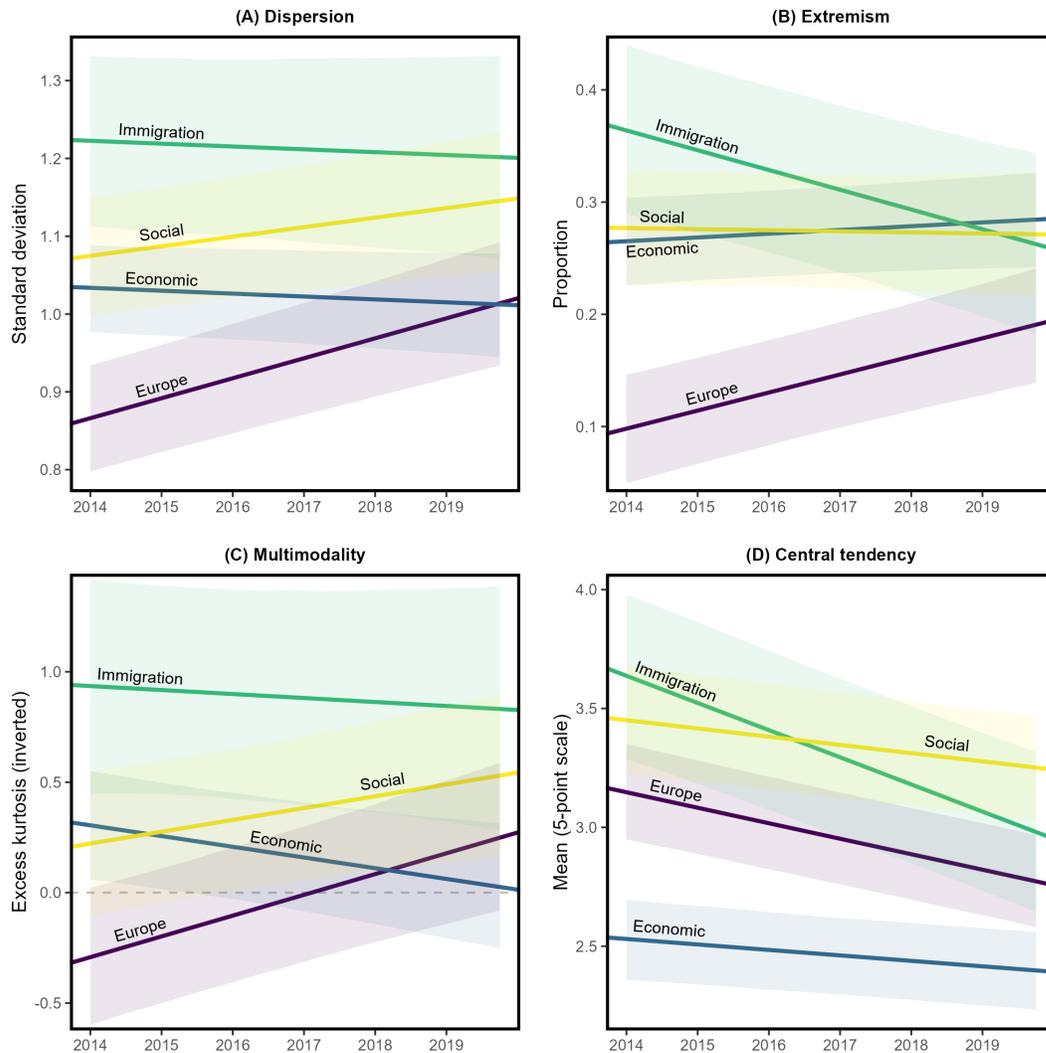
**Figure 5.7:** Trends in central tendency by political issue.

*Notes:* Each panel displays the average regression line for an attitude item, along with its 0.9 credible interval and slope. Attitude items have been rescaled from 1 to 5. Time is on the x-axis.

change, suggesting that the previous items might belong in a separate domain. Indeed, most of these items are associated with substantial increases in extremism, contradicting negative trends observed otherwise. Again, this explains aggregate uncertainty above, where the economic regression line was positive but statistically indistinguishable from zero. Yet those same issues are also subject to the sharpest declines in excess kurtosis, implying that attitudes become more unimodally distributed at one extreme. For items asking about spending cuts, specifically, the distribution of responses shows dramatic convergence on the far left (see Appendix B). This is emphatic agreement rather than polarisation, however, as noted in Section 4.3.

It thus makes little difference whether fiscal policy questions are grouped alongside other economic issues. These items might be related to independent ideological trajectories, but polarisation dynamics nonetheless remain convergent. This includes correspondingly modest trends in attitude dispersion. It also follows findings from Section 5.2, where all left-right positions have a similarly noisy, negative temporal relationship with Labour-Conservative identity (see Figure 5.2). All that would be gained by splitting this dimension into separate domains is potentially clearer depolarisation, especially in the multimodality model. The more fundamental point is that increasing attitude divergence is not observed on economic issues. The latter is limited to cultural domains, like trends in attitude partisanship.

Is partisan polarisation associated with attitude change, then? Results from this section suggest that it is. Figure 5.8 plots the average trend in dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and central tendency by domain. Clear divergence is apparent in the distribution of preferences surrounding *European integration* and *social values*. Moreover, Labour-Conservative dealignment mirrors declining kurtosis and otherwise shallow and mixed trends across *economic issues*. The relationship between changes in attitude partisanship and attitude divergence is less obvious for *immigration*, meanwhile. Only the proportion of extremism returns a clear polarisation trend in this domain, and it is in the opposite direction suggested by increasing partisan division. Declining extremism is caused by dramatic liberal shifts in preferences rather than attitude convergence. In fact, the distribution of responses to immigration questions not only show voters developing less restrictive sentiments; three out of four items even look more polarised over time (see Appendix B). Unlike similar changes affecting positions on European



**Figure 5.8:** Trends in attitude divergence by issue domain.

*Notes:* Shaded areas are 0.9 credible intervals of the mean regression line for each issue domain. The dashed line in panel C marks 0 (the value of excess kurtosis in a normal distribution). Excess kurtosis is multiplied by -1 so that positive trends indicate polarisation. Time is on the x-axis.

integration and social values, however, this does not register clearly as greater attitude divergence.

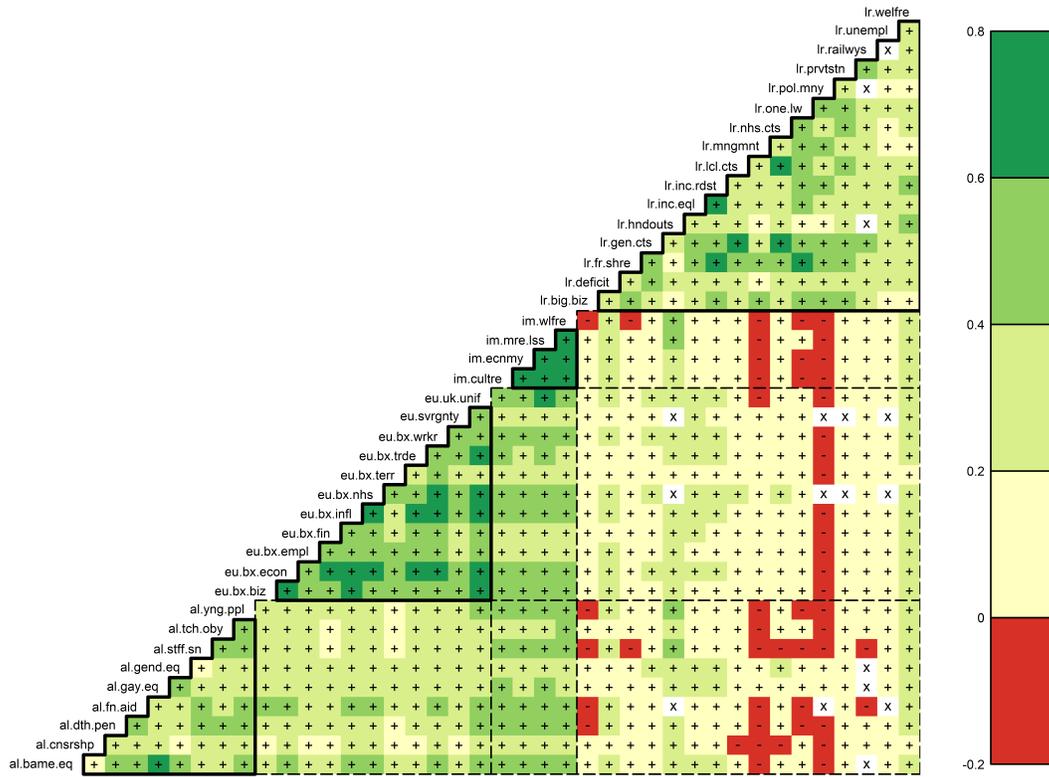
Some argue that kurtosis is insensitive to forms of polarisation such as trimodality (e.g., Downey and Huffman, 2001), or that standard deviations are overly sensitive to observations far from a distribution's central tendency (Van Der Eijk, 2001). In Appendix C, I present results from a model using van der Eijk's 'agreement A' on

issue  $i$  at time  $t$  as dependent variable.<sup>8</sup> Results confirm patterns discovered above. Namely, I observe rising attitude divergence on European integration and social values but not economic issues. This speaks to the robustness of findings from this subsection, confirming that attitude change is an important part of partisan polarisation. Yet the agreement A model also reveals increasing divergence in immigration positions. Three out of four items are associated with escalating disagreement between 2014 and 2019, consistent with visual inspection of responses to these questions in Appendix B. This generates aggregate outcomes comparable with European integration and social values, despite negative trends on an item asking about the economic consequences of immigration. Responses to the latter shift so strongly in a liberal direction that its distribution becomes visually less dispersed, extreme, and multimodal. I comment on possible explanations for such dynamics in Section 5.4, but for now conclude that *partisan polarisation is related to attitude change*.

Despite mixed trends in immigration positions, results from this subsection otherwise support sociological mechanisms. Partisan (de)polarisation on cultural (economic) issues is mirrored by changes in public disagreement. This most plainly challenges accounts based purely on party sorting. Yet evidence that increases in attitude divergence exclude left-right opinion also continues to challenge elite cue perspectives. Labour-Conservative differences are perhaps clearest on economic issues after the financial crisis. Hence, positive trends limited to more ambiguous cultural party disagreements are hard to reconcile with the argument that voters are following elite cues. More than that, however, left-right partisan dealignment actually mirrors attitude convergence on this axis, perhaps indicating that cultural polarisation is displacing traditional conflicts structuring mainstream British politics. Evidence that these findings follow trends in constraint would therefore constitute strong support for sociological accounts, revealing ideological realignment affecting voters in manner inconsistent with elite policy divergence.

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<sup>8</sup>Agreement A is a weighted average of the ‘peakedness’ of a distribution, estimated by disaggregating response frequencies on ordinal rating scales into ‘triples’ deviating from or conforming to unimodality. I measure a rescaled version of agreement A using the R package `agrmt`, with upper and lower bounds of 0 and 1 corresponding to attitude convergence and divergence, respectively (Ruedin, 2021).



**Figure 5.9:** Attitude alignment over time.

*Notes:* Positive correlations are colour-coded from light to dark green and negative correlations are in red. Plus and minus signs indicate the direction of relationship and ‘X’ marks issue pairs for which no observations are available. Solid borders frame issue pairs from the same area of elite policy divergence and dashed borders contain different types of cross-domain correlation.

## Changes in the relationship between distributions of attitudes across issues

Figure 5.9 provides a first impression of the extent of attitude alignment in Britain, plotting the correlation between 763 issue pairs in all waves.<sup>9</sup> The overall correlation is 0.26, but the strength and direction of unit-specific coefficients depends on which issues are involved. Within-domain pairs are typically more structured, with a mean of 0.41. The strongest association emerges between items asking about the cultural and economic consequences of immigration ( $\rho = 0.79$ ), and immigration issues are also the most constrained domain overall ( $\rho = 0.72$ ).<sup>10</sup> The mean correlation of preferences across issue domains is 0.19, by comparison, although an overarching cultural dimension

is apparent among positions on European integration, immigration, and social values. The average correlation between the latter is 0.35, while issue pairs combining cultural and economic matters are associated with much lower constraint ( $\rho = 0.12$ ).

This aggregate picture gives insight into the ideological basis of polarisation in Britain. Crucially, although generally less correlated than within-domain pairs, attitudes in different areas of elite policy divergence appear relatively structured. As Munzert and Bauer (2013a, p. 74) argue, constraint ‘is only a serious issue if people align along multiple issues and build overlapping groups’. While they observe ‘low to very low’ association between four domains of German public opinion over 1980-2010, [Figure 5.9](#) points to multifaceted cultural division in the British case. Immigration positions have a mean correlation of 0.41 and 0.42 with preferences for European integration and social values, respectively, which are themselves constrained with  $\rho = 0.30$ . The same alignment is notably absent from corresponding evidence presented by Munzert and Bauer (2013a, p. 74), in which cultural domains are essentially equally correlated with one another as they are with economic issues.

Part of the benchmark Converse (1964) establishes for a lack of constraint is low association among Americans’ attitudes towards different issues in the 1958 ANES: 0.23 within and 0.11 between domains (see comparisons of elite and public opinion in tables 7 and 8, pp. 228-229).<sup>11</sup> More recently, Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) report an average correlation of 0.12 across aspects of US public opinion in 1980, with little growth in this coefficient over ensuing decades (see results for Model B in Table 3, p.432). For their part, Munzert and Bauer (2013a, p. 74) find that ‘the correlation between [domains] is...almost always less than 0.2, and often there is no statistical relationship at all’. Against this, [Figure 5.9](#) suggests considerable ideological structure in the cultural division of British voters, while also confirming the cross-cutting status of left-right, liberal-conservative issue positions (see Evans, 1998, 1999, 2002a; Hobolt and Rodon, 2020; Surridge, 2018b).

Yet it is the processes surrounding a state of polarisation that determines its theoret-

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<sup>9</sup>[Figure 5.9](#) and similar plots in this section are produced using replication code from Munzert and Bauer (2013b).

<sup>10</sup>The average correlation of attitudes towards European integration, social values, and economic issues is 0.52, 0.39, 0.35, respectively, although there are many more issue pairs in these domains.

<sup>11</sup>These are tau-gamma coefficients and thus not strictly comparable with the Pearson correlations reported above. However, I obtain similar results using rank correlation measures on the BES data. For instance, Kendall’s tau is 0.37 for within-domain issue pairs and 0.16 for between-domain issue pairs.

ical interpretation. Sociological mechanisms describe ideological realignment affecting political conflict. Fragmented disagreements are organised into encompassing factions by socio-demographic change, which alters and merges together interests shared among otherwise heterogeneous subpopulations. Partisan realignment is then an outcome following changes in the association between attitudes. In particular, sociological interpretations of results from Section 5.2 imply unravelling ideological structure on economic issues and increased constraint driving Labour-Conservative division within and across cultural domains.

Note that left-right dealignment does not preclude positive trends in the relationship between economic and cultural dimensions. Many sociological accounts outline developments leading to class fragmentation and cultural polarisation (e.g., Kitschelt, 1994; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997; Kitschelt and Rehm, 2014). But it is not as if economic concerns disappear. Various liberal social groups are associated with redistributive preferences, including the metropolitan precariat, ethnic minority populations, public sector workers, and interpersonal elements of the professional middle classes. At the same time, technical and organisational middle-class occupations are linked to less liberal, more strongly pro-market values, which align with positions held among certain culturally conservative voters—e.g., small business owners and wage labourers exposed to import competition and seeking comparative advantage. Then there are ideological clusters not conforming to left-liberal, right-authoritarian political traditions. Namely, the ‘egalitarian conservatism’ encouraged by routine and semi-routine jobs in industries less subject to the vagaries of globalising markets—retail, construction, etc.—is central to accounts of xenophobic populism (e.g., Crouch, 2016, 2017b, 2020). Sociological developments lead to the displacement of formerly encompassing class conflict, not economic concerns themselves. The latter become segmented across social groups and regions with increasingly divergent and aligned cultural attitudes. Left-right ideology thus loses internal structure and polarisation the more it is integrated by cross-cutting conflicts.<sup>12</sup>

Partisan polarisation that is associated with greater constraint between issue positions is then strong evidence in favour of sociological accounts. The same outcome

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<sup>12</sup>This contrasts with conflict extension described in elite cue accounts, where identity-defensive mechanisms sustain increasing attitude divergence and alignment on cross-cutting dimensions (Layman and Carsey, 2002a,b).

is consistent with elite cue effects, although these remain challenged by convergence on economic issues among partisans and in the distribution of public opinion. Further evidence of left-right dealignment will continue to weaken the argument that voters are changing attitudes in line with mainstream policy platforms. Meanwhile, an account based purely on party sorting implies no attitude change, with [Figure 5.9](#) reflecting a static ideological structure with which elites are engaging. Along with changing attitude divergence observed above, these mechanisms are damaged by trends in attitude alignment.

I test for such trends via three varying intercept, varying slope multilevel models. Since constraint describes the organisation of attitudes in overarching belief systems (Converse, 1964), the first model simply regresses correlations from all 763 issue pairs on time, giving an overall estimate of ideological polarisation. Formally,

$$\rho_{pt} = \alpha_p + \beta_p t + \epsilon_{pt}, \quad (5.4)$$

where  $\rho_{pt}$  is the correlation between issue pair  $p$  at time  $t$ . This is like the no-grouping model introduced to assess aggregate attitude partisanship, but with intercepts and slopes varying over 763 units of constraint rather than 40 single attitude items. The no-grouping model is then adapted to differentiate the types of issues involved. First, I interact time with a dummy variable separating within- from between-domain pairs:

$$\rho_{pt} = \alpha_1 + \alpha_2 \cdot \textit{within domain} + \alpha_3 p + \beta_1 t + \beta_2 t \cdot \textit{within domain} + \beta_5 p t + \epsilon_{pt}. \quad (5.5)$$

$\alpha_1$  and  $\beta_1$  are the initial association and trend in attitudes belonging to different policy areas.  $\alpha_2$  and  $\beta_2$  are the initial association and trend in attitudes belonging to the same policy area. Second, I include finer-grained fixed effects distinguishing attitude constraint by domain:

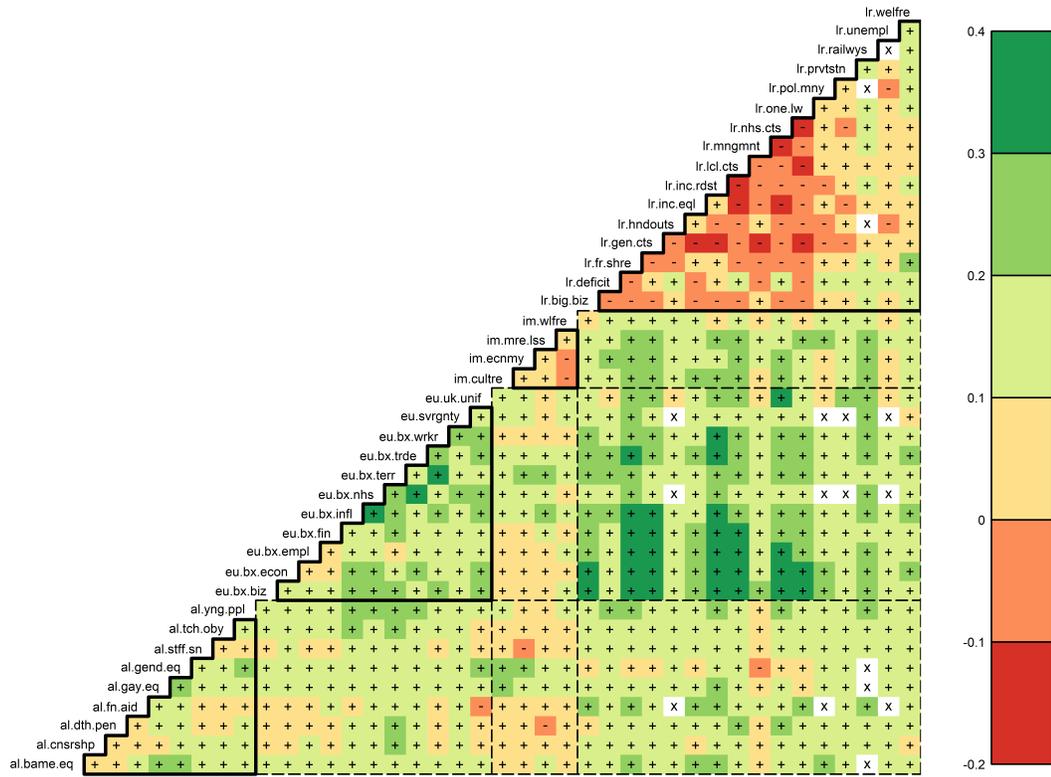
$$\begin{aligned} \rho_{pt} = & \alpha_1 + \alpha_2 \cdot \textit{immigration} + \alpha_3 \cdot \textit{social values} + \alpha_4 \cdot \textit{economic issues} \\ & + \alpha_5 \cdot \textit{cross-cultural pair} + \alpha_6 \cdot \textit{cross-dimension pair} + \alpha_7 p + \beta_1 t \\ & + \beta_2 t \cdot \textit{immigration} + \beta_3 t \cdot \textit{social values} + \beta_4 t \cdot \textit{economic issues} \\ & + \beta_5 t \cdot \textit{cross-cultural pair} + \beta_6 t \cdot \textit{cross-dimension pair} + \beta_7 p t + \epsilon_{pt}. \end{aligned} \quad (5.6)$$

Here, European integration positions are the baseline against which trends for immigration, social values, economic issues, and two broad combinations of policy area are compared. Cross-cultural pairs are correlations connecting preferences on European integration, immigration, and social values. Cross-dimension pairs combine cultural and

**Table 5.4:** Trends in attitude alignment.

Model	Constraint
<b>A) No grouping of pairs</b>	
Intercept	0.21 (0.01)
Time (decades)	0.14 (0.01)
Residual SD:	
Intercepts	0.19
Trends	0.12
Data	0.03
<b>B) Within and between domains</b>	
Intercept	0.13 (0.01)
Within domain	0.25 (0.01)
Time (decades)	0.18 (0.01)
Time x within domain	-0.12 (0.01)
Residual SD:	
Intercepts	0.15
Trends	0.11
Data	0.03
<b>C) Types of domains</b>	
Intercept	0.43 (0.02)
European integration	baseline
Immigration	0.29 (0.05)
Social values	-0.09 (0.02)
Economic issues	-0.05 (0.02)
Cross-cultural	-0.13 (0.02)
Cross-dimension	-0.37 (0.02)
Time (decades)	0.22 (0.01)
Time x European integration	baseline
Time x immigration	-0.23 (0.04)
Time x social values	-0.08 (0.02)
Time x economic issues	-0.32 (0.02)
Time x cross-cultural	-0.11 (0.02)
Time x cross-dimension	-0.02 (0.01)
Residual SD:	
Intercepts	0.11
Trends	0.07
Data	0.03

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from multilevel models with the correlation between attitudes on 763 issue pairs as dependent variable ( $N = 3,713$ ). Intercepts are the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Standard errors are in parentheses.



**Figure 5.10:** Trends in attitude alignment.

*Notes:* Positive trends are colour-coded from yellow through light to dark green and negative trends are orange to red. Plus and minus signs indicate the direction of trends and ‘X’ marks issue pairs for which no observations are available. Solid borders frame issue pairs from the same area of elite policy divergence and dashed borders contain cross-domain correlations.

economic issue positions. In all three models, intercepts represent average constraint among attitudes at the beginning of 2014 and slopes capture time trends in decades.

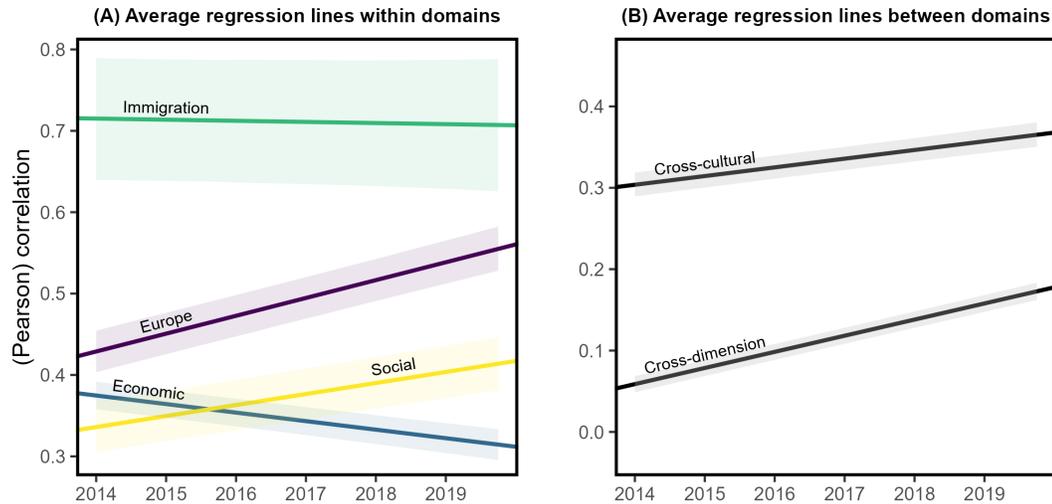
The results are summarised in parts A, B, and C of [Table 5.4](#). The no-grouping model estimates substantially increasing ideological structure in public opinion. From an overall intercept of 0.21, the average correlation between attitudes grows by 0.14 per decade, or roughly 0.08 between waves 1 and 19 of the [BES](#) data. This is far stronger than corresponding trends found by Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) and Munzert and Bauer (2013a)—0.02 and -0.04 per decade, respectively—providing clear evidence that partisan polarisation is associated with attitude change. I check the overall estimate of  $\beta$  against unit-level trends in [Figure 5.10](#), which plots average slopes for every issue

pair. Attitude constraint rises in most cases. Out of 763  $\beta_p$ , 706 are positive, 544 are greater than 0.1, 168 fall above 0.2, and 33 are between 0.3 and 0.4. Crucially, some of the largest trends occur among issue positions in different policy domains.

In accounts emphasising attitude alignment, partisan polarisation reflects increasing association between formerly orthogonal political preferences. For instance, although previously a more left-wing perspective, culturally conservative aspects of Euroscepticism are emphasised by the consequences of European integration, especially the freedom of movement (Marks, 2004). Immigration attitudes were weakly correlated with votes in the 1975 referendum on European Economic Community (EEC) membership. In fact, BES referendum survey respondents were slightly less likely to support withdrawal if believing there are too many immigrants (Crewe et al., 1980). The situation had swung much further in the other direction by 2015, however, with 51 per cent of those concerned about immigration levels supporting leaving compared with just 11 per cent of the unconcerned (Evans and Mellon, 2019; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 5). Beyond market harmonisation, European integration advances cosmopolitan political ideals. It thus became powerfully cross-cutting, fragmenting left-right cleavages while unifying social groups with distinct cultural outlooks (see Carey, 2002; Evans and Butt, 2007; Hix, 1999; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Hooghe et al., 2002; Kriesi et al., 2008; McLaren, 2002; Tillman, 2013; Van Der Brug and Van Spanje, 2009). Part of this process involves increasing constraint on similar issues, such as escalating concerns about immigration driving more hostile attitudes towards migrants themselves. Yet it is primarily across domains that enhanced ideological thinking emerges and threatens social integration and political pluralism (Blau, 1977; Blau and Schwartz, 1984; Coser, 1956).

Hence, if partisan polarisation is associated with attitude change, I expect stronger trends connecting preferences in different areas of elite policy divergence. That expectation is borne out in part B of Table 5.4, where the slope between domains ( $\beta = 0.18$ ) is three times larger than within-domain trends ( $\beta = 0.06$ ), on average. According to this model, the correlation among attitudes across policy areas increased by about 0.1 from 2014 to 2019, representing dramatic growth in ideological constraint. For comparison, Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) find no difference in very modest trends estimated with both types of issue pair ( $\beta = 0.02$ ). Munzert and Bauer (2013a) do observe stronger

trends between domains (-0.04) than within them (-0.02), but these are a fraction of corresponding changes affecting attitude alignment in Britain during the Brexit period.



**Figure 5.11:** Trends in attitude alignment by issue domain.

*Notes:* Shaded areas are 0.9 credible intervals of the mean regression line for each issue domain. Cross-cultural trends combine attitudes towards European integration, immigration, and social values. Cross-dimension trends combine economic and cultural domains. The dashed line in panel B marks 0. The y-axis has the same length in both panels. Time is on the x-axis.

Is attitude alignment extending equally within and between different domains, though? In the results for attitude partisanship and attitude divergence, polarisation is confined to cultural disputes while negative or null trends emerge on economic issues. Similar heterogeneity is also apparent here, with left-right pairs accounting for 51 out of 57 negative coefficients in Figure 5.10. I thus estimate separate regression lines for issue domain groups, including attitudes straddling ideological dimensions and different cultural policy areas. The results form part C of Table 5.4 and are summarised visually in Figure 5.11. Although model B found more evidence of polarisation averaging across domains, results in part C show rapid increases in constraint affecting specific aspects of public opinion. In fact, the strongest trend emerges among European integration positions, the correlation of which grows by 0.13 between 2014 and 2019. Social values are also associated with substantial positive trends:  $\beta = 0.14$  per decade, or 0.08 in years covered by the BES data. Yet within-domain attitude alignment is limited by developments affecting other political preferences. I observe declining internal structure

connecting economic issues, where constraint falls by roughly 0.06 in the 2014-2019 period ( $\beta = 0.10$ ). On the other hand, model C effectively estimates no trend in the correlation between immigration positions ( $\beta = -0.01$ , SE = 0.04, 90% CI [-0.08, 0.05]).

These results then confirm patterns of attitude divergence observed above. Namely, I find clear ideological polarisation limited to cultural issues, suggesting further problems with party sorting and elite cue accounts. Sorting mechanisms are based on partisanship change and cannot explain trends in constraint. Elite cue effects describe increasing attitude alignment on issues subject to elite policy divergence, providing no obvious reason for declines observed in the correlation among economic preferences. Indeed, left-right dealignment is associated with dramatic increases in constraint between economic and cultural dimensions. The latter are virtually orthogonal in wave 1 of the [BES](#) data ( $\alpha = 0.06$ ). Yet model C estimates a 0.2 per decade trend in cross-dimensional alignment, leading to a correlation of roughly 0.18 by the end of 2019. It also identifies positive trends in the relationship among cultural domains:  $0.30 + (0.11 \times 0.575) = 0.36$ . This is compatible with sociological accounts of conflict displacement, with growing attitude alignment on cultural issues fragmenting and integrating left-right cleavages (e.g., Kitschelt, 1994; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997).

## Summary

Trends in attitude divergence and alignment reveal consistent evidence in favour of Hypothesis 2. Partisan polarisation mirrors large-scale attitude change affecting voters from 2014 to 2019. I observe increased dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint among cultural issue positions, along with convergence and dealignment in the distributional properties of left-right opinion. Findings from this section thus contradict core empirical expectations in party sorting and elite cue accounts. Partisan polarisation is associated with attitude change, but not in manner suggesting that mass trends are caused by Labour-Conservative policy disagreements in the post-crisis period. Rather, increases in attitude divergence and alignment limited to cultural issues support sociological accounts of recent developments in British politics (e.g., Crouch, 2020; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

## 5.4 | Conclusion

This chapter outlined cross-sectional evidence of polarisation from 2014 to 2019, revealing a mixed relationship between elite policy divergence and developments affecting voters during the Brexit period of British politics. Section 5.2 asked whether elite trends are associated with partisan polarisation. Counterintuitive results were almost immediate since some of the clearest differences in Labour-Conservative platforms after the 2007-2008 financial crisis are linked to declining attitude partisanship. The correlation between economic positions and mainstream party identity decreases while domains subject to more ambiguous elite trends polarise considerably. Substantial positive trends are estimated for all cultural issues, yet particularly dramatic increases in attitude partisanship take place on European integration. Findings from Section 5.2 thus support Hypothesis 1a but not H2b. Elite policy divergence is associated with partisan polarisation excluding economic issues, on which Labour-Conservative coalitions converge.

Section 5.3 asked if this outcome is related to attitude change. Across models assessing aggregate dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint, distinct polarisation again emerges on cultural issues. The standard deviation, proportion of extremism, excess kurtosis, and correlation in attitudes towards European integration and (minus extremism) social values increases from 2014 to 2019. I also observed change in immigration preferences, which shift dramatically in a liberal direction. The latter has an ambiguous effect on attitude divergence and alignment, however, unlike corresponding dynamics in other cultural domains. The results for constraint, moreover, show voters developing greater ideological consistency across different areas of elite policy disagreement. Indeed, some of the largest increases in constraint occur between dimensions, with cultural realignment integrating formerly orthogonal economic positions. Section 5.3 therefore finds clear evidence in favour of Hypothesis 2: partisan polarisation is associated with attitude change.

It is not just partisan polarisation that mirrors changes in public opinion. Declining attitude partisanship corresponds with convergence and dealignment among economic preferences. These results contradict previous research. Namely, using the same operationalisation of polarisation and multilevel modelling framework, Cohen and Cohen

**Table 5.5:** Cross-sectional evidence of polarisation and the empirical expectations associated with sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts in the Brexit period.

	Sociological	Party sorting	Elite cue	Observed
<b>Polarisation through which variables?</b>				
Attitude change	✓	×	✓	✓
Partisanship change	×	✓	×	?
<b>Polarisation among which voters?</b>				
Partisans	✓	—	✓	?
Non-partisans	✓	—	×	?
<b>Polarisation on which issues?</b>				
Cultural issues	✓	✓	✓	✓
Economic issues	?	?	✓	×

(2021) observe increased redistributive attitude partisanship ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ), dispersion (0.01, 0.00), extremism (0.04, 0.01), and constraint (0.05, 0.00) from 2007 to 2016. These trends are estimated using 17 questions from the [BSAS](#), five of which form a standard left-right scale also present in the [BES](#) data (see Evans et al., 1996). The difference in trends recorded using the same approach on similar data between 2007 and 2016 suggests drastic changes in British politics after the Brexit vote.

But which mechanisms are best placed to explain these changes? [Table 5.5](#) compares findings from this chapter with empirical expectations of sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts. Evidence beyond the theoretical scope of party sorting emerges on the variables driving polarisation. These are partisanship change mechanisms and cannot explain trends in attitude divergence or alignment. The tick against attitude change thus requires sociological or elite cue processes. Top-down attitude change mechanisms are also damaged by the issues driving polarisation, however. Elite cues should cause mass trends corresponding with Labour-Conservative policy disagreements. Arguably the clearest separation in mainstream party platforms takes place on economic issues following the financial crisis, which are associated only with depolarisation among voters. This includes convergence and dealignment among party identifiers and in the distributional properties of public opinion. The cross against economic issues in the table then leaves sociological accounts as most consistent with the British case.

Sociological developments alter the structural conditions underpinning political conflict, leading parties to adapt electoral appeals. These results do not identify the developments involved but are compatible with demographic culture shifts (e.g., Inglehart, 2018; Kitschelt, 1994; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). The growing size and metropolitan concentration of subpopulations linked with progressive social outlooks readily explains partisan polarisation that is associated with attitude change and limited to cultural issues, especially since the latter appears to be caused by increasing liberalism. I observe consistent declines in what are on average highly conservative preferences for European integration, immigration, and broader social values. There might be alternative explanations for such attitude dynamics. In particular, several studies document ‘thermostatic’ reactions to immigration outcomes (Cunningham, 2014; Ford et al., 2015; Jennings, 2009; Vrânceanu and Lachat, 2021). It is plausible that less restrictive public opinion reflects at least the perception that net migration reduced following Brexit. Indeed, declining opposition towards immigration is far stronger than the liberal trajectory apparent in other domains, which is in turn associated with weaker trends in attitude divergence and alignment. I return to this in subsequent chapters, but for now note that sociological developments provide a more coherent explanation of attitude change observed in this chapter.

After all, it is difficult to explain left-right dealignment and convergence without conflict displacement mechanisms. Emphasis on post-material values has increased alongside wealth and income inequality in Western societies since the 1970s (e.g., Inglehart, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). The benefits of economic growth are consolidated increasingly by the rich, leaving greater numbers of voters subject to material insecurity (Piketty, 2014). Depolarisation is thus taking place on issues that, if anything, become more relevant in the post-crisis period. What explains this paradox? It is not just party deserting, nor obviously caused by polarising elite cues. Rather, the clearest explanation of left-right dealignment and convergence is found in sociological accounts, many of which describe cultural issues fragmenting and integrating class cleavages (e.g., Kitschelt, 1994; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997; Kitschelt and Rehm, 2014). Economic inequality does not imply polarisation if disorganised across constituencies with focussed cultural divides, just as the latter were once fractured in social groups and regions distinguished by class conflict. Such ideological rotation is apparent in results from this

chapter, contributing to claims that cultural realignment is displacing the left-right axis of British politics (e.g., Cutts et al., 2020; Crouch, 2020; Jennings and Stoker, 2016, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

Sociological accounts are most consistent with cross-sectional polarisation trends, yet that does not rule out party sorting nor elite cue mechanisms. As depicted in [Table 5.5](#), gaps remain in our understanding of the British case. Namely, partisan polarisation is associated with changing attitude divergence and alignment but potentially also subject to partisanship change. Moreover, there is nothing disproving elite cue effects other depolarisation on economic issues. Cultural attitude change might still be related to different partisan, non-partisan dynamics. The take-home point from this chapter is that aggregate outcomes contradict empirical expectations in party sorting and elite cue accounts. Recent events in British politics seem to indicate social change. Yet individual-level mechanisms beyond sociological developments are arguably relevant. I now isolate those mechanisms using a panel component of the [BES](#) data, beginning in [Chapter 6](#) by analysing changes in attitudes and partisanship leading to partisan polarisation.

