

Factions and Parties in a Polarized Era

Michael J. Ensley

Kent State University

mensley@kent.edu

Zachary G. Morris

Kent State University

zmorris5@kent.edu

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Abstract

The Democratic Party is often described as a “big tent” of diverse interests, whereas the Republican Party is portrayed as being organized around a shared ideological vision. However, recent developments within both parties raise questions about whether this characterization remains accurate. Since the end of the Cold War, much of the literature has focused on the transformation of party composition following elite polarization, rather than through the framework of factions, through individual partisans. We argue that there has been insufficient attention to the dynamics of intraparty factions in response to elite polarization. This research seeks to examine this gap by investigating the ideological unity of the parties by identifying factions in the American electorate through a Latent Class Analysis. Using the American National Election Studies from 1992 to 2024, we identify six factions based on a series of indicators of policy orientations, political values, and predispositions. In addition to providing a framework for analyzing the diversity of the American electorate, this analysis reveals several important changes, particularly since 2012. First, the largest change in the composition of the electorate is the growth in the most left-leaning faction (the Progressives). Second, the base of the Democratic Party is more left-leaning by 2024 because America has become more left-leaning on issues related to race and culture. Third, the base of the Democratic Party has become more cohesive in terms of policy and ideological leanings. The growing homogeneity of the Democratic Party puts it on par with the Republican Party in terms of party unity, which has implications for electoral competition and the willingness to work across party lines.

Introduction

The lasting impact of the expansion of the administrative state during Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society initiative was the Democratic Party's association with direct federal involvement in economic development and community relations (Aldrich 1995). Since the 1960s, the Democratic Party has shifted ideologically to the left, reshaping mass politics and altering the political identities of both major parties.

The conventional wisdom, expressed best by Grossmann and Hopkins (2015, 2016), says the Republicans are united in conservatism, whereas the Democratic Party is a collection of groups that are not united by common ideological bonds to the extent that the Republicans are. "The Republican Party is best viewed as the agent of an ideological movement whose members are united by a common devotion to the principle of limited government," whereas "the Democratic Party is properly understood as a coalition of social groups whose interests are served by various forms of government activity" (Grossmann and Hopkins 2015, 119).

The implications of Grossmann and Hopkins's argument on ideological asymmetry suggest that the diverse demographic factions within the Democratic Party lack cohesion, whereas the prospect of an empowered federal government has unified the various factions within the Republican Party. However, the Republican Party has not been the paragon of unity in the last decade that the ideological asymmetry thesis would suggest, whereas the Democratic Party has been able to unite behind the Harris campaign in 2024, just as they did in 2020 with the candidacy of Joe Biden (Masket 2020). Thus, it seems pertinent to revisit the cohesiveness of the parties.

In this paper, we investigate the dynamics of the parties by examining whether they have become more homogenous since 1992. We seek to investigate this by studying the ideological unity of the parties and examining the structure of the electorate, classifying individuals into distinct factions using Latent Class Analysis (LCA). Using the American National Election Studies (ANES) from 1992 through 2024, we identify six factions in the electorate using a series of indicators that tap various policy orientations, political values, and ideological predispositions in the American electorate.

This investigation reveals several important findings. First, the largest change in the composition of the electorate since 1992 has been the growth in the most left-leaning factions (which we label the Progressives and Liberals). Second, and related to this, the base of the Democratic Party is significantly more left leaning in 2024, in part because America has become more left leaning on issues related to race, gender, and lifestyle. Third, the base of the Democratic Party has become much more cohesive, less diverse in terms of policy and ideological leanings, particularly since the 2012 Election. This growing homogeneity in the electoral base of the Democratic Party puts it on par with the Republican Party in terms of party unity, which also implies that the ability to work across party lines has become increasingly more difficult.

Polarization and Party Factions

Grossmann and Hopkins (2015, 2016) argued that the Democratic Party and the Republican Party are not only polarized from each other, but in fact they are fundamentally different. The parties were not simply mirror reflections of each other but instead were constructed differently. The Republican Party is organized around an ideology rooted in small government conservatism, whereas the Democratic Party is organized as a coalition of social and demographic groups. The recognition of essential differences in the organizational foundations of the two parties informs how party politics scholars make sense of the internal character of America's parties (Mann and Ornstein 2016).

The Partisan Asymmetry theory implies that both parties function differently. The Republican Party builds support by appealing to values aligned with conservatism. The Democratic Party builds support by advocating for policies that provide specific benefits to its supporters. The result of the fundamental differences between the parties and their internal factions is that the loosely connected social movements, groups, and demographic groups that comprise the Democratic Party are not becoming more ideologically unified or homogeneous. The Republican Party's animus towards federal overreach should lead its internal factions to become more ideologically homogenous in response to government activity.

While attention to the causes of polarization were and remain of critical importance, the heavy focus on polarization has led to an underemphasis on the study of intra-party divisions. While this the focus on polarization is understandable given the depth of the changes that polarization has wrought, it is possible that the lack of focus on intra-party divisions has led us to miss changes such as the rise of Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican Presidential Primary and the strong showing of Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Primary of that same year.

While many researchers who focused on mass public opinion and behavior have concentrated on inter-party polarization, some scholars have been more attentive to intraparty differences. Notably, scholars focused on party organizations and activists have understood the importance of factional differences (Di Salvo 2012; Clarke 2020; Blum 2020; Blum and Noel 2024). We draw on the lessons of this research to guide our research.

The asymmetric polarization thesis suggests that, despite the expansion of elite polarization across all major issues (Layman and Carsey 2002, 2002b), fundamental differences in the character of the parties would remain unchanged. The Democratic Party would still be a diverse coalition of distinct social and demographic factions, bound together only by their desire for government benefits. The GOP's factions would become more unified and ideologically conservative in response to the Democratic Party's elite embracing social and economic liberalism.

Classifying Factions

America's electoral system obscures the true diversity within the American electorate (Cox 1997). First-past-the-post, single-member districts deter the creation of a multiparty

system, forcing voters who do not neatly align along a left-right dimension to choose between two parties. To measure the size and diversity of factions within the American electorate and their connections to the two main political parties, we conducted a latent class analysis (LCA). In this section, we describe the choice of LCA, the indicators used to classify individuals into factions, and the process of identifying the appropriate number of factions based on the estimated models.

Latent Class Analysis

The LCA approach allows us to categorize voters into unobserved classes or groups (or factions, as we label them here). In contrast to measuring citizens' attitudes and orientations using a set of scales representing latent variables or dimensions of political attitudes, the LCA uses the same sets of indicators but classifies individuals into latent groups based on the similarity of their responses and/or characteristics.

The advantage of the LCA approach is that it allows us to classify individuals into clusters based on their attitudes and values, rather than focusing on the independent marginal effect of a particular dimension of political thinking. A myriad of research has established that the structure of citizens' political attitudes and orientations is multidimensional (e.g., Zumbrennen and Gangl 2008; Ellis and Stimson 2012; Feldman and Johnston 2014; Carmines, et al. 2012). A typical analysis of the structure of citizens' political orientations would employ either an exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis to measure an individual's position on the latent political dimensions. In the case of exploratory factor analysis, one would determine how many dimensions are necessary to capture citizens' orientations adequately. In contrast, a confirmatory factor analytic approach would specify the dimensions a priori. With either approach, the results would then often be used to estimate which and to what degree each estimated factor would explain some attitude or behavior.

