Alternative Hypotheses and Analyses

A companion to "Polarization and Its Discontents": every explanation the drafts considered, the evidence for and against each, and what this project's data can add

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Summary. The essay argues for one account of American polarization: a half-century realignment in which race, religion, education and place came to line up behind the two parties, led by elites and compressed by a two-party system, and now sustained by safe seats and factional politics. Six earlier drafts, kept in the project's `archive/` folder, weighed far more explanations than the essay could discuss. This paper sets all of them out. For each, it states the claim in its strongest form, collects the evidence for and against it, adds what this project's data can test, and gives a verdict on a five-point scale. It applies the same standard to the essay's own account, as the pre-publication review asked. Six findings stand out. No media explanation can be the *origin* of trends that began in the 1970s, but media effects are real, and the newest experiments show that what a feed displays can move partisan animosity a little. Inequality and House polarization move together in the United States even in two-year changes, yet across twelve democracies rising inequality goes with *less* rising hostility. The two-axis "rotation" at the heart of two drafts is measurable but smaller than claimed: about 19 degrees in the General Social Survey, not 45. Elite polarization is the strongest cross-national correlate of mass hostility, but the association rests on ten countries and sparse data. Institutional explanations describe features that barely changed, so they can explain America's level of hostility better than its timing. And the self-sustaining "polarization trap" is plausible and partly measured but has not been tested as a whole. Appendix A lists every source the drafts cite, with what was checked; Appendix B lists the drafts' claims that turned out to be wrong.

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1. Purpose and method

1.1 What the archive contains

The archive holds one Word document (with a PDF copy) of seven pieces, dated October 27 to 30, 2026, where they carry a date at all. The essay merged and rewrote them. Table 1 lists them in the order they appear; the codes D1–D6 and N7 are used throughout.

Table 1 — The archived drafts.

Code	Title	Date	Thesis in one line
D1	The Architecture of Division: An Empirical Analysis of the Drivers of Political Polarization in the United States and Globally	Oct. 30	A literature review of four hypotheses (cable news, social media, economic shocks, social sorting and institutions), placed in comparative perspective; concludes for an "interactive model"
D2	The Great Rotation	Oct. 29	Political disagreement has two independent axes; between 1964 and 2000 the line between the parties turned onto the diagonal, stacking every quarrel into one
D3	The Great Alignment: How America Turned Two-Dimensional Politics Into a Tribal War	undated	The same two-axis argument, with more on how institutions amplify the alignment and how conflict becomes a winning strategy
D4	Causes of Polarization, Consequences and Sustenance via Extreme Politics	Oct. 27	Shared global shocks supply the fuel, American institutions the spark, and extreme politics keeps the fire going; falling trust in "the people" is partly a verdict on the candidates they elect
D5	Don't Blame the Social Media: How America's Political Machinery Makes Division Pay	Oct. 27	A longer, more hedged version of D4, centered on the candidate "menu" and polarization as a political business model
D6	Don't Blame the Social Media	Oct. 27	A shorter, tighter version of D4 and D5
N7	(untitled note on the two-axis chart)	undated	Psychological grounding for two axes, the congressional evidence for the rotation and Drutman's 2016 quadrant shares

Together they cite 126 distinct links, just over 100 distinct works once duplicate links to the same work are merged, and name a few more ideas without a source. Thirty-four of the links already appear in the essay or its Methods appendix. The rest had not been checked against their sources, and the project's experience with rewritten drafts (swapped numbers, overstated findings, invented citation details) argued for checking them all. Each was checked against the original source where it could be reached: the paper or book, its publisher's page, the Crossref

record of its DOI, or the organization's own release. Appendix A records the outcome for every source.

1.2 The standard of evidence

The essay judges explanations by three tests. Its review argued that each test is weaker than the essay sometimes implied, and this paper uses them in the narrower form the review recommended.