# 6

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## Panel Design I: Partisan Polarisation and Attitude and Partisanship Change

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### 6.1 | Introduction

Partisan polarisation requires attitude or partisanship change. Either the composition of groups change or the issue positions of members within them. The cross-sectional design reveals whether partisan polarisation is associated with changes in mass opinion. Hence, Chapter 5 observed corresponding trends in attitude partisanship, divergence, and alignment, with Labour-Conservative identifiers and public preferences (de)polarising on (economic) cultural issues. The implication is that partisan polarisation is at least partly caused by ideological developments, which would need to affect only voters outside mainstream party coalitions to be completely unrelated. Yet the cross-sectional design does not identify individual-level changes leading to attitude-partisanship realignment in sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts.<sup>1</sup>

Focus on the BES data therefore pivots in this chapter to a panel of respondents surveyed repeatedly from 2014 to 2019. As described in Section 4.4, the panel component comprises wave 1 participants also present in any 2019 wave. It thus contains

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<sup>1</sup>Note, polarisation does not require *individual-level* changes in attitudes or partisanship. Population replacement is a major source of social change described in sociological accounts, where expansions in higher education, shifting class structures, immigration, and many other developments alter mass electorates and hence aggregate distributional parameters of partisanship and public opinion. Some accounts even claim that socialisation crystallises political values and identities at an early age (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1976; Inglehart, 1977, 1990, 1997). The short-term focus adopted here is not designed to test these mechanisms of polarisation, but the individual-level processes distinguishing sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts (see Section 4.2).

individual-level measurements of attitude and partisanship change, allowing us to test certain claims advanced in the polarisation literature.

In particular, accounts based purely on party sorting argue that mass polarisation takes place because individuals switch partisanship without changing issue positions (e.g., Fiorina et al., 2011). Panel data allows us to establish what polarisation trends would look like among a fixed composition of voters if this were true. We can re-estimate attitude partisanship in survey waves using individuals' *initial* issue positions and *observed* Labour-Conservative identity, comparing trends emerging from party switching alone with those observed when both attitudes and partisanship change together. If sorting mechanisms are the principal cause of partisan polarisation, there should be little difference between this *fixed attitude* counterfactual and 'real' trends. That gives the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3a**—Fixed attitude polarisation matches observed trends: switching mechanisms alone are sufficient to explain partisan polarisation and attitude change is not required.

Evidence against H3a suggests that party sorting accounts are insufficient because partisan polarisation also requires attitude change.

We can extend this framework to test the reverse claim. Namely, some sociological and elite cue accounts argue that partisanship is an enduring socio-psychological attachment, which is either becoming more entrenched as a result of or itself driving ideological realignment on political issues (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Layman and Carsey, 2002a). Such perspectives imply that mass polarisation emerges from individuals adjusting attitudes without changing party identity. This claim is easily testable using panel data on *initial* partisanship and *observed* issue positions. Again, all I am doing is allowing partisan polarisation to emerge from attitude change alone. If individual-level ideological developments—bottom-up or otherwise—are the main cause of mass trends, this *fixed partisanship* counterfactual should match partisan polarisation observed between 2014 and 2019. A second hypothesis thus follows:

**Hypothesis 3b**—Fixed partisanship polarisation matches observed trends: attitude change alone is sufficient to explain partisan polarisation and switching mechanisms are not required.

Evidence against H3b suggests that sociological and elite cue accounts are insufficient because partisan polarisation also requires partisanship change.

Scarce support for either hypothesis is found in this chapter. Section 6.2 asks if changes in attitude partisanship are caused by attitude or partisanship change. I regress observed, fixed attitude, and fixed partisanship polarisation on time in the Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) multilevel modelling framework. Since Chapter 5 found heterogeneous trends across different issues, I perform this analysis separately on European integration, immigration, social values, and economic issues. In each case, changes in attitude partisanship involve attitude *and* partisanship change. Fixing issue positions and Labour-Conservative identity at initial values, respectively, introduces substantial variation to observed trends, suggesting that neither attitude change nor party switching mechanisms are sufficient to explain partisan polarisation alone.

## 6.2 | Are changes in attitude partisanship caused by attitude or partisanship change?

Attitude partisanship is observed by measuring the correlation between issue positions and Labour-Conservative identity in survey waves. I define two counterfactual variations on this outcome: the correlation between *initial* attitudes and *observed* partisanship and the correlation between *initial* partisanship and *observed* attitudes. The correlation between Labour-Conservative identity and the first wave of observations on attitude items estimates polarisation caused by partisanship change, because only the composition of mainstream electoral coalitions is changing. It thus approximates conditions leading to polarisation in pure party sorting accounts, where individuals switch partisanship without changing attitudes. The reverse is true when the composition of these coalitions is fixed in wave 1: respondents altering issue positions is all that can affect attitude-partisanship realignment between survey waves. This is like accounts of polarisation centred on socio-psychological conceptions of party identification, with perfectly stable partisans updating issue positions in response to sociological or elite cue processes.

We thus have three measurements of polarisation per unit of attitude partisanship. *Observed* polarisation is the correlation emerging from covariation in issue positions and party identity over time. *Fixed attitude* polarisation is the correlation between observed

partisanship and issue positions fixed at initial values. *Fixed partisanship* polarisation is the correlation between observed issue positions and partisanship fixed at initial values.<sup>2</sup>

We can extend the Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) multilevel modelling approach to describe differences in these outcomes. One option would be to fit separate models to observed and counterfactual measurements. However, it will be easier to compare the magnitude of fixed attitude and fixed partisanship polarisation in a single model with observed trends. I thus follow the specification used by Cohen and Cohen (2021), stacking  $n \times 3$  survey-wave correlations between attitudes and partisanship in the same dependent variable and introducing indicator variables to distinguish conditions leading to trends in polarisation. Formally,

$$\begin{aligned} \rho_{it} = & \alpha_1 + \alpha_2 \cdot \textit{fixed attitude} + \alpha_3 \cdot \textit{fixed partisanship} + \alpha_{4i} + \beta_1 t \\ & + \beta_2 t \cdot \textit{fixed attitude} + \beta_3 t \cdot \textit{fixed partisanship} + \beta_{4i} t + \epsilon_{it}, \end{aligned} \quad (6.1)$$

where  $\rho_{it}$  is a column containing observed, fixed attitude, and fixed partisanship correlations on issue  $i$  in survey wave  $t$ . Counterfactual conditions are distinguished via two dummy variables, both of which are coded as 0 when correlations result from observed covariation in issue positions and Labour-Conservative identity. *Fixed attitude* equals 1 and *fixed partisanship* is 0 if correlations are measured using initial issue positions and observed partisanship, whereas correlations between initial partisanship and observed issue positions are denoted when *fixed partisanship* is 1 and *fixed attitude* is 0.

The model is otherwise like those used throughout Chapter 5, where varying intercepts and slopes are estimated by unit of polarisation. Intercepts are the average correlation between attitudes and partisanship in wave 1 and slopes are the average trend in this outcome over time, with  $\alpha_1$  and  $\beta_1$ ,  $\alpha_2$  and  $\beta_2$ , and  $\alpha_3$  and  $\beta_3$  pooling observed, fixed attitude, and fixed partisanship data, respectively. Again, time is measured by counting years and quarters since the first BES wave, which I divide by 10 to obtain trends in decades. This independent variable provides a proxy for elite policy

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<sup>2</sup>The two questions used to operationalise partisanship are available in all but one of 19 waves fielded from 2014 to 2019. Attitude items are much more infrequent, meanwhile, and 15 out of 40 enter the panel after wave 1. Additional attitude partisanship units are thus created when fixing issue positions at initial values, since a different correlation is calculated for every wave in which partisanship is measured, even when the corresponding attitude item would not otherwise be available or has not actually entered the survey yet. Hence, to balance comparisons of attitude and partisanship change and to ensure that the latter is not measured prior to initial attitudes, observations of Labour-Conservative identity are dropped when collected in waves lacking data on a given issue.

divergence from 2014 to 2019. Hence, central interest is on its interaction with dummy variables, summarising the difference between observed and counterfactual trends.

If party sorting alone causes partisan polarisation, there is no difference in observed and *fixed attitude* trends. The interaction between this dummy variable and time will be null because individuals' party identification remains free to vary over time. *Fixing partisanship* at initial values would then introduce dramatic changes to the trend in partisan polarisation, with an interaction between time and this dummy variable that is inverse and proportionate to observed trends. In cases of polarisation, the coefficient on the interaction will be negative because the mechanisms increasing attitude partisanship have been constrained. Yet the British case also involves partisan *depolarisation* on certain issues. Namely, Section 5.2 revealed negative trends in left-right attitude partisanship. In such cases, the survey-wave correlation between issue positions and initial Labour-Conservative identity removes party *desorting*, leading to a positive interaction between time and the fixed partisanship dummy variable.

The reverse of all this applies to the extent that attitude change alone causes partisan polarisation, whether through sociological or elite cue processes. The interaction between time and the *fixed partisanship* dummy variable is null because ideological developments proceed as normal. However, holding individuals' issue positions constant at initial values prevents those ideological developments, leading to interactions between time and the *fixed attitude* dummy variable that are proportionally inverse to observed trends. Again, this interaction will be negative in cases where the correlation between issue positions and Labour-Conservative identity increases and positive in cases where it declines, such as on economic issues from 2014 to 2019.

Beyond these conceptually ideal scenarios, quite complicated results emerge when partisan polarisation requires attitude *and* partisanship change. A partisan group might move further in a certain direction when attitudes and partisanship change together than when attitudes and partisanship change alone. Yet it is also possible that party coalitions are subject to countervailing mechanisms. For example, in sociological accounts emphasising demographic culture shifts, polarisation is caused by the growing size and urban concentration of social groups with cosmopolitan preferences (e.g., Inglehart, 2018; Kitschelt, 1994; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). Cities and the people living in them become more liberal, leaving communitarian sentiments built up in non-metropolitan

areas. This creates partisan division because elites are appealing to constituencies with fundamentally different ideological values. But the attitude dynamics involved are unidirectional. Society is becoming less socially conservative over time. Suppose that these developments make existing Conservative Party identifiers more liberal on cultural issues, while the party's Brexit stance also attracts voters with Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, and other socially traditional preferences. Liberal attitude change has the opposite effect on Conservatives' cultural positions than party sorting, the aggregate consequences of which might cancel each other out. Depending on changes affecting the other partisan group, these scenarios can result in fixed attitude and fixed partisanship polarisation that is stronger or weaker than observed trends. Either way, the implication is that neither attitude nor partisanship change is sufficient to explain partisan polarisation alone.

The remainder of this chapter is split into four substantive subsections, each applying the counterfactual attitude partisanship model to a different area of elite policy divergence. European integration is associated with the sharpest polarisation in all aspects of Chapter 5, including an attitude partisanship trend around twice the size of any other issue domain. Let us thus begin there, before considering Labour-Conservative realignment on immigration, social values, and economic issues.

### **European integration**

Table 6.1 summarises two models. The main results are in part A, which displays observed trends and the effect of fixing attitudes and partisanship at initial values in the panel component. Part B just shows cross-sectional trends in partisan polarisation, estimated from the full BES sample used in Chapter 5. The first thing to note is that both datasets support similar results. The correlation between European integration positions and Labour-Conservative identity increases by about 0.3 and 0.33 per decade in the panel component and full BES sample, respectively. This is important because some accounts emphasise population replacement mechanisms (e.g., Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Inglehart, 1997). To the extent that polarisation results from dynamics taking place between rather than within individuals, panel data underestimates changing ideological preferences and identities. It is thus reassuring to observe similar trends among voters surveyed repeatedly from 2014 to 2019. At least as far as the issues surrounding

**Table 6.1:** Trends in attitude partisanship on European integration.

	attitude x partisanship	
	A) Panel trends	B) Cross-sectional trends
Intercept	0.26 (0.02)	0.24 (0.02)
Observed	baseline	—
Fixed attitude	0.03 (0.03)	—
Fixed partisanship	0.04 (0.03)	—
Time (decades)	0.30 (0.02)	0.33 (0.03)
Time x observed	baseline	—
Time x fixed attitude	-0.25 (0.03)	—
Time x fixed partisanship	-0.24 (0.03)	—
Residual SD:		
Intercepts	0.06	0.07
Trends	0.03	0.05
Data	0.03	0.03
N	312	104
Groups	33	11

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from multilevel models with the correlation between issue positions and Conservative (versus Labour) identity as dependent variable. The intercept is the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Dummy variables in part A separate partisan realignment observed in the panel data from fixed attitude and fixed partisanship trends. Part B shows cross-sectional trends from Chapter 5. Standard errors are in parentheses.

European integration are concerned, partisan polarisation involves changes affecting individuals as well as the aggregate property of attitude partisanship. But what exactly are those changes?

The dummy variables for fixed attitude and fixed partisanship outline differences in observed and counterfactual trends. Hypothesis 3a expects the same increase in polarisation emerging from the correlation between *fixed attitudes* and observed partisanship, indicating that party switching alone is sufficient and attitude change is not required. Yet the coefficient on this interaction is -0.25, which is both large and inverse to the rise in attitude partisanship documented when Labour-Conservative identity and EU preferences covary over time ( $\beta = 0.3$ ). Subtracting from baseline trends suggests that polarisation would increase by 0.05 per decade if only partisanship changed, or roughly 0.03 in the 2014-2019 period. To put it another way, over 80 per cent ( $0.25 / 0.3 = 0.83$ ) of the observed panel trend requires attitude change, contrary to pure party sorting accounts (e.g., Fiorina et al., 2011).

Meanwhile, Hypothesis 3b expects a null interaction between time and *fixed partisanship*, indicating that attitude change alone is sufficient to explain polarisation and party switching is not required. In fact, the coefficient associated with this interaction is comparably large, revealing that  $\beta = 0.24$  of the overall increase in attitude partisanship per decade would not take place without party switching. Interestingly, even though a large part of observed polarisation involves attitude change, only 20 per cent of the panel trend occurs through this variable alone. The remaining 80 also requires partisanship change.

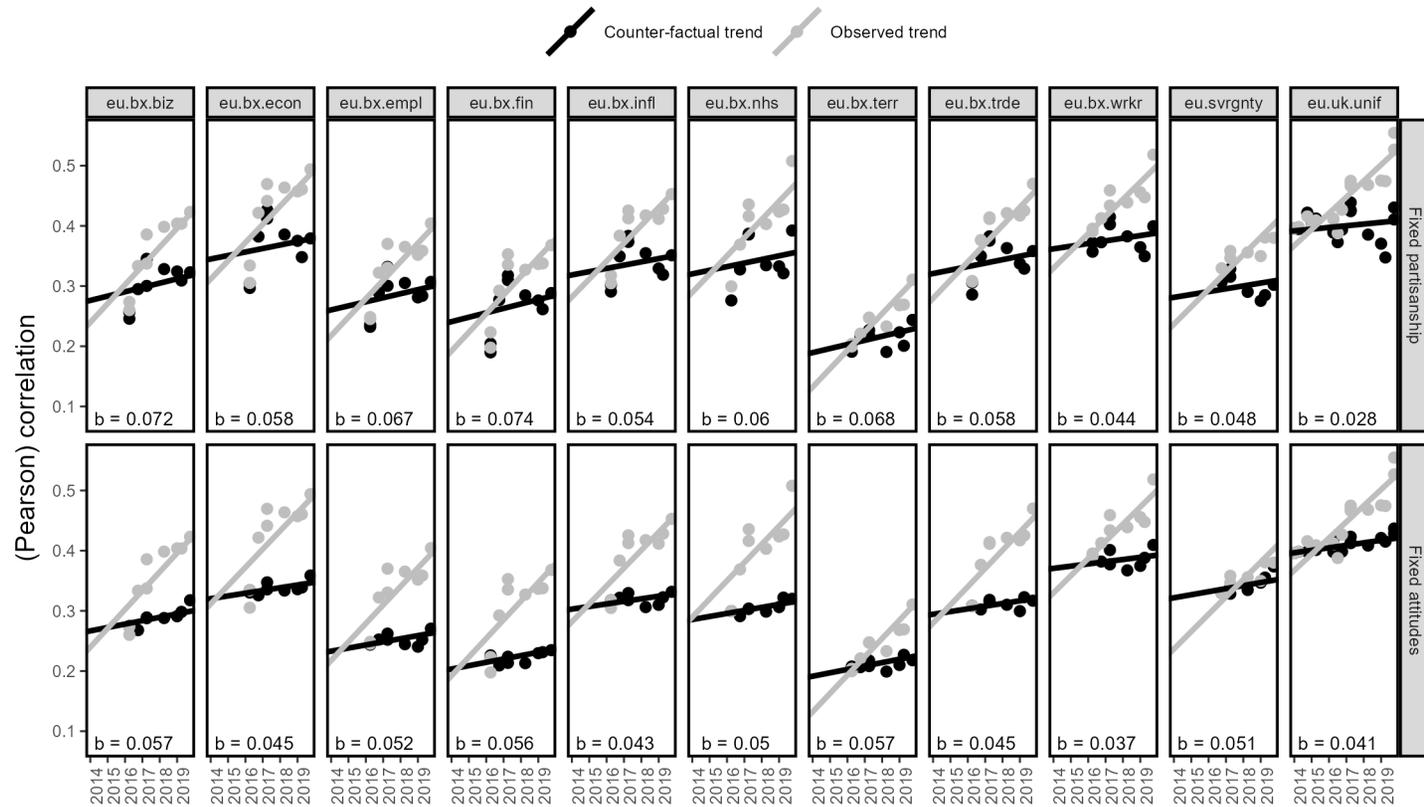
These findings are displayed in [Figure 6.1](#). Following Cohen and Cohen (2021), the figure plots observed attitude partisanship trends (grey) against counterfactuals (black) obtained by fixing individuals' issue positions (bottom row) and Labour-Conservative identity (top row) at initial values, respectively. It shows that both variables contribute relatively evenly to partisan polarisation from 2014 to 2019. Attitude change is perhaps more consequential, consistent with the overall point estimates in [Table 6.1](#). The fixed partisanship slope is slightly larger on most European integration items, meaning that more evidence of polarisation remains when only issue positions vary over time. Yet these differences are very small and probably not significant.

The figure also reveals visibly noisier ideological dynamics than trends affecting Labour-Conservative identity. European integration issues experience substantial attitude change-based spikes in their correlation with partisanship during 2016, 2017, and 2019. The average trend associated with these fluctuations is positive but seemingly nonlinear, rising and falling in association with the finer points of elite competition. Contrast this with less dramatic increases in partisan polarisation when only Labour-Conservative identity changes. Although there is some evidence of heightened party switching in 2017 and 2019—election years where Brexit was the defining issue (Cur-tice, 2020; Cutts et al., 2020; Heath and Goodwin, 2017; Mellon et al., 2018; Prosser, 2020)—attitude partisanship rises relatively steadily with EU preferences fixed at initial values.

Other things being equal, the correlation between attitudes and Labour-Conservative partisanship is just a rescaled difference in means.<sup>3</sup> We thus get a

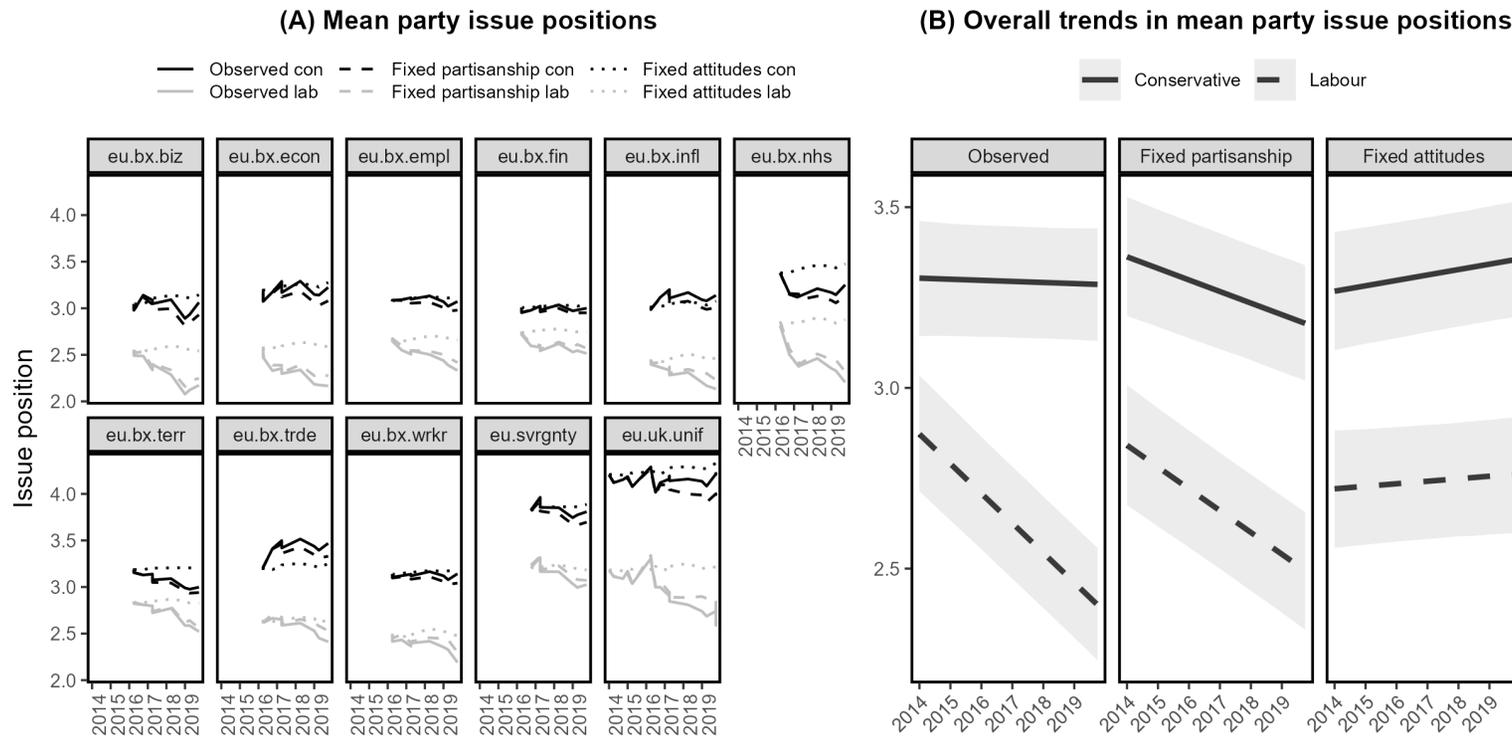
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<sup>3</sup>The assumption is that the relative size of these groups remains unchanged over time. [Figure 4.3](#) in [Chapter 4](#) supports this assumption. The proportion of voters identifying as Labour or Conservative stays fundamentally close to 0.3 in the panel component.



**Figure 6.1:** Observed and counterfactual trends in attitude partisanship on European integration.

*Notes:* Observed data and trends are in grey, while black dots and lines display the counterfactual by row. Counterfactual slopes are also printed for each issue, indicating the variation in attitude partisanship over time remaining when a given variable is held constant. Time is on the x-axis.



**Figure 6.2:** Observed and counterfactual Labour-Conservative positions on European integration.

*Notes:* Part A shows mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave by issue. Part B shows overall trends from a varying intercept, varying slope multilevel model with mean issue positions as dependent variable. Shaded areas are 0.9 credible intervals of the mean regression line for partisan groups under different conditions. Time is on the x-axis.

sense of the changes involved in these trends by disaggregating observed, fixed attitude, and fixed partisanship polarisation into average issue positions among partisan coalitions. Figure 6.2a displays survey-wave changes in the attitudes associated with Labour-Conservative identity under each condition. Solid lines are simply mean issue positions resulting from observed covariation in attitudes and partisanship. I create dashed lines by estimating average issue positions among wave 1 party identifiers. These averages diverge from observed trends over time because panellists are prevented from switching partisanship. Hence, survey-wave positions change only when *initial* partisans alter preferences for European integration. Dotted lines then represent the other counterfactual. They trace average *initial* positions among individuals identifying as Labour or Conservative over time, which vary when panellists with different attitudes adjust partisan affiliation.

The figure shows contradictory dynamics surrounding Conservatism. Wave 1 party identifiers develop less Eurosceptic preferences on most issues (black dashed lines), although spikes in the latter take place at various points during the Brexit period. The opposite pattern is apparent when attitudes are fixed in initial positions (dotted black lines), highlighting the effects of party switching. These trends are subject to less change between survey waves but show the prevalence of anti-EU preferences increasing from 2016 to 2019, either reflecting Eurosceptic voters joining or the Europhilic leaving. Hence, caught between countervailing tendencies, no clear trend is visible in aggregate positions occupied by Conservatives on European integration issues (solid black lines).

This contrasts with the Labour coalition, which moves more decisively in a liberal direction (solid grey lines). Most of that appears to be caused by pro-EU attitude dynamics (dashed grey lines), demonstrating less of the uncertainty characterising wave 1 Conservatives. It is difficult to interpret the effect of party switching, meanwhile, since no overarching shift is visible in the *initial* preferences associated with Labour identification (dotted grey lines). Yet observed data diverges slightly from fixed partisanship positions over time, with aggregate positions (solid grey lines) becoming visibly more Europhilic than when attitudes change alone (dashed grey lines). This appears to follow declining *initial* Euroscepticism among Labour identifiers during later stages of the Brexit period.

Figure 6.2b summarises observed and counterfactual partisan polarisation on Euro-

pean integration. It displays average trends from a multilevel model with mean Labour-Conservative positions on issue  $i$  at time  $t$  as dependent variable. I estimate trends in this way to overcome inconsistencies in the BES data. This is especially necessary among European integration issues since all but one of these items do not enter the survey until 2016. Only the question asking if Britain should unite fully with the European Union is available from wave 1. That item is administered in virtually every wave and twice as often as any of the Brexit questions. It also has a different original scale length (0-10), which is associated with more Eurosceptic responses relative to the five-point scale of other items. Ignoring such differences biases estimates of Labour-Conservative position, since the latter fluctuates dramatically during waves when only the unification question is present. I thus make full use of information on partisan polarisation by fitting varying unit-level trends to data displayed in Figure 6.2a, consistent with the overall approach established in Section 4.2. The mean posterior intercept and slope for Labour-Conservative coalitions under observed and counterfactual conditions gives the regression lines in part B.

These trends contextualise findings from the counterfactual model of attitude partisanship on European integration. They suggest that the two main developments driving panel trends are Eurosceptic *switching* within the Conservative Party and Europhilic *attitude change* among Labour. Overall partisan polarisation increases because the Labour coalition becomes rapidly less Eurosceptic while Conservatives remain stable (left-hand panel). The liberal trajectory of Labour identifiers matches fixed partisanship trends (middle panel) and therefore seems to be caused mainly by attitude change. But the same dynamics are also affecting wave 1 Conservatives. The association between initial Conservative partisanship and Eurosceptic attitudes declines from 2014 to 2019, on average, albeit less prominently than among wave 1 Labour identifiers. This leads to an increase in fixed partisanship polarisation that is much smaller than observed trends, with both coalitions of initial partisans subject to effectively parallel ideological developments. Observed polarisation increases more strongly because the *aggregate* position associated with Conservatism remains unchanged, which seems to reflect the countervailing effects of party switching on this coalition. The prevalence of Euroscepticism increases among Conservatives when attitudes are fixed (right-hand panel), either reflecting voters with these preferences joining or the Europhilic leaving.

Again, this creates modest fixed attitude polarisation, with essentially no overarching shift in the initial issue preferences associated with Labour identity.<sup>4</sup>

Such results support no simple conclusion in favour of hypotheses 3a or 3b. Neither attitude nor partisanship change alone sufficiently explain partisan polarisation on European integration, which appears to result from different mechanisms pushing different coalitions in different directions. That panel trends require attitude change is clear evidence against *pure* party sorting accounts. This is the most established perspective in Britain, where positions for and against the EU seemingly stabilised once integrated into Labour-Conservative competition (Evans and Butt, 2007). Indeed, Evans and Menon (2017, p. 73) point out that 80 per cent of Brexit votes can be predicted using a single 2010 BES question about European integration, arguing that it is not public division that changed so much as its relationship with mainstream political discourse (see also Clements and Bartle, 2009; Evans, 1998, 1999, 2002a; Hobolt and Rodon, 2020).

Counterfactual attitude partisanship trends do reveal Europe-based sorting. Voters with different initial preferences switch Conservative identity in a manner consistent with policy signals coming from this party, as shown by the right-hand panel of [Figure 6.2b](#). These findings contribute to wide-ranging literature documenting EU issue voting (de Vries, 2007, 2010; De Vries et al., 2011; Hobolt et al., 2009; Hobolt and Tilley, 2016; Schoen, 2008; Tillman, 2004, 2012). In particular, Schonfeld and Winter-Levy (2021) observe clear sorting in the immediate aftermath of Brexit, with pre-referendum Euroscepticism linked to Conservative switching following the party's 'almost overnight' reversal in Leave-Remain position. I have shown that this is part of broader changes affecting Conservative partisanship from 2014 to 2019.

Yet these dynamics do not sufficiently account for the strength of partisan polarisation without attitude change. Although results from this chapter cannot explicitly distinguish bottom-up and top-down mechanisms, the ideological dynamics involved are surprising from the perspective that partisanship causes polarisation. Namely, the overall trajectory of preferences associated with initial Conservative identity is in the opposite direction of elite cues, becoming less (not more) opposed to the EU over time. Beyond momentary outbursts of Euroscepticism close to the 2016 referendum and 2017

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<sup>4</sup>Party switching actually leads to a mild Eurosceptic trend in mean initial preferences among Labour partisans, although the 0.9 credible interval for this trend is -0.03, 0.17.

and 2019 general elections, the prevalence of these attitudes declines in association with increasing Europhilia among initial Labour partisans. This raises serious questions for identity-defensive mechanisms, supporting those arguing that changes in public preferences for European integration are exogenous to elite policy divergence (see Carrubba, 2001; Schmitt and Thomassen, 2000).

It is not just that wave 1 Conservatives move against strong cues coming from the party's leadership; the opposing policy messages supplied by Labour are comparably weak. Economically left-wing voters are badly divided by social values structuring attitudes towards the EU (SurrIDGE, 2018b). Hence, Labour maintained ambiguous positions on Brexit issues while trying to frame them in economic rather than cultural terms (Hobolt, 2018; Prosser, 2020; Shaw, 2021). It would be surprising if this strategic ambiguity was the source of Europhilic attitude change, especially considering minimal party switching in that direction. One possible explanation is that Conservative cues are repelling Labour identifiers, consistent with contrast effects described in literature on partisan motivated reasoning (Aaroe, 2012; Nicholson, 2012; Slothuus and De Vreese, 2010). Yet such mechanisms do not explain the trajectory of preferences associated with initial Conservative identity. Sociological developments thus provide a more unified explanation of pro-integration attitude dynamics affecting both mainstream partisan coalitions from 2014 to 2019.

Ultimately, establishing the effect of identity-defensive mechanisms is beyond the scope of these results and addressed in detail next chapter. All we can say for now is that the two main developments driving panel trends are Eurosceptic switching within the Conservative Party and Europhilic attitude shifts among Labour. Together, these developments push mainstream partisan coalitions in opposing directions on European integration, providing evidence against hypotheses 3a and 3b and thus accounts based purely on party sorting or ideological change.

## **Immigration**

Debates surrounding European integration are closely tied up with immigration. These issues were weakly correlated at the time of 1975 referendum on [EEC](#) membership. In fact, respondents in the [BES](#) referendum survey were slightly less likely to support withdrawal if believing there are too many immigrants (Crewe et al., 1980). The situation

**Table 6.2:** Trends in attitude partisanship on immigration.

	attitude x partisanship	
	A) Panel trends	B) Cross-sectional trends
Intercept	0.30 (0.03)	0.28 (0.02)
Observed	baseline	—
Fixed attitude	0.00 (0.04)	—
Fixed partisanship	0.01 (0.04)	—
Time (decades)	0.07 (0.03)	0.14 (0.03)
Time x observed	baseline	—
Time x fixed attitude	0.01 (0.05)	—
Time x fixed partisanship	-0.18 (0.05)	—
Residual SD:		
Intercepts	0.05	0.04
Trends	0.06	0.03
Data	0.02	0.02
N	135	45
Groups	12	4

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from multilevel models with the correlation between issue positions and Conservative (versus Labour) identity as dependent variable. The intercept is the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Dummy variables in part A separate partisan realignment observed in the panel data from fixed attitude and fixed partisanship trends. Part B shows cross-sectional trends from Chapter 5. Standard errors are in parentheses.

had swung much further in the other direction by 2015, however, with 51 per cent of those concerned about immigration levels supporting leaving compared with just 11 per cent of the unconcerned. According to Fieldhouse et al. (2020b, Ch. 5), this shift can be traced back to the government’s decision not to implement transitional border controls during the 2004 EU enlargement, which directed migrant flows from 10 new member states towards Britain, Ireland, and Sweden—the only three countries following this policy. Fieldhouse et al. argue that rising immigration created issue linkages allowing European integration to emerge as a powerful cross-cutting cleavage, ultimately leading to the rise of [UKIP](#) and another referendum on membership in 2016 (see also Evans and Mellon, 2019).

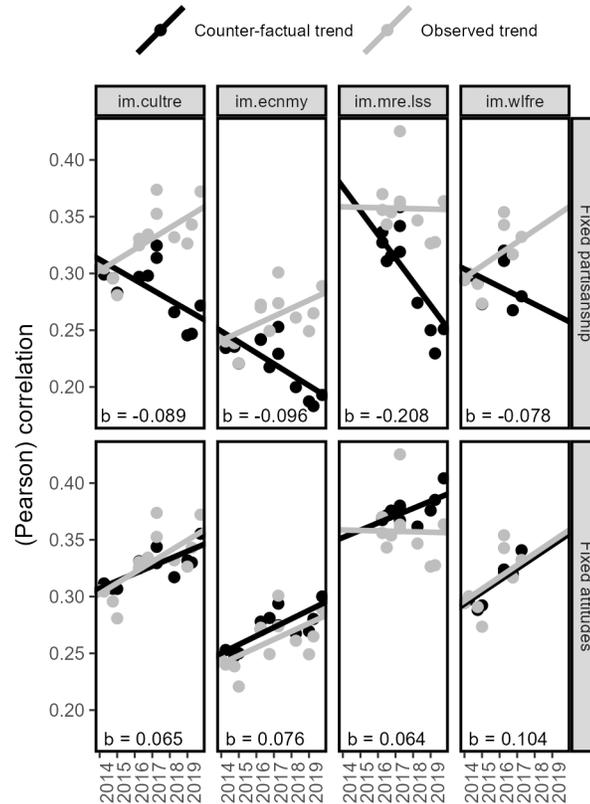
It was thus surprising *not* to observe similar polarisation trends on these issues during Chapter 5. Whereas the partisanship, distribution, and alignment of European integration preferences diverges rapidly from 2014 to 2019, findings for immigration are mixed. Partisan polarisation increases in line with elite policy disagreements during

this period, but the only clear attitude changes—other than greater constraint across domains—are declining extremism and a dramatic liberal shift in the central tendency of immigration positions. The raw distribution of responses to these questions shows voters developing less restrictive sentiments, and some attitude items even look more polarised over time (see Appendix B). However, unlike similar changes affecting preferences for European integration and social values, this does not result in clearly rising attitude divergence or alignment.

Yet we have just seen that partisan polarisation on European integration involves conflicting dynamics. Wave 1 identifiers in both parties adopt progressively pro-EU positions between 2014 and 2019. But Labour’s coalition moves further away from aggregate Conservative issue positions held in place by Eurosceptic switching. A similar combination of mechanisms might then drive increased attitude partisanship on immigration. Even if Labour and Conservative coalitions are subject to the same ideological trajectory, sorting processes could escalate political conflict by enhancing or offsetting mass party movements. I test for such dynamics using the counterfactual attitude partisanship model.

Table 6.2 reveals substantial differences separating partisan polarisation observed in the panel and results from Chapter 5, however. On average, panel trends are half the overall increase in attitude partisanship estimated through the full BES sample:  $\beta = 0.07$  and  $0.14$ , respectively. This implies that a considerable portion of partisan polarisation on immigration is removed by fixing the composition of respondents in wave 1. One possible explanation is that it involves changes taking place between rather than within individuals, consistent with generational accounts of ideology and party identification (e.g., Converse, 1976; Inglehart, 1997). It could also indicate problems with the panel data itself, such as fundamentally different behaviour among the kinds of people responding to multiple survey waves. Section 4.4 provides evidence against the latter concern, yet we should nonetheless be cautious when interpreting cross-sectional trends in terms of individual-level attitude and partisanship dynamics.

The polarisation that does remain in the panel clearly requires party switching. Immigration positions converge quite strongly with the individuals comprising Labour-Conservative coalitions held constant. The interaction between *fixed partisanship* and time is  $-0.18$ , suggesting that attitude partisanship would decline by roughly  $-0.06$  if only



**Figure 6.3:** Observed and counterfactual trends in attitude partisanship on immigration.

*Notes:* Observed data and trends are in grey, while black dots and lines display the counterfactual by row. Counterfactual slopes are also printed for each issue, indicating the variation in attitude partisanship over time remaining when a given variable is held constant. Time is on the x-axis.

individuals' issue positions varied from 2014 to 2019. Removing partisanship change does not thus simply alter partisan polarisation; it completely reverses the direction of this trend, providing strong evidence against Hypothesis 3b. These findings confirm that liberal shifts observed previously on immigration are affecting Labour-Conservative identifiers, resulting in dealignment when considered in isolation from party switching. Indeed, the top row of [Figure 6.3](#), which plots fixed partisanship dynamics (black) against observed attitude partisanship trends (grey), shows that an item associated with weaker evidence of partisan polarisation—asking about immigration levels—also features much stronger counterfactual convergence than any other issue.