While this approach can be enlightening in terms of assessing the relative importance of a particular factor, it may not accurately capture the extent to which these factors cluster for specific individuals. The LCA approach uses the same indicators but instead seeks to estimate latent groups, as opposed to estimating latent factors. Thus, with LCA, we can classify individuals based on a shared set of political orientations and examine how individuals within that group behave relative to individuals that do not share all the same political orientations. One useful element of this approach is that we can straightforwardly compare groups that share some elements in common but not all, while simultaneously comparing groups that share very little to nothing in common. In short, this is a more efficient method for examining factional composition and conflict within and between political parties.

Feldman and Johnston (2014) provide an excellent example of the value of this approach for assessing the structure of citizens' political orientations (see Bakker et al. 2018 for a similar approach). They use factor analysis to investigate the dimensionality of ideology but then turn to using a "person-centered" LCA to assess the number of discrete and distinct

ideological factions. They uncover six classes, where approximately forty percent of individuals in the 2000 American National Election Study can be classified as either Liberal or Conservative (implying they have ideologically consistent positions across multiple dimensions).

Indicators of Factions

We start our analysis with 1992 since this a pivotal moment in American politics. The disparate factions of the Republican Party had been united by its opposition to Communism in the post-World War II Era (Continetti 2022). The strength of this coalition, which culminated during the Reagan-Bush administrations (1981-1993), began to deteriorate with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Further, the base of the Republican Party was shifting and strengthening with its ascendance in the South and West, while at the same time the Democratic Party was coalescing into a more consistently liberal party in Congress and in the electorate (Rohde 1991; Aldrich 1995; Abramowitz 2010). Finally, the 1994 midterm elections saw Republicans winning majority control of both chambers of Congress for the first time in forty years, and in which both parties began to viably compete for control in every election (Lee 2016).

Using the ANES data from 1992 through 2024 for presidential election years, we need to select a set of indicators that are available for most respondents in most years. To obtain the most reliable estimates, we want to avoid missing data but still have enough indicators that are consistent across time to accurately compare respondents. Note that the LCA can be estimated via full maximum likelihood (FIML), which does not delete cases for partially missing data and utilizes the available information to classify all respondents into a class. Given the need for consistent data across time, we chose indicators that would distinguish factions from each other along several important dimensions.

To help organize the presentation, we focused on the set of common dimensions of political conflict that scholars have identified as important across a wide range of political domains. First, most analyses that specified a multidimensional conception of ideology define an economic dimension and a social or cultural dimension (e.g., Layman and Carsey 2002; Treier and Hillygus 2009; Highton 2020; Feldman and Johnston 2014; Carmines, et al. 2012). The economic dimension captures beliefs and policy positions that pertain to how involved the government should be in regulating business and economic competition, providing a social safety net for citizens, and more generally, questions regarding the overall size and scope of government in economic affairs.

We include several measures to capture orientations towards economic issues. First, we include two seven-point scales that measure support for government provided *Health Care* and the provision of guaranteed *Jobs* and income. Second, variables indicating whether the

respondent supports increasing or decreasing federal spending on *Social Security* and the *Poor* are included.¹

The cultural dimension captures attitudes regarding the appropriate modes of conduct in social settings, the role of government in shaping individuals' morals, and policy questions limiting or prohibiting certain actions. The most notable issues associated with the cultural dimension are abortion and the rights of homosexuals and other gender identities. Thus, we include an item measuring support for *Abortion* and whether there should be a law preventing *Gay Discrimination* in employment. The cultural dimension is also frequently linked to issues related to religious practice and morality. Thus, cultural politics is associated with the strength of religious convictions and behaviors. To capture religiosity, we use an indicator of the perceived authority of the *Bible*.

Race is also critical to understanding America's current political divide (Hajnal 2020), as has been the case throughout American history. Attitudes towards racial minorities, and Blacks in particular, along with views on policies designed to aid historically disadvantaged groups are often the strongest indicators of political attitudes and behaviors. To account for attitudes regarding race, we include the seven-point scale that measures whether a respondents believe that the government should provide *Aid to Blacks*. We also include a measure that captures whether a person supports *Affirmative Action* for Blacks. Given the strong connection between race and crime (Murakawa 2012), we also include a measure of whether the individual supports increasing or decreasing government spending for fighting *Crime*.

Closely related to attitudes towards race in American politics are issues regarding immigrants (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015). Nativist sentiments and opposition to increasing immigration have jumped to the forefront of American political discourse in recent decades. To capture nativists sentiments, we include whether the individual supports increasing *Immigration* and a feeling thermometer score towards *Illegal Aliens*.

Finally, scholars have generally noted the growing importance of populist and authoritarian tendencies in American politics (Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Stenner 2005). Recent research by Uscinski et al. (2021) demonstrates that there is an "anti-establishment" dimension to political attitudes that is reflected in populist sentiments. Focus on authoritarianism for explaining political attitudes has taken more prominence as populist movements have gained momentum across the world, including the United States (Lee 2020). Stenner notes that authoritarianism is defined by "an enduring predisposition, in all matters political and social, to favor obedience and conformity (oneness and sameness) over freedom and difference" (2009, 142). And for these reasons, it is often correlated with

¹ The two survey questions regarding support for federal spending on social security and the poor are measured on a three-point scale (1=increase spending, 2=stay the same, 3=decrease spending). It is worth noting that spending on entitlements like Social Security is one of the key issues that distinguished 2016 Republican primary voters who supported Trump instead of one of the other Republican presidential candidates (Sides et al. 2018).

attitudes towards minorities, foreigners, and immigrants. *Authoritarianism* is effectively measured with attitudes towards childrearing, which are available in the ANES (Engelhardt et al. 2023).² Finally, to capture populist and anti-establishment sentiments, we include one indicator which prompts people to assess whether the government is run for the *Interests of the Few* or for the benefit of all people.

One point to reemphasize is that citizens' orientations across these different dimensions of political conflict are likely to be correlated with each other in significant ways but fail to align consistently across different individuals (as Converse (2006) famously demonstrated). And while there may be strong correlations between some of these indicators, citizens' orientations and attitudes across these dimensions may cluster in unique ways that diverge from a simple left versus right dichotomy. Further, some concepts and their corresponding measures can be complex and multifaceted, such as is the case with racial resentment (Kam and Burge 2018). But the LCA approach allows us to deal with this complexity and account for the different ways these orientations and attitudes cluster together by assigning individuals into a number of to-be-determined groups.

Estimation

The goal here is to classify individuals into factions based on the differences in attitudes and beliefs and to see how the size of these factions varies over time, as well how these factions relate to the two main political parties in the United States. Thus, we chose to estimate a single LCA model in which we pool respondents from the nine presidential election year surveys in the ANES between 1992 and 2024. It is worth noting that we specifically chose indicators that were consistently available across these election surveys so we can make direct comparisons across time.