1. **Timing.** A cause cannot follow its effect. If a trend was well under way before a candidate cause appeared, the candidate cannot be its origin. Timing cannot say how much of the *later* change the candidate caused, and a milestone such as "half of adults use social media" is not the date exposure began.
2. **Causal identification.** Randomized experiments and natural experiments can isolate an effect from self-selection. Most of them run for weeks or months and measure a few outcomes, so a null result bounds a short-run effect on those outcomes, not a long-run effect on others.
3. **Cross-national fit.** If a force struck every rich democracy but hostility rose in only some of them, a version of the explanation in which the force has the same effect everywhere is ruled out. A version in which its effect depends on local conditions is not. With ten to twelve countries, correlations across countries are suggestive at best.

This paper adds a fourth test that the drafts often skipped:

4. **Outcome match.** "Polarization" names at least four outcomes: issue disagreement, partisan sorting, mutual hostility and the distance between the parties in Congress. The drafts also discuss a fifth, falling trust. Evidence that a factor moved vote shares, or moved Congress, is not evidence that it moved hostility between voters. Each hypothesis is assessed against the outcome it claims to explain.

Each hypothesis receives one verdict from Table 2. A verdict summarizes the evidence assembled here; it is a judgment, not a test statistic.

Table 2 — Verdict scale.

Verdict	Meaning
Not the origin	The candidate arrived after the trend it is meant to explain was under way. It may still have accelerated the trend.
Identified contributor	Experimental or quasi-experimental evidence shows an effect on a polarization outcome, though not necessarily a large one, nor on every outcome the drafts claimed.
Consistent, not identified	Fits the timing and the comparative pattern, but no design isolates its effect.
Weak or contrary	The predicted pattern is absent, or the evidence points the other way.
Untested	No evidence in hand bears on it either way.

Where this project's own data bear on a hypothesis, the analysis is either one already documented in the Methods and Data appendix or one of six new checks computed for this paper by `code/alternatives.py` (Appendix C). New checks are marked "computed for this paper." Everything else is quoted from the cited study.

2. What is being explained

All seven pieces start from the same distinction. *Ideological* polarization is disagreement over policy; *affective* polarization is partisans' dislike and distrust of the other side; *elite* polarization is the distance between the parties in Congress. D1 roots the second in social identity theory, Henri Tajfel and John Turner's 1979 account of intergroup conflict (the link is a 2004 reprint), in which group membership alone breeds in-group favoritism. Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood and Yphtach Lelkes applied it to party, and later reviews by Iyengar and colleagues and by Eli Finkel and colleagues, who call the result "political sectarianism," summarize the evidence. The essay adds *sorting*, the alignment of party with ideology and social identity, and treats trust as a consequence. Table 3 restates where each outcome stands, so that later sections can say which outcome a hypothesis explains.

Table 3 — The outcomes, and how far each moved.

Outcome	Measure	Change	Source
Affective polarization	ANES thermometer: own party minus other party	27 points (1978) to 56 (2020); 98% of the rise from colder ratings of the other party (47 to 19)	Computed in the essay (Fig. 1)
Issue polarization	Pew's ten political values items	Average partisan gap 15 points (1994) to 36 (2017); Democrats saying immigrants strengthen the country, 32% to 84%	Pew, 2017
Ideological consistency	Pew scale of consistently liberal or conservative views	10% of adults (1994) to 21% (2014); the median Republican more conservative than 94% of Democrats (70% in 1994), the median Democrat more liberal than 92% of Republicans (64%)	Pew, 2014; Pew, "7 things"
Self-placement	GSS: moderate; extremely liberal or conservative	Moderates 40% (1974) to 37% (2024); extremes 4% to 10%	Computed in the essay (Fig. 4)
Sorting	GSS correlation of party with ideology	0.17 (1974) to 0.63 (2024)	Computed in the essay (Fig. 4)
Elite polarization	Distance between House party means, DW-NOMINATE	0.57 (1977) to 0.91 (2025); no overlap since 2001–02	Computed in the essay (Fig. 3)
Trust in government	Pew compilation	77% (1964) to 17% (2025)	Pew
Trust in the people's judgment	Gallup	86% (1976) to 51% (2026)	Gallup topline

Two points from this table recur below. First, the outcomes moved at different speeds and from different starting dates, so an explanation can fit one and fail another. Second, the classic dispute between Morris Fiorina and colleagues, who called mass polarization largely a myth, and Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders, who disagreed, is partly a dispute over which row one reads. Self-placement barely moved; sorting, issue gaps and hostility moved a great deal. As the review notes, stable self-labels do not prove that policy views stayed put, because the meaning of "moderate" can drift.