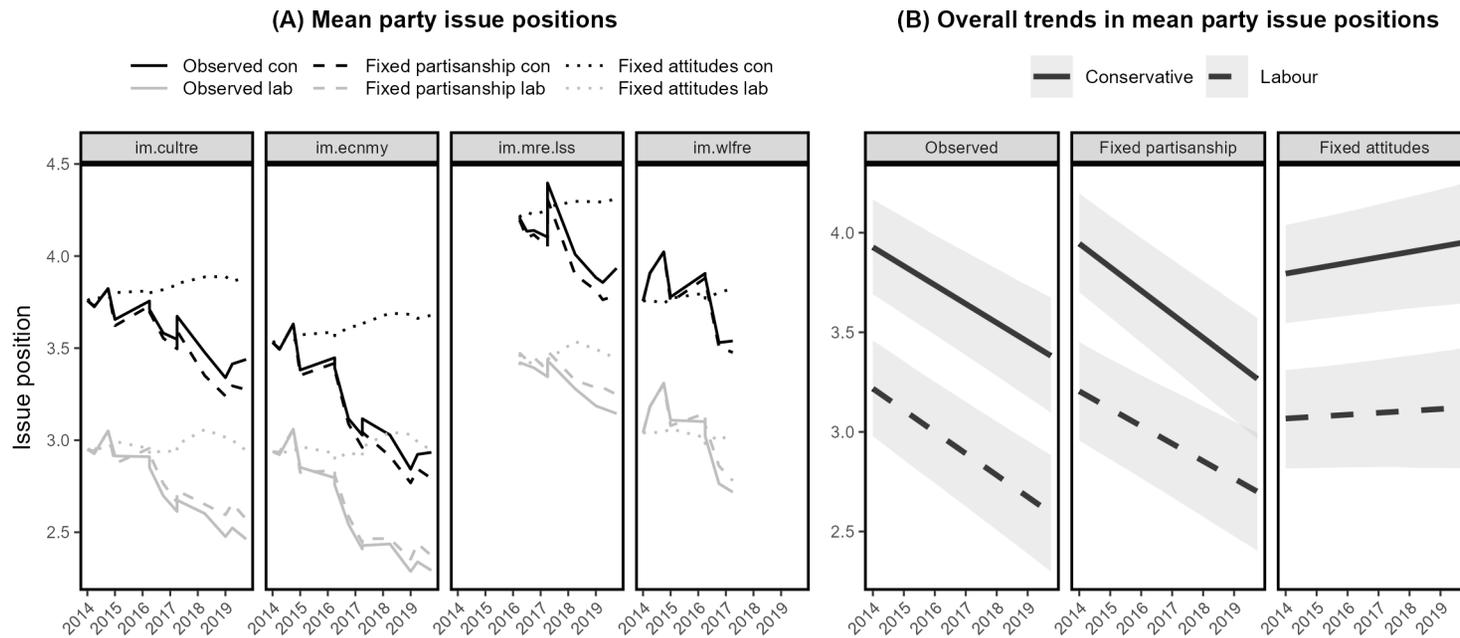
Although initial mainstream partisans clearly change perspectives on immigration, removing these dynamics makes virtually no difference to observed trends. The very

small interaction between time and the *fixed attitude* dummy suggests that we would still find polarisation under stable ideological conditions described in pure party sorting accounts. Many panellists adjust Labour-Conservative identity in line with initial immigration positions. Hence, the bottom row of [Figure 6.3](#) shows that counterfactual regression lines are only substantially different on the item asking about immigration levels, which was null in the observed data but now shares a similar positive trend with other issues. This offers support to Hypothesis 3a: party switching alone is sufficient to explain partisan polarisation and attitude change is not required.

As with European integration, I unpack the dynamics driving Labour-Conservative division on immigration by plotting observed and counterfactual average issue positions. [Figure 6.4a](#) displays the mean preferences associated with partisanship in survey waves. Again, I find wave 1 identifiers in both parties developing more liberal perspectives (dashed lines). Unlike European integration, however, this trend is stronger among initial Conservatives. There is some evidence of spiking opposition to immigration at key points of the Brexit period. Yet this does very little to halt changing Conservative positions, which converge on the Labour coalition despite similar fixed partisanship dynamics affecting the latter. Clearly, partisan polarisation requires switching mechanisms.

Dotted lines show initial attitudes becoming increasingly illiberal among voters identifying as Conservative. This seemingly limits the effect of attitude change in the other direction, both by making the observed Conservative trajectory slightly shallower and prone to spikes in restrictionist sentiments (solid lines). There is no straightforward pattern in the fixed attitudes associated with Labour partisanship (dotted lines), meanwhile, which fluctuates in manner consistent with European integration preferences above. Labour's aggregate position (solid lines) does diverge slightly from fixed partisanship trends over time, revealing liberal developments that are more prominent than when attitudes change alone (dashed lines). Again, this appears to follow declining *initial* opposition to immigration during later stages of the Brexit period (dotted lines).

These findings complicate what initially seemed like an easy conclusion in favour of Hypothesis 3a. Matched increases in observed and fixed attitude polarisation are something of an artefact, rather than reflecting dynamics driven mainly by partisanship change. This is clear in [Figure 6.4b](#), where I plot average trends in Labour-Conservative



**Figure 6.4:** Observed and counterfactual Labour-Conservative positions on immigration.

*Notes:* Part A shows mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave by issue. Part B shows overall trends from a varying intercept, varying slope multilevel model with mean issue positions as dependent variable. Shaded areas are 0.9 credible intervals of the mean regression line for partisan groups under different conditions. Time is on the x-axis.

issue positions under each condition. Observed party movement (left-hand panel) resembles pro-immigration attitude trajectories (middle panel) in both coalitions more than the effects of party switching (right-hand panel), which push Conservatives in the opposite direction. Aggregate polarisation is then a product of these contradictory forces. Partisanship change moderates ideological developments, serving to limit liberal dynamics among Conservatives while enhancing them for Labour.<sup>5</sup> This escalates partisan differences as voters supporting Labour become less opposed to immigration faster than Conservatives.

Such results further challenge accounts based *purely* on party sorting or attitude change. Against hypotheses 3a and 3b, a combination of mechanisms drives panel trends observed among Labour-Conservative partisans from 2014 to 2019. There is evidence of switching mechanisms pushing the Conservative coalition towards more restrictionist immigration positions, as shown by the right-hand panel of [Figure 6.4b](#). This is like patterns documented in relation to Euroscepticism above, either reflecting voters with such preferences joining or liberal flight to Labour and elsewhere. Immigration concerns were a key factor motivating radical right defection before Brexit (Evans and Mellon, 2016; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 5; Ford and Goodwin, 2010; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Ford et al., 2012; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Ch. 6; Webb and Bale, 2014). Hence, increases in the association between Conservatism and initial hostility towards immigration suggests that the party is recovering lost ground, consistent with the flow of votes coming from [UKIP](#) after 2016 (Evans et al., 2021; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 9).

New support for party sorting would be novel in any other issue area following [Chapter 5](#), yet it is the role also played by ideological change that is particularly interesting here. This subsection began by highlighting the difference between increased attitude divergence and alignment observed on European integration and more ambiguous developments affecting immigration preferences. Beyond growing constraint across domains, the only clear cross-sectional polarisation trend was declining extremism, which at face

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<sup>5</sup>Observed party switching actually increases mean opposition to immigration among Labour partisans when panellists' issue positions are held constant (right-hand panel of [Figure 6.4b](#)). Yet there is considerable heterogeneity involved in this trend (90% CI [-0.11, 0.3]). Indeed, the coalition supporting Labour becomes more liberal when attitudes and partisanship change together than when attitudes change alone, suggesting some role for party switching. This is like patterns found on European integration above (see [Figure 6.2](#)).

value indicates that immigration issues involve distinct attitude dynamics. In fact, both domains are subject to liberal shifts in cultural ideology, with similar effects on partisan polarisation in the panel component.

The cause of this attitude change remains unclear. As with European integration, it does not clearly follow elite cues. Since before the financial crisis, Labour has advocated tighter border controls while emphasising the benefits of migration (see Section 3.2). This is part of a broader strategy aimed at minimising cultural fragmentation in its electoral coalition. For example, during the 2017 general election, Labour promised to end freedom of movement but for the purposes of cracking down on ‘unscrupulous’ employers (The Labour Party, 2017). That platform is an unlikely source of liberal issue positions, especially among other partisans. Again, it is Conservative elites providing the strongest cues, not least by aligning themselves increasingly with ‘hard’ Brexit after the 2016 referendum. Conservative border policy is clearly related to party switching, yet there is little *corresponding* evidence of attitude change beyond momentary spikes in restrictionist sentiments. The latter does suggest some top-down sensitivity in immigration preferences (Brader and Tucker, 2012; Hellwig and Kweon, 2016; Vrânceanu and Lachat, 2021). However, something else appears to cause liberal shifts in ideology regardless of initial partisanship.

One possible explanation is provided by ‘thermostatic’ models of public opinion (Soroka and Wlezien, 2010; Wlezien, 1995; Wlezien and Soroka, 2012). Several studies document an inverse link balancing aggregate preferences for immigration with border policy outputs (Cunningham, 2014; Ford et al., 2015; Jennings, 2009; Vrânceanu and Lachat, 2021). Fieldhouse et al. (2020b) argue that freedom of movement within the EU suppresses that link, allowing concern to build up among voters (see also Evans and Mellon, 2019). Restrictionist sentiments did subside in Britain following the 2016 referendum (Ford, 2018; Gottfried and Aslaksen, 2017). Some associate that with a greater sense of control among Leavers, the lack of which was a key factor underpinning these votes (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2021). Along with attitude changes described in this and the previous chapter, such findings are compatible with thermostatic responses to the changing political context in Britain, even if not strictly informed by policy outputs. Just as immigration concerns become more salient features of mainstream party platforms, Labour-Conservative identifiers converge rapidly on less

restrictive preferences.

Yet liberal ideological dynamics are also consistent with sociological accounts. Generational differences in education, ethnic diversity, and cultural values are associated with declining opposition to and ethnocentric discrimination among different types of immigration (Ford, 2011; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). Indeed, there is evidence that the current liberal trajectory of British voters began long before 2016, potentially from the early 2010s (Blinder and Richards, 2021; Caughey et al., 2019). Thermostatic reactions might explain some of the shift in attitudes following Brexit, which is far stronger on immigration than other cultural domains. But sociological mechanisms are better placed to explain broader ideological developments. After all, it is not just immigration preferences that are subject to declining conservatism. Mainstream partisans are also adopting more Europhilic positions, and Chapter 5 found similar dynamics affecting social values. Evidence that the latter is related to partisan polarisation would thus add to sociological accounts of the British case.

### **Social values**

Attitudes towards European integration and immigration are linked in an overarching cultural dimension via broader social values (Kriesi et al., 2008; Van Der Brug and Van Spanje, 2009). Ethnic, racial, and cultural compositional concerns consistently overshadow economic components of models predicting anti-immigration preferences (Card et al., 2012; Chandler and Tsai, 2001; Citrin et al., 1997; Facchini and Mayda, 2012; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007; Ivarsflaten, 2005; Sides and Citrin, 2007). Similarly, they have grown more important to the structure of party competition and voters' positions on European integration (Carey, 2002; Hix, 1999; Hooghe et al., 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; McLaren, 2002; Prosser, 2016; Tillman, 2013). The association between these domains is exemplified by the cultural basis of Brexit votes (Evans and Menon, 2017, Ch. 4; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 9; Norris and Inglehart, 2019, Ch. 11; Scotto et al., 2018; SurrIDGE, 2018a; Swales, 2016). It also emerges in the [BES](#) data, where European integration, immigration, and social values are more strongly correlated with each other than with economic issues (see the discussion of attitude alignment in Section [5.3](#)).

Chapter 5 observed clear partisan polarisation on social values. This trend is sup-

**Table 6.3:** Trends in attitude partisanship on social values.

	attitude x partisanship	
	A) Panel trends	B) Cross-sectional trends
Intercept	0.25 (0.02)	0.24 (0.02)
Observed	baseline	—
Fixed attitude	0.00 (0.02)	—
Fixed partisanship	0.00 (0.02)	—
Time (decades)	0.09 (0.01)	0.14 (0.02)
Time x observed	baseline	—
Time x fixed attitude	-0.07 (0.02)	—
Time x fixed partisanship	-0.12 (0.02)	—
Residual SD:		
Intercepts	0.05	0.05
Trends	0.02	0.04
Data	0.02	0.02
N	171	60
Groups	27	9

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from multilevel models with the correlation between issue positions and Conservative (versus Labour) identity as dependent variable. The intercept is the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Dummy variables in part A separate partisan realignment observed in the panel data from fixed attitude and fixed partisanship trends. Part B shows cross-sectional trends from Chapter 5. Standard errors are in parentheses.

ported by broader changes unfolding in public opinion, which becomes more dispersed, multimodal, and constrained (within and between domains) from 2014 to 2019. Since similar dynamics are found for European integration and immigration but not economic issues, I concluded in favour of sociological accounts. Partisan (de)polarisation on (economic) cultural matters mirrors trends in attitude divergence and alignment, pointing to aspects of the British case unexplained by party sorting or elite cue mechanisms.

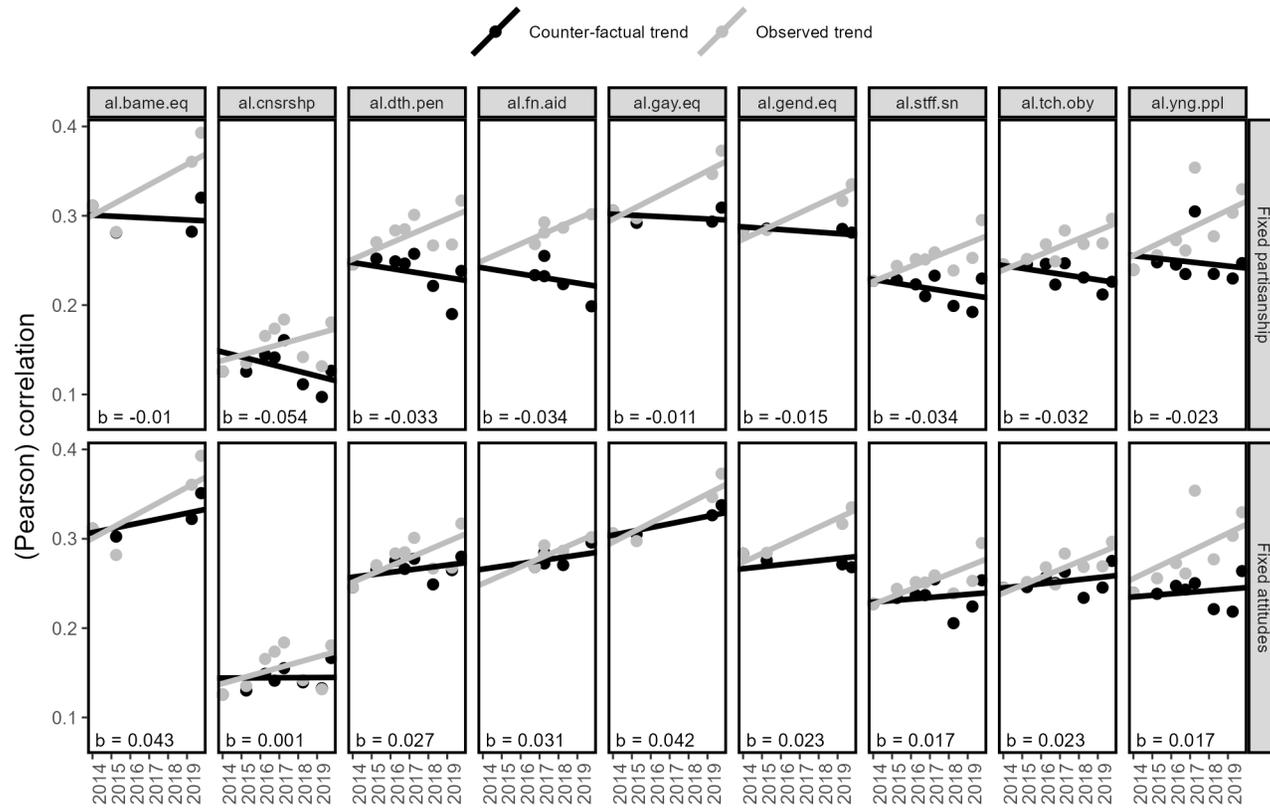
However, that conclusion is moderated by findings from this chapter. Partisanship dynamics are intrinsic to Labour-Conservative division on European integration and immigration. Indeed, attitude partisanship might even decline without them because both mainstream coalitions are associated with liberal ideological trajectories. The previous two sections identify complex interactions between attitude and partisanship change. While initial party identifiers develop less Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant preferences, on average, shifts in the Conservative position are to some extent counteracted by party switching. The issue positions associated with Conservatives become more liberal when

attitudes change alone than when attitudes and partisanship change together, which is consistent with increases in the association between Conservative identity and *initially* Eurosceptic and anti-immigration positions. Attitude change is thus important because it is the main mechanism pushing Labour's coalition in cosmopolitan directions, whereas party switching is important because it limits the effect of corresponding ideological developments among Conservatives, increasing the degree to which voters in different parties hold different attitudes. Similar results for social values would therefore suggest a broader explanation of cultural realignment in Britain.

Table 6.3 summarises the evidence. The observed panel trend is 0.09, substantially smaller than cross-sectional increases in attitude partisanship ( $\beta = 0.14$ ). This is particularly notable here since Section 4.4 found divergent trajectories in social values across BES datasets (see Figure 4.4). The full sample reveals liberal dynamics that are not only reduced but, in some cases, qualitatively different in the panel component. Such differences are limited in other domains and on partisanship items, potentially suggesting something unique about social values. These questions assess authoritarian-liberal predispositions, which many regard as enduring personality types (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950; Hetherington and Weiler, 2009; Stenner, 2005). We might then observe modest panel trends because social values are less subject to individual-level change. After all, many of the items in this domain are designed to measure stable core values, cutting through everyday political issues (see Evans et al., 1996; Evans and Neundorf, 2020; Feldman, 1988; Heath et al., 1994; McClosky and Zaller, 1984). I will come back to this point next chapter, yet for now emphasise that partisan polarisation on social values is already associated with cross-sectional increases in attitude divergence and alignment. The remainder of results in Table 6.3a and displayed by Figure 6.5 outline *individual-level* dynamics involved.

The negative interaction between time and the *fixed attitude* dummy confirms the importance of ideological change. Subtracting this coefficient from baseline trends leaves a 0.02 per decade increase in attitude partisanship caused by party switching alone. Fixed attitude polarisation does not thus match observed trends, suggesting that partisan polarisation also requires attitude change. This is more evidence against Hypothesis 3a and *pure* party sorting accounts.

However, party switching is not unimportant. In contrast with Hypothesis 3b and ac-



**Figure 6.5:** Observed and counterfactual trends in attitude partisanship on social values.

*Notes:* Observed data and trends are in grey, while black dots and lines display the counterfactual by row. Counterfactual slopes are also printed for each issue, indicating the variation in attitude partisanship over time remaining when a given variable is held constant. Time is on the x-axis.

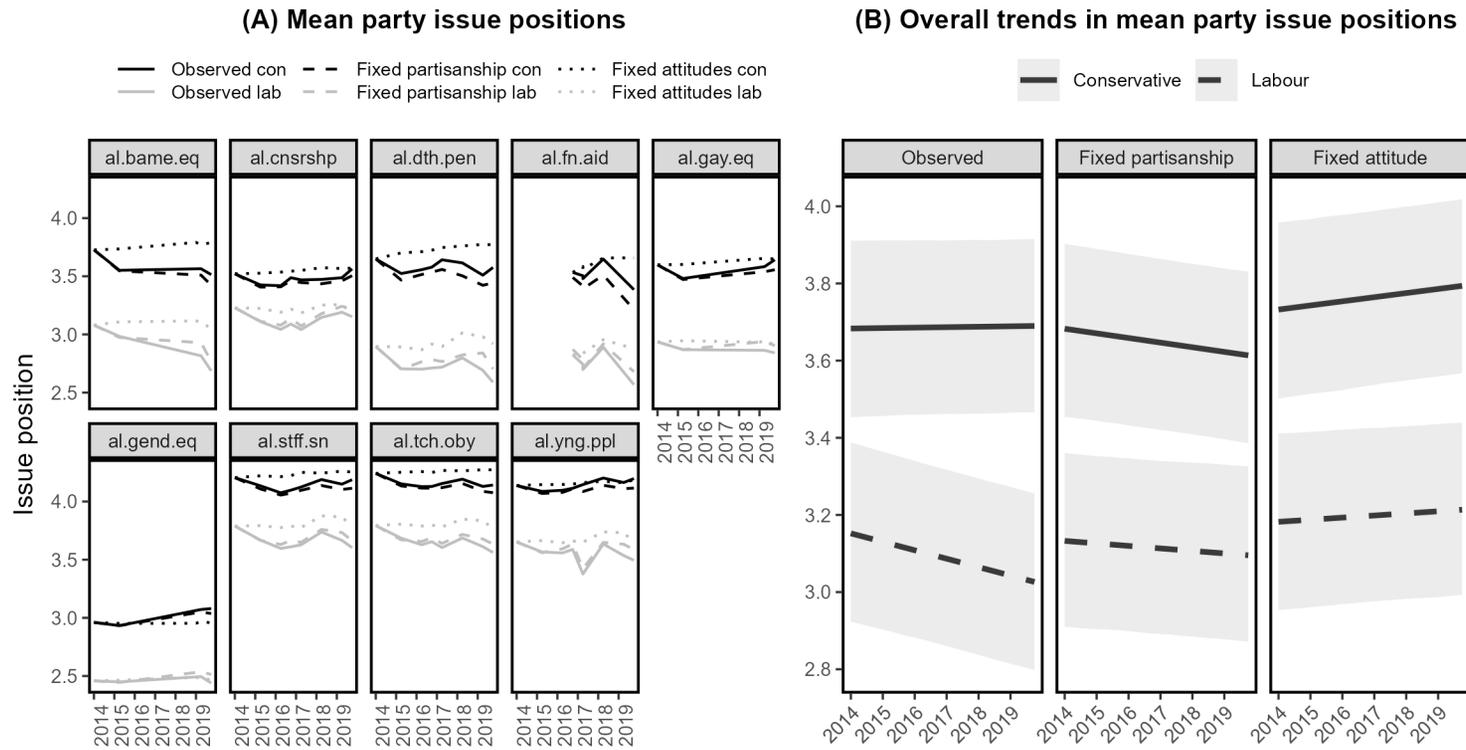
counts based purely on ideological developments, the interaction between time and *fixed partisanship* is -0.12. This is larger than the absolute value of observed trends, indicating that attitude partisanship might decline if individuals only changed issue positions. Like fixed partisanship *depolarisation* on immigration, social values are associated with convergent ideological dynamics among initial Labour-Conservative identifiers, although the 0.9 credible interval for this trend is between -0.05 and 0.

Once again, neither attitude nor partisanship change alone are sufficient to explain partisan polarisation, implying that some combination of these variables is important. [Figure 6.6](#) therefore explores developments in Labour-Conservative issue positions further, using the same approach described for European integration and immigration above. Part A displays survey-wave means on each item under observed, fixed attitude, and fixed partisanship conditions. Part B summarises average trends across social values.

Observed trends in mean social values (left-hand panel, part B) show polarisation increasing because Labour partisans become more liberal over time while Conservatives remain stable. Counterfactual trends suggest that the liberal shift among Labour partisans is driven mainly by attitude change. When respondents' partisanship is fixed at initial values (middle panel, part B), observed variation in the social values of wave 1 Labour identifiers alone generates a liberal trend. That trend is more modest than the one observed in reality. In fact, under fixed partisanship conditions, less than 90 per cent of draws CI [-0.16, 0.02] from the posterior distribution of mean slopes are negative (indicating declining traditionalism). The liberal trajectory of Labour's coalition does then seem to involve some party switching, even though the latter leads to a mild traditionalist trend in the *initial* social values of this group, on average (right-hand panel, part B).<sup>6</sup> This is consistent with patterns observed on European integration and immigration above (see figures 6.2 and 6.4). In each case, the issue positions associated with Labour identity become less culturally conservative when attitudes and partisanship change together than when attitudes change alone.

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<sup>6</sup>Again, mean fixed attitude trends are heterogenous among Labour identifiers (90% CI [-0.03, 0.14]), reflecting the lack of an overarching change in *initial* social values. Dotted lines in [Figure 6.6a](#) show the latter becoming more traditionalist on political issues around 2017-2018, either reflecting voters with such attitudes switching to Labour or the socially liberal moving elsewhere. However, that trend is reversed during 2019 and earlier in some cases, seemingly corresponding with divergence between observed and fixed partisanship issue positions over time. Solid lines become more prominently liberal than dashed lines during later stages of the Brexit period, as observed in other cultural domains.



**Figure 6.6:** Observed and counterfactual Labour-Conservative positions on social values.

*Notes:* Part A shows mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave by issue. Part B shows overall trends from a varying intercept, varying slope multilevel model with mean issue positions as dependent variable. Shaded areas are 0.9 credible intervals of the mean regression line for partisan groups under different conditions. Time is on the x-axis.

The result is polarisation in combination with aggregate stability observed among Conservatives (left-hand panel, part B), which appears to mask two countervailing mechanisms. Counterfactual trends show that, when respondents' partisanship is held constant (middle panel, part B), observed variation in the attitudes of wave 1 Conservative identifiers leads to a liberal trend in mean social values for this group. On the other hand, when respondents' social values are fixed at initial values (right-hand panel, part B), observed party switching leads the Conservative coalition to comprise individuals with increasingly traditionalist issue positions, on average. These changes in attitudes and partisanship cancel out, with an aggregate mean slope among Conservative partisans of 0.01 (90% CI [-0.08, 0.1]).<sup>7</sup> Partisan polarisation thus emerges as Labour identifiers move further towards liberal social values.

This contributes to the mixed account of attitude partisanship trends found across cultural issues in the panel component. There is evidence against Hypothesis 3a, since observed trends do not match partisan polarisation emerging when individuals switch partisanship without changing issue positions. These are the processes leading to increased attitude partisanship in *pure* party sorting accounts, which thus remain unsupported in the British case. It has long been claimed that voters' social values are 'stable and enduring over time at the individual as well as the aggregate level' (Heath et al., 1994, p. 120; see also Bartle, 2000; Evans et al., 1996). Yet I find clear evidence of ideological change in this domain, confirming that cross-sectional trends documented by Chapter 5 are affecting partisan division in the panel component. Specifically, the fixed partisanship counterfactual shows wave 1 Labour and Conservative identifiers developing less socially traditional positions from 2014 to 2019.

Such trends contextualise existing research on culture wars emerging following Brexit. The 39<sup>th</sup> BSAS report documents long-term liberal shifts in public attitudes towards social values, with its authors linking this to cultural realignment in attitude partisanship (Butt et al., 2022). My analysis of the BES data, which is shorter-term but provides exceptionally rich individual-level measurement of attitude and partisanship change, reveals the same dynamics unfolding regardless of initial party identification. In fact, to the extent that liberal attitude change is moderated by partisanship, it is more prominent among voters identifying as Conservative in wave 1 than those

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<sup>7</sup>Recall similar outcomes observed on European integration (see the left-hand panel of Figure 6.2b).

identifying as Labour. Along with similar changes observed in attitudes towards European integration and immigration above, this challenges the elite cue claim that partisan motivated reasoning causes polarisation. It is not just that voters are subject to corresponding ideological developments regardless of initial partisanship; the Conservative Party leadership arguably became more culturally traditionalist by aligning with Leave during the Brexit period. That is associated with expected observations of party switching but not attitude change. The implication is that something other than identity-defensive mechanisms affect individuals' social values, including any number of sociological developments.

Yet accounts based purely on the latter are also weakened by observations of party switching. Hypothesis 3b expects little difference in polarisation trends emerging from attitude change alone and attitude and partisanship change together. That expectation is plainly not met since Labour-Conservative division on social values *declines* when the wave 1 composition of these coalitions is held constant. Liberal ideological shifts contribute to increased attitude partisanship only in association with party switching. Along with Euroscepticism and restrictionist border preferences, Conservative identity becomes more strongly related to *initially* traditionalist outlooks over time. The aggregate effect of this sorting offsets liberal ideological developments among Conservatives, allowing Labour partisans to move further towards cosmopolitan positions. There is also some evidence that the Labour coalition's trajectory is enhanced by party switching, if only because it is more prominent when attitudes and partisanship change together than when attitudes change alone. In other words, although accounts based purely on sorting mechanisms remain insufficient, party switching on social values is driving attitude-partisanship realignment through its interaction with ideological developments. This is consistent with observations that European integration, immigration, and social values are growing more important as a cultural dimension of British voting behaviour (Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 9).

### **Economic issues**

Cultural issues are only part of a realignment that also involves left-right depolarisation. Attitude partisanship was initially twice as strong on economic issues than any cultural domain but declines substantially from 2014 to 2019. This dealignment emerges despite

**Table 6.4:** Trends in attitude partisanship on economic issues.

	attitude x partisanship	
	A) Panel trends	B) Cross-sectional trends
Intercept	0.49 (0.02)	0.49 (0.02)
Observed	baseline	—
Fixed attitude	-0.01 (0.03)	—
Fixed partisanship	0.00 (0.03)	—
Time (decades)	-0.05 (0.02)	-0.11 (0.03)
Time x observed	baseline	—
Time x fixed attitude	-0.05 (0.02)	—
Time x fixed partisanship	-0.06 (0.02)	—
Residual SD:		
Intercepts	0.08	0.09
Trends	0.03	0.05
Data	0.03	0.04
N	357	119
Groups	48	16

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from multilevel models with the correlation between issue positions and Conservative (versus Labour) identity as dependent variable. The intercept is the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Dummy variables in part A separate partisan realignment observed in the panel data from fixed attitude and fixed partisanship trends. Part B shows cross-sectional trends from Chapter 5. Standard errors are in parentheses.

clear elite policy divergence following the financial crisis. Moreover, virtually all of it appears to take place during the Brexit period, with Cohen and Cohen (2019; 2021) finding positive trends using the same methods on similar data for 2007-2016. Labour shifted even further to the left under Jeremy Corbyn, 2015-2019, and the party continued focussing on economic issues at the expense of European integration and immigration in its 2017 and 2019 manifestos (Allen and Bara, 2019, 2021). Yet mainstream partisanship suddenly loses left-right structure after 2016. Indeed, the 2019 general election ‘offered the clearest ideological choice in nearly three decades’ (Allen and Bara, 2021, p. 540), but that year is associated with the second lowest (to 2018) correlation between economic preferences and Labour-Conservative identity.

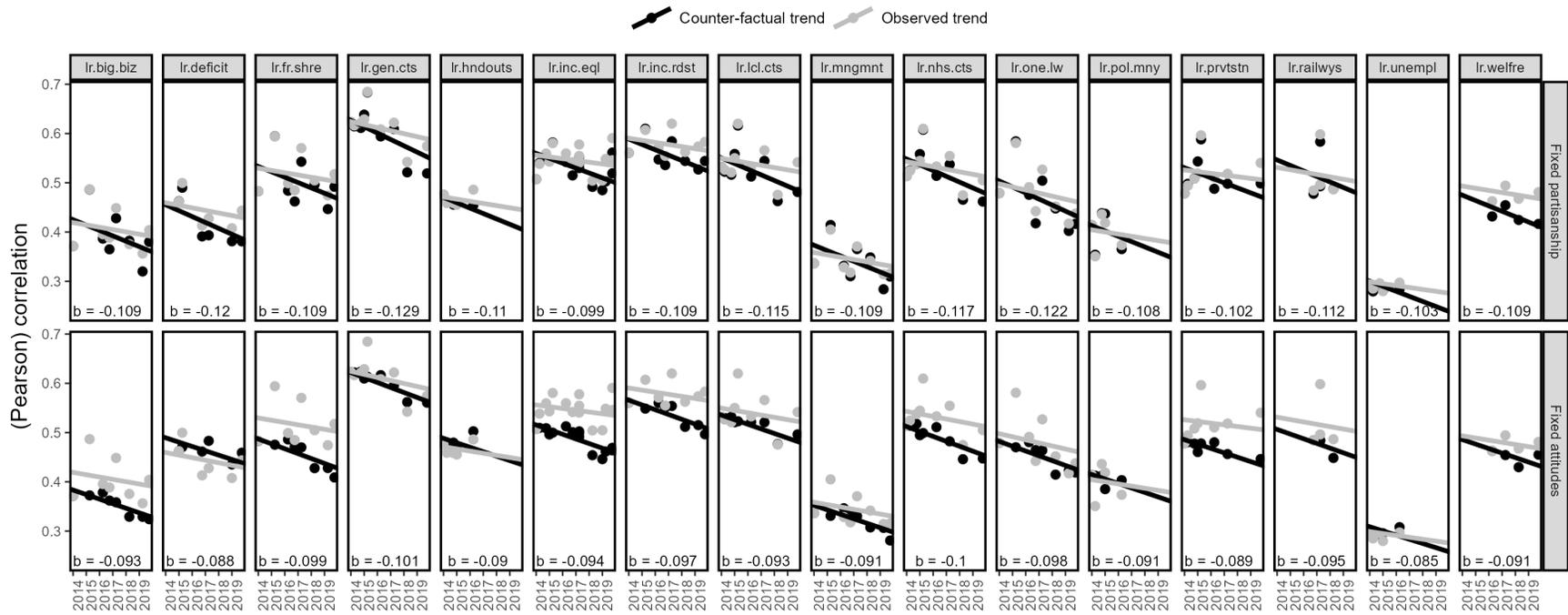
This gap separating mainstream party competition from mass trends raises serious questions for elite cue accounts. One of the main arguments supporting partisan motivated reasoning is that it facilitates conflict extension observed in the American context (Carsey and Layman, 2006; Layman and Carsey, 2002a,b; Layman et al., 2010,

2006). Elite policy divergence on cross-cutting dimensions destabilises electoral coalitions, leading to party switching among those perceiving more proximate representation of their issue positions. Hence, without identity-based ideological conversion, cultural conflicts would displace attitude partisanship structured around economic issues. Yet that is exactly what appears to be happening in the British case, where partisan polarisation on European integration, immigration, and social values is associated with left-right dealignment.

This is related to broader changes in public opinion, offering support to sociological accounts. The distributional properties of economic preferences converge despite escalating political competition, an outcome that is hard to explain using top-down perspectives but consistent with demographic culture shifts. However, as repeatedly observed throughout this chapter, partisanship dynamics are fundamental to trends taking place between Labour-Conservative identifiers. Beyond European integration, there would be no evidence of polarisation if only issue positions changed. Voters initially identifying with either mainstream party are developing more liberal ideologies, but this is interacting with switching mechanisms to limit (enhance) the trajectory of Conservative (Labour) partisans. Cultural division is then a product of attitude and partisanship change. Although ideological dynamics encountered so far are surprising from the perspective of elite cue theory, it is possible that Labour's shift left is motivating corresponding attitude change among some of its partisans that nonetheless produces convergence in combination with cross-cutting party sorting.

Table 6.4a and Figure 6.7 thus summarise results from the counterfactual attitude partisanship model applied to economic issues. The overall trend observed in the panel data is -0.05, less than half the cross-sectional estimate of partisan depolarisation in part B ( $\beta = -0.11$ ). Again, this implies changes that are not captured by panel data, such as population replacement mechanisms proposed in accounts of left-right deserting and ideological dealignment (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Inglehart, 1997). Section 4.4 found comparable dynamics among responses to economic attitude items in the panel component and full BES sample, however. Hence, let us assume that the negative trend in part A represents cross-sectional observations of partisan depolarisation, while remembering that the latter is subject to additional attitude-partisanship change.

Panel trends are associated with countervailing dynamics in every domain considered



**Figure 6.7:** Observed and counterfactual trends in attitude partisanship on economic issues.

*Notes:* Observed data and trends are in grey, while black dots and lines display the counterfactual by row. Counterfactual slopes are also printed for each issue, indicating the variation in attitude partisanship over time remaining when a given variable is held constant. Time is on the x-axis.

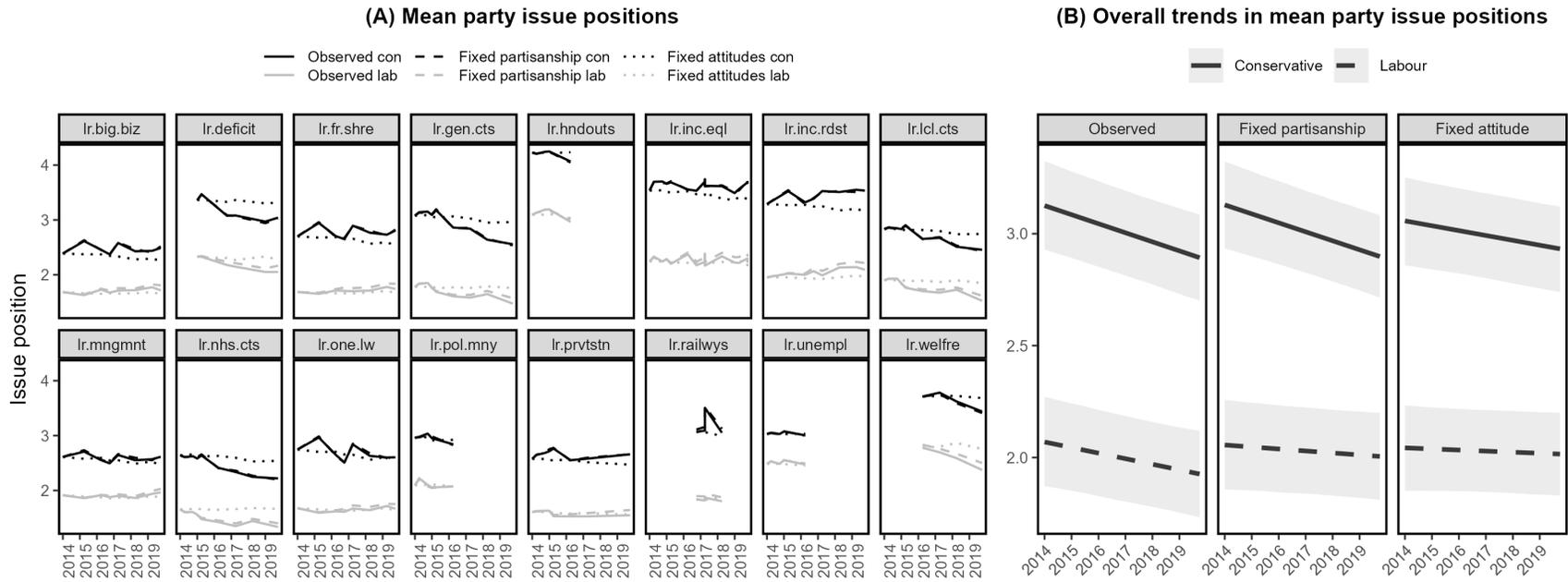
so far. The interaction between time and fixed attitude and fixed partisanship dummy variables reveals different but similarly complex results for economic issues. Both are in the same direction as observed negative trends, meaning that convergence is more pronounced when attitudes and partisanship change alone than when attitudes and partisanship change together. The correlation between Labour-Conservative identity and *initial* issue positions decreases by -0.1 per decade, on average. This suggests ideological dynamics that are reducing the absolute value of observed trends, since attitude partisanship declines twice as much when only individuals' party identification varies over time. Fixed partisanship depolarisation is even stronger, meanwhile ( $\beta = -0.11$  per decade). Neither counterfactual therefore matches trends observed when individuals' issue positions and partisanship change together providing evidence against hypotheses 3a and 3b. The implication is that complex dynamics affect the correlation between Labour-Conservative identity and economic preferences, which is somehow *weaker* than the sum of its parts. We get a better sense of those changes in [Figure 6.8](#), where I plot mean observed and counterfactual issue positions in survey waves (part A) and average trends in these outcomes across the domain (part B).