While we estimated a single model covering the entire period, we did need to estimate several LCA models with a different number of classes. Given LCA is an exploratory measurement model, the researcher must determine based on the fit of the model how many classes are appropriate to adequately capture the variation in the population of respondents. For LCA, there are a set of guidelines for assessing model fit, which generally indicate that there at least six distinct factions in the American public, which is consistent with the LCA analyses of Feldman and Johnston (2014) and Bakker et al. (2018). Based on strict statistical criteria, we could argue that there may be some benefit to estimating more than six. However, in terms of analyzing the relative factional composition of the two parties and whether there have been changes in the last three decades of American politics, the six-class model is sufficient. It is to this task that we now turn.

² Specifically, there are four questions that begin with the prompt “Which is more important for a child to have,” which is followed by four separate binary choices: (1) curiosity of good manners; (2) obedience or self-reliance; (3) considerate or well-behaved; and (4) independence or respect for elders. These questions are available for every survey year except 1996. These four survey questions are included as indicators in the LCA.

The Characteristics of the Factions

The LCA model estimates coefficients for each indicator included in the analysis, but we will focus on the average values of the indicators within each faction to describe and label the six factions. We also validate the labelling of the factions by comparing the factions on a set of latent scales that are derived from a variety of survey items, including items that are not used to estimate the LCA models.

Table 1 shows the mean value for each indicator for members assigned to each faction. To aid in the description and labelling of the factions, we highlight values in Table 1 that are different than the mean value in a liberal, left-leaning direction. The one exception is for the last indicator, *Few Interests*, because that question addresses a populist orientation which can be coded as a left or right leaning orientation depending upon who is described as the few interests or elites. We have shaded the last row in gray to distinguish it from the other indicators.

Table 1: LCA Factions

Indicator	Faction						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	Mean
	Progressives	Libertarians	Conservatives	Racial Liberals	Nationalists	Liberals	
Spending on Poor	1.1	2.1	2.1	1.4	1.3	1.4	1.6
Social Security	1.4	1.8	1.6	1.3	1.2	1.5	1.5
Health Care	2.0	4.7	5.7	3.5	3.0	2.5	3.8
Jobs	2.6	5.3	5.9	3.4	3.3	3.4	4.2
Abortion	3.9	3.4	2.1	2.7	2.8	3.8	3.0
Gay Discrimination	1.1	1.6	2.4	1.9	1.8	1.1	1.7
Bible	2.6	2.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	2.6	1.9
Spending on Crime	2.0	2.5	2.6	2.6	2.8	2.3	2.5
Aid to Blacks	2.0	5.3	6.0	3.2	4.3	3.1	4.3
Affirmative Action	1.5	4.8	4.8	1.5	4.6	4.2	3.8
Immigration	2.3	3.5	4.0	3.3	3.5	2.7	3.4
Illegal Aliens	0.7	0.3	0.2	0.5	0.4	0.6	0.4
Authoritarianism	-1.1	-0.5	0.5	0.6	0.6	-1.0	0.0
Interests of the Few	1.2	1.2	1.1	1.3	1.3	1.1	1.2

In Column 1 all the values are highlighted, which indicates that the average on each indicator for members assigned to the faction have values that are liberal. Thus, we label the first faction as the **Progressives** given the strong liberal position on each indicator. The

opposite of the Progressive faction is presented in Column 3; the average values for each indicator in Column 3 is near or different than the mean value in a right-leaning direction. Thus, we label the faction represented in Column 3 as the **Conservatives** given the consistent right-leaning orientation across the indicators.

The remaining four factions in Table 3 have some but not all the values highlighted, implying that members of these factions have a mix of conservative and liberal positions. Column 2 has four indicators highlighted, implying that the members of the faction lean to the left on those issues. For this faction, the members possess a liberal orientation on the cultural issues, *Abortion* and *Discrimination towards Gays*, as well being more likely to deny the *Bible* is the literal word of God and are low on the *Authoritarian* scale. On the remaining issues, the members of this faction have a conservative orientation. Given the secular orientation and being oriented to liberty and liberal positions on social issues but conservative on economic issues, we label this faction as the **Libertarians**.

The members of the faction represented in Column 4 from Table 1 are individuals that possess liberal positions on the economic issues (*Health Care*, *Jobs*, *Social Security*, and *Spending on Poor*) and the issues related to race and immigration (*Affirmative Action*, *Aid to Blacks*, *Illegals*, and *Immigration*). However, this group leans in a conservative direction on the cultural issues of *Abortion* and *Discrimination towards Gays*. The group also appears to be more religious than average citizen and is more authoritarian. In short, members of this faction are the mirror image of the Libertarians; we label members of this faction the **Racial Liberals**.

The members of the faction represented in Column 5 are similar to the racial liberals (i.e., they are religious, have an authoritarian predisposition, and are conservative on social and cultural issues but liberal on economic issues). It is worth noting the members of this faction are the most opposed to cutting Social Security. However, the members of the faction are conservative on the race and immigration issues, which differentiates them from the Racial Liberals. We label members of this faction the **Nationalists**. The final faction represented in Column 6 possesses liberal, left-leaning predisposition on almost every issue. Thus, members of this faction are very similar to the Progressives. It is worth first noting that values on indicators related to culture, religiosity, and authoritarianism are near identical to the Progressive column. On the economic issues, the members of this faction are left leaning but more moderate than the Progressives. The one indicator where there is a clear distinction with Progressives is *Affirmative Action*. The members of the faction represented in Column 6 have a conservative position on affirmative action that is much closer to Conservatives than Progressives. Given the strong left leaning orientation on most issues, we label the last faction the **Liberals**.

The second approach we use to describe and validate the labels we assigned to the factions is to create a series of summated rating scales from the various items to capture the distinct dimensions of political orientations and values we identified earlier.

Specifically, we created scales for each of the following latent dimensions: **Economic**³, **Equality**⁴, **Cultural**⁵, **Moral Traditionalism**⁶, **Religiosity**⁷, **Racial Resentment**⁸, and **Nativism**⁹.

The scales are coded such that the mean value is 0, the standard deviation is 1, and higher values indicate a right-leaning or conservative orientation. Thus, a positive value indicates the average individual in the faction is conservative on the dimension and a negative value indicates that the average individual in the faction is liberal on that dimension. We also include **Ideology**, which is the average position on the seven-point ideological self-identification scale. Table 2 shows the average value on each scale for members that fall into one of the six factions that were uncovered from the LCA.

³ The economic scale was created by combining responses from the seven-point scales that measure support for government provided health care, provision of guaranteed jobs and income, and the level of government services and spending. Further, variables indicating whether the respondent supports increasing or decreasing federal spending on welfare and the poor are included

⁴ The four equality indicators are five-point scales ranging from *agree strongly* to *disagree strongly*. Survey respondents were asked how much they agree with the following statements: (1) the U.S. would have fewer problems if everyone treated equally; (2) should worry less about how equal people are; (3) not a big problem is some people have more of a chance in life; and (4) society should ensure equal opportunity succeed.