A detail worth recording: D1's thermometer figures come from Finkel and colleagues, who report warmth toward the other party falling from 48 degrees in the 1970s to about 20 "today,"

with own-party warmth "in the 70° to 75° range"; their 2020 point is not from the ANES. In the project's ANES series, partisans *including* independents who lean to a party rate the other party 48 in 1978 and 20 in 2020, with own-party warmth near 71. Excluding leaners, as the essay does, gives 47 and 19, with own-party warmth near 75. Both versions put 98% of the widening on the out-party side.

3. Media and technology

3.1 Partisan cable news and the end of the broadcast era (D1, D4, D5, D6)

Claim. The move from three broadcast networks to fragmented cable, and above all the arrival of Fox News in 1996 and a repositioned MSNBC in the mid-2000s, broke up a shared national public and pushed viewers apart.

Mechanisms the drafts considered. Four distinct channels appear:

- *Persuasion.* Exploiting Fox's staggered entry into 9,256 towns' cable systems, Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan found Republican presidential vote shares 0.4 to 0.7 points higher where Fox was carried in 2000, and estimated that Fox convinced 3% to 28% of its viewers to vote Republican, depending on the audience measure. Using channel position as an instrument, Gregory Martin and Ali Yurukoglu estimate that Fox increased Republican vote shares by 0.3 points among viewers induced to watch 2.5 more minutes a week, and their model implies that without Fox the Republican presidential vote share would have been 0.46 points lower in 2000, 3.59 in 2004 and 6.34 in 2008, as Isabel Sawhill and Eleanor Krause summarize. More recent estimates by Elliott Ash and colleagues put the effect at half a point or more in recent elections.
- *Selective exit.* In Markus Prior's account, broadcast television made the politically uninterested watch the news because little else was on. Cable, and later the internet, let them leave for entertainment while the interested consumed more news, so the less partisan voted less and elections became more partisan. The mechanism changes who votes, not what voters believe.
- *Reinforcement and spillover.* Matthew Levendusky finds that partisan media mainly push the already committed further out. Viewers then pass the message on, a modern version of the "two-step flow" that Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld described in 1955; James Druckman, Levendusky and Audrey McLain show experimentally that partisan-media effects reach people who discuss politics with viewers.
- *Effects on elites.* Joshua Clinton and Ted Enamorado find that House members whose districts got Fox became less supportive of President Clinton.

Evidence against. The audience is small: in record-setting 2020, Fox News, CNN and MSNBC together averaged about 6.5 million prime-time viewers, roughly 2% of Americans, and between 3.5 and 4.2 million in 2016–19 (Pew Research Center). Spillover through conversation is the

drafts' answer, and it is plausible, but it has been shown experimentally rather than measured nationally. Andrew Gelman questions the extrapolation behind the 6.3-point figure. Martin and Yurukoglu themselves find that cable can account for the public's modest rise in ideological polarization but not for the far faster divergence of Congress.

What this project adds. 55% of the House's widening between 1977 and 2025 had occurred before Fox launched (computed in the essay from Voteview). Across eleven democracies, growth in the number of private 24-hour news channels correlates +0.35 with the trend in partisan hostility, with a 95% interval from −0.32 to +0.78; the United States has the second-largest increase in channels.

Verdict. *Identified contributor* to Republican vote shares and to some congressional behavior; *not the origin* of elite polarization; *untested* as a cause of mass hostility, because none of the natural experiments measures affective polarization. The test that would settle the last point is a cable-rollout design with feeling thermometers as the outcome.