Observed changes in partisans' mean economic positions (left-hand panel, part B) show left-right dealignment emerging because Conservatives become more left-wing over time, converging on the less prominent left-wing trajectory also found among the Labour coalition. Counterfactual trends suggest that the left-wing shift among Conservatives' is driven by attitude *and* partisanship change. When respondents' partisanship is fixed at initial values (middle panel, part B), observed variation in the economic preferences of wave 1 Conservative identifiers alone generates the left-wing trend that we observe in reality.<sup>8</sup> Yet a similar left-wing trend also emerges for this group when respondents' attitudes are fixed at initial values (right-hand panel, part B), either reflecting voters with these preferences becoming Conservative or the initially right-wing moving to other parties.

Counterfactual trends are less prominent among the Labour coalition, meanwhile.

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<sup>8</sup>Close inspection of panels in part A shows that left-wing attitude change (dashed lines) is driven by certain items—asking about the level of benefits, approaches to reducing the deficit, and attitudes towards public spending cuts—which appear to tap into clustered positions on post-2010 austerity policies of the British government. Chapter 5 identified distinct cross-sectional trends in the central tendency of distributions surrounding these items but argued against separating them from economic issues more broadly. Similarly, there is no indication that finer grained left-right domains would alter conclusions in favour of attitude or partisanship change.



**Figure 6.8:** Observed and counterfactual Labour-Conservative positions on economic issues.

*Notes:* Part A shows mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave by issue. Part B shows overall trends from a varying intercept, varying slope multilevel model with mean issue positions as dependent variable. Shaded areas are 0.9 credible intervals of the mean regression line for partisan groups under different conditions. Time is on the x-axis.

When respondents' partisanship is held constant (middle panel, part B), observed variation in the attitudes of fixed Labour identifiers leads to a mild left-wing trend in mean economic positions for this group. Similarly, when respondents' economic attitudes are fixed at initial values (right-hand panel, part B), observed party switching leads the Labour coalition to comprise individuals with slightly more left-wing preferences, on average. Neither of these trends are very clear but nonetheless combine to generate the left-wing trajectory actually observed among Labour partisans (left-hand panel, part B). That is why counterfactual depolarisation resulting from attitude and partisanship change alone is stronger than observed trends resulting from attitude and partisanship change together: the issue positions associated with labour identity become more left-wing in reality than under counterfactual conditions, reducing the extent to which Conservatives converge on these positions over time.

The complexity of these results speaks to the left-right dealignment affecting attitude and partisanship change. Evidence of economic attitude convergence continues to confound empirical expectations. A large gap remains between polarising elite cues and ideological dynamics taking place among mainstream partisans in this domain. I suggested above that depolarisation on economic issues might be the product of countervailing mechanisms, like how cultural realignment combines bipartisan liberal shifts in attitudes that are offset (enhanced) by socially conservative (liberal) switching in the Conservative (Labour) coalition. Evidence that Labour identifiers updated issue preferences in a manner consistent with changes their party's leadership after the 2007-2008 financial crisis might have redeemed aspects of the elite cue account, even if masked by partisan depolarisation at the aggregate level. The Labour coalition does move left from 2014 to 2019, on average, as shown by the left-hand panel of [Figure 6.8b](#). Yet, to the extent that this is related to attitude change, it is less clear than the left-wing trajectory in attitudes found among panellists identifying as Conservative in wave 1 (see the middle panel of [Figure 6.8b](#)). Although substantial attitude change emerges in the fixed partisanship counterfactual, it has no obvious relationship with mainstream party identity or elite policy divergence on economic issues. This is compatible with findings from [Chapter 5](#), where declining attitude partisanship in this domain mirrors depolarisation in public opinion. I thus continue to observe ideological developments described in sociological accounts, specifically those outlining how cultural polarisation

fragments left-right political conflict (e.g., Crouch, 2020; Kitschelt, 1994; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997).

There is an obvious relationship between partisanship change and economic preferences in the fixed attitude counterfactual, on the other hand. Conservative identity is associated with increasingly left-wing *initial* positions in the 2014-2019 period, as displayed in the right-hand panel of [Figure 6.8b](#). This is unusual but follows broader findings from the chapter. Both mainstream parties were losing supporters to the radical right before Brexit (e.g., Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 5; Ford and Goodwin, 2010; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Ford et al., 2012; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Ch. 6). The left is particularly fragmented by cultural ideology (Surridge, 2018b). Yet less economically right-wing voters were also most likely to defect from the Conservatives, possibly reflecting supporters gained from Labour while in opposition (see Evans and Chzhen, 2013; Evans and Mellon, 2016; Webb and Bale, 2014). Previous sections show partisanship change pushing Conservatives in a Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, and traditionalist direction. Patterns of vote switching observed following the referendum suggest that this reflects gains made back from radical right parties and formerly lost by Labour (Evans et al., 2021; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 9; Mellon et al., 2018). Hence, it makes sense that the association between Conservatism and initially left-wing economic preferences increases alongside illiberal cultural positions. These results do not thus resemble party sorting so much as long-term desorting, detaching labour from part of its traditional constituency (Surridge, 2020).

The counterfactual attitude partisanship model of economic issues then supports similar mechanisms found throughout this chapter. In contrast to hypotheses 3a and 3b, left-right partisan dealignment requires attitude *and* partisanship change. Convergent ideological dynamics are unfolding in association with wave 1 partisanship, confirming that depolarisation in public opinion is reducing attitude partisanship in the panel component. Yet this trend also involves unusual party switching, leading the Conservative coalition to comprise individuals with increasingly left-wing *initial* issue positions. These individual-level developments correspond with conflict displacement described in sociological and party sorting accounts but are not sufficiently explained by attitude or partisanship change alone.

## Summary

Evidence against hypotheses 3a and 3b and accounts based purely on attitude or partisanship change is found in every part of this chapter. Fixed partisanship trends show initial identifiers in both parties adopting more liberal preferences for European integration, immigration, and social values, along with left-right dealignment. This follows shifts in public opinion but suggests limits to the sociological conclusion from Chapter 5. Ideological developments have independent polarising effects only on European integration, where Europhilic attitude dynamics are less pronounced among wave 1 Conservatives than wave 1 Labour partisans. Even then, fixed partisanship polarisation is far weaker than observed trends, while changes in issue positions lead initial Labour-Conservative identifiers to become less (not more) divided by immigration and social values. Partisan polarisation thus also requires partisanship change. Party switching emerging in association with initial cultural attitudes limits the liberal trajectory of Conservatives while mildly enhancing the one affecting Labour's coalition. This in turn contributes to dealignment in the relationship between economic issues and mainstream party identity, mainly by pushing Conservatives left. Hence, although reconfirming ideological developments compatible with sociological accounts, results from this chapter lend new support to party sorting.

## 6.3 | Conclusion

In pure party sorting accounts, polarisation emerges when individuals switch partisanship in a manner consistent with issue positions. In accounts based purely on attitude change, polarisation must reflect partisans updating attitudes in a manner consistent with political identities. This chapter used panel data to create counterfactual conditions based on these perspectives, facilitating analysis of the dynamics leading to attitude-partisanship change in the British case.

Section 6.1 established two hypotheses. If voters switch partisanship without changing issue positions as described in pure party sorting accounts, there should be little difference between observed trends and partisan polarisation emerging when individuals' issue positions are fixed at initial values. This *fixed attitude* counterfactual is summarised by Hypothesis 3a, which states that party switching alone is sufficient to

explain observed trends and attitude change is not required. If voters update issue positions without switching partisanship, meanwhile, there should be little difference between observed trends and partisan polarisation emerging when individuals' party identification is fixed at initial values. This *fixed partisanship* counterfactual corresponds to claims surrounding party identification in sociological and elite cue accounts, leading to Hypothesis 3b: attitude change alone is sufficient to explain observed trends and party switching is not required.

Section 6.2 studied observed and counterfactual attitude partisanship on European integration, immigration, social values, and economic issues, returning limited support for hypotheses 3a or 3b. In no case are ideological developments or party switching alone sufficient to explain observed trends in partisan polarisation, which require attitude *and* partisanship change. This challenges accounts based purely on party sorting and claims related to that perspective in the British case, where it has long been argued that individual-level ideology is enduring and stable over time (Bartle, 2000; Evans et al., 1996; Heath et al., 1994). Previous research finds cross-sectional evidence consistent with pure party sorting during post-Thatcher convergence (Adams et al., 2012b; Adams et al., 2012c; but see Cohen and Cohen, 2021). Similarly, cross-lagged panel models indicate that individuals' ideological preferences are more stable than and exogenous to changes in their partisanship, especially when Labour-Conservative platforms are less converged at earlier stages of the post-Thatcher period (Evans and Neundorf, 2020; Milazzo et al., 2012; but see Cohen and Cohen, 2021). My findings do not establish granger causation among attitude and partisanship dynamics, yet they do suggest that both are required to explain recent developments in British politics.

In addition to weakening *pure* party sorting perspectives, this also moderates the sociological conclusion from Chapter 5. Indeed, virtually all evidence of partisan polarisation is removed when individuals' party identification is fixed at initial values. Partisanship change pushes Conservatives in a Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, traditionalist, yet left-wing direction from 2014 to 2019. This contributes to research showing the party recovering ground previously lost to UKIP and other radical right parties after Brexit (e.g., Cutts et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2021; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 9; Mellon et al., 2018). The increasing association between initially left-wing preferences and observed Conservative identity suggests that some of these gains are voters formerly

aligned with Labour (see also Evans and Chzhen, 2013; Evans and Mellon, 2016; Ford and Goodwin, 2010, 2014). The Labour Party maintained strategic ambiguity on European integration and immigration to stem and reverse such dealignment (Hobolt, 2018; Prosser, 2020; Schonfeld and Winter-Levy, 2021; Shaw, 2021). Fixed attitude dynamics therefore show no clear overarching shift in the initial issue positions of its coalition in any domain. That being said, party switching does seemingly contribute to the left-liberal trajectory observed among Labour partisans, especially as the party leadership adopts less ambiguous policies on European integration and immigration during later stages of the Brexit period.

Ultimately, a lot else changes from 2014 to 2019, so we cannot conclude that elite policy divergence causes partisanship dynamics. Yet there is a distinctive pattern of cultural realignment in these results which is compatible with sorting mechanisms. Many accounts argue that political competition on cross-cutting issues destabilises electoral equilibrium, leading to conflict displacement as cross-pressured partisans switch identities (e.g., Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Key, 1955; Riker, 1982; Schattschneider, 1960; Sundquist, 1983). Something like that does seem to unfold in relation to Brexit. The latter engages Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, and traditionalist preferences that intersect and are marginalised by elites representing mainstream party coalitions (Bale et al., 2020; Evans and Menon, 2017; Hanretty et al., 2020; Hobolt and Rodon, 2020). Conservative-Leave alignment connects these preferences more closely with partisanship. We thus observe systematic switching across cultural issues, apparently at the expense of economic preferences.

This takes nothing away from ideological developments found in Chapter 5. Fixing individuals' issue positions at initial values also alters observed trends, considerably reducing partisan polarisation on European integration and social values. In fact, results show that attitude change is important in every domain, despite not always having independent polarising effects. Whereas liberal shifts in public preferences are associated with greater attitude divergence and alignment, these changes are affecting Labour *and* Conservative identifiers at the individual level and do not necessarily increase partisan division once isolated from switching mechanisms. Fixed partisanship trends are convergent on immigration and social values, and considerably less polarising when only individuals' preferences for European integration vary over time. Cultural realignment

then requires partisanship change, but the latter's interaction with ideological dynamics is what explains partisan polarisation from 2014 to 2019. Although initial identifiers in both parties develop less Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, and traditionalist positions, on average, the observed trajectory of the Conservative coalition seems to be limited by patterns of switching described above. This generates polarisation because Labour partisans becomes more liberal while Conservatives are caught between countervailing attitude and partisanship dynamics.

It is not therefore evidence of attitude or partisanship change that is particularly novel here. Chapter 5 already established liberal ideological developments, whereas cultural sorting is a well-documented trend in voting behaviour since the financial crisis (Evans and Chzhen, 2013; Evans and Mellon, 2016; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 5). What is new is the interaction between these processes observed from 2014 to 2019. Party switching converges left-right positions while pushing Labour-Conservative coalitions in opposite directions on European integration, immigration, and social values. Although suggesting that sorting mechanisms are involved in the British case, it is mainly by enhancing or offsetting attitude dynamics that this affects aggregate outcomes. The shifting ideological properties of mass opinion move voters in both parties towards more liberal cultural positions and thus Labour identifiers away from Conservatives in association with partisanship change.

While we cannot say for sure what drives these attitude dynamics, the specific changes observed remain unexpected from elite cue perspectives. Not only are they opposed to the clearest policy signals on European integration and immigration; liberal ideological shifts are affecting voters regardless of initial partisanship. Conservative-Leave alignment is systematically related to Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, and traditionalist switching. Yet there is little indication that partisan motivated reasoning causes sustained attitude change. Along with continuing evidence of dealignment in economic preferences, which also has no clear relationship with partisanship nor elite policy divergence after the financial crisis, this reinforces sociological interpretations of ideological developments documented by Chapter 5. It is consistent with accounts describing the consequences of demographic culture shifts in Britain (e.g., Goodhart, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). We will not be able to properly distinguish bottom-up from top-down attitude change without comparing

partisan, non-partisan dynamics, however, as in the next chapter.



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## Panel Design II: Attitude Change and Political Engagement

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### 7.1 | Introduction

The polarisation literature proposes two main sources of attitude change: elite cue effects based on partisan motivated reasoning and bottom-up sociological developments. Previous chapters establish that polarisation involves ideological realignment affecting British voters from 2014 to 2019. The specific dynamics observed are not obviously related to Labour-Conservative partisanship nor elite cues in this period, but I have not yet explicitly tested identity-defensive mechanisms on the British case. The present chapter thus returns to the [BES](#) panel component and asks if attitude change varies by political engagement. I fix voters into partisan, non-partisan subpopulations and compare ideological developments unfolding among them.

Elite cue accounts are challenged by findings from previous chapters. Left-right depolarisation between partisans and in the broader distributional properties of public opinion is difficult to reconcile with elite policy divergence, which is arguably clearest on economic issues following the financial crisis. Similarly, liberal attitude shifts contradict Conservative-Leave alignment and strategic Labour ambiguity during the Brexit period. The latter is associated with systematic party switching among voters with different initial preferences for European integration, immigration, and social values, yet initial Labour *and* Conservative identifiers adopt more cosmopolitan positions from 2014 to 2019.

Identity-defensive mechanisms are damaged yet not ruled out by these findings. Elite cue accounts describe the interaction between party leaders and party followers, which is diluted when aggregating trends beyond politically engaged voters. As Layman and Carsey (2002a, p. 789) put it, ‘the only citizens we expect to respond to the developments observed among party elites by bringing their own views on different issue dimensions closer together are party identifiers, particularly strong partisans, who are aware of party polarisation on all of those dimensions’. Partisanship-based attitude change thus potentially affects very small groups and might not be visible in trends analysed so far.

These groups matter because they are also the voters to which party leaders are most responsive. Elite cue proponents argue that political conflict is sustained and spreads to cross-cutting domains via reciprocal influence among politicians and issue activists (e.g., Layman et al., 2010; Zaller, 2012). Politicians have an incentive to stand on increasingly extreme, ideological platforms that appeal to broader coalitions of issue activists, while issue activists subsequently adopt the overarching platforms advocated by politicians (see also Saunders and Abramowitz, 2004; Karol, 2015; Carsey and Layman, 1999; Layman, 1999; Layman and Carsey, 1998). In the American case, this top-down, bottom-up feedback reconciles the paradox of polarising parties representing voters with unconstrained issue preferences. It is not that elites are responding to sociological realignment so much as interacting with potentially small groups of politically engaged partisans.

Such an interaction may therefore explain elite policy messaging seemingly disconnected from attitude change observed in chapters 5 and 6. In particular, despite intensifying mainstream party competition on economic issues following the financial crisis, I consistently find left-right convergence and dealignment among voters. Cultural shifts in partisanship and public opinion are compatible with sociological and party sorting accounts, but the reason why Labour and Conservative elites continue competing on economic terms remains unclear. Elite cue proponents would contend that political leaders are managing left-right coalitions while recruiting voters with different cultural preferences (see Bawn et al., 2012; Baylor, 2018; Cohen, 2019; Karol, 2009; Noel, 2013). Identity-defensive mechanisms sustain these cross-cutting processes by facilitating ideological conversion among partisans and party switchers. Partisans incorporate new issue positions along with elites and party switchers adapt other attitudes in a manner

consistent with their new political identity. Indeed, such conflict extension is a major justification of elite cue accounts (see Carsey and Layman, 2006; Layman and Carsey, 2002a,b; Layman et al., 2010, 2006). If elite policy divergence only causes party sorting, ‘the old cleavage must be played down [for] the new conflict...to be exploited’ (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 63). Yet partisanship-based attitude conversion allows partisan polarisation incorporating economic and cultural issues, reconciling unidimensional party competition with multidimensional mass trends. Conflict displacement is what we observe averaging across British voters or even Labour-Conservative identifiers. However, engaged partisans might resemble elite disagreements more closely.

Some might also challenge the claim that cosmopolitan attitude change goes against elite trends. Section 3.2 described complex cultural developments in British politics after the financial crisis. Labour maintains ambivalent positions on European integration and immigration during the Brexit period, but its non-economic platform otherwise becomes more liberal. Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership promised ‘a kinder politics’ and was seen as a victory for internationalist and anti-war factions of the party (Seymour, 2016). This shift is visible in manifesto data, where Labour represents neutral social values in 2015 and has an increasingly cosmopolitan position in 2017 and 2019 (Allen and Bara, 2021). It also emerges in the liberal trajectory of expert and voter party placements reviewed in Section 3.2. The Conservatives’ cultural platform beyond Brexit is quite unclear, meanwhile. Tory modernisation defined the leadership of David Cameron (Bale, 2016; Hayton and McEnhill, 2015). Theresa May began her tenure as prime minister signalling ‘One Nation’ priorities and ‘social justice’ (Hickson et al., 2020). In fact, without European integration and immigration, there is little evidence of Conservative policy moving in any direction on cultural issues, even in its 2019 general election manifesto (Allen and Bara, 2021).

There are thus many ways for elite cues to generate liberal attitude change. It is not just that Labour policy messaging is stronger on values structuring Brexit divides (see Evans and Menon, 2017, Ch. 4; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 9; Norris and Inglehart, 2019, Ch. 11; Scotto et al., 2018; SurrIDGE, 2018a; Swales, 2016). The partisan motivated reasoning literature outlines various top-down reactions to political persuasion. A major innovation is the concept of ‘contrast effects’, where voters form opinions against parties and politicians they dislike (Nicholson, 2012; Slothuus and De Vreese, 2010).

For instance, Conservative-Leave alignment might encourage Labour's Europhilic and pro-immigration trajectory, even though its own leadership espouses ambivalent positions on Brexit. A related form of elite cue-taking involves party identifiers shifting preferences away from unlikable leaders (Aaroe, 2012). This could explain liberal attitude dynamics affecting Conservatives, especially considering the failing popularity of Theresa May (Denver and Johns, 2022, Ch. 5; Mellon et al., 2018). The generally poor leadership images associated with Ed Miliband and Jeremy Corbyn could similarly contribute to left-right convergence and dealignment (Denver and Johns, 2022; Evans and Mellon, 2015). Some also challenge the assumption that it is specific policy messages that voters follow rather than the wider informational context (Adams et al., 2011, 2014). It may not then take explicit cues on Europe or immigration for Labour identifiers to figure out what side of Brexit divides they are on.

Moreover, Chapter 6 did actually find attitude change compatible with the classical interpretation of partisan motivated reasoning. Initial Labour identifiers move more decisively in a Europhilic direction than initial Conservatives, among whom declining Euroscepticism rebounds and is less consistent across issues. Polarisation thus increases even once isolated from party switching, with Labour's coalition becoming less opposed to the EU faster than Conservatives. Contrast this with convergent pro-immigration attitude dynamics and we see how elite cues might contribute to electoral division on European integration, if only by limiting or enhancing ideological changes caused by something else.

All this amounts to substantial room for partisanship-based explanations of attitude change. Despite the various elite cue effects described above, Section 3.4 established a simple test for distinguishing top-down from bottom-up polarisation mechanisms. Top-down mechanisms are mediated by political engagement, since voters must receive political communications to act on them in general, but require a reason to be persuaded by them in the case of ideological conversion (as opposed to sorting).<sup>1</sup> Partisanship provides that reason, either because people have a psychological need to defend their identity or want to limit the informational costs involved in political decisions (Campbell et al., 1960; Achen and Bartels, 2016; Green et al., 2002; Sniderman and Stiglitz, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup>Although party sorting mechanisms are also top-down and hence mediated by political engagement, they are already supported by Chapter 6 and not tested further here.

Therefore, to the extent that elite policy divergence causes attitude change, it should be limited to partisans and potentially only those with a certain level of political attentiveness. Sociological developments can affect voters regardless of their engagement in politics, meanwhile.

We can then reduce the distinction between top-down and bottom-up dynamics as follows:

**Hypothesis 4**—If partisanship causes polarisation, ideological developments should be moderated by political engagement.

The remainder of the chapter tests this hypothesis in two parts. An established method for assessing subgroup dynamics is to disaggregate polarisation trends (e.g., Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Munzert and Bauer, 2013a). Section 7.2 therefore re-runs attitude divergence and alignment models (from Chapter 5) on fixed partisan, non-partisan samples. First, trends in the dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint of preferences among Labour-Conservative identifiers are compared with other voters (those with no/third party identity). The same models are then fit to subsamples of these groups comprising engaged party identifiers and independents—those most and least likely to follow elite cues, respectively. Section 7.3 follows up this analysis with an extension of the counterfactual attitude partisanship model from Chapter 6. It matches mainstream partisans with other voters using procedures described by Ho et al. (2007). I create a dummy variable that equals 1 for Conservative identifiers and non-partisans with similar characteristics in wave 1, and 0 for initial Labour identifiers and Labour matches. The correlation between this fixed variable and observed issue positions then summarises attitude dynamics among mainstream partisans and other voters. If these groups are sufficiently balanced, the difference in trends separating them measures the effect of mainstream partisanship on polarisation.

Even with such lenient criteria, elite cue effects remain largely unsupported by this chapter. The best evidence of partisan motivated reasoning is a less prominent pro-EU trajectory in attitudes among wave 1 Conservatives. Euroscepticism declines more rapidly across fixed Labour identifiers and Labour-Conservative matches. Hence, polarisation is limited to partisans in this domain. To the extent that political identity mediates attitude change, it is interacting with broader liberal shifts unfolding regardless of initial political engagement. Indeed, I find no other evidence that Labour-Conservative

identifiers are subject to different ideological developments. If anything, polarisation is stronger outside mainstream party coalitions in Section 7.2, while Section 7.3 observes parallel partisan, non-partisan dynamics beyond European integration. This reinforces the sociological interpretation of attitude change advanced during previous chapters.

## 7.2 | Are trends in attitude divergence and alignment associated with political engagement?

This section disaggregates trends in attitude divergence and alignment by political engagement. Specifically, it returns to models of dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint to establish if public opinion is polarising via partisanship, as described in elite cue accounts. These models all have the following generic form:

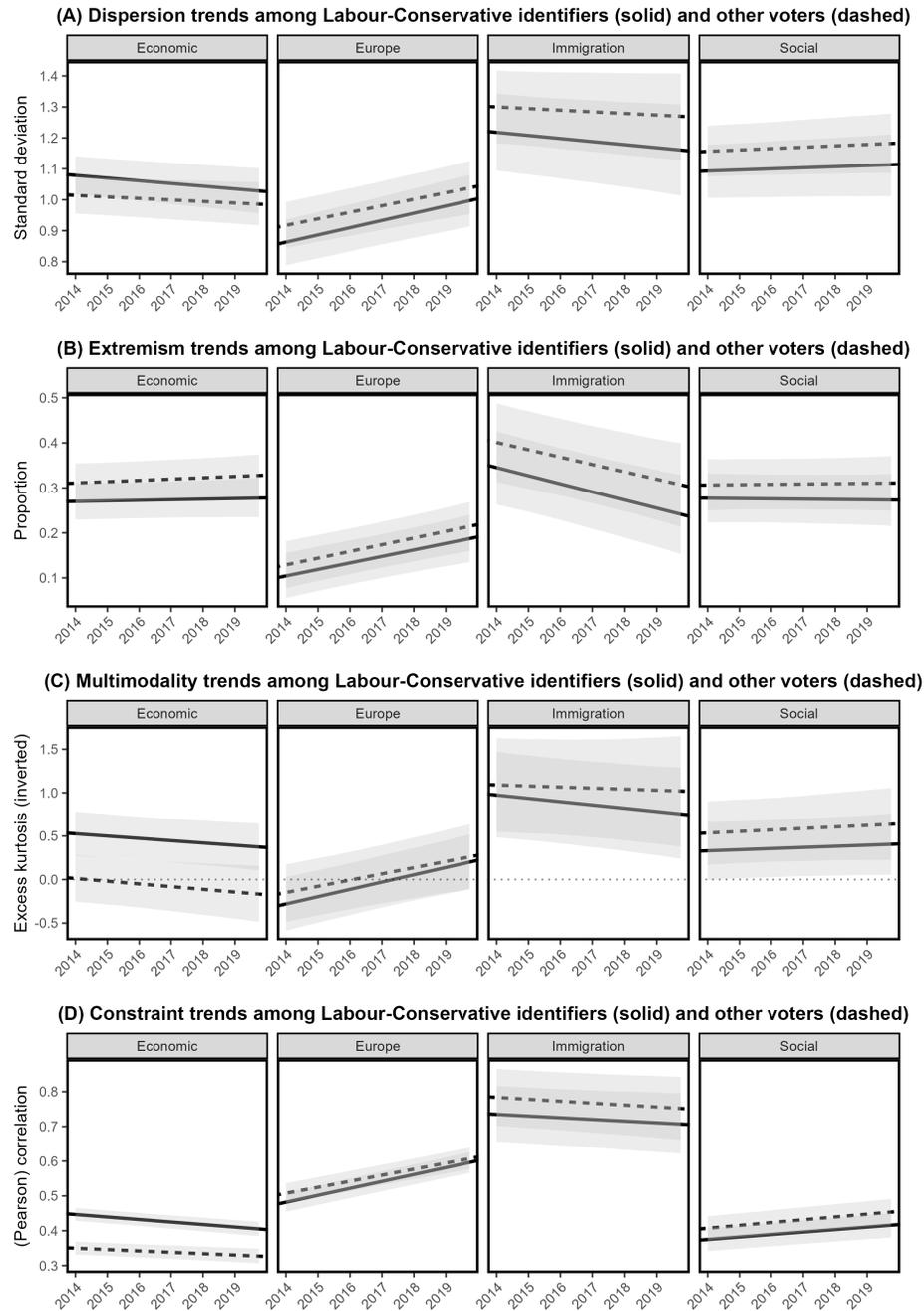
$$y_{it} = \alpha_1 + \alpha_2 \cdot \text{immigration} + \alpha_3 \cdot \text{social values} + \alpha_4 \cdot \text{economic issues} + \alpha_{5i} + \beta_1 t \quad (7.1) \\ + \beta_2 t \cdot \text{immigration} + \beta_3 t \cdot \text{social values} + \beta_4 t \cdot \text{economic issues} + \beta_{5i} t + \epsilon_{it},$$

where  $y_{it}$  is the survey-wave standard deviation, proportion of extremism, excess kurtosis, and correlation in issue positions for dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint, respectively. In each case, the measure of polarisation is regressed on time in a multilevel model with varying intercepts and slopes for attitude items and partial pooling within domains. The interpretation of results thus remains unchanged from Chapter 5. Intercepts summarise polarisation during the first quarter of 2014 and slopes represent time trends in decades, with European integration as baseline.<sup>2</sup> The only difference is that I apply each model separately to fixed partisan, non-partisan subsamples, comparing mainstream party identifiers with other voters and engaged mainstream partisans with independents.

### Comparing Labour-Conservative identifiers with other voters

Table 7.1 and Figure 7.1 summarise trends in attitude divergence and alignment among subsamples comprising initial Labour-Conservative partisans and wave 1 respondents with no/third party identity (labelled ‘non-partisan’). The differences we might expect if partisanship caused attitude change are not apparent. In fact, the only domain in

<sup>2</sup>Again, time is counting the number of years and quarters since wave 1 and dividing by 10, providing a proxy for increasing elite policy divergence from 2014 to 2019.



**Figure 7.1:** Trends in attitude divergence and alignment among Labour-Conservative identifiers and other voters.

*Notes:* Shaded areas are 0.9 credible intervals of the mean regression line for each issue domain. The dotted line in Panel C marks 0 (the value of excess kurtosis in a normal distribution). Excess kurtosis is multiplied by -1 so that positive trends indicate polarisation. Time is on the x-axis.

**Table 7.1:** Trends in attitude divergence and alignment among Labour-Conservative identifiers and other voters.

	Dispersion		Extremism		Multimodality		Constraint	
	Partisan	Non-partisan	Partisan	Non-partisan	Partisan	Non-partisan	Partisan	Non-partisan
Intercept	0.86 (0.04)	0.92 (0.05)	0.10 (0.03)	0.13 (0.03)	-0.28 (0.19)	-0.15 (0.20)	0.48 (0.02)	0.51 (0.02)
European integration	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline
Immigration	0.35 (0.09)	0.38 (0.08)	0.24 (0.06)	0.27 (0.06)	1.25 (0.35)	1.24 (0.38)	0.25 (0.05)	0.28 (0.05)
Social values	0.23 (0.07)	0.24 (0.07)	0.17 (0.04)	0.18 (0.05)	0.61 (0.28)	0.68 (0.30)	-0.11 (0.03)	-0.10 (0.03)
Economic issues	0.22 (0.06)	0.10 (0.06)	0.17 (0.04)	0.18 (0.04)	0.81 (0.24)	0.16 (0.26)	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.16 (0.02)
Time (decades)	0.23 (0.04)	0.21 (0.04)	0.14 (0.03)	0.15 (0.03)	0.84 (0.19)	0.71 (0.24)	0.20 (0.01)	0.17 (0.01)
Time x European integration	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline
Time x immigration	-0.33 (0.07)	-0.26 (0.07)	-0.32 (0.06)	-0.31 (0.07)	-1.22 (0.35)	-0.84 (0.45)	-0.25 (0.03)	-0.23 (0.04)
Time x social values	-0.20 (0.05)	-0.17 (0.05)	-0.15 (0.05)	-0.14 (0.05)	-0.71 (0.26)	-0.54 (0.35)	-0.13 (0.02)	-0.09 (0.02)
Time x economic issues	-0.32 (0.05)	-0.26 (0.05)	-0.13 (0.04)	-0.12 (0.04)	-1.10 (0.24)	-1.02 (0.31)	-0.27 (0.02)	-0.21 (0.02)
Residual SD:								
Intercepts	0.15	0.14	0.10	0.10	0.60	0.64	0.12	0.12
Trends	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.44	0.67	0.04	0.05
Data	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.17	0.15	0.03	0.02
N	325	325	325	325	325	325	1175	1175
Groups	40	40	40	40	40	40	214	214

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from multilevel models with dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint as dependent variables. Intercepts are the standard deviation, proportion of extremism, excess kurtosis, or correlation among issue positions in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Models are fit to partisans and non-partisans separately, with the composition of these groups fixed in wave 1. Excess kurtosis is multiplied by -1 so that positive trends indicate polarisation. Standard errors are in parentheses.

which either subpopulation grows consistently more polarised is *European integration*, where parallel trends in mean dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint emerge from similarly divided initial conditions. Polarisation is generally modest and imprecisely estimated for *social values*. Only constraint increases reliably in this area, on average, and equally across Labour-Conservative identifiers and other voters.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, there is limited evidence of polarisation elsewhere, let alone among partisans. Significantly, these voters provide the strongest negative mean trends on *economic issues*, with the standard deviation ( $\beta = -0.09$ , 90% CI [-0.14, -0.04]), excess kurtosis (-0.26 [-0.52, -0.01]), and correlation (-0.07 [-0.09, -0.06]) in Labour-Conservative preferences declining considerably over time.<sup>4</sup> Along with fundamentally equivalent partisan, non-partisan convergence on *immigration*, the latter is difficult to explain from the perspective that polarising elite cues are causing attitude change. Ideological developments are not obviously moderated by political engagement and there is no indication that Labour-Conservative identifiers more closely mirror elite trends from 2014 to 2019. This is evidence against Hypothesis 4.

Yet Labour and the Conservative Party are not the only source of elite cues in this period. Several smaller parties with focussed policies in certain areas gained traction following the financial crisis. An obvious example is UKIP, whose stance on European integration and immigration forced both issues into mainstream political discourse (Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Chs. 5 and 9; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Ch. 6). Indeed, in almost every model summarised by Table 7.1 and Figure 7.1, Labour-Conservative identifiers are initially more divided on economic issues while intercepts for cultural domains are mildly higher among other voters. This would be unexpected in a pure partisan, non-partisan comparison, even if elite cues were not causing polarisation.<sup>5</sup> It suggests that the effects of political engagement are not properly isolated by distinguishing Labour-Conservative identifiers from voters with no/third

<sup>3</sup>The mean attitude alignment trend in initial *partisans*' social values has a 0.9 credible interval of 0.05, 0.09. The mean attitude alignment trend in initial *non-partisans*' social values has a 0.9 credible interval of 0.06, 0.1.

<sup>4</sup>The only mean non-partisan trend in this domain with a 0.9 credible interval not encompassing zero is the one measuring constraint ( $\beta = -0.05$ , CI [-0.06, -0.02]).

<sup>5</sup>Elite cue proponents claim that polarisation increases partly because party policy divergence activates identity-defensive mechanisms (Layman and Carsey, 2002a; Zaller, 1992). Yet even these are based on sociological conceptions of partisanship from which we would expect deeper cleavages between opposing partisans than among independents, at least on the issues motivating political engagement (see Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964).

party identity, especially in relation to the cultural axis of British politics. I therefore filter the individuals most and least likely to be following elite cues in these groups below.

### Comparing engaged mainstream partisans with independents

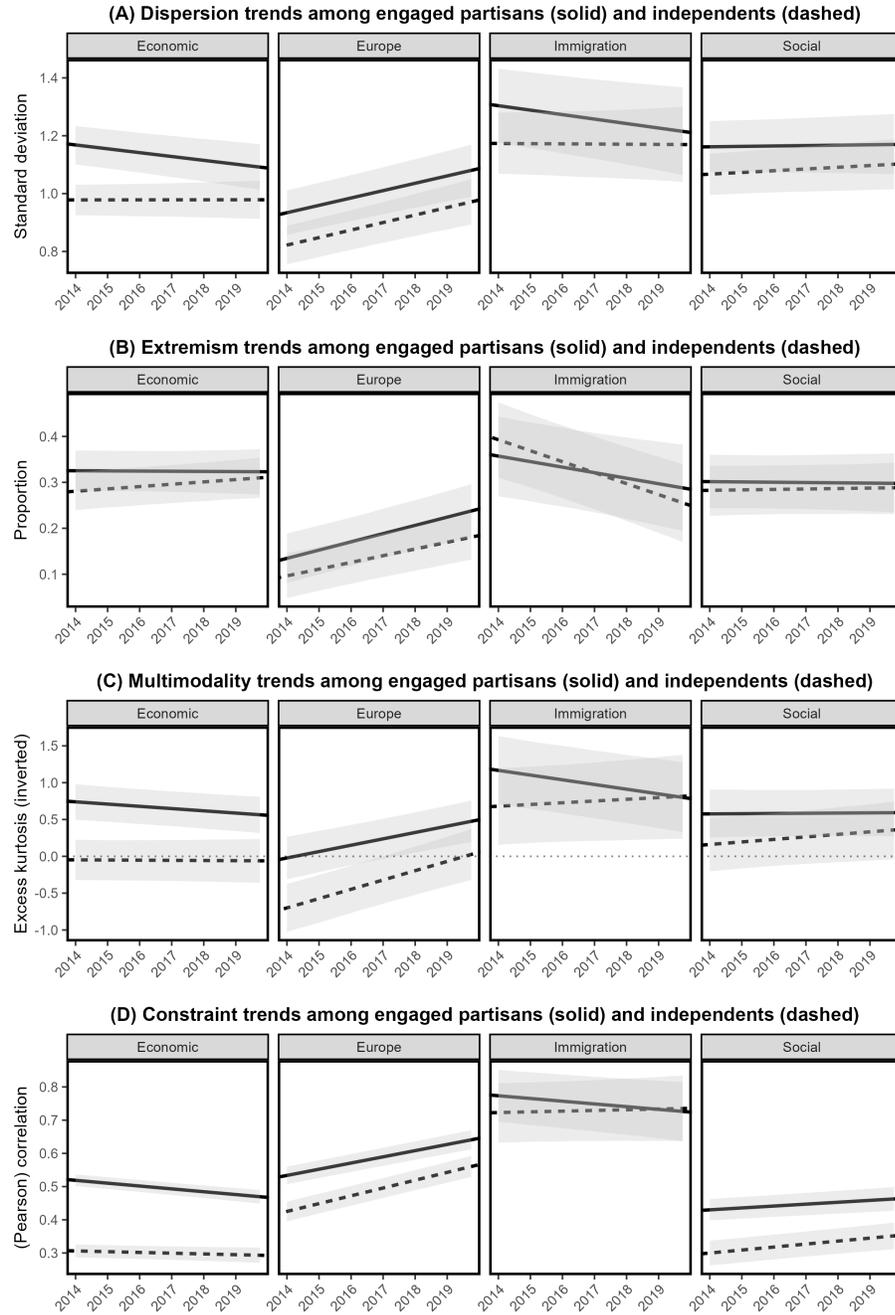
Elite cues influence attitudes through partisan motivated reasoning, but political communications cannot persuade voters that do not receive them (Carsey and Layman, 2006; Zaller, 1992; Cavallé and Neundorf, 2022). Moreover, several studies find that strong partisans are considerably more likely to adjust issue positions in response (Schonfeld and Winter-Levy, 2021; Layman and Carsey, 2002a; Bakker et al., 2020). Elite cue theory is thus not sufficiently tested even if polarisation is no more prominent among Labour-Conservative identifiers. Its proponents could claim that we have simply failed to locate the engaged partisans mirroring elite policy divergence. Similarly, the group least compelled by identity-defensive reasoning are independents, who lack party attachments and the motivation to accept partisan cues (Leeper and Slothuus, 2014). Some argue that independents are politically disengaged and hence less likely to receive top-down appeals (Campbell et al., 1960; Norpoth and Velez, 2012). Others suggest that independence is a non-partisan identity, making such voters more concerned by policy outcomes (as opposed to ideology) and sceptical of partisan influence (Jerit et al., 2009; Klar, 2014). Either way, the effect of elite cues should be weaker among those lacking party identification.