⁵ The cultural scale includes items on support for abortion, support for opposing gay discrimination in employment, support for gay marriage, the role of women in society, and support for whether gay people should be able to adopt children.

⁶ Moral traditionalism “may be viewed as constituting a backlash against postmaterialistic values, such as secularism, moral relativism, and alternative lifestyle choices, that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s” (Knuckey 2005, 652). The moral traditionalism items are questions that ask respondents if they agree with the following statements, where responses range from *agree strongly* to *disagree strongly*: (1) The newer lifestyles are contributing to the breakdown of our society; (2) World is always changing, and we should adjust our view of moral behavior to those changes; (3) This country would have fewer problems if there were more emphasis on traditional family ties; and (4) We should be more tolerant of people who choose to live according to their own moral standards, even if they are very different from our own.

⁷ The items measuring religiosity are: (1) How important is religion to them; (2) How much guidance in daily life does religion provide; and (3) The perceived authority of the Bible.

⁸ The racial resentment scale captures subtle underlying prejudice towards Blacks (Tarman and Sears 2005; Simmons and Bobo 2018). The racial resentment scale is composed of whether respondent agrees or disagrees with the following statements: (1) Conditions make it hard for blacks to succeed; (2) Blacks must try harder to succeed; (3) Blacks should not have special favors to succeed; and (4) Blacks have gotten less than they deserve over the past few years. With the addition of the seven-point measuring support for government aid to blacks, the five measures create a scale with a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.86. This scale is included as a single indicator in the LCA.

⁹ To capture nativism, we include whether the individual supports increasing immigration, whether the respondent thinks immigrants take away jobs from citizens, and feeling thermometer scores towards Hispanics/Chicanos, illegal aliens, and Muslims.

Table 2: Characteristics of Factions

SCALE	FACTIONS					
	Progressives	Libertarians	Conservatives	Racial Liberals	Nationalists	Liberals
Ideology	2.3	4.5	5.5	4.0	4.2	3.0
Economic	-1.1	0.7	1.0	-0.4	-0.5	-0.6
Equality	-1.0	0.4	0.7	-0.2	-0.1	-0.5
Cultural	-0.9	-0.3	0.9	0.2	0.1	-0.8
Traditionalism	-1.1	0.1	0.8	-0.1	0.2	-0.8
Religiosity	-0.9	-0.5	0.6	0.5	0.3	-0.8
Resentment	-1.4	0.5	0.8	-0.5	0.2	-0.7
Nativism	-1.0	0.2	0.6	-0.1	0.1	-0.6

The Progressives faction contains citizens that are to the left on every dimension listed in Table 2. First, note that the average score on the ideological self-identification scale is 2.5 on the 1 to 7 scale, which is the most liberal score among all 6 factions. Second, the average score on the other scales is equal to -0.9 or less, which again implies that citizens in this faction are left leaning, as the average score is 0, and the standard deviation is 1.

The Libertarians lean right on economic issues (the average score on the economic and equality scales is positive) but to the left on cultural issues (the average score on the moral traditionalism scale is just above the mean and the value on the cultural scale is -0.3). The group also displays a secular orientation, as the value of religiosity is negative. The group is conservative on the racial resentment and the nativism scales. Finally, the group's average score on the self-identification scale is 4.5, which is near the moderate position (4).

The faction with the highest average ideological identification score of 5.5. is the Conservatives. This group mirrors the Progressives in that they are generally the most conservative across every dimension. Compared to the other factions, members of this faction are the most right leaning on every scale listed in Table 2.

The Racial Liberals also self-identify as moderate (average score of 4.0) on the ideological scale. This group has positive values, hence conservative positions, on the cultural and religiosity scales but are generally liberal on the other scales. The Nationalists identify as moderates on the ideological self-identification scale (average score of 4.2). They share similar positions on economic issues and social issues as the racial liberals but the biggest difference between the Nationalists and Racial Liberals is on the racial resentment scale, which is what we would anticipate.

The sixth and final faction is the Liberals. This faction is the second most liberal on the ideological self-identification scale (3.0) and leans left on all of the scales. However, this

group is not as left leaning as the Progressives. In general, the statistics reported in Table 2 reinforce the descriptions and labels derived from the LCA results described in Table 1.

This LCA analysis has broken down the American electorate into six factions which reveal distinct clusters of orientations and values that map well on to conventional accounts of American politics. There is a Progressive left with consistently left-leaning orientation across all dimensions and a Conservative faction with a consistently right-leaning orientation. And there are several other factions that are not simply moderate but lean conservative on some dimensions but liberal on others. This analysis demonstrates why a simple left-versus-right classification of American politics can be problematic. Note that three of the factions (Libertarians, Nationalists, and Racial Liberals) have an average ideological self-identification near the moderate position on the scale (a value of 4). But these groups are very distinct in terms of their political orientations and values and even polarized on some dimensions. Thus, it would be a mistake for analytical purposes to group these individuals together in the same category as moderates.

Demographics and Factions

Given this breakdown of the electorate into six distinct factions, we want to analyze how these factions have evolved over time in terms of their composition of the electorate, as well as how they relate to the two major political parties. However, before turning to this task, it is valuable to describe the demographic breakdown of these factions. While demographic analyses often are insufficient, many popular analyses of the American electorate focus on the levels and changes in support of demographic groups. Table 3 provides a breakdown for each faction in terms of the percent of each demographic group that constitute the faction. Note that these demographic characteristics were not used in estimating the LCA model.

The first characteristic in Table 3 is the percent of the faction that possesses a college degree. There is a large degree of variance across the factions. The Racial Liberals (20 percent) and Nationalists (21 percent) have the fewest proportion of individuals with a college degree, whereas the Progressive faction (66 percent) has the largest share of members with a college degree followed by Liberals (55 percent). The Libertarians (46 percent) and Conservatives (31 percent) are in between these other factions in terms of the percentage of individuals that possess a college degree.

We see a similar pattern with respect to income, which is not surprising given the strong correlation between income and education. Income is measured on five-point scale (1 through 5) and Table 3 show the average on the scale. The three factions with the largest share of college graduates also have the highest average incomes. One subtle difference here is that despite the large gap in college degrees between Progressives versus Libertarians and Conservatives (20 percent and 35 percent, respectively), the average incomes among the three factions are quite similar. The Liberals also have an average income that is similar to these three higher income factions.

Next, we see that right-leaning factions, particularly on economic issues, tend to be older and less female on average. Conservatives and Libertarians have lowest percentage of females and the lowest percentage of individuals under the age of 30. The Progressives and Racial Liberals factions, on the other hand, have the largest percentage of individuals under 30 and have the highest percentage of females.

With regards to race and ethnicity, there are substantial differences. First note that a majority of Blacks are classified as Racial Liberals and one-fourth are classified as Nationalists (53 percent and 26 percent, respectively). So more than three-fourths of Blacks fall into one of those two factions. Table 3 shows the percentage of each faction that is made up of members who identify as Black. More than 40 percent of the Racial Liberals are Black, and 14 percent of the Nationalists are Black. The only other faction that has more than 10 percent being Black is the Progressives. Blacks make up less than ten percent of each of the remaining factions, with only three percent of the Conservative faction identifying as Black.