3.2 Social media and algorithms (all drafts)

The drafts' central target is economist Noah Smith's line that "social media really messes with liberal democracy." They treat it as one hypothesis, but it bundles at least six claims with different evidence.

(a) Echo chambers and filter bubbles. Cass Sunstein and Eli Pariser argued that personalized media wall users off from opposing views. The evidence contradicts the premise more than the conclusion. Reducing Facebook users' exposure to like-minded sources for three months in 2020 left their polarization unchanged (Brendan Nyhan and colleagues). Paying partisans to follow a Twitter bot that retweeted the other side for a month made Republicans substantially *more* conservative, while Democrats became slightly more liberal, not significantly (Christopher Bail and colleagues). Petter Törnberg's simulation model proposes the mirror image of the echo chamber: "it is not isolation from opposing views that drives polarization but precisely the fact that digital media bring us to interact outside our local bubble," merging cross-cutting local identities into two national "megaparties." That is a model, not a measurement.

(b) Engagement-ranked feeds that reward outrage. Out-group language is the strongest predictor of sharing: in 2.7 million posts studied by Steve Rathje and colleagues, each word about the political out-group raised the odds of a share by about 67%. Whether the ranking algorithm turns that into hostility is the experimental question. Switching Facebook and Instagram users to chronological feeds for three months in 2020 cut time on the platforms, reduced uncivil content on Facebook and raised exposure to political and untrustworthy content, but did not significantly change affective or issue polarization (Andrew Guess and colleagues). Switching on X's ranking algorithm shifted users' political attitudes within weeks while leaving partisan dislike unchanged (Germain Gauthier and colleagues). Two newer studies, which the drafts did not

have, find small positive effects on the affective outcome itself. In a preregistered experiment with 1,256 participants, reranking X feeds for ten days to show more or less content expressing partisan animosity and antidemocratic attitudes shifted out-party animosity by more than two points on a 100-point thermometer (Tiziano Piccardi and colleagues). And in a six-month test of five alternative rankers with 9,386 users of Facebook, Reddit and X, still a preprint, Jonathan Stray and colleagues report a reduction of about 0.03 standard deviations in a preregistered affective-polarization index and of 1.5 points in the thermometer gap. The direction of feed effects is therefore not in doubt for content that expresses hostility; their size is small.

(**c**) **Quitting the platform.** Paying users to deactivate Facebook for four weeks before the 2018 midterms reduced an index of political polarization by 0.16 standard deviations, driven by issue views and exposure to congenial news; dislike of the other party fell by 0.06 standard deviations, not significantly (Hunt Allcott and colleagues, 2020). D1's comparison, that this is about 42% of the rise in American polarization over the previous two decades, is the authors' own, but it compares the effect with the rise in a different index. The larger 2020 study enrolled 19,857 Facebook and 15,585 Instagram users; 27% were assigned to deactivate for the six weeks before the election and the rest for one week. The effects on affective polarization were -0.031 standard deviations for Facebook ($p = 0.049$, but $q = 0.19$ after the study's preregistered adjustment for multiple outcomes) and -0.030 for Instagram ($p = 0.074$), which the authors describe as "precisely estimated and close to zero" (Allcott and colleagues, 2024).

(**d**) **Perception distortion.** Partisans estimate that about 55% of the other side holds extreme views when about 30% do, and the gap is three and a half times wider among people who follow the news most of the time (28 points) than among those who hardly follow it (8 points) (More in Common). Americans also overestimate the share of party-stereotypical groups in the other party by about 342% on average (Douglas Ahler and Gaurav Sood). The same report gives a first clue to the sources. The 26% who had shared political content on social media in the past year had an average gap of 29 points, against 18 for those who had not; with demographic and ideological controls, regular audiences of Fox News (+4 points), of left-leaning sites such as Slate and the Huffington Post (+8), of talk radio (+9) and of Breitbart and the Drudge Report (+11 each) had larger gaps than non-audiences. These are associations from one 2018 survey, and they implicate partisan media of every kind, not only social media.