Therefore, [Table 7.2](#) and [Figure 7.2](#) summarise results from the same set of models applied to engaged mainstream partisans and independents.<sup>6</sup> Subsetting Labour-Conservative identifiers according to the strength of their political engagement and other voters by a complete lack of party identity introduces substantial differences to polarisation trends, but not in the direction expected by elite cue accounts. Whereas the mean survey-wave distribution and alignment of independents appears stable on *economic issues*, engaged partisans continue registering negative trends.<sup>7</sup> In particular, the standard deviation in these attitudes decreases by an average of -0.14 per decade, which is

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<sup>6</sup>Engaged partisans are strong (initial) Labour-Conservative identifiers with an average (across survey-waves) interest in politics above the median and independents are voters that claim no partisanship in wave 1 (see Section 4.4).

<sup>7</sup>In fact, the only non-partisan trend on economic issues that is statistically distinguishable from zero is *increasing* mean extremism on economic issues ( $\beta = 0.05$ , CI [0.01, 0.1].)



**Figure 7.2:** Trends in attitude divergence and alignment among engaged partisans and independents.

*Notes:* Shaded areas are 0.9 credible intervals of the mean regression line for each issue domain. The dotted line in Panel C marks 0 (the value of excess kurtosis in a normal distribution). Excess kurtosis is multiplied by -1 so that positive trends indicate polarisation. Time is on the x-axis.

**Table 7.2:** Trends in attitude divergence and alignment among engaged partisans and independents.

	Dispersion		Extremism		Multimodality		Constraint	
	Partisan	Non-partisan	Partisan	Non-partisan	Partisan	Non-partisan	Partisan	Non-partisan
Intercept	0.93 (0.05)	0.82 (0.04)	0.13 (0.03)	0.10 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.17)	-0.70 (0.20)	0.53 (0.02)	0.43 (0.02)
European integration	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline
Immigration	0.37 (0.09)	0.35 (0.08)	0.22 (0.06)	0.30 (0.06)	1.19 (0.33)	1.38 (0.37)	0.24 (0.05)	0.30 (0.06)
Social values	0.23 (0.07)	0.25 (0.06)	0.17 (0.05)	0.19 (0.04)	0.60 (0.27)	0.86 (0.29)	-0.10 (0.02)	-0.13 (0.03)
Economic issues	0.23 (0.06)	0.16 (0.05)	0.19 (0.04)	0.18 (0.04)	0.76 (0.23)	0.65 (0.26)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.12 (0.02)
Time (decades)	0.25 (0.04)	0.26 (0.04)	0.18 (0.04)	0.15 (0.03)	0.86 (0.17)	1.26 (0.20)	0.19 (0.01)	0.24 (0.02)
Time x European integration	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline	baseline
Time x immigration	-0.41 (0.08)	-0.27 (0.07)	-0.30 (0.07)	-0.39 (0.06)	-1.50 (0.30)	-1.03 (0.36)	-0.27 (0.04)	-0.21 (0.05)
Time x social values	-0.24 (0.06)	-0.20 (0.05)	-0.19 (0.05)	-0.14 (0.05)	-0.84 (0.24)	-0.92 (0.28)	-0.13 (0.02)	-0.15 (0.02)
Time x economic issues	-0.39 (0.05)	-0.26 (0.05)	-0.18 (0.05)	-0.10 (0.04)	-1.17 (0.22)	-1.28 (0.26)	-0.27 (0.02)	-0.26 (0.02)
Residual SD:								
Intercepts	0.15	0.13	0.10	0.10	0.56	0.62	0.11	0.13
Trends	0.10	0.09	0.10	0.09	0.36	0.41	0.04	0.07
Data	0.04	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.17	0.21	0.03	0.04
N	325	325	325	325	325	325	1175	1175
Groups	40	40	40	40	40	40	214	214

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from multilevel models with dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint as dependent variables. Intercepts are the standard deviation, proportion of extremism, excess kurtosis, or correlation among issue positions in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Models are fit to partisans and non-partisans separately, with the composition of these groups fixed in wave 1. Excess kurtosis is multiplied by -1 so that positive trends indicate polarisation. Standard errors are in parentheses.

over 1.5 times larger than the mean decline observed among Labour-Conservative identifiers generally. Except for extremism, engaged partisans are subject to much stronger depolarisation on *immigration*, both in comparison with independents and the overall Labour-Conservative trend. Meanwhile, where attitude divergence and alignment increase consistently, it is no more pronounced for the voters most likely to receive and accept elite cues, with essentially equivalent trends found across the dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint of *European integration* preferences. To the extent that *social values* are polarising, it is among independents more than engaged party identifiers, although clear trends are limited to the correlation between issue positions (partisans and non-partisans) and an increase in excess kurtosis (non-partisans only).

Results from this section thus give no indication that public opinion is polarising via political engagement. Parallel trends emerge when comparing Labour-Conservative identifiers and other voters in general, whereas the only substantial difference separating engaged partisans and independents is stronger *depolarisation* in attitudes associated with mainstream partisanship. If the individuals highlighted as most likely to mirror elite trends provide the least compelling evidence of increasing attitude divergence and alignment, there are clearly gaps in top-down perspectives on the British case. On the other hand, attitude polarisation extending beyond mainstream and even third-party coalitions lends further support to sociological accounts, suggesting that something other than identity-defensive mechanisms are involved.

These findings still do not rule out elite cue effects, however, even though partisanship is not associated with stronger evidence of polarisation. Chapter 6 established that Labour-Conservative coalitions are subject to similar ideological dynamics, with initial identifiers in both parties developing more cosmopolitan preferences on European integration, immigration, and social values over time. It is mainly in cooperation with partisanship change that these dynamics escalate cultural divisions from 2014 to 2019, because party switching enhances the Labour coalition's liberal trajectory while offsetting similar ideological developments observed among Conservative partisans. We are thus not necessarily looking for aggregate polarisation so much as a relationship between political engagement and attitude change, as stated by Hypothesis 4.

Partisan motivated reasoning might still explain aspects of attitude-partisanship realignment observed during the Brexit period, even if not polarising Labour-Conservative

coalitions in isolation from party switching. Indeed, switching mechanisms were always an important part of elite cue accounts. Layman and Carsey (2002a) outline partisanship-based attitude conversion taking place at either end of sorting processes. Switchers update ideology in line with their new party's broader policy platform, while continuing partisans incorporate new issue positions added to their established party's platform. Similarly, Zaller (1992) establishes ideological predispositions leading some voters to resist political persuasion, with the implication that they must change partisanship for more proximate representation of those predispositions. Moreover, there are various elite cue effects beyond classical interpretations of partisan motivated reasoning (see Aaroe, 2012; Nicholson, 2012; Slothuus and De Vreese, 2010). The following section therefore unpacks partisan, non-partisan dynamics further, using an adapted version of the counterfactual attitude partisanship model from Chapter 6.

### 7.3 | Are fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship associated with different attitude dynamics?

Chapter 6 established counterfactual variations on survey-wave attitude partisanship. It assessed ideological change using the correlation between *initial* partisanship and *observed* attitudes, calling this *fixed partisanship* polarisation. Fixed partisanship trends are compared with another counterfactual outcome in this section. I preprocess wave 1 of the BES panel using ad hoc matching procedures described by Ho et al. (2007). For initial Conservative identifiers, I create a matched group of non-partisans who share similar wave 1 issue positions to those Conservative identifiers. I then create another matched non-partisan group for initial Labour identifiers. Just as partisanship is coded 1 for Conservative and 0 for Labour, I create a new dummy variable that equals 1 for non-partisan Conservative matches and 0 for non-partisan Labour matches. The correlation between that fixed dummy variable and issue positions observed in survey waves thus measures polarisation among matched non-partisans. Let this be called *matched non-partisanship* polarisation, which changes as non-partisan voters update attitudes.

I estimate elite cue effects by comparing fixed partisanship polarisation with trends in matched non-partisanship polarisation. The assumption is that partisan,

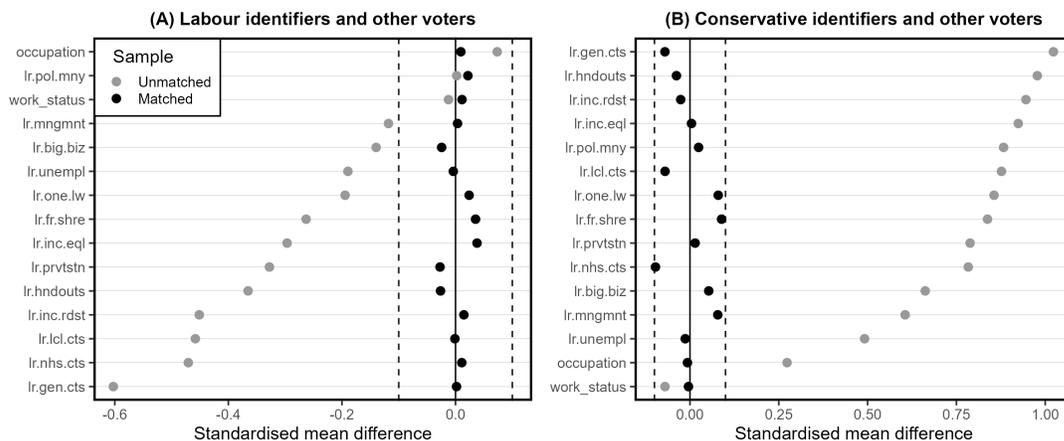
non-partisan groups are initially balanced. Hence, differences in polarisation emerging between them reflect identity-defensive mechanisms caused by partisanship.

We can extend the Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) multilevel modelling approach to describe those differences. One option would be to fit separate models: first, to the correlation between *fixed partisanship* and observed attitudes on issue  $i$  at time  $t$ ; second, to the correlation between *matched non-partisanship* and observed attitudes on issue  $i$  at time  $t$ . Like in Chapter 6, however, it will be easier to compare these outcomes in a single model. I therefore follow the specification used by Cohen and Cohen (2021), stacking fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship correlations in the same dependent variable:

$$\rho_{it} = \alpha_1 + \alpha_2 \cdot \text{fixed partisanship} + \alpha_{3i} + \beta_1 t + \beta_2 t \cdot \text{fixed partisanship} + \beta_{3i} t + \epsilon_{it}. \quad (7.2)$$

Partisan, non-partisan outcomes are distinguished by an indicator variable that equals 1 when correlations are between *fixed partisanship* and observed attitudes and 0 when correlations are between *matched non-partisanship* and observed attitudes. The model is otherwise like those used previously. Intercepts reflect average polarisation at the beginning of 2014 and slopes are the average trend in polarisation over time, with  $\alpha_1$  and  $\beta_1$  and  $\alpha_2$  and  $\beta_2$  pooling matched non-partisanship and fixed partisanship data, respectively. Again, time is measured by counting years and quarters since the first BES wave, which I divide by 10 to give trends in decades. This independent variable provides a proxy for elite policy divergence from 2014 to 2019. Central interest is thus on its interaction with the fixed partisanship dummy, summarising the difference between this counterfactual and matched non-partisanship polarisation.

I match Labour-Conservative identifiers with other voters (those with no/third party identity), yet Appendix D presents fundamentally similar results for engaged partisans and independents. The panel component is preprocessed by dimension and modelled separately for each issue domain. The first part of this section balances economic positions among Labour-Conservative identifiers and other voters in wave 1, before comparing left-right polarisation separating the coalitions comprising these groups. The second part matches across cultural domains but uses the same preprocessed data in separate models for European integration, immigration, and social values.



**Figure 7.3:** Partisan, non-partisan differences in economic preferences and demographic variables before and after matching.

*Notes:* The area between dashed lines marks standardised mean differences less than 0.1.

## Economic issues

Economic issues are associated with attitude change that is awkward from the perspective of elite cue theory. Despite clear elite policy divergence following the financial crisis, Section 5.3 found depolarisation in left-right public opinion, which Chapter 6 linked to incoherent ideological dynamics affecting Labour-Conservative voters regardless of initial partisanship. Indeed, results from Section 7.2 suggest that trends in attitude convergence and dealignment are more prominent among mainstream partisans. This reinforces problems with accounts of polarisation based on identity-defensive mechanisms, but it does suggest some kind of relationship with political engagement, potentially damaging sociological interpretations of ideological developments advanced in previous chapters.

Yet the current British party system is built on economic issues. Labour-Conservative identifiers are initially far more divided on this axis than other voters, which could cause the difference in trends between them rather than partisan motivated reasoning. I thus balance starting conditions among these groups employing nearest neighbour matching with replacement. The balancing procedure is a logistic regression model. It estimates propensity scores for initial partisanship using 13 left-right attitude items available in wave 1 as predictors, along with variables measuring occupational

class and working status.<sup>8</sup> Each partisan is assigned to a non-partisan with the closest estimated propensity score, such that units of the latter may serve multiple units of the former and remaining non-partisans are dropped (see Ho et al., 2007). This matches 3,683 wave 1 Labour identifiers with 1,909 third/non-party identifiers and matches 3,340 wave 1 Conservative identifiers with 1,339 third/non-party identifiers. The resulting balance between these groups is displayed in [Figure 7.3](#). Standardised mean differences are dramatically reduced on most variables and all are less than 0.1, the conventional threshold of negligibility (Austin, 2011).

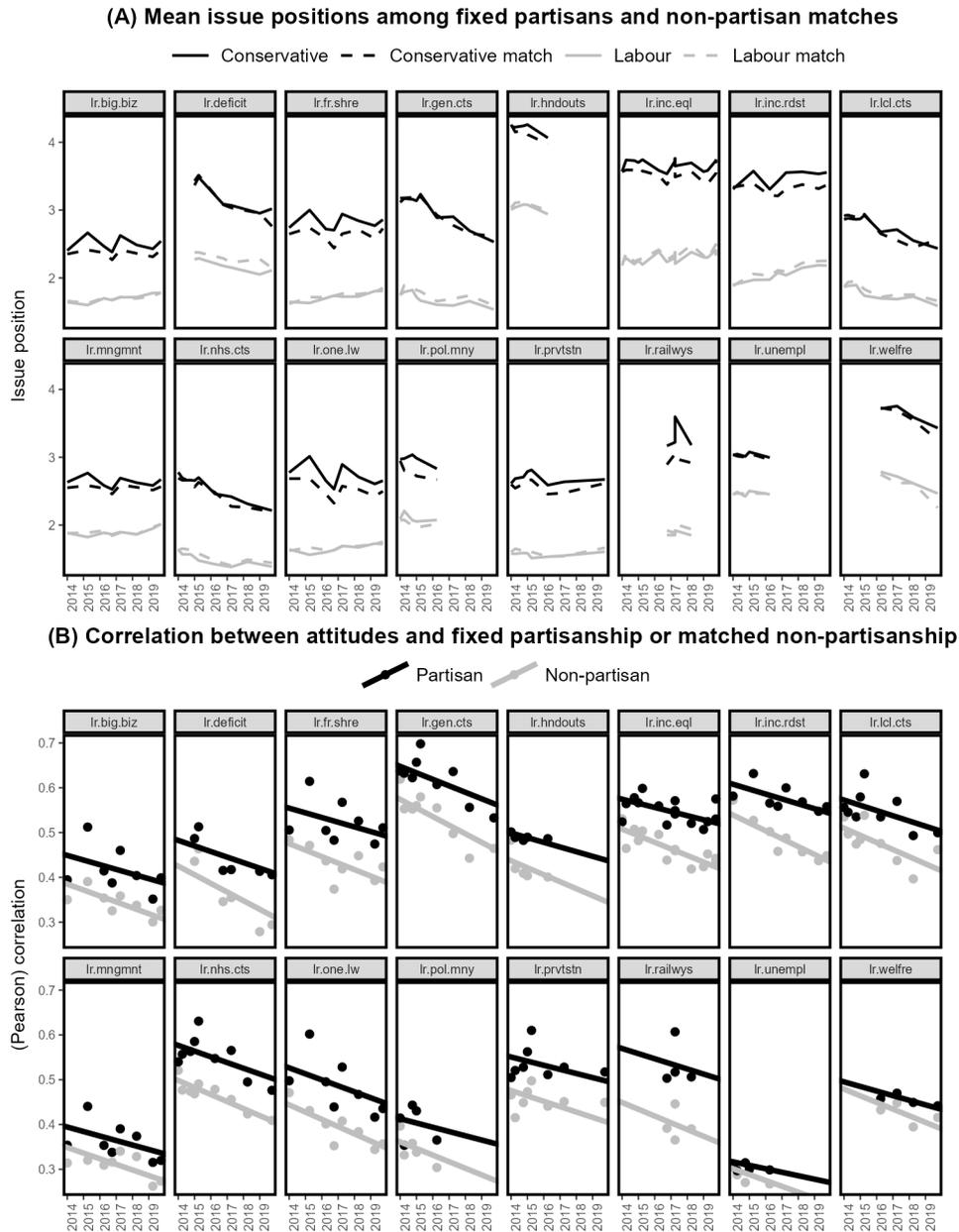
[Figure 7.4](#) summarises attitude dynamics emerging from these more balanced initial conditions. Part A simply plots average survey-wave issue positions among initial Labour-Conservative identifiers and their matches. The first thing to note is the small mean differences between them at the beginning of 2014, reconfirming the balance achieved by matching on wave 1 economic preferences and demographic variables. Even on three items entering the survey later and not included in the matching procedure, as such, partisan, non-partisan differences are comparably small once introduced.

[Figure 7.4a](#) also gives a rough impression of polarisation trends. Two different attitude dynamics distinguish the left-right axis of British politics. All voters shift left on certain questions—asking about the level of benefits, approaches to reducing the government deficit, and public spending cuts—which appear to tap into clustered positions on post-2010 austerity policies pursued by the British government. Less coherent developments characterise other items, meanwhile, which measure general economic principles and attitudes towards the role of government and redistribution. Initial Labour identifiers and Labour matches move right or else remain stable, whereas no clear trend emerges from initial Conservatives or right-wing non-partisans. This difference across attitude items might suggest narrower domains, as noted in previous chapters. Yet it ultimately makes no difference for present purposes. Left-right divisions converge or at least do not change clearly across economic issues and, crucially, the same dynamics are affecting mainstream party identifiers and other voters alike.

[Figure 7.4b](#) thus shows parallel, negative trends in the correlation between observed

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<sup>8</sup>Occupational class is measured using the [NRS](#) social grading system, grouped into AB, C1, C2, and DE. Working status is a variable distinguishing retired people, who are included in the non-working category of the NRS scale, from those engaged in full-time employment and everyone else (part-time workers, students, the unemployed, and those not in paid work for other reasons).



**Figure 7.4:** Left-right attitude change among Labour-Conservative identifiers and other voters, matched on wave 1 economic positions and demographic variables. *Notes:* Part A shows mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave. Part B shows trends in the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship or matched non-partisanship. Time is on the x-axis.

**Table 7.3:** Trends in fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship polarisation on economic issues.

	attitude x fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship
Intercept	0.45 (0.02)
Non-partisanship	baseline
Fixed partisanship	0.06 (0.03)
Time (decades)	-0.15 (0.02)
Time x non-partisanship	baseline
Time x fixed partisanship	0.04 (0.03)
Residual SD:	
Intercepts	0.08
Trends	0.04
Data	0.03
N	238
Groups	32

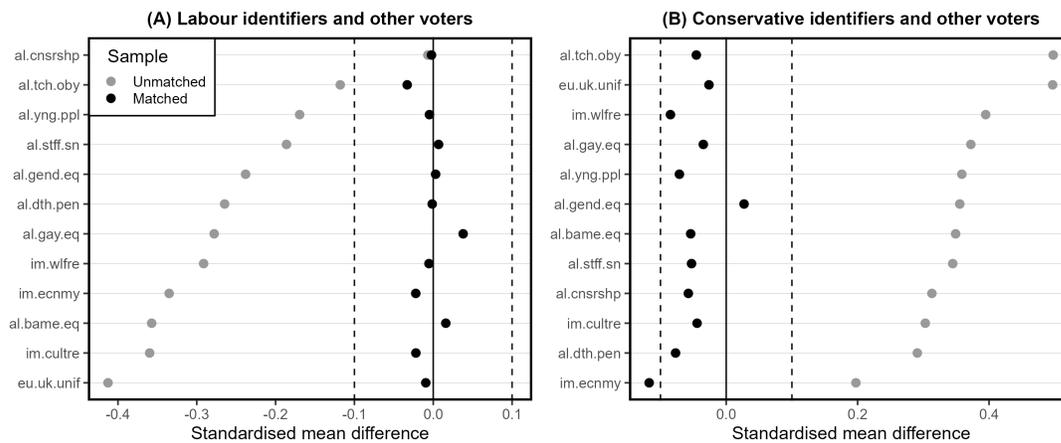
*Notes:* Posterior statistics from a multilevel model with the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship as dependent variable. The intercept is the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Standard errors are in parentheses.

attitudes and fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship. Against Hypothesis 4, left-right developments are not linked to political engagement, with fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship polarisation declining substantially from 2014 to 2019. [Table 7.3](#) summarises the posterior distribution of these trends. The small, imprecisely estimated interaction between time and fixed partisanship ( $\beta = 0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ) confirms that no statistically distinguishable elite cue effect separates Labour-Conservative identifiers from other voters. Matched non-partisanship polarisation decreases by -0.15 per decade, on average. Hence, the 0.9 credible interval for mean fixed partisanship trends is roughly -0.14, -0.07.

This is more evidence against elite cue accounts of attitude change. Although the only clear depolarisation on economic issues in [Section 7.2](#) was found among initial Labour-Conservative partisans, similar dealignment unfolds in association with fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship. There is no difference in trends affecting mainstream party identifiers and other voters after controlling for initial division within these subpopulations. This is consistent with Cohen and Cohen (2021), who observe parallel partisan, non-partisan convergence on redistributive issues from 1991 to 2007. My findings further highlight the limits of elite cue mechanisms in the British case. The

interaction between political engagement and attitude change is unsupported in contexts involving left-right elite depolarisation and repolarisation. Indeed, the fact that voters continue developing less ideological economic preferences despite Labour-Conservative policy divergence after the financial crisis reconfirms sociological conclusions from previous chapters. Corresponding evidence that socially liberal attitude change is unmoderated by political engagement would thus lend additional support to bottom-up accounts of cultural realignment (e.g., Crouch, 2020; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

## Cultural issues



**Figure 7.5:** Partisan, non-partisan differences in cultural preferences before and after matching.

*Notes:* The area between dashed lines marks standardised mean differences less than 0.1.

Results from previous chapters suggest that European integration, immigration, and social values are linked in a cultural dimension of British politics. Items in these domains are highly correlated and demonstrate similar attitude dynamics, with initial Labour *and* Conservative identifiers adopting more liberal positions during the 2014-2019 period. I establish if corresponding developments are affecting non-partisans by matching mainstream partisans to other voters with initially similar cultural preferences. 12 survey questions on European integration, immigration, and social values are available in wave 1 and used to predict initial partisanship via logistic regression.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Eight ask about social values, three immigration, and one is measuring attitudes towards European

Nearest neighbour matching with replacement assigns all party identifiers to the closest propensity score among other voters and drops remaining units. 1,844 Labour partisans are matched with 991 other voters and given the value 0 in a new dummy variable where 1,900 Conservatives and 1,024 non-partisan matches are given the value 1. The dummy variable therefore indicates initial Conservative partisanship or culturally conservative ideology.

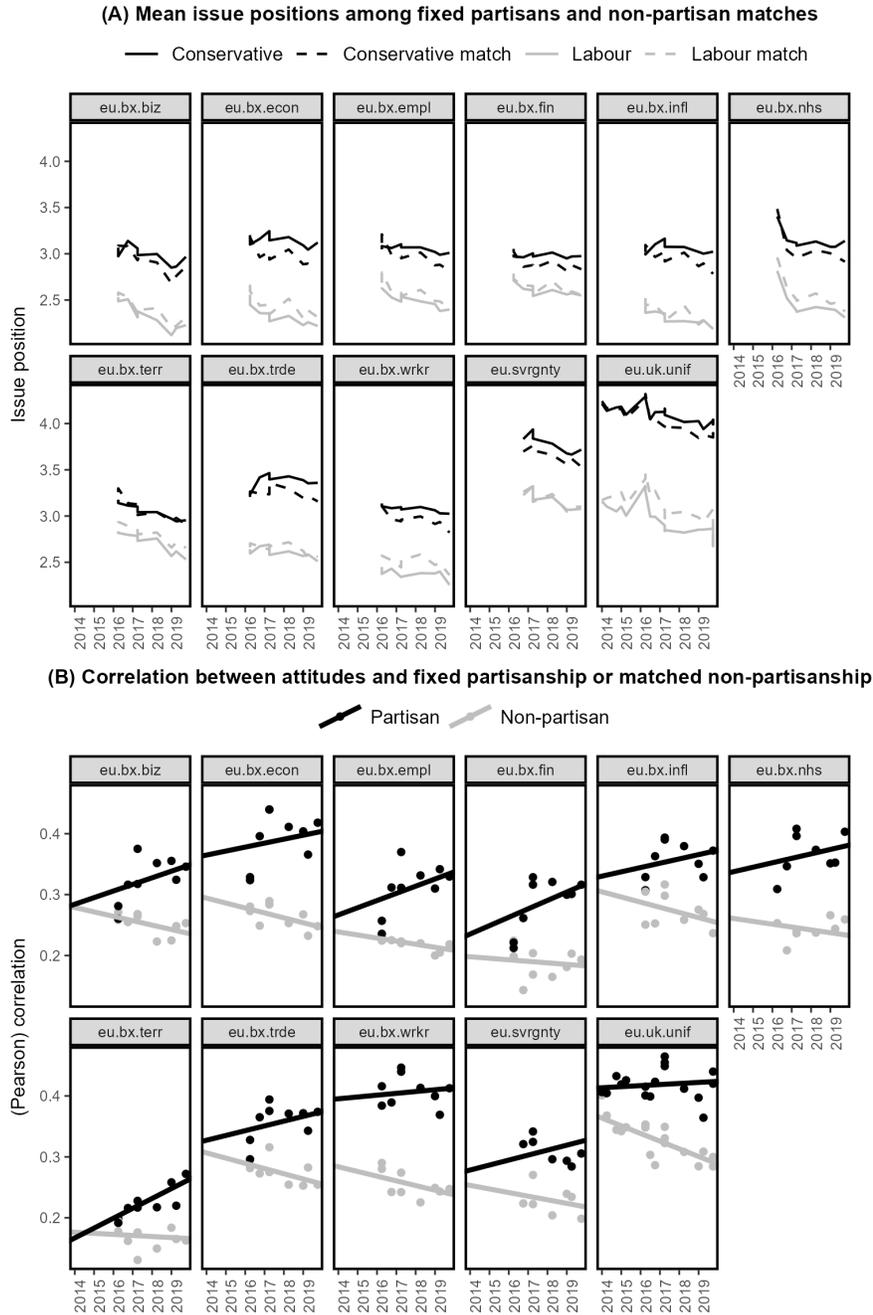
Figure 7.5 summarises the improvement in balance between these groups, showing reduced mean differences across cultural issues. The distance separating mainstream party identifiers and other voters is now less than 0.1 on all but one item, meaning that we can compare the trajectory in attitudes among partisans and non-partisans with initially similar ideological compositions. This is performed separately by domain below. I use the same preprocessed data to filter preferences for European integration, immigration, and social values in each wave, allowing me to model fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship trends. Let us begin with European integration, where elite cue expectations remain relatively intact.

### European integration

Section 7.2 shows partisan, non-partisan polarisation on European integration, whether distinguishing Labour-Conservative identifiers from other voters or engaged mainstream partisans and independents. This already suggests bottom-up attitude change since it is unfolding among those least likely to receive or accept elite cues. Yet there is still reason to expect top-down effects. Chapter 6 observed differences in the trajectory of initial Conservatives' positions relative to Labour partisans. Even though both groups adopt more Europhilic preferences, on average, that trend is less pronounced and consistent in the Conservative coalition, thereby increasing fixed partisanship polarisation.

Indeed, Figure 7.6 suggests that Conservative identity is counteracting liberal attitude change, systematically reducing declines in Euroscepticism. Part A displays mean survey-wave issue positions for mainstream partisans and other voters with initially matched cultural ideology. It is important to stress how well balanced these groups are. Only one European integration item is present from wave 1, asking if 'Britain should do all it can to unite fully with the European Union'. The logistic regression model predicting initial partisanship is thus based mainly on immigration preferences and social integration.

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**Figure 7.6:** European integration attitude change among Labour-Conservative identifiers and other voters, matched on wave 1 cultural positions.

*Notes:* Part A shows mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave. Part B shows trends in the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship or matched non-partisanship. Time is on the x-axis.

**Table 7.4:** Trends in fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship polarisation on European integration.

	attitude x fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship
Intercept	0.27 (0.02)
Non-partisanship	baseline
Fixed partisanship	0.04 (0.03)
Time (decades)	-0.07 (0.02)
Time x non-partisanship	baseline
Time x fixed partisanship	0.15 (0.03)
Residual SD:	
Intercepts	0.06
Trends	0.05
Data	0.03
N	208
Groups	22

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from a multilevel model with the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship as dependent variable. The intercept is the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Standard errors are in parentheses.

values. Mean differences between Labour-Conservative identifiers and their matches are nonetheless small when the remaining 10 items appear during 2016. This justifies the matching procedure used across European integration, immigration, and social values, supporting the idea that such issues are linked in an overarching cultural dimension (see Kriesi et al., 2008).<sup>10</sup>

As in Chapter 6, we see that initial partisans adopt less Eurosceptic positions from 2014 to 2019, but that this trend is weaker among Conservatives. Hence, the same increase in fixed partisanship polarisation is displayed in Figure 7.6b. However, these plots also show considerable attitude change taking place in association with matched non-partisanship. Panellists outside mainstream electoral coalitions shift clearly in a liberal direction, regardless of initial cultural ideology. In particular, those matched with wave 1 Conservatives drift away from this party and closer towards Labour matches, whose Europhilic trajectory also seems less pronounced than the one affecting Labour identifiers. Figure 7.6b and Table 7.4 therefore reveal negative trends in matched non-partisanship polarisation. The mean correlation between European integration preferences and initial cultural conservatism declines by -0.07 per decade, on average, which is around -0.04

<sup>10</sup>To allay concerns, Appendix E presents similar results after matching on 9 EU items available by wave 7.

from 2014 to 2019. Contrast that with the positive interaction between time and fixed partisanship and we observe a clear elite cue effect, with Labour-Conservative coalitions polarising by roughly 0.05 during the same period.

These results offer some support to Hypothesis 4. Partisanship alters the trajectory of initial Conservative identifiers, which is less liberal than it might otherwise have been without elite cues in the aftermath of Brexit. Indeed, focussing on the item asking whether Britain should unite with the European union in [Figure 7.6a](#) (last panel of the second row), it is striking how closely fixed Conservative and matched non-partisan trends correspond prior to the referendum and diverge in 2016 and subsequent years. This is consistent with Schonfeld and Winter-Levy (2021), who find pre-referendum Conservatives adopting more Eurosceptic positions after the ‘almost overnight’ reversal in their party’s Brexit policy.<sup>11</sup> Something similar may also happen among voters identifying as Labour in wave 1, whose pro-EU trajectory looks slightly stronger but is difficult to distinguish from comparable matched non-partisanship developments. Either way, the distance separating mainstream electoral coalitions increases despite otherwise convergent dynamics unfolding in association with initial cultural ideology. Such findings contribute to comparative research documenting changing support for Europe following exogenous shifts in party competition (Down and Wilson, 2010; Gabel and Scheve, 2007; Hellstrom, 2008; Ray, 2003; Steenbergen et al., 2007), suggesting that, to some extent, partisanship cues attitudes towards European integration (see also Hobolt, 2006, 2007; Ray, 1999; Schuck and De Vreese, 2006).

However, this takes nothing away from results described in [Section 7.2](#). The dispersion, extremism, multimodality, and constraint of initial non-partisans’ issue positions increases from 2014 to 2019, revealing attitude change beyond the scope of elite cue theory. In fact, matched non-partisanship trends suggest that liberal dynamics are not caused by identity-defensive mechanisms. After all, Conservatives still become *less* opposed to Europe, whereas potentially stronger (than matched Labour non-partisans) pro-EU shifts among Labour identifiers at best enhances broader developments affecting voters regardless of initial political engagement. Such party movements remain difficult to reconcile with elite cues in this period, which are increasingly Eurosceptic for Conservatives and strategically ambivalent from the Labour leadership (see Hobolt, 2018;

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<sup>11</sup>Their main claim is that party sorting effects are stronger, however.

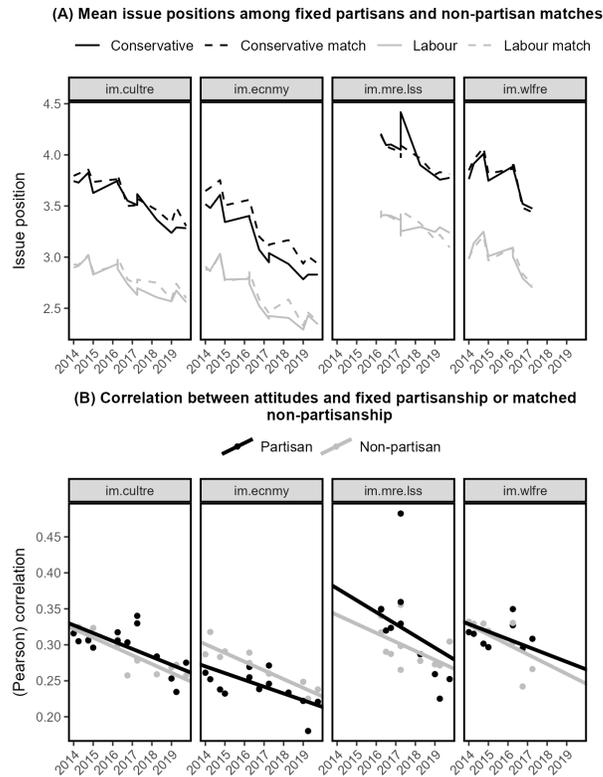
Prosser, 2020; Shaw, 2021). Partisanship might have polarising effects on mainstream electoral coalitions, but something else seems to be driving Europhilic attitude change between 2014 and 2019. Similar partisan, non-partisan dynamics on other cultural issues will thus add to sociological accounts of the British case (e.g., Goodhart, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

### **Immigration**

Substantial attitude change takes place on immigration from 2014 to 2019. The central tendency of preferences in this domain becomes dramatically less restrictionist, leading to declining extremism observed in Section 5.3 and fixed partisanship convergence in Chapter 6. The fact that initial Labour-Conservative coalitions shift in the same direction suggests that identity-defensive mechanisms are not involved, which is consistent with non-partisan dynamics found by Section 7.2. Depolarisation is more robust among engaged party identifiers but other voters also converge rapidly on less extreme immigration positions, especially the subsample of wave 1 independents. If fixed partisanship trends mirror developments unfolding in association with matched non-partisanship, there will then be comprehensive evidence against elite cue accounts of attitude change in this domain.

Figure 7.7 indeed shows corresponding dynamics affecting immigration preferences among mainstream partisans and other voters. Part A plots the average survey-wave issue positions of fixed Labour-Conservative identifiers and their matches. Mean differences between these groups are initially small and remain that way for much of the 2014-2019 period, again showing that balancing across cultural issues has been successful. Partisan, non-partisan divisions are even virtually identical on an item first administered in 2016 and not featured explicitly in the matching procedure, asking about immigration levels. The figure also demonstrates that all respondents converge on less restrictive immigration positions over time.

Figure 7.7b therefore displays parallel trends in the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship or matched non-partisanship. The only noticeable difference is a spike in partisan polarisation on the item asking about immigration levels (third from the left) during 2017, corresponding with Labour-Conservative positions moving briefly in opposite directions. Declining opposition towards immigration is not otherwise related to initial partisanship. In fact, Table 7.5 shows that overall regression lines are



**Figure 7.7:** Immigration attitude change among Labour-Conservative identifiers and other voters, matched on wave 1 cultural positions.

*Notes:* Part A shows mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave. Part B shows trends in the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship or matched non-partisanship. Time is on the x-axis.

nearly identical among mainstream party identifiers and other voters: 0.32 – 0.12 and 0.32 – 0.13, respectively.