Overall, Hispanics look similar to Blacks but show slightly more diversity. About 23 percent of Hispanic identifiers are classified as Racial Liberals and 35 percent are classified as Nationalists. About 10 percent of Hispanics are classified in each of the other four factions. In terms of composition of the factions reported in Table 3, Hispanics make up about one-fifth of the Nationalists and Racial Liberals (18 percent and 17 percent, respectively).

This demographic breakdown of the factions helps validate the groups we have estimated. In particular, the strong differences in education and income across factions is what we would anticipate observing. Further, the factions that are composed on the largest share of Blacks and Hispanics are moderate or liberal on the racial resentment and nativism scales, as well as being socially conservative. Overall, these demographic patterns demonstrate the classification of citizens into factions provides a valid approach to measurement.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Factions

	College	Income	Age	Female	Black	Hispanic
Progressives	0.66	3.36	0.19	0.57	0.11	0.11
Libertarians	0.46	3.33	0.13	0.48	0.02	0.07
Conservatives	0.31	3.12	0.09	0.48	0.03	0.07
Racial Liberals	0.20	2.40	0.19	0.60	0.41	0.17
Nationalists	0.21	2.66	0.15	0.59	0.14	0.18
Liberals	0.55	3.25	0.17	0.54	0.05	0.10
Total	0.36	2.98	0.15	0.54	0.12	0.12

Partisanship and Factions

A final step in validating the approach here is to examine the connection between factions and partisan identification. Note that no information regarding partisanship or attitudes

towards the parties was used in classifying individuals into factions. Table 4 reports the percentage of individuals that identify as Democrat, Independent, or Republican. Note that individuals that identify as Independent but report as closer to one of the two parties (the so-called “leaners”) are classified as Republican or Democrat in Table 4.

Table 4: Party Division by Faction

	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Progressives	90	7	3
Libertarians	29	13	57
Conservatives	14	8	78
Racial Liberals	61	15	23
Nationalists	53	15	32
Liberals	78	11	11
Total	48	12	40

Table 4 shows that Progressives and Liberals are strongly aligned with the Democratic Party, as we would expect. Approximately 90 percent of members of the Progressives and 78 percent of the Liberals identify as Democrats. Most members of the Conservative faction are likely to identify with the Republicans (78 percent).

The other three factions are more evenly divided between the parties. A majority of Nationalists and Racial Liberals identify as Democrats (53 percent and 61 percent respectively) but a significant share also identifies as Republican. Among Racial Liberals, 23 percent are Republicans and 32 percent of Nationalists are Republican identifiers. Among the Libertarians, we find a majority identify as Republicans (57 percent) but 29 percent identify as Democrats. Among those independents that do not lean towards either party, they are spread out across the 6 factions we have identified (although 70 percent are in the factions that fit the least well into the left-right divide, that is the Racial Liberal, Nationalist, and Libertarian factions).

This discussion of the partisanship, as well as the preceding discussion regarding demographics, helps validate the classification scheme we have developed. With confidence in the measurement, we can turn towards the main question motivating this analysis: how has the factional composition of the electorate and their support of the parties changed over time?

Factional Change, 1992-2024

Now that we identified the factions, we turn to assessing how these factions have changed over time. Research on polarization and conflict extension suggests that there would be a growth in the homogeneity of the factions that comprise both parties (Layman and Carsey 2002a, 2002b; Brewer 2005; Abramowitz 2018). We should see that divisions within the party become less acute over time. The increase in the electorate connecting what

ideological positions go with ‘what party’, along with the expansion of polarization in the electorate to niche issues (Hare 2022), should assist citizens in sorting themselves into the parties and adopting positions aligned with their coalition. Partisan awareness of differences between the parties (Brewer, 2005), coupled with the deep-seated calcification of partisan attachments (Sides et al., 2022; see also Mason, 2018), is the primary driver of the growing homogeneity in both parties' coalitions. Thus, we would expect that between 1992 to 2024 the Conservatives will become the largest faction in the Republican Party, and the Progressives and Liberals will become the largest groups within the Democratic Party.

However, research on parties, coalition building, and American political development suggests that the diversity of factions may still be maintained over time. Despite the growth in elite polarization and partisan awareness of interparty distinctiveness, diversity in the electorate persists (Carmines et al. 2012). There may be a change in the relative strength of different factions within the parties, but the level of heterogeneity may be unaffected. Further, research on partisan asymmetry suggests that the Republicans would be more unified and homogeneous than the Democratic Party. However, there are reasons to suspect that things may have changed. First, the events of the last decade have raised some questions regarding whether this perspective still holds. Notably, the Republican Party brand of conservatism has undergone revisions under Donald Trump (Barber and Pope 2019; Amira 2022). Also, Congressional Republicans have shown a high level of disunity in policymaking, even when they have possessed unified control of Congress (Lee 2018).

On the side of the Democratic Party, we may have also seen some important changes as well. Consider for example that when debates were swirling around whether Joe Biden should drop out of the 2024 Presidential race, given poor polling numbers and perceptions of declining health, there was concern among some Democrats that if Biden dropped out, it would launch a power struggle among competing factions that would damage the party heading into the November general election. After the disastrous debate performance by Biden against Donald Trump on June 27, 2024, some feared that “[t]hrowing open the nomination process at the convention would invite chaos and intra-party fights, forfeiting one of the party’s best opportunities to message its case against Donald Trump, and likely leaving Democrats embittered rather than united” (Prokop 2024). However, instead of devolving into a factional fight, the members of the Democratic Party quickly unified around Vice President Kamala Harris with great enthusiasm.

This Democratic unity stands in stark contrast to recent disunity that we have seen in the leadership battles within the Republican Party. The emergence of Donald Trump starting in 2015 as the Party’s standard bearer has been anything but unifying. And we have also seen Republican disunity on display in the numerous battles for control of the House Speakership. The contrast of these leadership battles within the two parties is surprising and paradoxical considering the perceived asymmetry in the cohesion of the two parties. Democrats have traditionally been described as a “big tent” of diverse interests, whereas Republicans are typically portrayed as being organized around a shared ideological vision. Thus, one might speculate that the more ideologically cohesive faction would be more

effective in uniting behind their leadership. One explanation for this paradox might be explained by the ascendance of the “insurgent faction” driven by activists in the Republican Party that is averse to compromise (Blum 2020).

This suggests that the partisan asymmetry hypothesis may need some updating, particularly given that many scholars perceive that ideological purists and activists similarly capture both parties.

In short, the polarization literature and related research should suggest that the factional diversity of the parties should be decreasing, and the partisan behavior of those factions should be increasing. A secondary expectation is that the relative heterogeneity of the two parties differs, and that those differences should persist (i.e., the Republican Party is more homogeneous). In the rest of this paper, we investigate the support for the changes in partisan factional composition over time by analyzing the prevalence of different factions in the American electorate over time (1992-2024). After identifying these changes, we examine which parties receive support from these factions and how that has changed over the last 30 years. Finally, we analyze the implications of these changes for the state of parties in the United States.