This is more evidence against Hypothesis 4 and elite cue accounts of attitude change. Along with liberal shifts in public preferences observed during Section 5.3, which Chapter 6 linked to partisan polarisation and Section 7.2 above found was also affecting non-partisans, these results suggest that immigration attitudes are subject to dynamics independent of political engagement. There is no evidence of partisanship moderating ideological developments beyond an isolated increase in Labour-Conservative polarisation during 2017, highlighting the limits of persuasion effects documented on immigration issues elsewhere (see Brader and Tucker, 2012; Hellwig and Kweon, 2016; Vrânceanu and Lachat, 2021). The prevalence of restrictionist sentiments declines across fixed partisan and matched non-partisan coalitions, consistent with research document-

**Table 7.5:** Trends in fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship polarisation on immigration.

	attitude x fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship
Intercept	0.32 (0.02)
Non-partisanship	baseline
Fixed partisanship	0.00 (0.03)
Time (decades)	-0.13 (0.03)
Time x non-partisanship	baseline
Time x fixed partisanship	0.01 (0.05)
Residual SD:	
Intercepts	0.04
Trends	0.04
Data	0.03
N	90
Groups	8

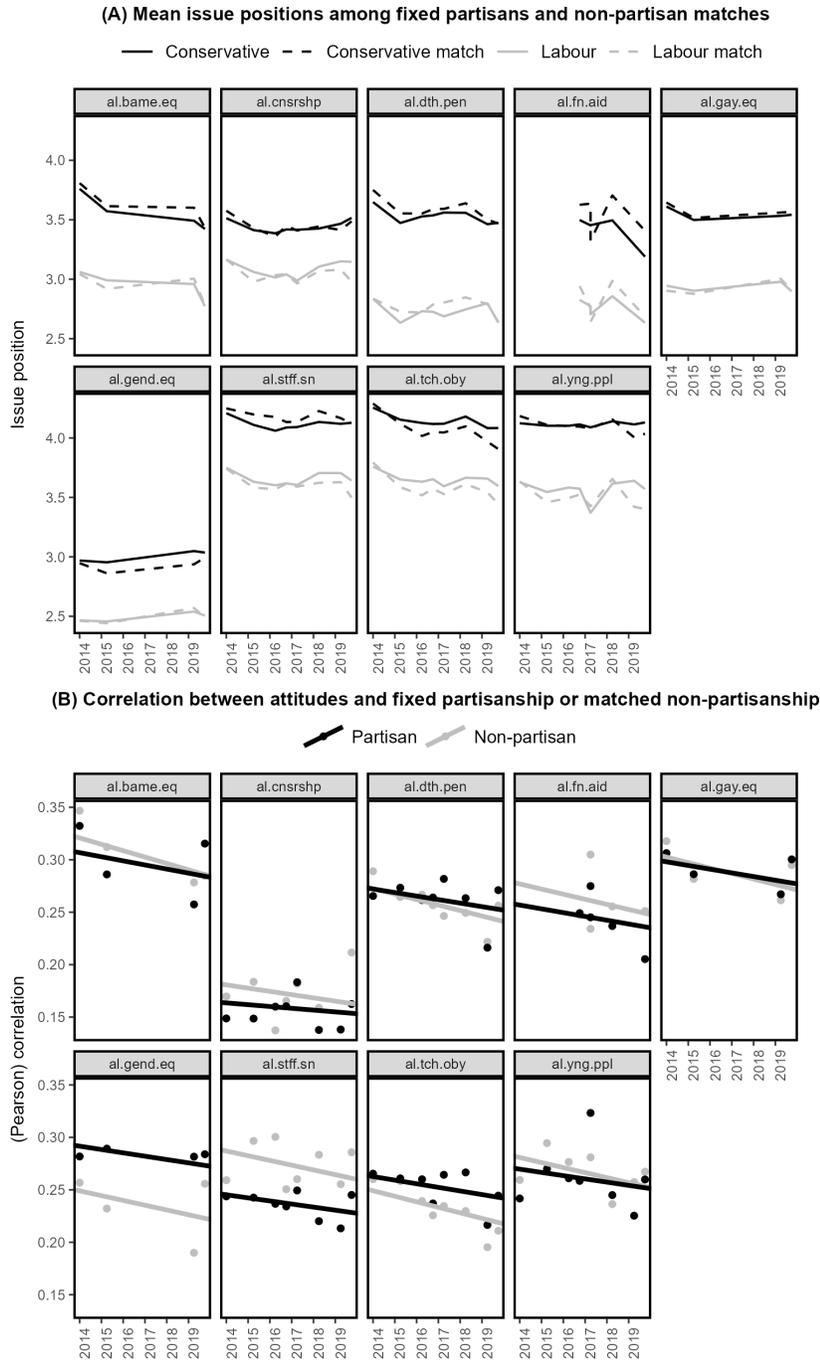
*Notes:* Posterior statistics from a multilevel model with the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship as dependent variable. The intercept is the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Standard errors are in parentheses.

ing a liberal tilt in this domain following Brexit and beginning potentially much earlier (Blinder and Richards, 2021; Caughey et al., 2019; Ford, 2011, 2018; Gottfried and Aslaksen, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2021). Although we do not know what is driving voters in that direction, it is compatible with demographic culture shifts and similar partisan, non-partisan dynamics in European integration attitudes. Corresponding trends for social values will thus provide a coherent set of findings supporting sociological accounts of cultural realignment in Britain.

### Social values

Section 5.3 found substantial polarisation on social values, where liberal shifts in public opinion cause increased dispersion, multimodality, and constraint from 2014 to 2019. However, the panel component returns evidence of attitude change that is less pronounced during subsequent chapters. Fixed partisanship dynamics push Labour-Conservative coalitions towards more liberal positions, on average. Yet these dynamics are relatively modest and inconsistent across attitude items in Chapter 6. Similarly, the polarisation emerging on social values in Section 7.2 above is mainly limited to increased constraint.

Figure 7.8 shows correspondingly modest changes in the relationship between so-



**Figure 7.8:** Social values attitude change among Labour-Conservative identifiers and other voters, matched on wave 1 cultural positions.

*Notes:* Part A shows mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave. Part B shows trends in the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship or matched non-partisanship. Time is on the x-axis.

**Table 7.6:** Trends in fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship polarisation on social values.

	attitude x fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship
Intercept	0.27 (0.02)
Non-partisanship	baseline
Fixed partisanship	-0.01 (0.02)
Time (decades)	-0.05 (0.02)
Time x non-partisanship	baseline
Time x fixed partisanship	0.02 (0.02)
Residual SD:	
Intercepts	0.04
Trends	0.02
Data	0.02
N	114
Groups	18

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from a multilevel model with the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship as dependent variable. The intercept is the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Standard errors are in parentheses.

cial values and matched non-partisanship. Mean issue positions among initial Labour-Conservative identifiers and their matches are displayed in part A. Again, we see that these groups are appropriately balanced matching partisans and non-partisans on cultural questions available in wave 1. Yet limited attitude change emerges during the 2014-2019 period. Along with mainstream party identifiers, other voters adopt only slightly less traditionalist social values and not consistently across attitude items. Hence, [Figure 7.8b](#) and [Table 7.6](#) reveal small decreases in the mean correlation between these positions and initially conservative ideology ( $\beta = -0.05$ ). Fixed partisanship polarisation is not statistically distinguishable from this trend, meanwhile, with 90 per cent of draws from the posterior distribution of its mean slope falling between -0.06, -0.01.

These results have two main implications for understanding attitude change on social values, both of which challenge elite cue accounts. Ideological developments in the panel data are not moderated by political engagement. Against Hypothesis 4, fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship are associated with similar dynamics. But elite cue effects are also challenged by ideological developments *not* in the panel data. [Section 4.4](#) highlighted divergent mean trajectories among social values across [BES](#) datasets. The full sample reveals liberal dynamics that are reduced in the panel com-

ponent, potentially explaining more modest and mixed trends observed when using the latter.

The difference between these datasets implies that some ideological change is lost in fixing the composition of BES respondents. This could indicate problems with the panel component, but it only seriously affects social values. Survey-wave issue positions are mostly consistent in other domains, seemingly suggesting something unique about these attitudes. Social values questions ask about authoritarian-liberal predispositions, which many regard as enduring personality types (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950; Hetherington and Weiler, 2009; Stenner, 2005). We might then observe modest panel trends because responses involve less individual-level change. Indeed, many items in this domain are designed to measure the core values structuring transient issues of the day (see Evans et al., 1996; Evans and Neundorf, 2020; Feldman, 1988; Heath et al., 1994; McClosky and Zaller, 1984).

This has implications for ideological conversion based on identity-defensive mechanisms. Partisanship is the durable feature of individual-level psychology in elite cue accounts, whereas attitudes are weakly held and unstable (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964). Elite policy divergence causes ideological realignment because it activates partisan motivated reasoning (Achen and Bartels, 2016, Ch. 10; Leeper and Slothuus, 2014). Voters must adjust partisanship or issue positions to reduce the cognitive dissonance created by (un)supported parties and politicians moving (closer to) away from established preferences. The defining elite cue claim is that it is easier to update attitudes than identities unless the former are intrinsic to the latter (Carsey and Layman, 2006; Zaller, 2012). In other words, cross-sectional evidence of polarisation should be associated with panel trends if it involves top-down attitude change, which is fundamentally an individual-level phenomenon. There is no observable effect of partisanship on social values, however, whether comparing wave 1 Labour-Conservative identifiers and other voters, engaged mainstream partisans and independents, or balancing the initial ideological composition of these groups. We must reject identity-defensive mechanisms in favour of sociological accounts, as such.

## Summary

Results from this section offer scarce support to Hypothesis 4. Only on European integration does political engagement noticeably alter ideological developments. Fixed partisan and matched non-partisan coalitions all shift in a pro-EU direction but Conservatives less clearly. This liberal trajectory is part of broader culture shifts unfolding independently of initial party identity or ideological location. Hence, I observe parallel partisan, non-partisan convergence in immigration positions from 2014 to 2019, whereas significantly reduced panel trends for social values show no indication of identity-defensive reasoning. Combined with corresponding dealignment in the correlation between economic preferences and fixed partisanship or matched non-partisanship, these findings reinforce sociological interpretations of attitude change. The effects of elite cues are limited, transient, and not otherwise driving cultural realignment in British politics.

## 7.4 | Conclusion

This chapter explored partisan, non-partisan dynamics to distinguish top-down from bottom-up accounts of attitude change. Section 7.1 established a simple hypothesis based on the argument that partisanship causes polarisation. To the extent that partisan motivated reasoning is involved in the 2014-2019 period, Hypothesis 4 states that ideological developments should be moderated by political engagement. Evidence to the contrary thus reinforces sociological interpretations of attitude change advanced in previous chapters.

Section 7.2 disaggregated attitude divergence and alignment trends among fixed partisan, non-partisan subpopulations, finding limited support for the elite cue claim that polarisation affects potentially small groups of active voters. The distributional properties of issue positions are polarising unambiguously only on European integration. Yet subpopulations are subject to parallel trends in this domain, whether comparing Labour-Conservative identifiers with other voters or engaged mainstream partisans and independents. Similar partisan, non-partisan increases in constraint are observed for social values, whereas evidence of depolarisation is actually stronger between the voters most likely to follow elite cues. Despite escalating policy disagreements following the financial crisis, engaged mainstream partisans converge more clearly on economic issues

and immigration, suggesting that these groups are not mirroring elite trends.

Some support for Hypothesis 4 and elite cue accounts did finally emerge in Section 7.3, which compared fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship attitude dynamics. Euroscepticism declines less prominently among wave 1 Conservatives than other respondents, including those with initially similar attitudes across cultural issues. The space separating mainstream partisan coalitions thus grows as Labour moves further in a pro-integration direction, but it is difficult to distinguish elite cue effects on the latter from similar developments unfolding in other parts of the electorate. Indeed, beyond divergent Europhilic trajectories disconnecting fixed Conservatives and matched non-partisans from 2016, there is virtually no evidence that attitude dynamics are moderated by political engagement. Voters adopt more liberal positions in every cultural domain regardless of initial party identity or ideology, not to mention increasing Euroscepticism and opposition to immigration among Conservative and arguably even Labour elites during this period. Moreover, corresponding left-right dealignment reduces the correlation between economic preferences and both fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship.

Ultimately, however, we cannot rule out identity-defensive mechanisms. Although Section 3.2 showed increased polarisation in mass perceptions of mainstream party positions, the observational research design used in this chapter does not guarantee that partisans have received elite cues. Attempts to isolate political engagement through partisanship and interest in politics require strong assumptions. Hence, internal validity concerns limit the extent to which we can draw conclusions about elite cue effects. Those same assumptions are made in accounts supporting elite cue perspectives in the American context (Layman and Carsey, 2002a). It is thus based on terms laid out in these accounts that I find limited support for partisan motivated reasoning during the Brexit period. This suggests that other factors may play a more important role in driving attitude polarisation. Yet more research is required to test the generalisability of these mechanisms beyond American politics.

All we can say for now is that the overarching conclusion supported by this chapter is consistent with sociological accounts of attitude change. Section 5.3 found cultural polarisation and left-right fragmentation in public opinion, which Chapter 6 linked to changes in the relationship between political issues and partisanship. The contribution

of this chapter is that it demonstrates similar ideological developments among non-partisans, i.e., voters not (or less) subject to Labour-Conservative cues. I observe no evidence that polarisation is weaker outside mainstream party coalitions, and a liberal trajectory in cultural ideology—along with left-right dealignment—that is seemingly exogenous to political engagement. Identity-defensive reasoning might temporarily accelerate or slow down aspects of attitude-partisanship realignment, although such evidence is limited to uniquely divisive debates surrounding Brexit. Broader patterns of attitude change are compatible with bottom-up mechanisms from 2014 to 2019, however, supporting sociological perspectives on the British case (e.g., Goodhart, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).



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## Conclusion

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Are British voters polarising? This thesis found polarisation limited to cultural issues, involving attitude and partisanship change, and taking place among partisans and non-partisans. Such results have implications for sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts, advancing understanding of recent political changes in Britain. The present chapter discusses those implications in greater detail. I contextualise evidence against elite cue accounts using literature on party system fragmentation and voter volatility, but also highlight potential issues in claims surrounding partisan motivated reasoning more generally. The British case supports sociological and party sorting processes, suggesting a broader explanation of cultural realignment. I speculate on cultural realignment following the Brexit period, before concluding that future research needs to reconcile my findings with trends observed during earlier stages of elite policy divergence. I begin by summarising substantive points from the thesis.

Chapter 2 established three perspectives on polarisation. *Sociological* accounts describe demographic shifts altering the structural conditions of political conflict. I focussed on mechanisms leading to culture wars in advanced industrial society, including expansions in higher education, class fragmentation, and immigration. The latter increase the number of liberal voters and direct them towards prosperous cities and university towns, consolidating formerly predominant communitarian sentiments in non-metropolitan areas. This creates the basis for partisan polarisation on cultural issues, especially as demographic axes tilt towards modernisation and prompt reactionary backlashes among the left behind. Many argue that Brexit is the bottom-up consequence of such processes, yet *party sorting* presents an alternative perspective. I outlined switch-

ing mechanisms driving American culture wars, declining cleavage politics, and left-right convergence in post-Thatcher Britain, arguing that sociological developments are not a precondition for trends in partisan polarisation. Cultural realignment might just reflect partisanship change caused by elites competing more openly on European integration, immigration, and social values. However, these issues intersect left-right coalitions, raising problems for top-down perspectives. I thus introduced identity-defensive mechanisms through elite cue accounts of the heuristic and psychological properties underpinning partisanship. Cultural sorting reduces the association between economic attitudes and left-right party identity, leading to conflict displacement unless some voters update issue positions in line with party platforms. Elite cue proponents claim that politically engaged citizens incorporate the broader ideology associated with political identities, whether maintaining or switching party. I argued that this can sustain polarisation on cross-cutting dimensions, allowing political leaders to manage diverse electoral coalitions.

Three principal debates differentiate sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts: polarisation through which variables, among which voters, and on which issues. Chapter 3 developed a theoretical framework based around these debates, providing empirical expectations to test on the British case. The latter was outlined using expert and voter survey measures of mainstream party positions following the financial crisis. Evidence of elite polarisation combining cultural and economic issues emerged, with relatively clear left-right party divergence and more ambiguous disputes across European integration, immigration, and social values. This should be associated with mass polarisation if the theoretical framework explains recent developments in British politics. Mass polarisation that is related to attitude change suggests sociological or elite cue accounts, and party sorting otherwise. Attitude change that is limited to partisans is consistent with elite cue accounts, whereas non-partisan dynamics imply sociological processes. And mass polarisation on cultural *and* economic issues is required by elite cue accounts, but other perspectives are compatible with conflict displacement.

These empirical differences were operationalised in Chapter 4, where I adopted a multilevel modelling approach taking full advantage of attitude items fielded in 2014-2019 waves of the BES data. Two main outcomes are discussed by sociological, party sorting, and elite cue accounts: attitude partisanship trends that are and are not as-

sociated with trends in attitude divergence and alignment. I defined these concepts, establishing a cross-sectional design testing for trends in the correlation between issue positions and Labour-Conservative identity, the dispersion, extremism, and multimodality in issue positions, and the correlation among pairs of issue positions. I then developed a panel design using BES respondents present in multiple waves from 2014 to 2019. The first part of the panel design compares partisan polarisation emerging from attitude and partisanship change alone and attitude and partisanship change together. The second part compares ideological developments unfolding within fixed partisan, non-partisan subpopulations.

I began the empirical analysis in Chapter 5, outlining cross-sectional evidence of polarisation. The chapter answered two questions. Are elite trends related to partisan polarisation? And is partisan polarisation related to attitude change? I found increasing attitude partisanship on cultural issues but dealignment in the correlation between economic positions and Labour-Conservative identity. This immediately highlighted flaws in elite cue accounts, since escalating left-right policy disagreements are linked to partisan depolarisation. Yet I also found mass trends unexplained by party sorting, with changes in public opinion mirroring these inverse cultural and economic dynamics. Liberal shifts in attitudes towards European integration, immigration, and social values cause polarisation while economic preferences converge. Despite that convergence, the correlation between left-right and cultural dimensions increases dramatically. I interpreted these findings in favour of sociological accounts, arguing that demographic culture shifts are desegregating left-right cleavages.

The following two chapters implemented aspects of the panel design. Chapter 6 asked if changes in attitude partisanship are caused by attitude or partisanship change. I compared survey-wave covariation in issue positions and Labour-Conservative identity with the correlation between initial attitudes and observed partisanship and initial partisanship and observed attitudes. Results confirmed that both dynamics affect mainstream partisan divisions from 2014 to 2019. Although leading to polarisation in public opinion, liberal attitude shifts are found among Labour *and* Conservative identifiers. Hence, only on European integration does polarisation emerge in isolation from party switching, and only then because Euroscepticism declines slightly less prominently in the wave 1 Conservative coalition. Across cultural domains, the correlation between

issue positions and mainstream party identity increases in association with partisanship change, which limits or completely offsets the ideological trajectory of Conservatives and allows Labour identifiers to move further towards cosmopolitan preferences. It is thus the product of attitude and partisanship change driving polarisation on European integration, immigration, and social values. I also found both dynamics contributing to dealignment on economic issues, mainly by pushing Conservatives left and closer to the Labour coalition's position. These results offered newfound support to party sorting, as such, while reconfirming ideological developments consistent with sociological accounts and problematic from the perspective of elite cue theory.

Chapter 7 nonetheless tested identity-defensive mechanisms effects explicitly. I initially split the panel component into fixed partisan, non-partisan subpopulations, comparing attitude divergence and alignment trends unfolding among them. These results showed no evidence of Labour-Conservative identifiers mirroring elite trends more closely, even when focussing specifically on engaged partisans and independents. In addition to challenging the idea that elite policy disagreements are interacting with small groups of activists, non-partisan dynamics suggest that something other than partisan motivated reasoning is involved. I tested this further by matching Labour-Conservative identifiers to non-partisans with similar ideological predispositions, removing voters outside mainstream coalitions with fundamentally different initial characteristics. I found little relationship between political engagement and ideological dynamics unfolding from 2014 to 2019, with parallel partisan, non-partisan trends on immigration, social values, and economic issues. The best evidence of an elite cue effect is a slightly less prominent decrease in Euroscepticism among wave 1 Conservatives, creating polarisation limited to partisans. The overall trajectory of attitude change is not obviously associated with party identification nor elite policy divergence in this period, however, further supporting sociological accounts. I argued that the effect of elite cues is transient and at most limits or enhances aspects of cultural realignment.

Table 8.1 summarises these findings against empirical expectations established in the British case. I observed polarisation limited to cultural issues, involving attitude and partisanship change, and taking place among partisans and non-partisans. This is compatible with some combination of sociological and party sorting processes but contradicts core aspects of elite cue accounts. Namely, mass polarisation excludes issues

**Table 8.1:** Evidence of polarisation and the empirical expectations associated with sociological, party sorting, and elite cue mechanisms in the British case.

	Sociological	Party sorting	Elite cue	Observed
<b>Polarisation through which variables?</b>				
Attitude change	✓	×	✓	✓
Partisanship change	×	✓	×	✓
<b>Polarisation among which voters?</b>				
Partisans	✓	—	✓	✓
Non-partisans	✓	—	×	✓
<b>Polarisation on which issues?</b>				
Cultural issues	✓	✓	✓	✓
Economic issues	?	?	✓	×

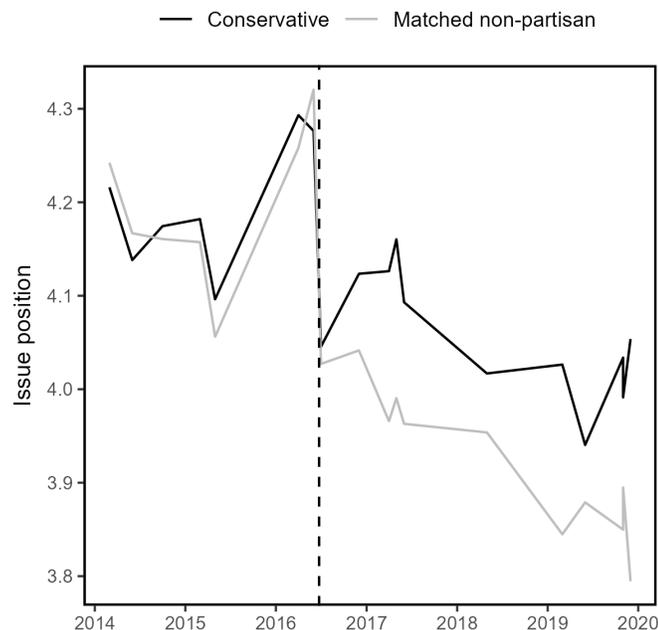
subject to elite policy divergence and includes citizens not obviously (or at least to the same extent) affected by political persuasion. Mainstream party differences are arguably weakest across cultural domains. Yet the latter are associated with clear social division, which increases because voters adopt more cosmopolitan positions regardless of initial partisanship and in contrast to Conservative-Leave alignment and strategic Labour ambiguity after the Brexit vote.

One reason why elite cue accounts are largely unsupported could be that they do not generalise to Britain. These mechanisms are prominent in the American case, where it is widely held that mass partisanship is growing in strength, becoming more ideological, and increasingly structuring political behaviour (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009; Bartels, 2000, 2002; Brewer, 2005; Green and Palmquist, 1990; Green et al., 2002; Hetherington, 2001; Lupu, 2015; Miller and Shanks, 1996). However, the importance of party identification and its conflation with current electoral choice has long been debated in Britain and other West European countries (Brynin and Sanders, 1997; Butler and Stokes, 1969; Clarke et al., 2004; Clarke et al., 2009; Dalton, 2020, Ch. 9; Heath and Pierce, 1992; Shively, 1979; Thomassen, 1976; Thomassen, 2005; Westholm and Niemi, 1992; Whiteley et al., 2013). Much research shows the number of partisans and strength and stability of partisanship declining over many decades (Abramson, 1992; Berglund et al., 2005; Clarke and McCutcheon, 2009; Clarke and

Stewart, 1998; Crewe et al., 1977; Dalton, 1984; Dalton, 2013, Ch. 9; Dassonneville and Hooghe, 2016; Denver, 2007; Särilvik and Crewe, 1983; Scarrow, 2004). This is associated with increasing voter volatility (Dalton et al., 2003; Farrell et al., 1994; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 4; Johnston, 1987), exposing political competition to electoral shocks and unprecedented switching (Evans et al., 2021; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b; Mellon et al., 2018). As Fieldhouse et al. (2020b, p. 50) put it, swing voters...now comprise the *majority* of the modern British electorate.

This has implications for elite cue accounts because it suggests that party identity no longer anchors political behaviour, at least in the way that it did prior to the 1970s. Indeed, a major development discussed in recent decades is long-term dealignment alienating Labour from part of its core constituency, leading to lower turnout among working classes, independence-based voting in Scotland, increased support for the radical right, and Conservative-Leave alignment in the aftermath of Brexit (see Evans and Tilley, 2017; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). Mainstream parties responded to fragmentation by expanding already highly centralised organisational features (Webb, 1994). Even attempts to democratise Labour party management escalated tensions between parliamentary, mass, and affiliated members (Dorey and Denham, 2016). Hence, not only are an increasing number of former partisans cut adrift and exposed to electoral shocks motivating switching; institutional conditions are far removed from the activist-candidate cooperation encouraged in the American case (Cohen et al., 2008).

Previous research nonetheless finds evidence of elite cue effects in Britain. For instance, Cavallé and Neundorf (2022) document a spike in centrism among initially left-wing Labour identifiers during 1997, when the party returned to power under New Labour. Schonfeld and Winter-Levy (2021) observe pre-Brexit Conservatives adopting more Eurosceptic positions immediately after the referendum, whereas those joining the party also show declining support for redistribution. And survey experiments show elite cues shifting partisan responses to various attitude items (Brader and Tucker, 2012). Such findings do not contradict my results, however. After all, I record similar top-down effects in the panel component. To explain this point, [Figure 8.1](#) displays mean survey-wave positions on European integration for fixed Conservatives and matched



**Figure 8.1:** Attitude change on European integration among initial Conservatives and third/non-party identifiers, matched using wave 1 cultural positions. *Notes:* Solid lines show mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave. A dashed line marks the date of the Brexit referendum (2016-06-23). Time is on the x-axis.

non-partisans from Chapter 7 (see Figure 7.6).<sup>1</sup> As noted at the time, both groups are subject to remarkably parallel dynamics until the Brexit vote, after which they diverge quite sharply. Regressing attitudes on dummy variables indicating Conservative partisanship and the post-referendum period would thus show a causal elite cue effect (see Angrist and Pischke, 2009, Ch. 5). In fact, the interaction between these dummy variables (the difference in differences) suggests that Conservative identity leads to a 0.13 (SE = 0.02) increase in Euroscepticism over waves 9 to 19, on average.<sup>2</sup>

Yet this is taking place in the context of declining opposition to Europe. Wave 1 Conservatives still move against the party line between 2016 and 2019, just less prominently than they might have done if not Conservative. Elite cue effects consist of short-term spikes, in this case, momentarily reducing pro-EU attitude change in proximity to the 2017 and 2019 general elections. Similar spikes are even less effective in other cases. For instance, Chapter 7 shows initial Labour-Conservative identifiers shifting in

<sup>1</sup>The figure contains mean responses to an item asking whether or not Britain should unite fully with the European Union (see the last panel in the second row of Figure 7.6).

<sup>2</sup>Wave 9 is the post-referendum survey also used by Schonfeld and Winter-Levy (2021).

opposite directions on an item asking about immigration levels in the post-2017 general election wave (see [Figure 7.7](#), third panel from the left). This creates an isolated burst in polarisation not observed among matched non-partisans but does not alter liberal dynamics affecting panellists regardless of fixed partisanship or cultural ideology. It is not then necessarily the generalisability of these mechanisms at stake. Rather, there is a broader point to make about the kind of evidence supporting elite cue perspectives.

Standard approaches to identifying top-down attitude change measure the discrete-time effect of elite cues introduced under natural or experimental conditions. Typically, surveys vary issue framing in treatment and control groups and estimate differences between them (Bakker et al., 2020; Bolsen et al., 2014; Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2014; Brader and Tucker, 2012; Bullock, 2011; Ciuk and Yost, 2016; Druckman et al., 2013; Goren et al., 2009; Kam, 2005; Levendusky, 2010; Mullinix, 2016; Nicholson, 2012; Petersen et al., 2010; Peterson, 2019; Slothuus and De Vreese, 2010). It is also possible to leverage instrumental variables or exogenous discontinuities in observational research, like the ‘as-if random’ reversal in Conservative Party positioning after Brexit (Schonfeld and Winter-Levy, 2021; see also Gabel and Scheve, 2007; Hopkins, 2010; Ray, 2003; Slothuus and Bisgaard, 2021; Steenbergen and Marks, 2007). Another common method uses cross-lagged attitude-partisanship transitions to establish granger causation (Carsey and Layman, 2006; Dancey and Goren, 2010; Goren, 2005; Highton and Kam, 2011; Layman and Carsey, 2002b). Each approach might identify partisan motivated reasoning pushing voters in expected directions. Yet this can create somewhat misleading impressions of identity-defensive mechanisms, as shown by the comparison of Conservative and matched non-partisan dynamics above. The differences in differences separating these groups suggests a strong elite cue effect. My argument is not that such effects are wrong. But, viewed in the context of broader attitude change, they explain little of the polarisation observed in Britain from 2014 to 2019. Elite cue accounts might then be overstated in general.

Unfortunately, the observational research design used throughout this thesis does not allow such a strong conclusion against identity-defensive mechanisms. [Section 3.2](#) suggests that voters receive polarising elite cues following the 2007-2008 financial crisis, but we cannot be certain without experimental manipulation. Moreover, a difficulty in the British case is that elite policy divergence is associated with high levels of internal

party dissent, especially during the Brexit period. For instance, Jeremy Corbyn signalled a left-wing shift in Labour's policy platform, but his leadership was also marked by internecine conflict among Labour MPs. It is not clear that we should expect voters to toe their party's line when its elites are disseminating conflicting cues. The Brexit period was highly contentious for both mainstream parties. Hence, it might not be a good case study in which to observe partisan motivated reasoning.

Another difficulty is the short time horizon of this thesis. Adams et al. (2012b) look at [BES](#) data from four elections between 1987 and 2001. Cohen and Cohen (2021) analyse trends during 1983-2007 and 2007-2016 periods of depolarisation and repolarisation. Outside the UK, Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) present results from the [ANES](#) cumulative data file, 1948-2004, whereas Munzert and Bauer (2013a) study convergence in German public opinion over three decades, from 1980 to 2010. In contrast to these long-term studies, I focus on an intense but relatively brief period in British politics. The 2014-2019 [BES](#) data does cover some salient electoral events, including the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the 2014 and 2019 European Parliament elections, the 2016 Brexit referendum, and three general elections in 2015, 2017, and 2019. However, all of this takes place within six years, leaving me exposed to the argument that I am over-interpreting what might look inconsequential over a longer time period.

Yet, if anything, this should bias results against sociological accounts. Social structural change is a glacial process. Although some also claim that party sorting takes effect over several generations (e.g., Carmines and Stimson, 1989), top-down mechanisms should have more immediate effects. For instance, one of the main examples Zaller (1992) uses to demonstrate elite cue theory is changes in US public opinion towards the Vietnam War between 1966 and 1970. Similarly, Layman and Carsey (2002b) document individual-level partisan change using four-year panel studies similar to the [BES](#) data. The latter should thus reveal elite cue effects taking place during the Brexit period. But partisan motivated reasoning provides a poor explanation of findings observed throughout this thesis.

The main reason for introducing these effects was the claim that identity-defensive mechanisms facilitate conflict extension (see Carsey and Layman, 2006; Layman and Carsey, 2002a,b; Layman et al., 2010, 2006). Ideological politicians can straddle coalitions of issue activists because the latter update other positions in line with party

platforms, therefore facilitating unidimensional polarisation on cross-cutting cleavages. Despite Labour-Conservative policy competition combining economic and cultural axes of British politics following the 2007-2008 financial crisis, I find no such interaction between party leaders and party followers. Every step of analysis contradicts core empirical expectations, from left-right convergence and dealignment to cosmopolitan ideological developments affecting voters regardless of partisanship, political engagement, or elite cues during the Brexit period. The implication is that something other than partisan motivated reasoning causes attitude change observed from 2014 to 2019.

Despite this relatively short time horizon, such dynamics are compatible with sociological accounts. Since the 1970s, cross-national research has documented liberal culture shifts in advanced industrial societies (Inglehart, 1977, 1990, 1997, 2018). The resulting cultural polarisation is associated with left-right fragmentation, desegregating once encompassing class cleavages in West European party systems (Kitschelt, 1994; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997). After decades of converged political competition, the same ideological realignment now appears to be taking place in Britain. Many describe a tilting demographic axis, in which cosmopolitan voters are beginning to overshadow communitarian sentiments concentrated among left behind people and places (e.g., Jennings and Stoker, 2016, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). My findings contribute towards these accounts, linking liberal attitude change to aggregate distributional parameters of polarisation and individual-level mechanisms discussed in American political science.

An important insight from this thesis is the interaction between culture shifts and party switching. Liberal attitude change causes divergence and realignment in public preferences, but partisan polarisation on European integration, immigration, and social values also requires changes in Labour-Conservative identity. Partisanship change pushes mainstream coalitions in opposite directions across cultural issues, in addition to converging left-right positions. This is consistent with the flow of votes observed between elections since the 2007-2008 financial crisis. Conservatives gained Leave voters after the Brexit vote (Evans et al., 2021; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 9; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Ch. 10), many of whom had switched from Labour to Conservative to the radical right previously (Evans and Chzhen, 2013; Evans and Mellon, 2016; Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 5; Ford and Goodwin, 2010; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Ford and

Goodwin, 2016; Ford et al., 2012; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Ch. 6). The [SNP](#) also mobilised nationalist sentiments against Labour following the 2014 independence referendum (Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 8; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Ch. 9). Yet Labour otherwise consolidated Remain voters, notably benefitting from collapsing Liberal Democrat support among white graduates (Fieldhouse et al., 2020b, Ch. 7; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, Ch. 7). My findings link these trends to changes in mainstream political space. In particular, Chapter 6 showed the *initial* attitudes associated with Conservatives becoming more Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, traditionalist, but also left-wing between 2014 and 2019. Hence, partisanship change increases polarisation by offsetting liberal culture shifts in the Conservative coalition, allowing Labour partisans to move further towards cosmopolitan positions.

The British case then supports sociological *and* party sorting mechanisms, suggesting a broader account of polarisation. This makes sense in a political system structured mainly by the legacy of left-right cleavages. Cultural divisions are opening between constituencies that cut across mainstream party support bases, making a purely bottom-up account unlikely. Labour cannot represent metropolitan voters without antagonising communitarian sentiments concentrated in former manufacturing hubs. Similarly, moving in on the latter requires that Conservatives risk right-liberal elements of its own coalition. Yet ignoring these divisions is what led to the rise of [UKIP](#) and culminated in Brexit. Indeed, it is by acknowledging party sorting processes that sociological accounts explain such developments. Proponents of cultural backlash theory argue that we are at a demographic tipping point, with social norms shifting against formerly predominant cultural outlooks and prompting authoritarian, ethnocentric reflexes among the left behind (e.g., Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). Antagonised by rising economic inequality, trade shocks, immigration, and various financial and political crises, older, less educated, white working-class voters outside prosperous cities and university towns are becoming more receptive to xenophobic populism. Cultural backlashes thus reflect socio-demographic conditions yet are mobilised into political action by top-down mechanisms.

This has implications for future cultural realignment, which therefore depends on the issues subject to elite policy divergence. Mainstream parties could not contain cross-cutting divisions leading to Brexit, but the political context has changed funda-

mentally since 2019. Britain left the EU in 2021, ostensibly removing a major focus of polarisation. The Covid-19 pandemic and 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine are contributing to a cost of living and energy crisis currently dominating Labour-Conservative competition. There is also widespread industrial action over pay and working conditions reminiscent of the 1978-1979 ‘Winter of Discontent’. Moreover, it is unclear what happens to cultural divisions as associated demographic trends progress. The ‘tipping point’ metaphor implies that we are in the most intense stage of ‘cultural evolution’ (Inglehart, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Small shifts in party platforms can leverage dramatic political realignment, which remain relatively untapped in the British case (see Hanretty et al., 2020; Hobolt and Rodon, 2020). Yet this values gap will close if voters continue converging on liberal positions already established among mainstream party elites (see Bale et al., 2020). I cannot then claim that results from this thesis represent long-term changes in British politics.

After all, there is a tension between my findings and previous research using the same methods on similar data. Cohen and Cohen (2019; 2021) document left-right polarisation that is stronger than cultural trends from 2007 to 2016. A striking change thus separates aggregate outcomes observed during different stages of elite policy divergence following the financial crisis (see also Perrett, 2021). I find polarisation limited to cultural issues, suggesting that the Brexit period profoundly disrupted redistributive political conflict. My findings indicate that this is related to sociological and party sorting processes. But future research should establish if it is temporary, or an enduring feature of ideological realignment taking place across advanced industrial societies.

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# Appendices

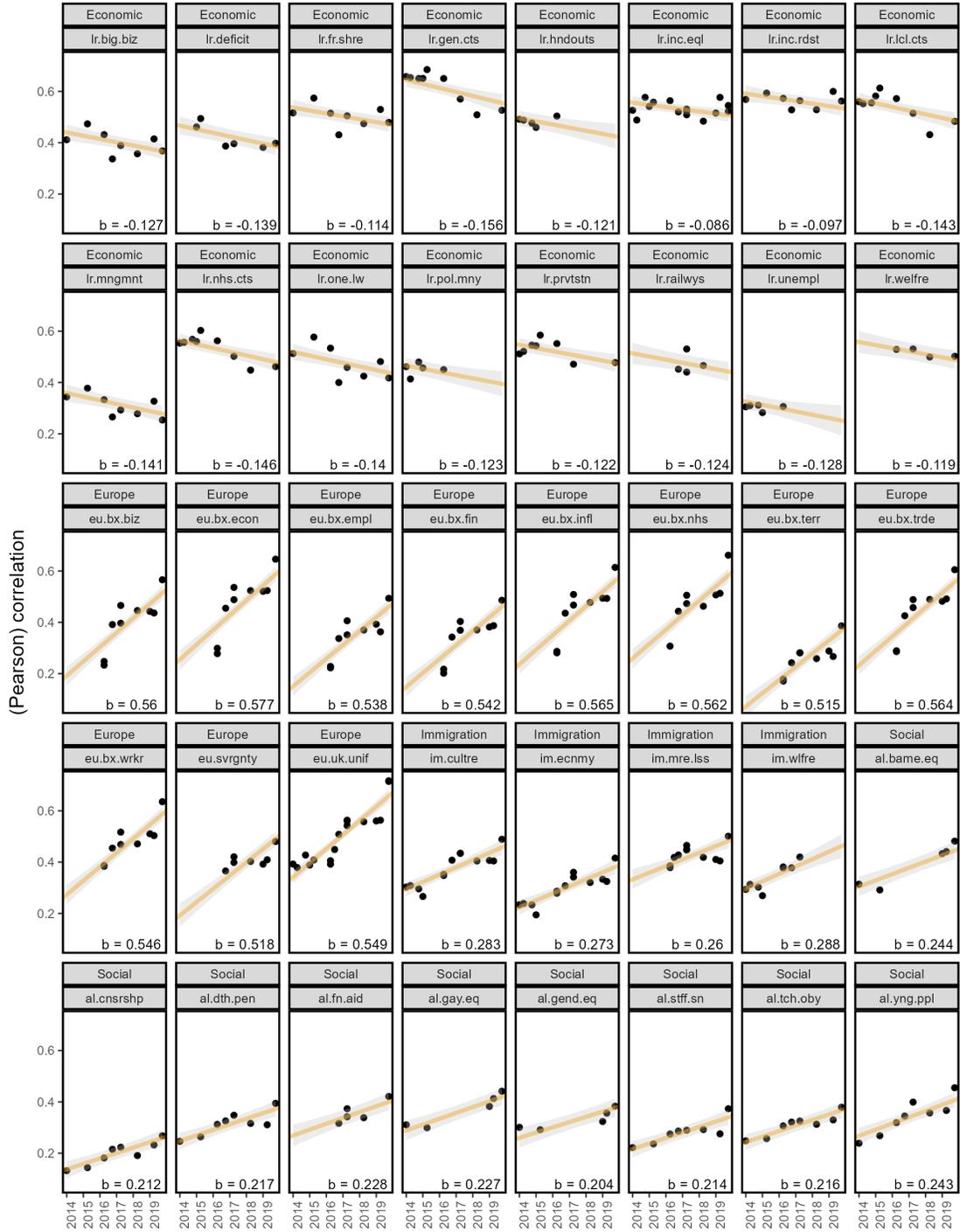


## A | Attitude Partisanship Using Vote Choice and Left-right Self-identification

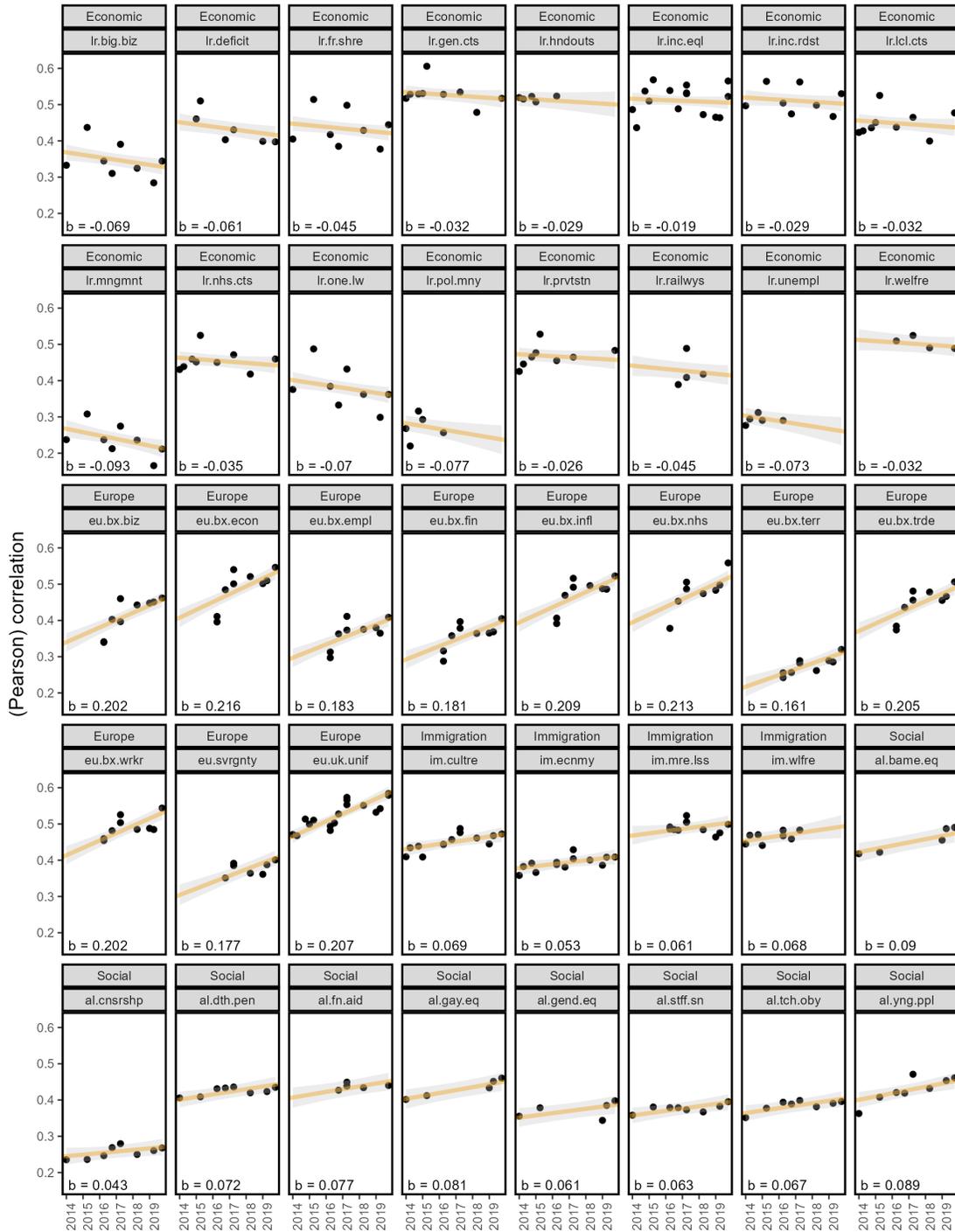
**Table A.1:** Trends in the correlation between attitudes and (A) Conservative (versus Labour) vote choice and (B) an 11-point left-right self-placement scale by issue domain.

	(A) attitude x vote choice	(B) attitude x left-right ID
Intercept	0.21 (0.03)	0.35 (0.02)
European integration	baseline	baseline
Immigration	0.07 (0.05)	0.08 (0.04)
Social values	0.03 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)
Economic issues	0.29 (0.03)	0.08 (0.03)
Time (decades)	0.55 (0.03)	0.20 (0.02)
Time x European integration	baseline	baseline
Time x immigration	-0.27 (0.06)	-0.13 (0.04)
Time x social values	-0.33 (0.05)	-0.12 (0.03)
Time x economic issues	-0.68 (0.04)	-0.24 (0.03)
Residual SD:		
Intercepts	0.08	0.07
Trends	0.05	0.03
Data	0.04	0.03
N	328	328
Groups	40	40

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from multilevel models. Intercepts are the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Standard errors are in parentheses.

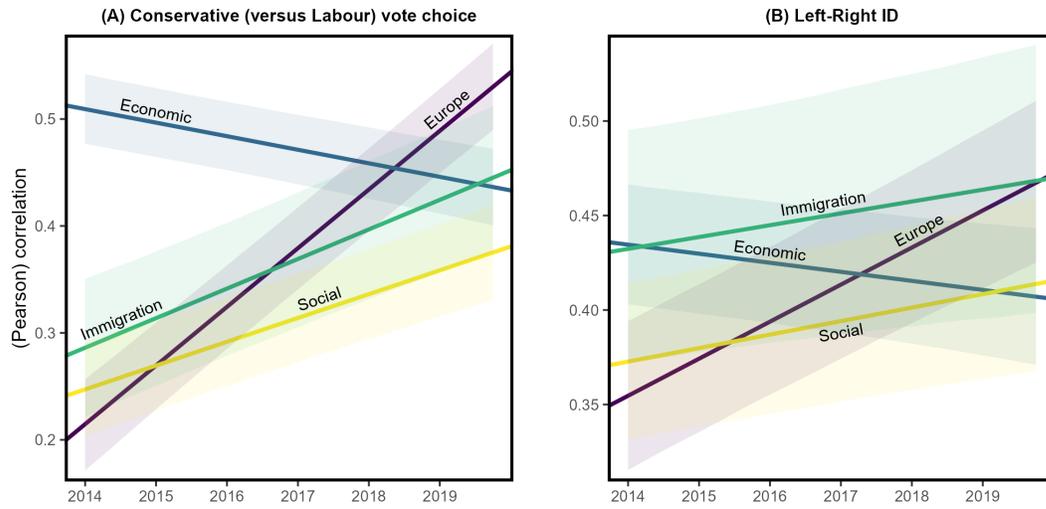


**Figure A.1:** Trends in the correlation between attitudes and Conservative (versus Labour) vote choice by political issue.  
*Notes:* Each panel displays the average regression line for an attitude item, along with its 0.9 credible interval and slope. Time is on the x-axis.



**Figure A.2:** Trends in the correlation between attitudes and left-right identity by political issue.

*Notes:* Each panel displays the average regression line for an attitude item, along with its 0.9 credible interval and slope. Time is on the x-axis.

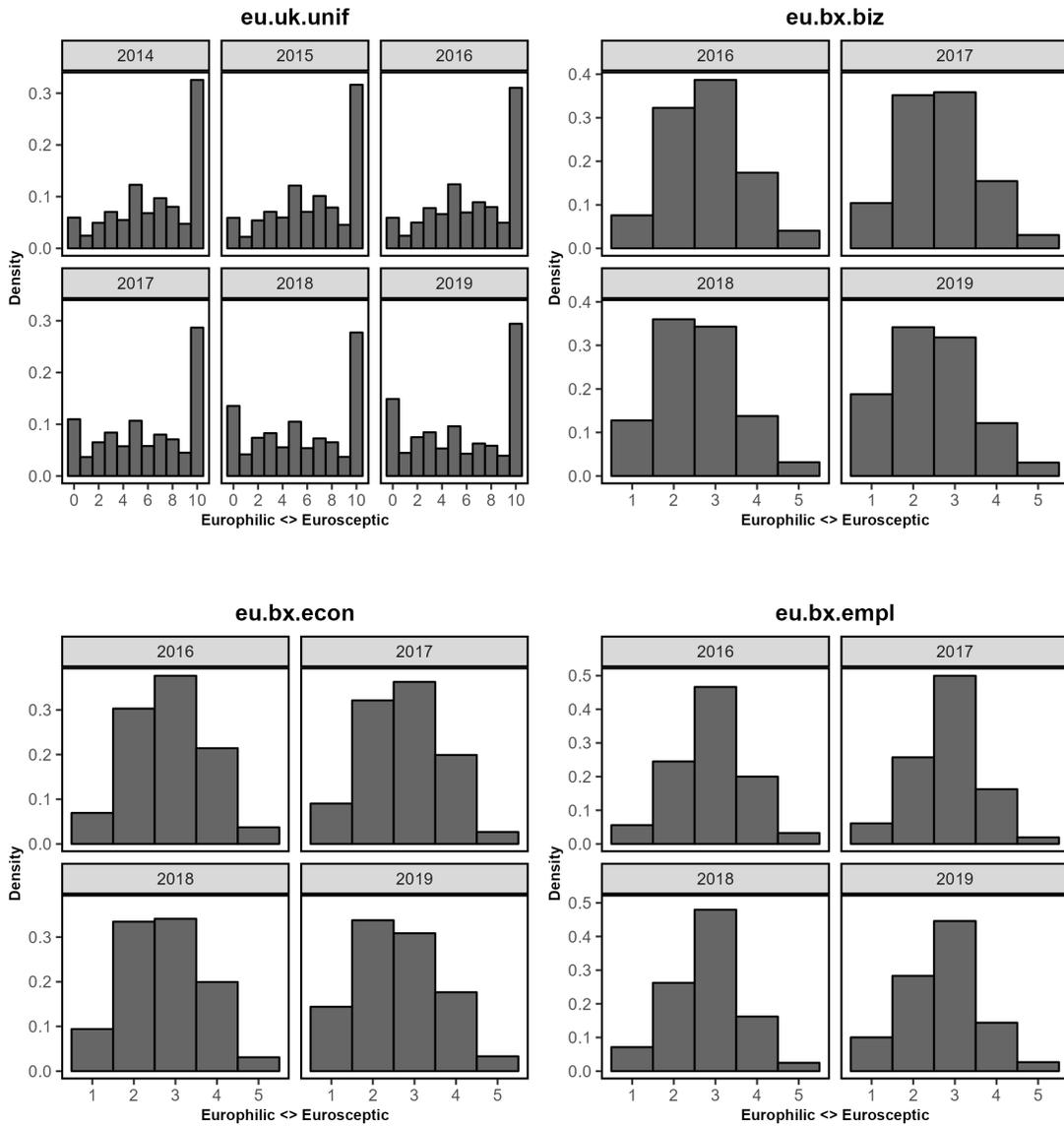


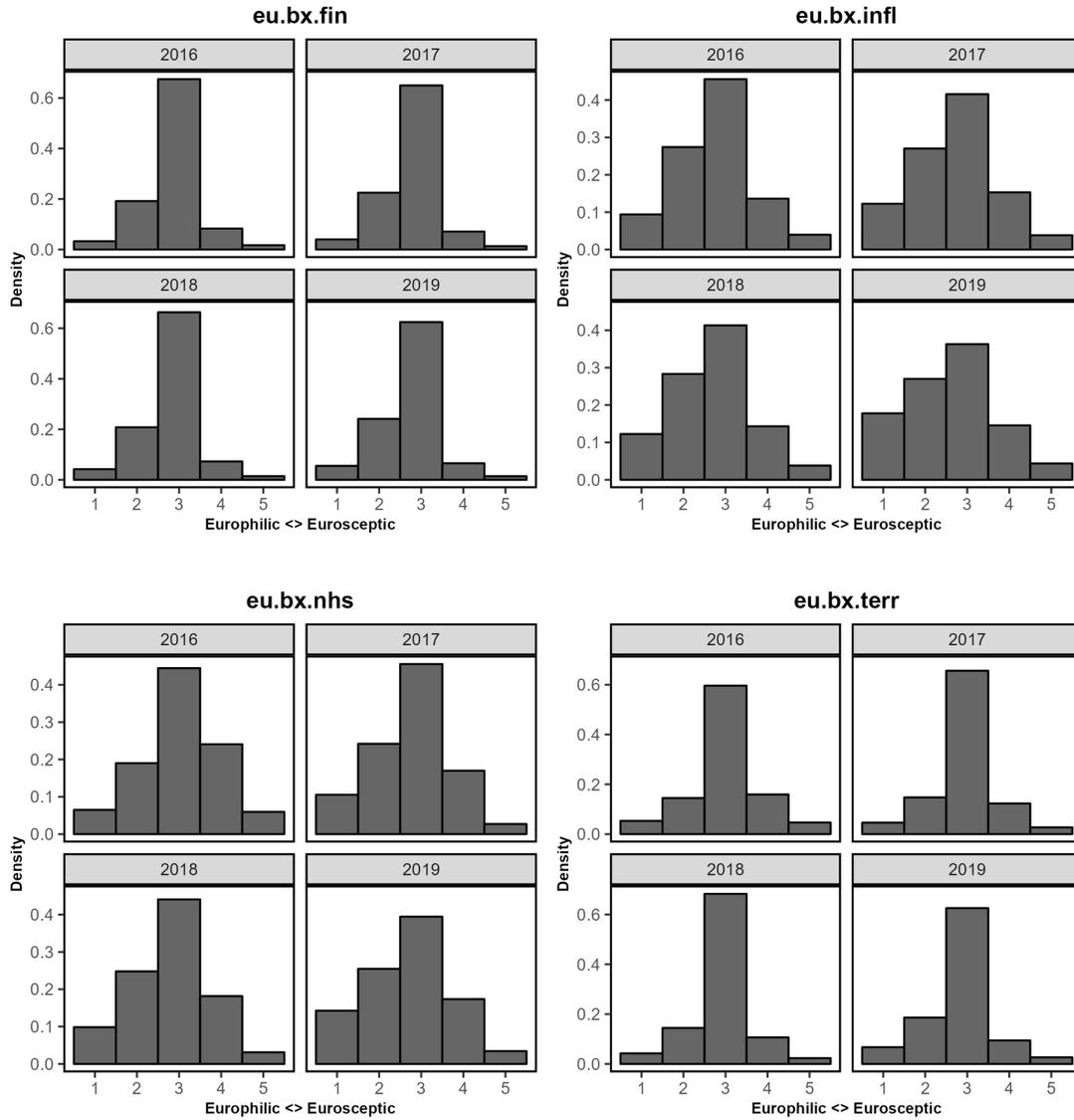
**Figure A.3:** Trends in the correlation between attitudes and (A) Conservative (versus Labour) vote choice and (B) an 11-point left-right self-placement scale by issue domain.

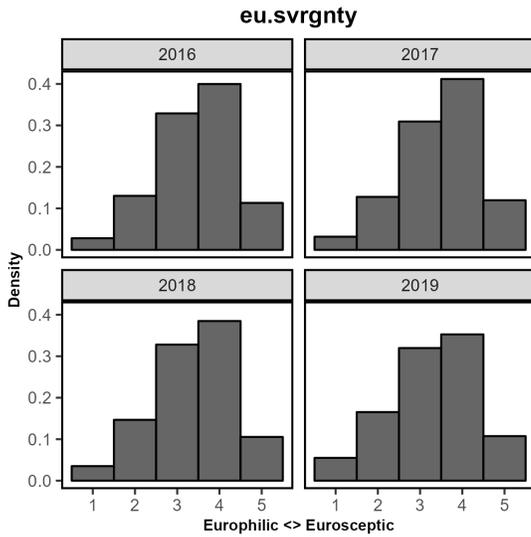
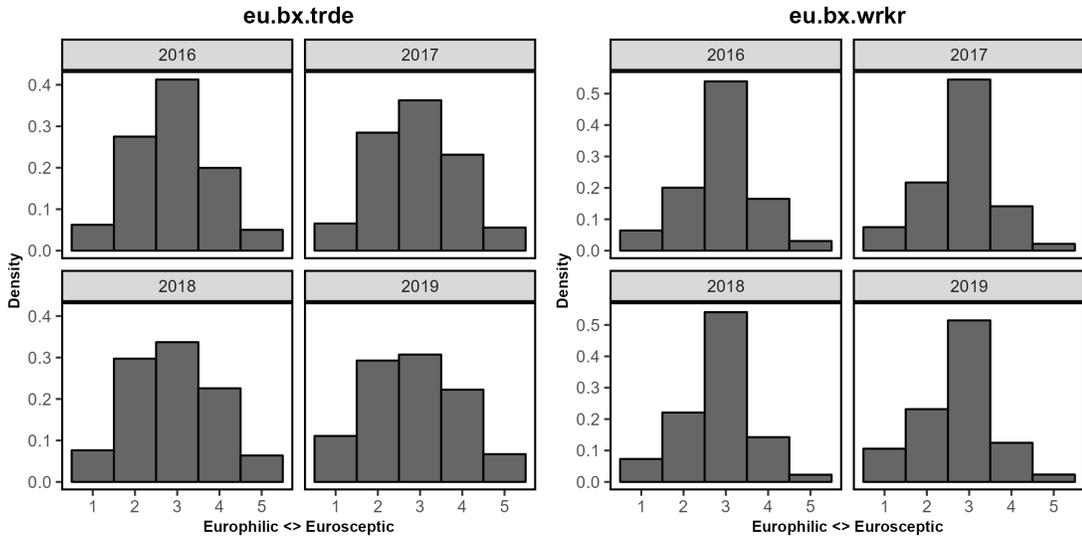
*Notes:* Shaded areas are 0.9 credible intervals of the mean regression line for each issue domain. Time is on the x-axis.

## B | The Distribution of Public Opinion on Political Issues

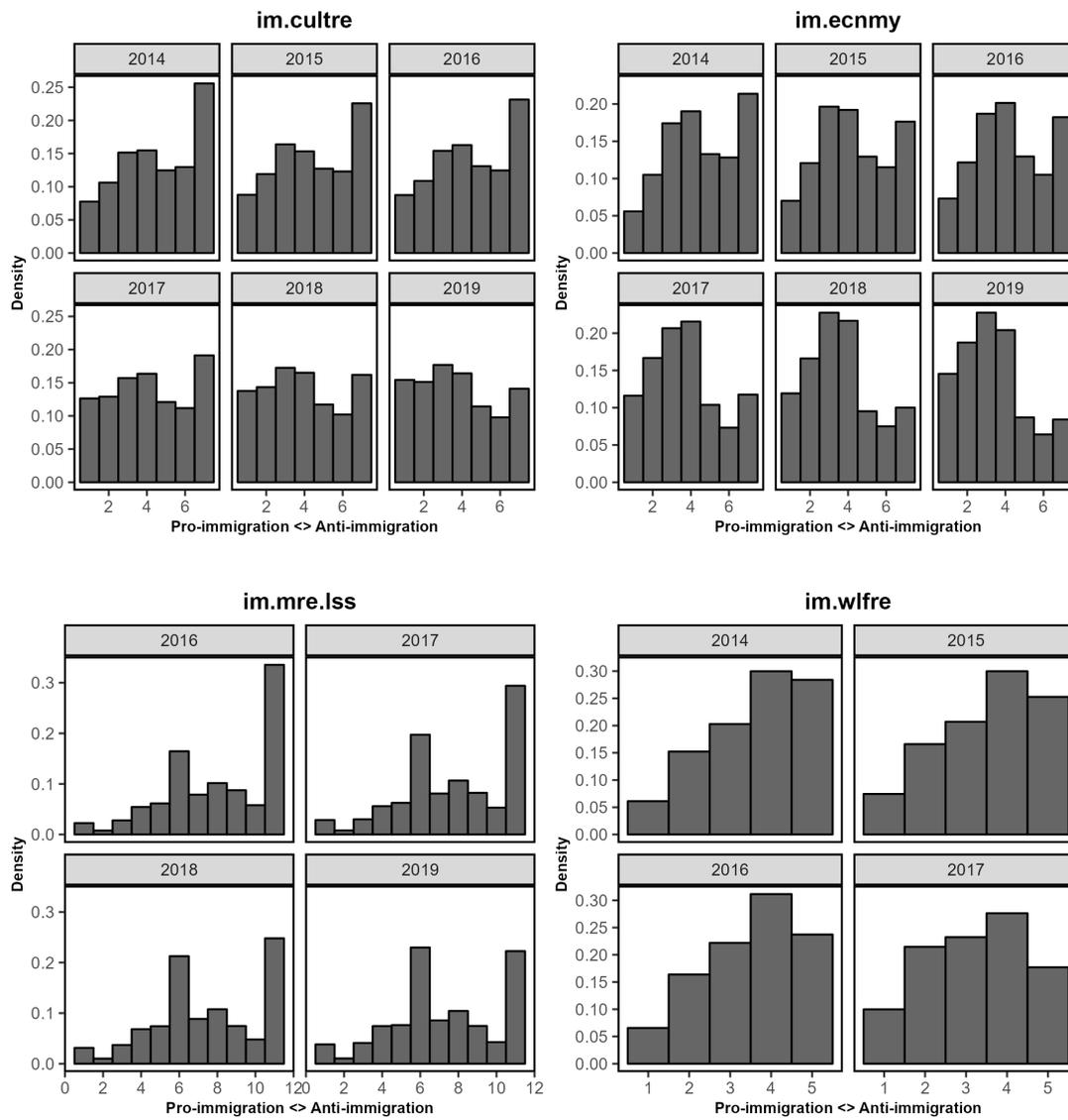
**Figure B.1:** The weighted density of responses to European integration attitude items by year.



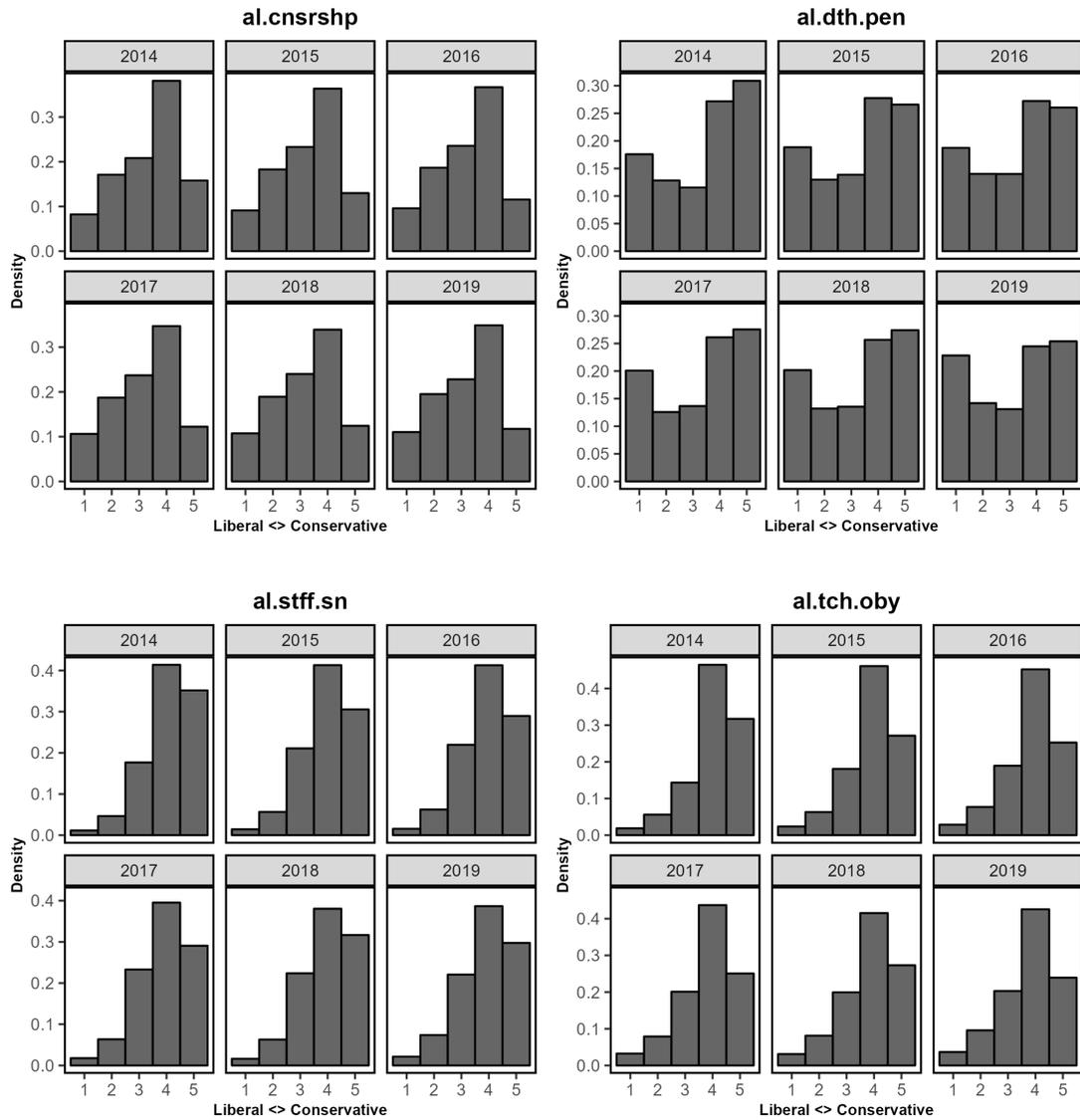


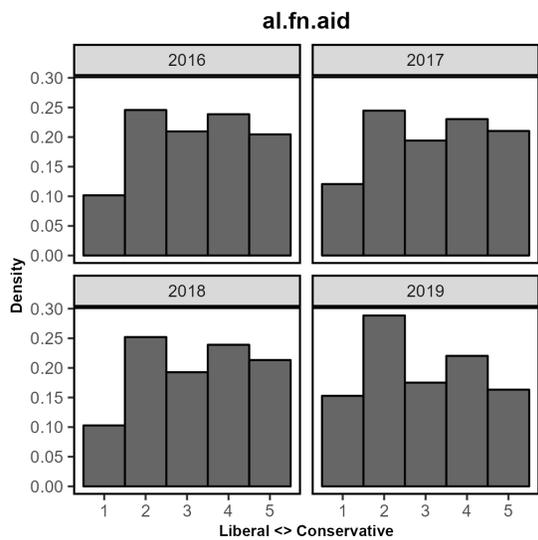
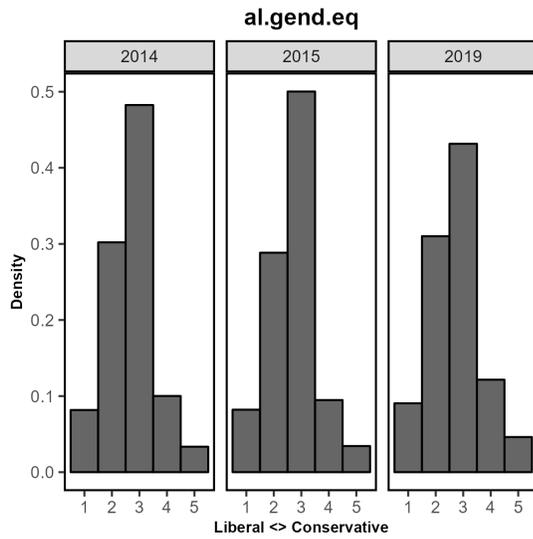
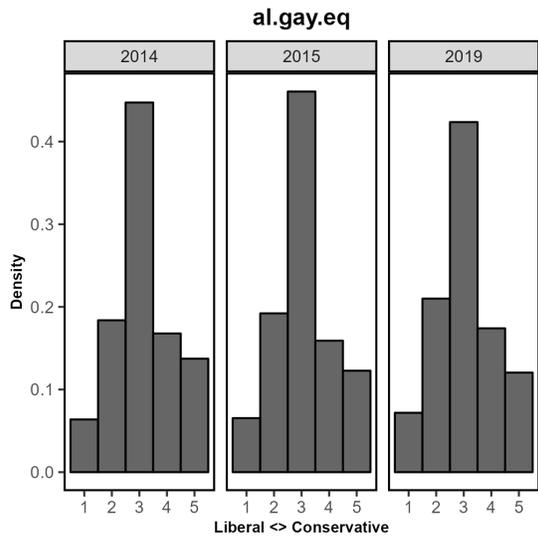
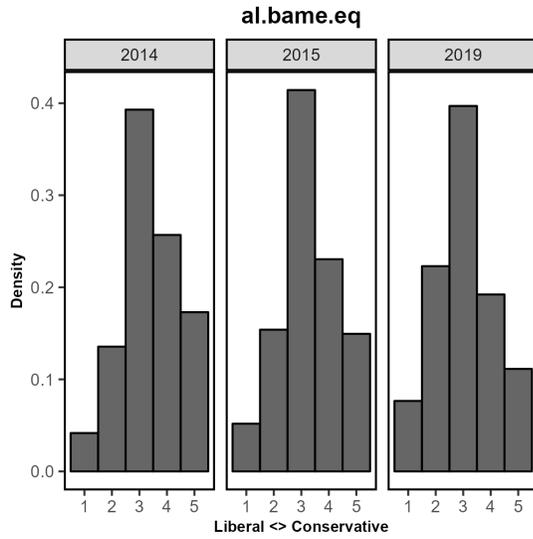
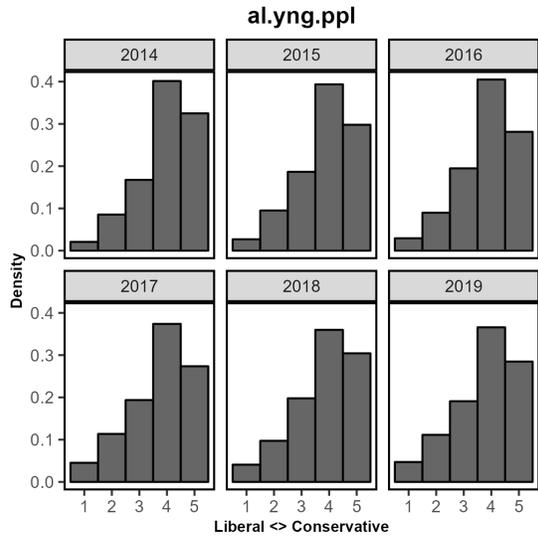


**Figure B.2:** The weighted density of responses to immigration attitude items by year.

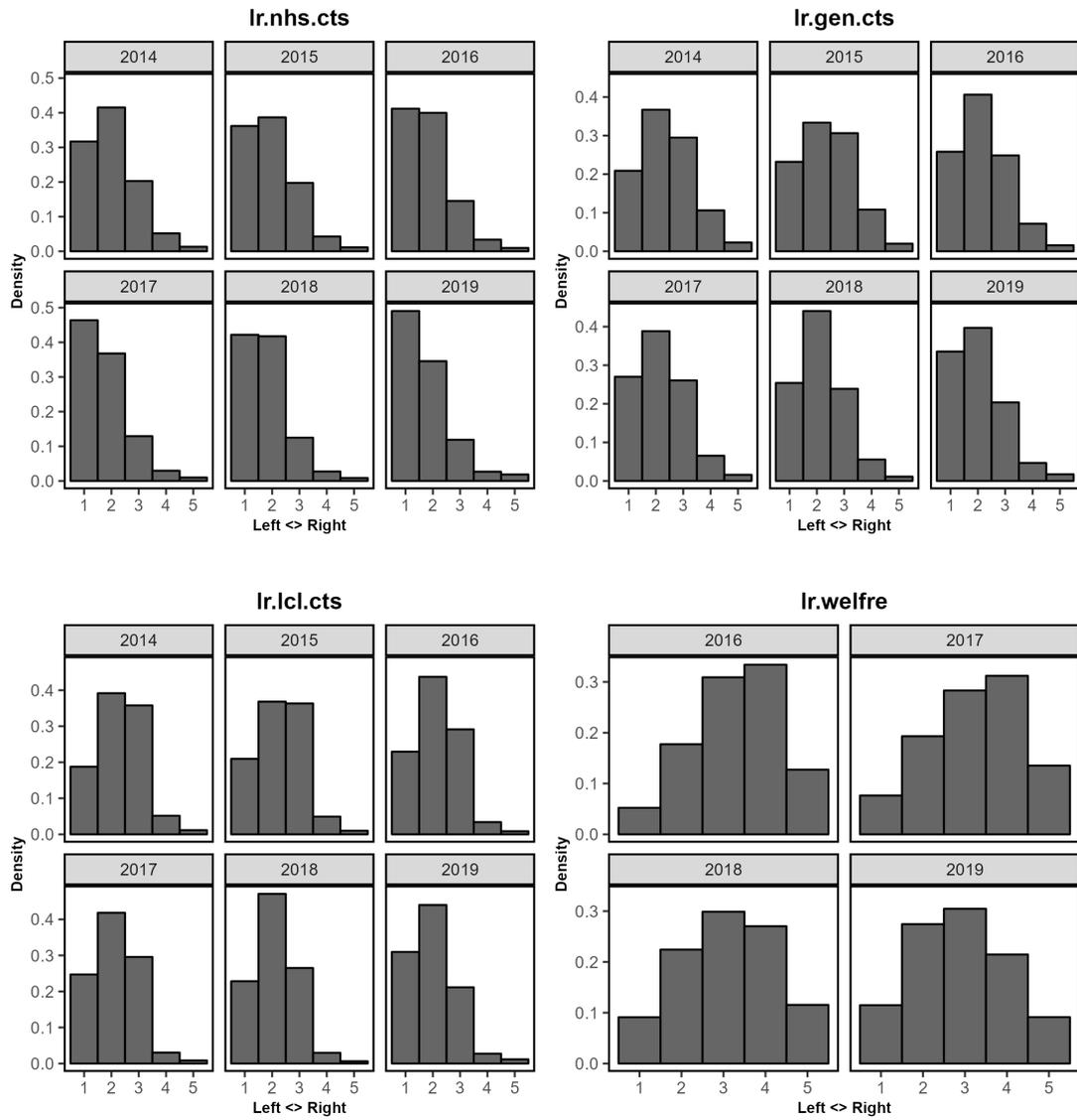


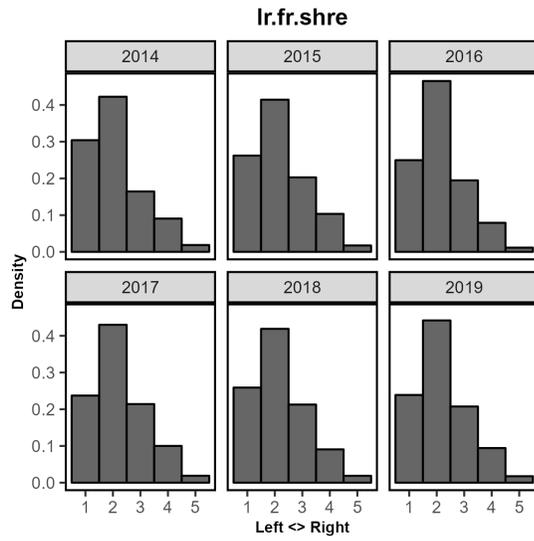
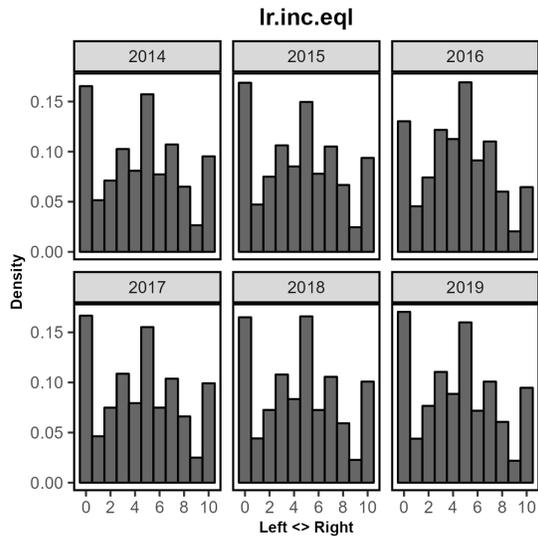
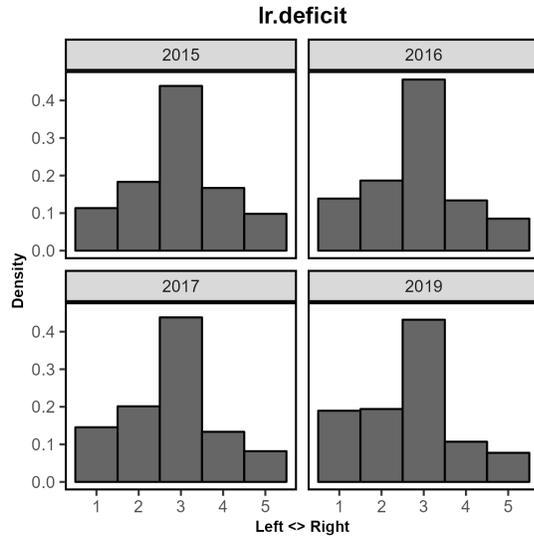
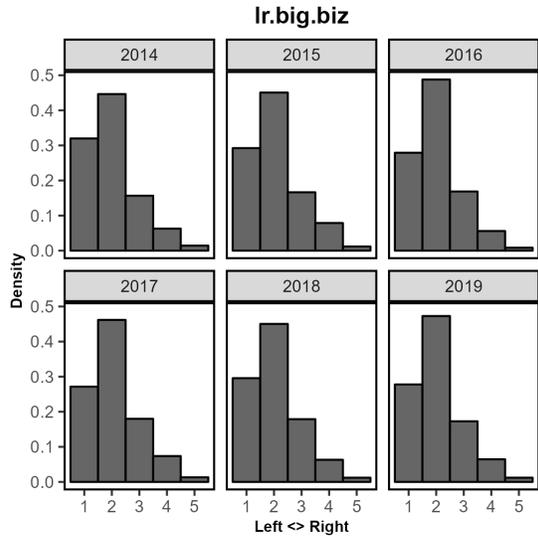
**Figure B.3:** The weighted density of responses to social values attitude items by year.