Changes in Factions, 1992-2020

Now we turn to investigating how the factions have changed over time as a share of the electorate and how attitudes and support for the parties have changed. Table 5 reports the percent of citizens in each faction for each presidential election year between 1992 and 2024. The most significant shift evident is the large increase in the size of the Progressive faction (from 3 percent to 16 percent) with a corresponding drop in the Nationalists (from 31 percent to 19 percent). The size of the Liberals has grown from 7 percent to 15 percent, whereas the Libertarians have decreased as a share of the electorate (from 21 percent to 17 percent). The size of the Conservatives and Racial Liberals factions has remained relatively similar over time. In short, the left-leaning factions have grown the most since 1992.

Table 5: Faction Percentage of the Electorate, 1992-2024

Year	Progressives	Libertarians	Conservatives	Racial Liberals	Nationalists	Liberals
1992	3	21	20	17	31	7
1996	2	22	24	16	30	6
2000	2	21	20	17	33	7
2004	5	17	20	15	34	9
2008	3	17	23	15	33	9
2012	4	26	24	15	22	9
2016	9	20	22	17	21	11
2020	16	17	19	16	16	16
2024	16	15	19	16	19	15
Total	9	19	21	16	23	11

The next question is how this relates to partisanship in the electorate. Table 6 shows the breakdown of factions by year for Democratic, Independent, and Republican identifiers. Among those who identify as Democrats, the most significant change has been the growth in the Progressive faction as a percentage. In 1992, 6 percent of Democratic identifiers were in the Progressive faction. Starting in 2016 there was a dramatic increase in the percent of Democratic identifiers that are members of the Progressive faction. And by 2020, more than 30 percent of the Democratic identifiers are Progressives. Also, the percentage of Democratic identifiers that are Liberals also increased from 11 percent in 1992 to 25 percent in 2024. This shows a significant shift in the Democratic Party: the average citizens aligning with the Democrats is now far more likely to come from a strongly left-leaning faction. In the 1990s, less than 20 percent of citizens would be classified as Liberal or Progressive. By 2024, that number had increased to 56 percent.

Table 6: Faction Percentage by Partisan Identification, 1992-2024

	Democrats					
Year	Progressives	Libertarians	Conservatives	Racial Liberals	Nationalists	Liberals
1992	6	13	12	21	36	11
1996	5	19	13	20	35	8
2000	4	16	11	23	35	10
2004	9	11	9	21	36	14
2008	6	11	11	20	37	15
2012	8	19	8	21	27	16
2016	17	13	6	23	23	19
2020	32	6	2	20	15	25
2024	31	7	1	17	18	25
Total	18	12	6	20	25	19

	Independents					
Year	Progressives	Libertarians	Conservatives	Racial Liberals	Nationalists	Liberals
1992	1	23	13	19	38	7
1996	1	17	18	20	39	5
2000	0	25	11	16	40	7
2004	4	14	19	17	43	3
2008	1	22	17	22	36	3
2012	2	29	19	17	29	5
2016	7	20	16	17	29	11
2020	10	19	10	23	19	19
2024	10	17	10	29	19	16
Total	5	22	14	20	28	11

	Republicans					
Year	Progressives	Libertarians	Conservatives	Racial Liberals	Nationalists	Liberals
1992	1	29	33	11	23	2
1996	0	27	41	9	21	2
2000	0	26	35	8	27	3
2004	1	26	32	8	29	3
2008	0	24	41	5	26	4
2012	0	32	46	7	12	1
2016	1	28	44	10	15	2
2020	1	28	41	9	15	5
2024	1	24	39	12	21	3
Total	1	28	41	9	18	3

The percentage of Democratic identifiers coming from Racial Liberals faction has remained relatively steady, whereas the number of citizens as a percentage from the Conservatives and Libertarians has dropped below to single digits. In particular, the percentage of citizens from the Conservative faction has dropped from 13 percent in 1992 to 1 percent by 2024.

In stark contrast to the Democratic Party, the factional composition of the Republican Party has remained relatively stable. Conservatives remain the largest faction throughout the period and increased somewhat from 33 percent in 1992 to 39 percent in 2024. Progressives and Liberals are essentially non-existent throughout the period, whereas Libertarians have remained a stable and sizeable proportion of the Republican Party identifiers (about one-fourth of the total). Racial Liberals are about 10 percent of Republican identifiers. Nationalists as a proportion of the Republican Party have fluctuated between 1992 and 2024 but by 2024 the percentage was about one one-fifth and near the average.

Finally, while a much smaller percentage of the total electorate, the independents are a reflection of the factions we have identified. In fact, if you examine the changes in the independents over time, you will see that the changes reflect the broader changes in the electorate. For example, the percentage of the total electorate that is Progressive or Liberal increased between 1992 and 2024. We see an increase among independents among those associated with the Progressive and Liberal factions in proportion to the broader changes in the electorate.

The data reported in Table 6 show several important things related to our earlier expectations. First, the Republican Party has not become more homogenous over time as theories of conflict extension and realignment might suggest. The Conservative faction is still the largest, but it is far from a majority of the party's identifiers. But combined with the Libertarians and Nationalists, these three factions dominate the Republican Party identifiers (approximating 85 percent of all identifiers). In short, the composition of the Republican Party has remained relatively stable over this period.

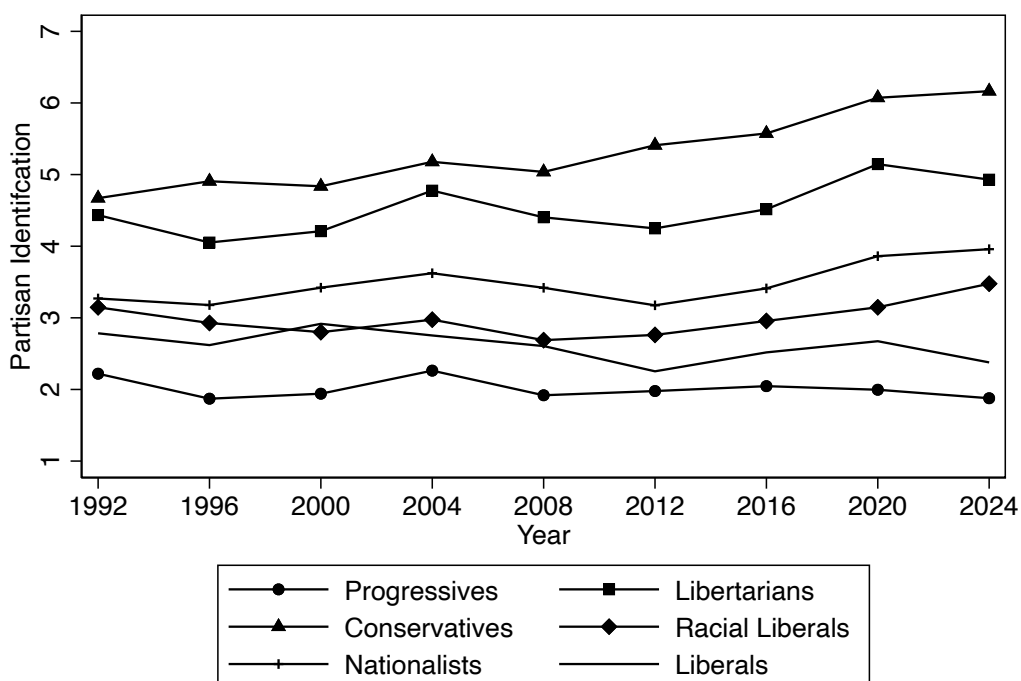
The composition of the Democratic Party, on the other hand, has changed significantly. In 1992, 57 percent of the party could be classified as either Racial Liberals or Nationalists, whereas Progressives and Liberals were the smallest factions with the Democratic coalition given their small size in the electorate. However, by 2024 the Progressive and Liberal factions were the largest among the Democratic identifiers. Now those two groups make up 56 percent of the total number of identifiers. The Racial Liberals and Nationalists make up the other significant part of the Democratic identifiers (35 percent in total split evenly between the two factions). In short, the Democratic Party has become more strongly dominated by left-wing identifiers and has become more homogenous. This suggests the partisan asymmetry hypothesis needs revision considering these recent changes in the composition of the two parties. The Republican and Democratic parties look relatively similar to each other in terms of the level of ideological cohesion.