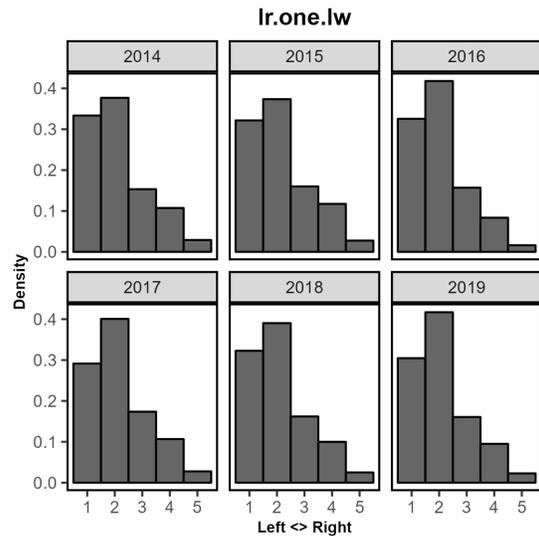
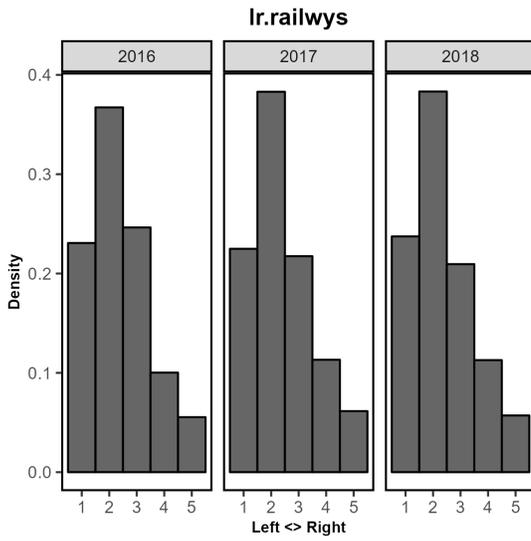
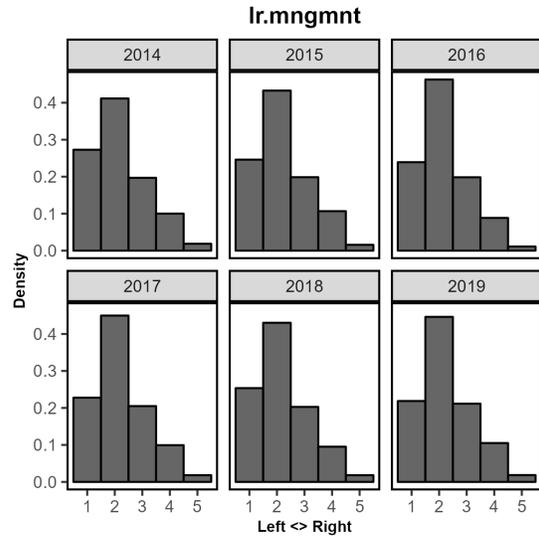
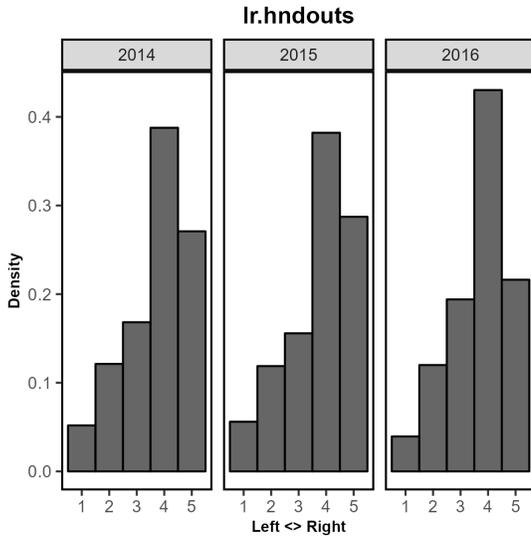


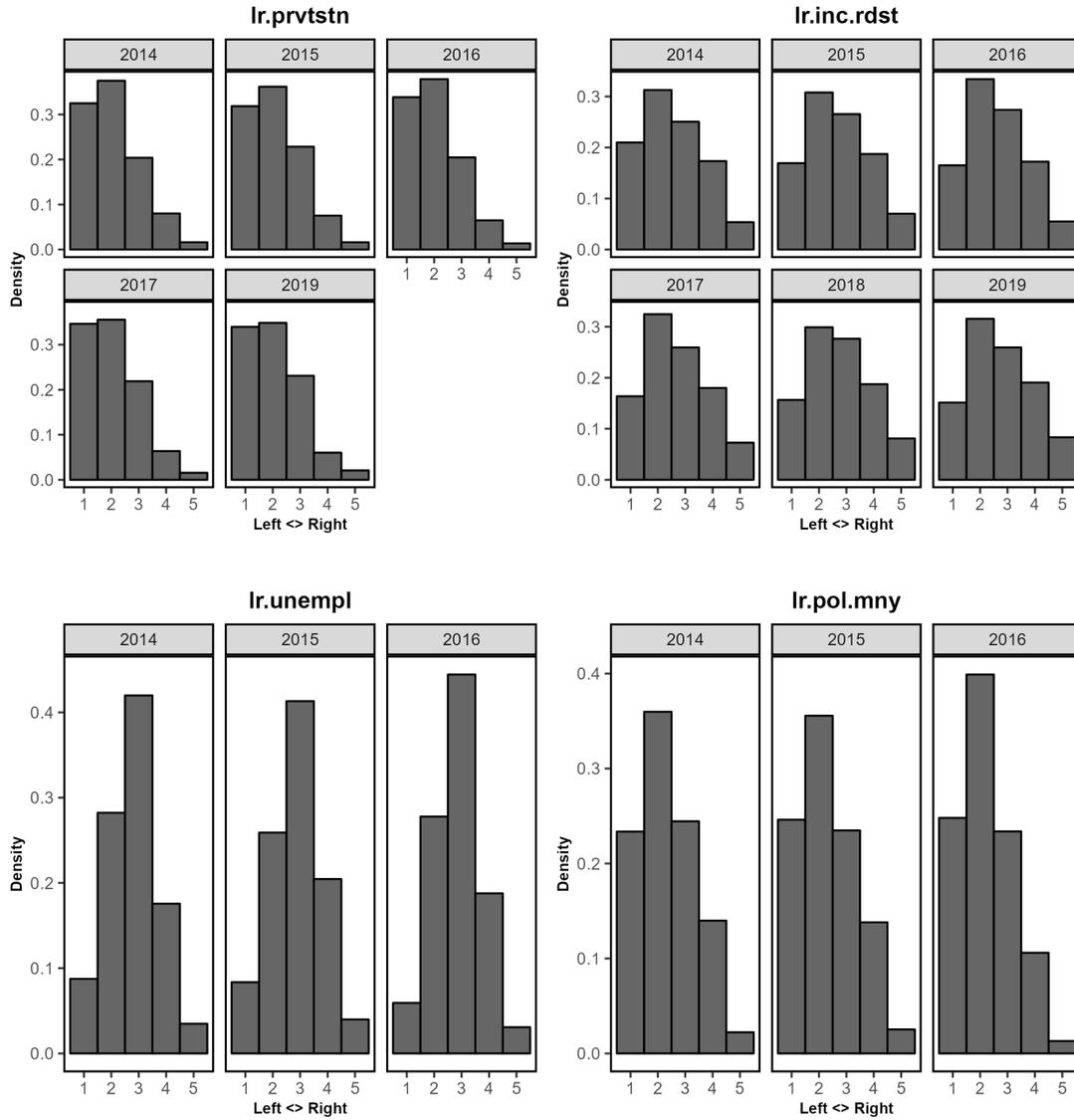


**Figure B.4:** The weighted density of responses to economic issues attitude items by year.







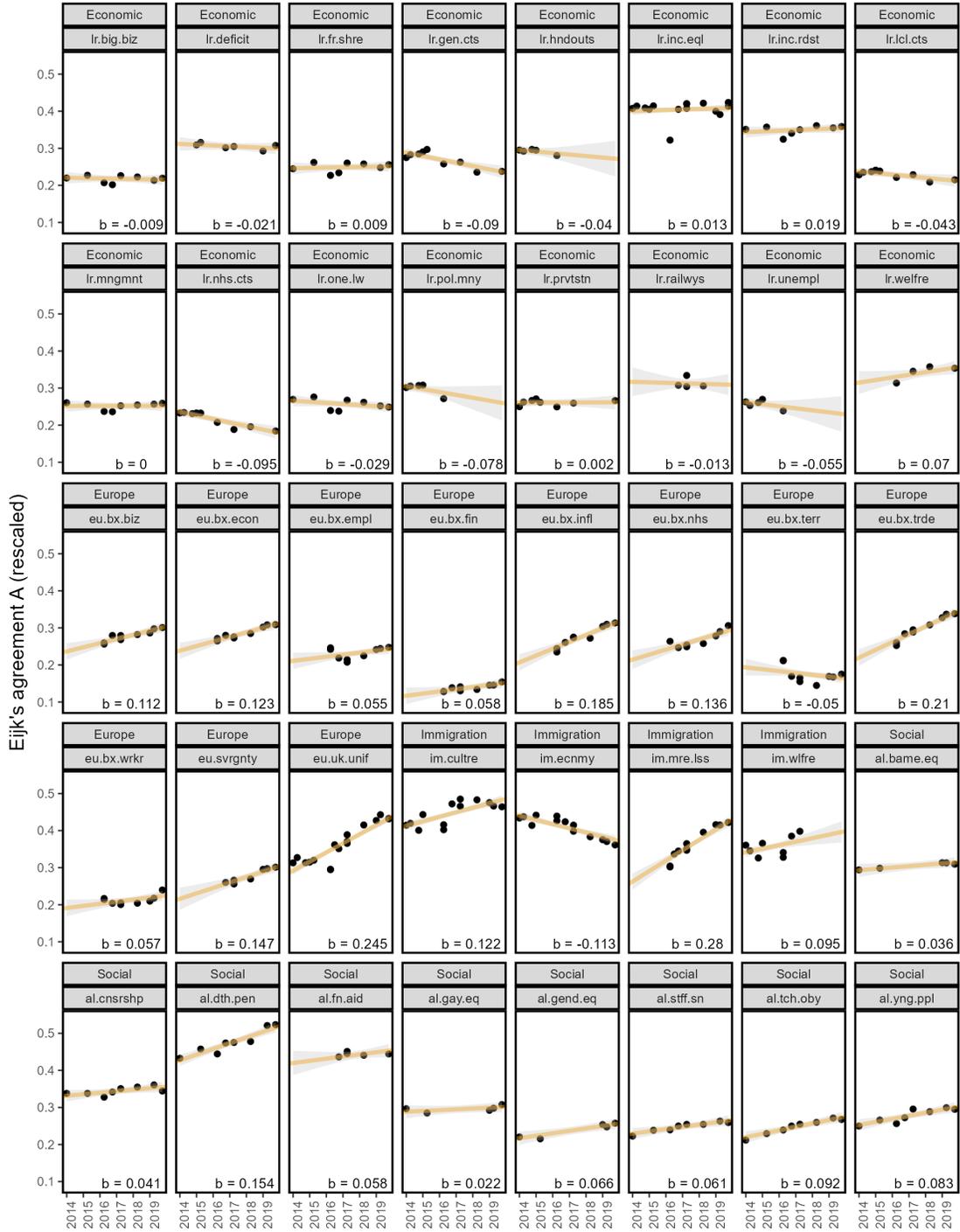


## C | Eijk's 'agreement A' as Attitude Divergence

**Table C.1:** Trends in Eijk's agreement A by issue domain.

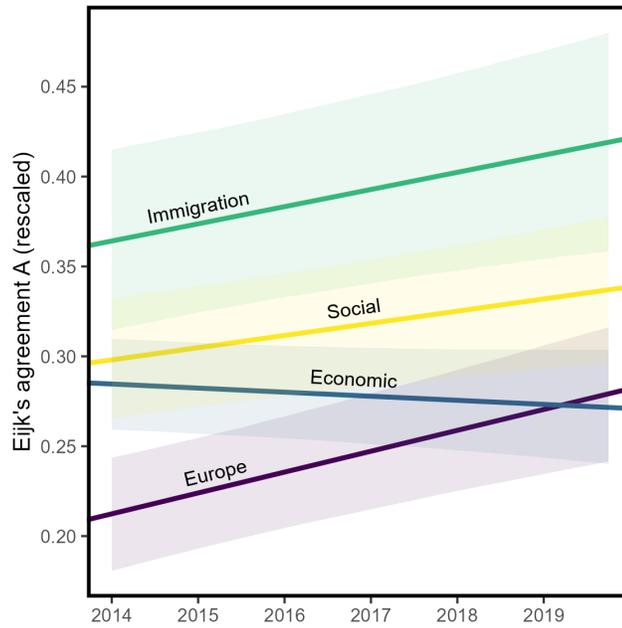
	agreement A
Intercept	0.21 (0.02)
European integration	baseline
Immigration	0.15 (0.04)
Social values	0.09 (0.03)
Economic issues	0.07 (0.02)
Time (decades)	0.12 (0.03)
Time x European integration	baseline
Time x immigration	-0.02 (0.05)
Time x social values	-0.05 (0.04)
Time x economic issues	-0.14 (0.03)
Residual SD:	
Intercepts	0.06
Trends	0.08
Data	0.01
N	328
Groups	40

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from a multilevel model. Agreement A is rescaled from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more polarisation. The intercept is then average textitdis-agreement in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Standard errors are in parentheses.



**Figure C.1:** Trends in Eijk's agreement A by political issue.

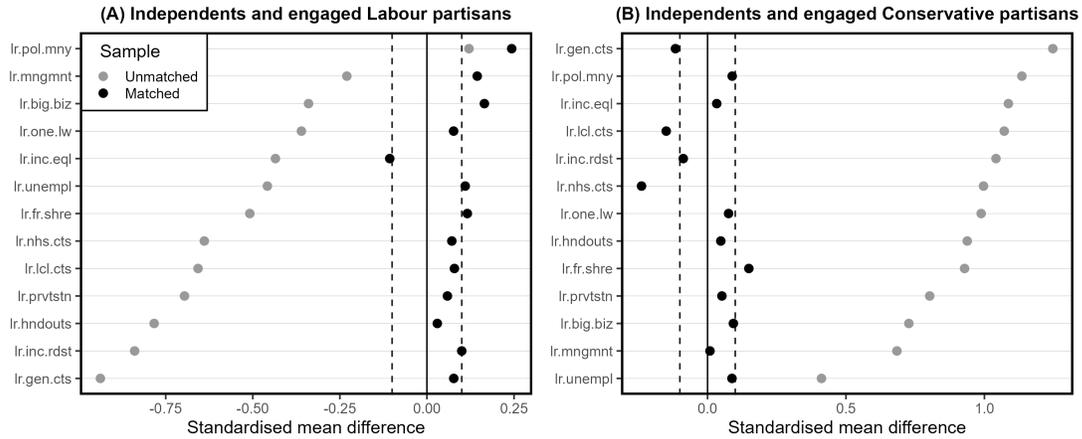
*Notes:* Each panel displays the average regression line for an attitude item, along with its 0.9 credible interval and slope. Agreement A is rescaled from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more polarisation. Time is on the x-axis.



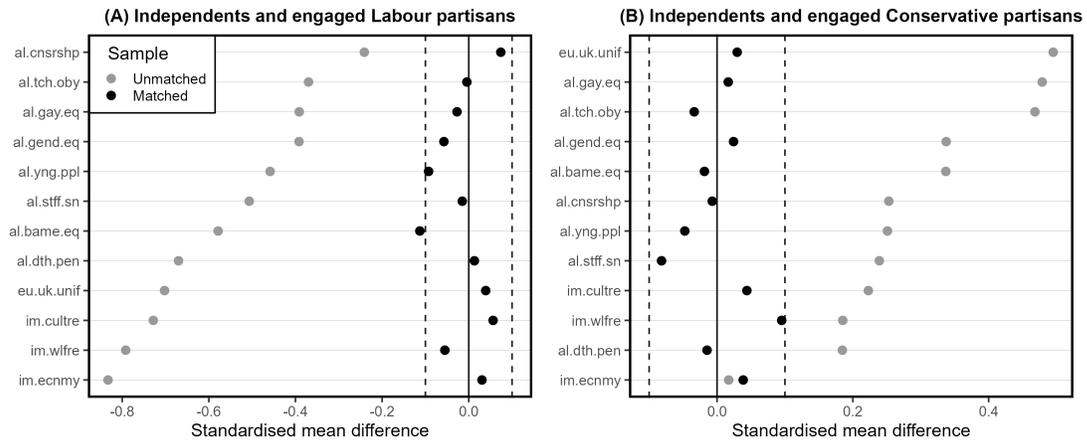
**Figure C.2:** Trends in Eijk's agreement A by issue domain.

*Notes:* Shaded areas are 0.9 credible intervals of the mean regression line for each issue domain. Agreement A is rescaled from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more polarisation. Time is on the x-axis.

## D | Fixed Partisanship and Matched Non-partisanship Trends with Engaged Partisans and Independents



**Figure D.1:** Partisan, non-partisan differences in economic preferences before and after matching.  
*Notes:* The area between dashed lines marks standardised mean differences less than 0.1.



**Figure D.2:** Partisan, non-partisan differences in cultural preferences before and after matching.  
*Notes:* The area between dashed lines marks standardised mean differences less than 0.1.

**Table D.1:** Trends in fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship polarisation on economic issues.

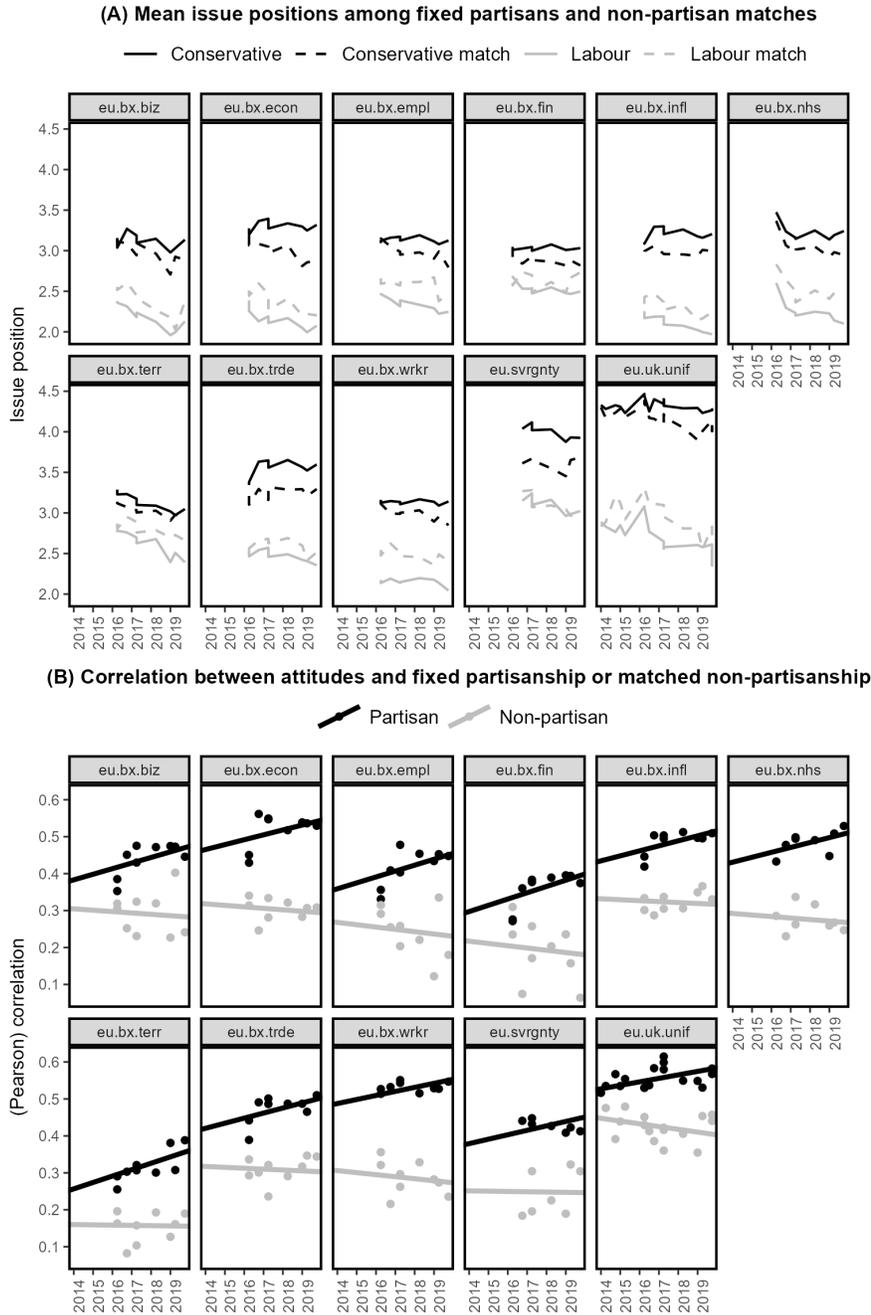
	attitude x fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship
Intercept	0.55 (0.02)
Non-partisanship	baseline
Fixed partisanship	0.05 (0.03)
Time (decades)	-0.15 (0.03)
Time x non-partisanship	baseline
Time x fixed partisanship	0.03 (0.04)
Residual SD:	
Intercepts	0.09
Trends	0.05
Data	0.05
N	238
Groups	32

*Notes:* Posterior statistics from a multilevel model with the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship as dependent variable. The intercept is the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Standard errors are in parentheses.

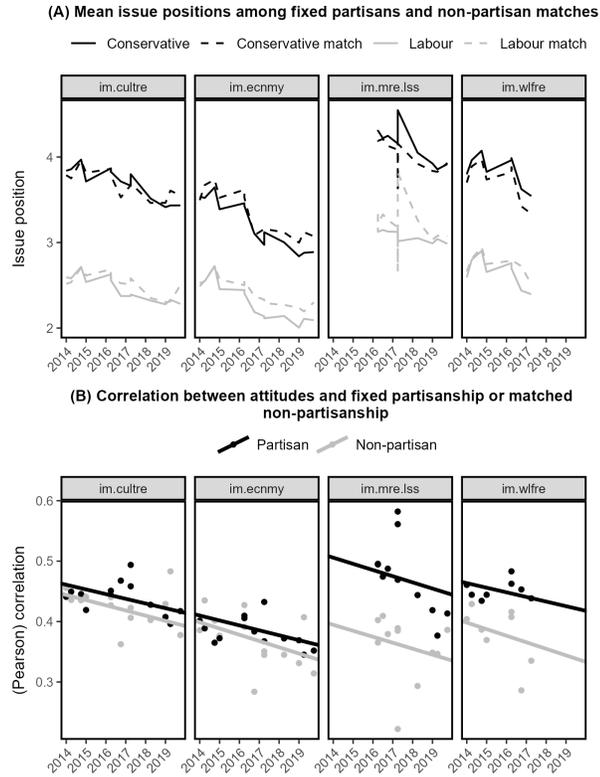
**Table D.2:** Trends in fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship polarisation on cultural issues.

	attitude x fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship		
	European integration	Immigration	Social values
Intercept	0.29 (0.03)	0.41 (0.02)	0.35 (0.02)
Non-partisanship	baseline	baseline	baseline
Fixed partisanship	0.11 (0.04)	0.05 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Time (decades)	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.10 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.03)
Time x non-partisanship	baseline	baseline	baseline
Time x fixed partisanship	0.18 (0.05)	0.02 (0.06)	0.03 (0.04)
Residual SD:			
Intercepts	0.08	0.04	0.05
Trends	0.05	0.04	0.03
Data	0.04	0.04	0.04
N	208	90	114
Groups	22	8	18

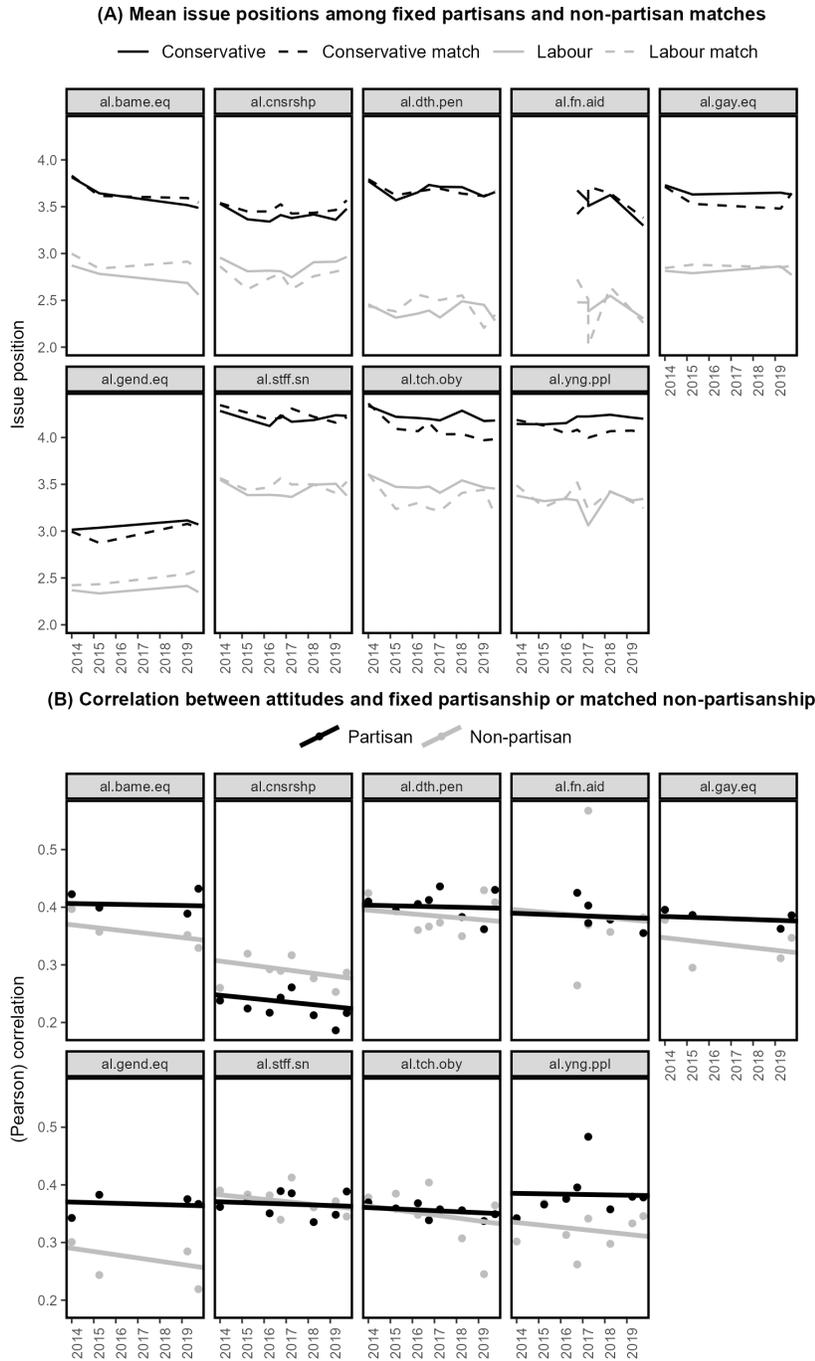
*Notes:* Posterior statistics from a multilevel model with the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship as dependent variable. The intercept is the average correlation in wave 1, collected during the first quarter of 2014. Standard errors are in parentheses.



**Figure D.3:** European integration attitude change among engaged partisans and independents, matched on wave 1 cultural positions.  
*Notes:* Part A shows mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave. Part B shows trends in the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship or matched non-partisanship. Time is on the x-axis.



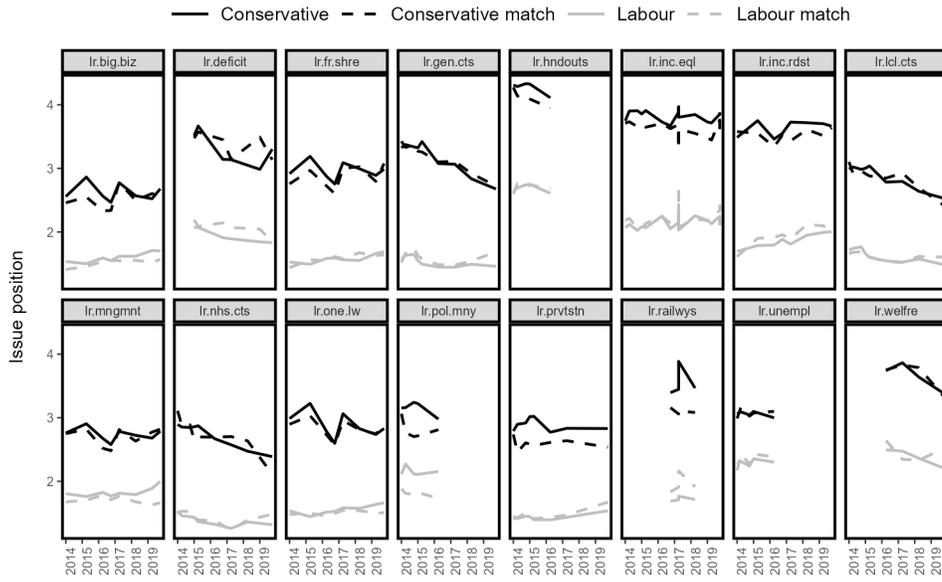
**Figure D.4:** Immigration attitude change among engaged partisans and independents, matched on wave 1 cultural positions.  
*Notes:* Part A shows mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave. Part B shows trends in the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship or matched non-partisanship. Time is on the x-axis.



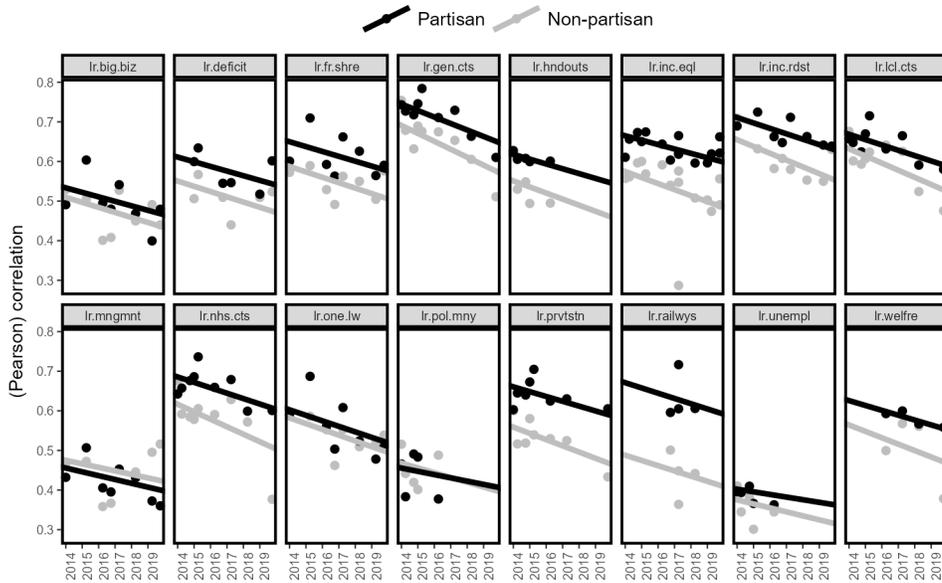
**Figure D.5:** Social values attitude change among engaged partisans and independents, matched on wave 1 cultural positions.

*Notes:* Part A shows mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave. Part B shows trends in the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship or matched non-partisanship. Time is on the x-axis.

**(A) Mean issue positions among fixed partisans and non-partisan matches**



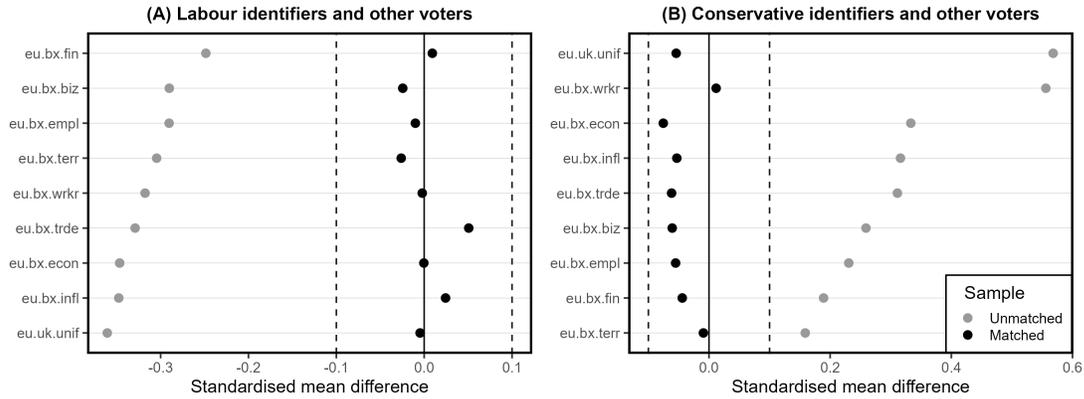
**(B) Correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship or matched non-partisanship**



**Figure D.6:** Left-right attitude change among engaged partisans and independents, matched on wave 1 economic positions.

*Notes:* Part A shows mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave. Part B shows trends in the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship or matched non-partisanship. Time is on the x-axis.

## E | Fixed Partisanship and Matched Non-partisanship Trends Using Wave 7 European Integration Positions



**Figure E.1:** Partisan, non-partisan differences in wave 7 European integration preferences before and after matching.

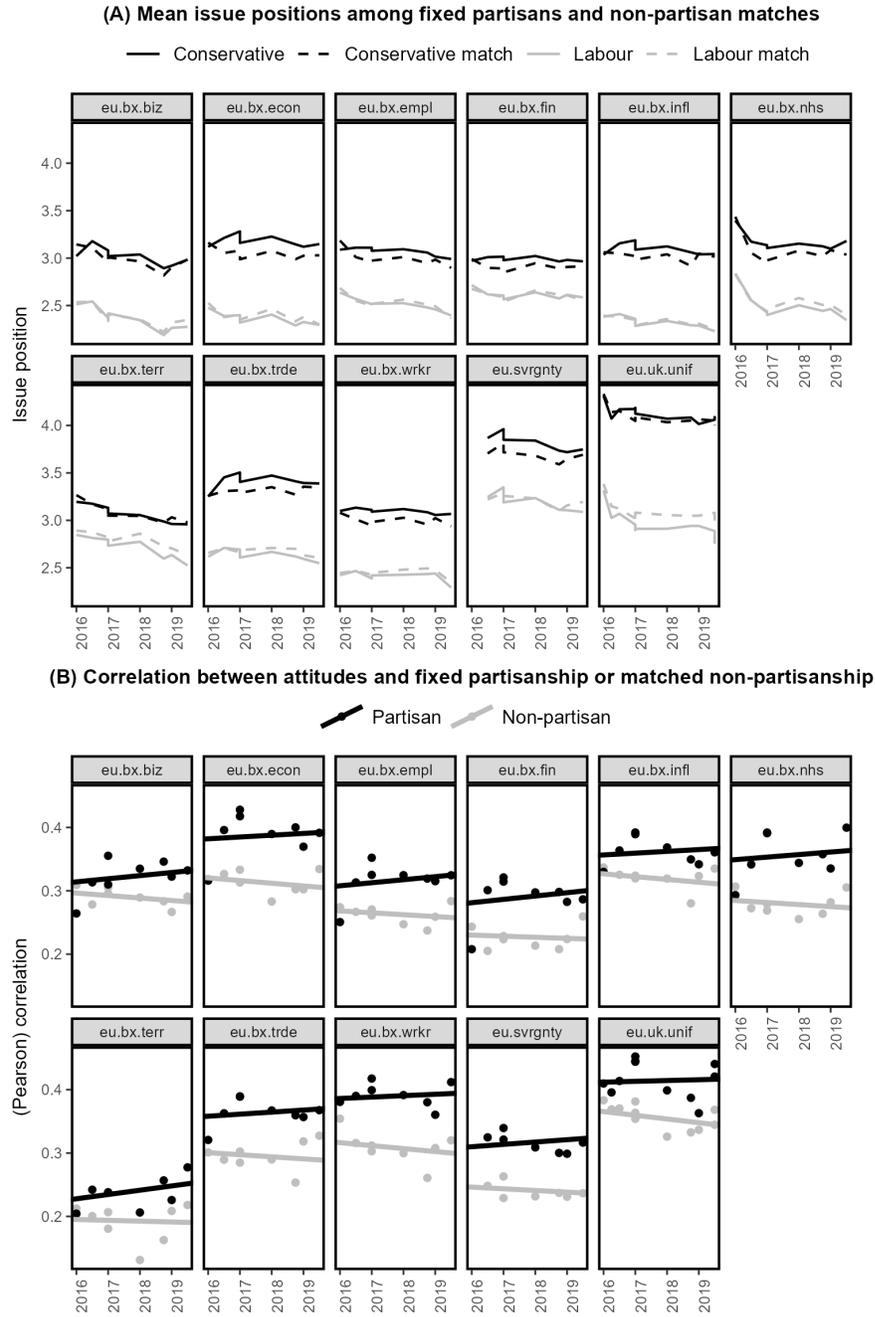
*Notes:* The area between dashed lines marks standardised mean differences less than 0.1.

**Table E.1:** Trends in fixed partisanship and matched non-partisanship polarisation on European integration, after balancing wave 7 issue positions in this domain.

attitude x fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship	
Intercept	0.29 (0.02)
Non-partisanship	baseline
Fixed partisanship	0.03 (0.03)
Time (decades)	-0.03 (0.02)
Time x non-partisanship	baseline
Time x fixed partisanship	0.07 (0.03)
Residual SD:	
Intercepts	0.06
Trends	0.03
Data	0.02
N	180
Groups	22

**Table E.2:** Posterior statistics from a multilevel model with the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship/matched non-partisanship as dependent variable. The intercept is the average correlation during the second quarter of 2016. Standard errors are in parentheses.

E. FIXED PARTISANSHIP AND MATCHED NON-PARTISANSHIP TRENDS USING WAVE 7 EURO



**Figure E.2:** European integration attitude change among engaged partisans and independents, matched on wave 7 European integration positions.

*Notes:* Part A shows mean preferences (on a 1-5 scale) in each survey wave. Part B shows trends in the correlation between attitudes and fixed partisanship or matched non-partisanship. Time is on the x-axis.