Partisanship, Attitudes, and Voting Among Factions

The previous breakdown has shown that the base of the Democratic Party has undergone a significant change. Identifiers with the Democratic Party are much more likely to be left leaning now. How has this translated to voting and attitudes towards the parties? Here we examine the strength of partisan identification, voting in presidential elections, and feeling thermometers towards the two parties.

Figure 1 shows the average partisan identification on the seven-point ANES scale over time for each of the six factions. Progressives and Liberals have remained strongly Democratic over this period. The other four factions have become more Republican, and the Conservative and Libertarian factions are the strongest identifiers with the Republican Party. While the Nationalists and Racial Liberals have become more Republican, they remain relatively divided between the Democratic and Republican parties.

Figure 1: Partisan Identification by Faction, 1992-2024

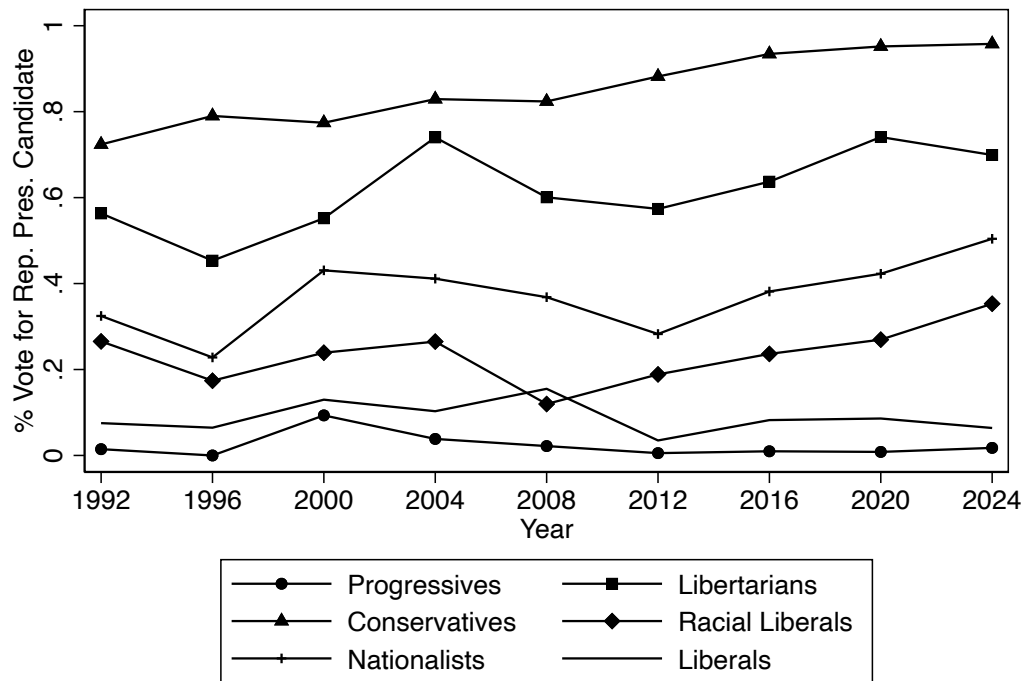


Source: ANES 1992-2024

Figure 2 shows the likelihood of voting for the Republican presidential candidate for each faction. The pattern is similar to the pattern for partisan identification. Progressives and Liberals have remained highly supportive of the Democratic presidential candidate. There was a small increase in support for George W. Bush in 2000 but generally these two factions have been overwhelming supportive of the Democratic candidate. The other four factions have become more supportive of the Republican presidential candidate, particularly since 2012. Thus, as the Democratic Party has been more Progressive, citizens

in other factions have become more supportive of the Republican Party. Nationalists and Racial Liberals still are more likely to vote for the Democrat, but that margin has decreased significantly.

Figure 2: Voting for Republican Presidential Candidates by Faction, 1992-2024



Source: ANES 1992-2024

Finally, we examine the link between the factions and attitudes towards the parties over time by analyzing the feeling thermometer scores for each party. Figure 3 shows the average feeling thermometer towards the Republican Party, and Figure 4 shows the average feeling thermometer towards the Democratic Party for each faction. The first observation from both figures is the general polarization in attitudes towards the parties. The second observation is the extent of negative partisanship. The most significant changes are the increasingly cold feelings towards the Democrats from the Conservatives and Libertarians, and the increasingly cold feelings towards the Republicans from the Liberals and Progressives.

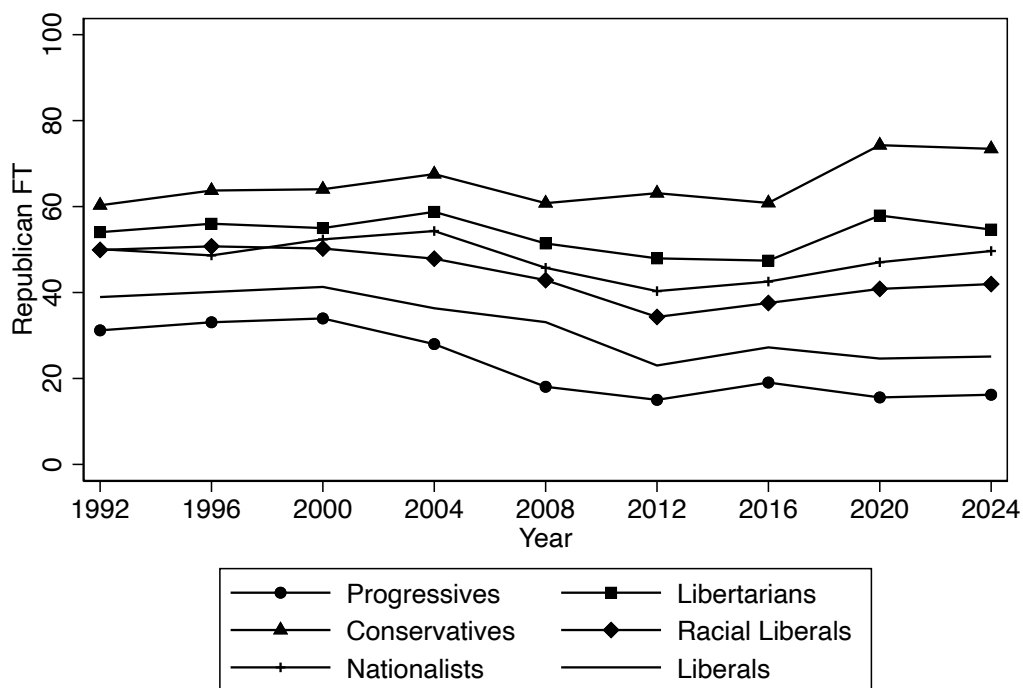
As we would anticipate, Progressives and Liberals are the warmest towards the Democratic Party and the coldest towards the Republican Party. The Conservative and Libertarian factions are the warmest towards the Republican Party, whereas those factions are the coldest towards the Democratic Party.

The feelings towards the Republican Party have decreased over time for members of the Progressive and Liberal factions, whereas there has been a small increase among the other four factions since 2012. Feelings towards the Democratic Party have decreased more significantly. The average score for members of the Conservative and Libertarian factions

have decreased by about 20 points between 1992 and 2024. Scores for members of the Nationalist and Religious Moderate factions have also decreased by about 10 points over this same period. Feelings towards the Democratic Party for the Progressive and New Deal Liberal factions have remained relatively constant. The interesting observation regarding the Racial Liberals and Nationalists are that since 2012 these groups have become slightly more favorable towards the Republican Party but slightly cooler towards the Democratic Party.

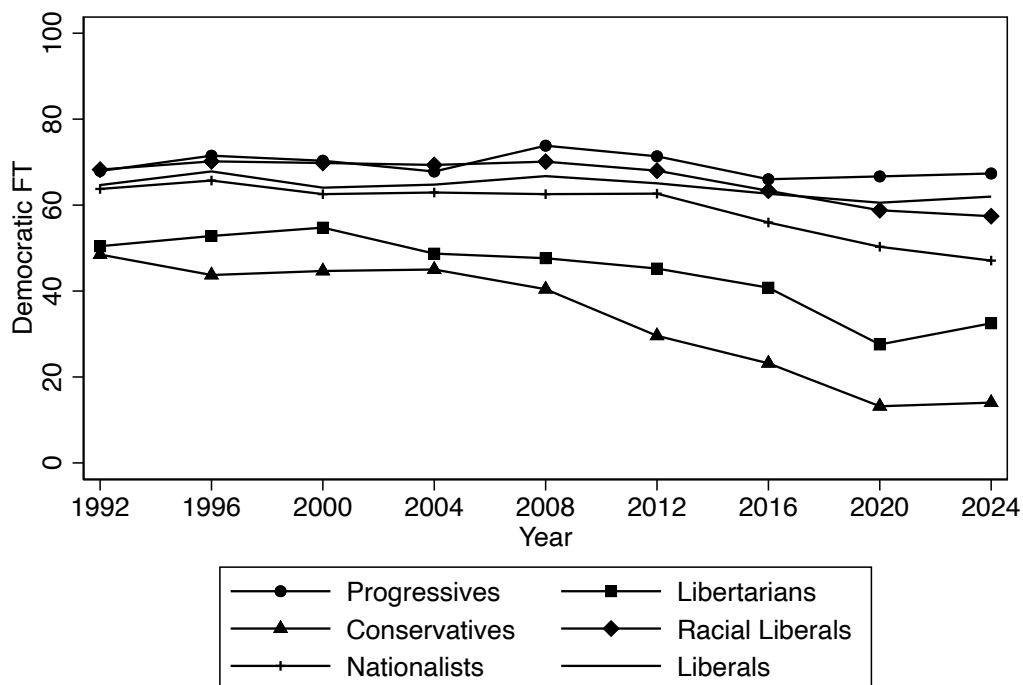
Collectively, these results clearly show that Democratic Party has solidified its support among members of the Progressive and Liberal factions but has lost support from members of the other factions. The Republicans have gained support not surprisingly among Conservatives and to a lesser extent from Libertarians since 1992. And since 2012, it appears that the Nationalists and Religious Liberals have become marginally more supportive of Republicans.

Figure 3: Feeling Thermometer towards the Republican Party



Source: ANES 1992-2024

Figure 4: Feeling Thermometer towards the Democratic Party



Source: ANES 1992-2024

Discussion

In this paper, we have conducted an exploratory analysis of factions in the American electorate since the end of the Cold War. We have identified six distinct factions and examined how their sizes have changed relative to one another. The most notable change has been the increase in the size of the Progressive and Liberal factions, whereas the Nationalist faction has decreased as a proportion of the electorate.

The Progressive and Liberal factions have evolved from being a small component of the overall Democratic Party base in the electorate to becoming the dominant factions in the party. This finding, along with the fact that the Republican Party is dominated by the Conservative faction, clearly illustrates the ideological polarization of the two parties. This also suggests that both parties are now less asymmetrical than in the past; the Democratic Party now has a more cohesive base in the electorate than it has had in the past. Both parties now seem to be on equal footing in terms of having a core ideological faction that is the base of their respective parties.

However, these factions, which form a significant part of the parties' bases, are not large enough for the parties to consistently win elections. Both parties need to build broader coalitions, which requires gaining support from other factions that do not share all the same attitudes and beliefs. And the analysis shows that these other four factions are less committed to either party. This analysis reveals why the parties are polarized yet unable to

form a durable, winning coalition in the twenty-first century. Particularly, the findings of this analysis present real warning signs for the Democratic Party's electoral viability. While the base of the Democratic Party has consolidated, all other factions in the electorate have become more Republican.

It is also worth noting that while polarization has increased between the parties, the parties are not necessarily becoming more homogenous ideologically. The Republican Party has remained relatively stable over this period, with the Conservatives and Libertarians being the biggest factions. The Democratic Party has undergone much more significant change, but it remains a diverse coalition. The Democratic Party is more cohesive now and is on par with the Republican Party. The asymmetry in the ideological consistency between the two parties has been dramatically diminished.

The LCA approach adopted here has enabled us to move beyond considering dimensions of conflict and focusing on electoral coalitions. Furthermore, the LCA approach is constructive if we believe that there may be significant asymmetries between the two political parties. A standard factor analytic, "variable-centered" approach implicitly assumes that the same set of factors would be relevant for individuals who identify with either party. The "person-centered" approach of LCA, which groups individuals based on the similarity of their attitudes, reframes political competition in terms of building coalitions of diverse citizens rather than choosing the right position on a specific dimension or issue. This approach, which centers on factions, may help us better understand partisan change and intraparty dynamics.

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