(**e**) **Candidate supply.** D4, D5 and D6 concede Smith's point in one form: platforms let candidates bypass party committees, donors and the press, raise small-dollar money and reach primary voters directly. The drafts illustrate it with Trump's use of Twitter in 2016, Sanders's small-dollar network and Ocasio-Cortez's rise on Instagram. No study in the drafts tests it, and D5 says so.

(**f**) **Closed messaging.** D1 notes that in Brazil, misinformation spread across public political WhatsApp groups and from them to other platforms (Gustavo Resende and colleagues). What-

sApp has no ranking feed, so the case is a caution against blaming ranking algorithms specifically: virality does not need one. (The paper documents the spread; the point about ranking is D1's inference.)

What this project adds. Three descriptive patterns, each with the caveat the review attached. Between 1996 and 2016 the GSS correlation between party and ideology rose by 0.21 among Americans 65 and older and by 0.14 among those 18 to 39, the same direction as Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro's finding that their index of eight polarization measures rose 0.47 among the oldest and 0.23 among the youngest. In the 2024 Cooperative Election Study, 92% of 18- to 29-year-olds used social media the day before against 69% of those 65 and older, yet 79% of the oldest partisans were ideologically consistent on both axes against 67% of the youngest. And across twelve democracies, faster internet growth went with *less* growth in hostility ($r = -0.48$, interval -0.83 to $+0.12$). Age comparisons mix cohort, life cycle and spillover, so they cannot falsify a media mechanism, and an interval that includes zero is not evidence that the internet works in the opposite direction. A fourth pattern comes from the project's separate CES modeling analysis (`src/`, `outputs/`): among 39 blocks of survey questions, a respondent's social media use and political posting alone account for about 0.2% of the variation in seven-point party identification, against 18% for the television networks they watch. This shows that social media use is not sorted by party the way cable viewing is; it does not show that social media fails to intensify partisanship, which that model does not measure.

Verdict. *Not the origin* of sorting, elite polarization or the rise in hostility, all of which were under way before 2004. *Identified contributor*, small and short-run, for content that expresses hostility (b). *Weak or contrary* for the echo-chamber mechanism (a) and for deactivation as a cure for hostility (c). *Consistent, not identified* for perception distortion (d). *Untested* for candidate supply (e), the channel the drafts considered most important. The test that would move these verdicts is a long-horizon feed experiment, or a natural experiment in platform access, measured against the affective outcome.

3.3 Foreign influence operations (D4, D5, D6)

Claim. Russian and other foreign campaigns inflamed American divisions.

Evidence. The intent is documented. The Senate Intelligence Committee reports that as many as 126 million Americans came into contact with Internet Research Agency content on Facebook between 2015 and 2017. Its main focus was socially divisive issues such as race, immigration and gun rights, with race the preferred target, though its electoral content was "almost invariably supportive" of Trump. In 2024 the Justice Department indicted two RT employees for covertly routing nearly $10 million to a Tennessee company that produced viral videos (NPR). The measured effect is close to zero: in 2016, 1% of Twitter users accounted for 70% of exposures to Russian accounts, mostly strongly identified Republicans, and exposure showed no measur-

able relationship with changes in attitudes, polarization or vote choice (Gregory Eady and colleagues). A study of the same agency's Twitter accounts a year later, by Bail and colleagues, likewise found no significant effects of interaction with them on political attitudes or behavior. The agency's American operation was under way by 2014, decades after hostility started rising. Foreign campaigns may matter more in small, low-trust electorates: Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the first round of its November 2024 presidential election after declassified intelligence documents alleged a coordinated, paid TikTok campaign promoting Călin Georgescu (OCCRP).

Verdict. *Not the origin*; *weak or contrary* as a contributor in the United States on present evidence; a plausible risk elsewhere.

4. Economic explanations

4.1 Rising inequality: the "dance of ideology and unequal riches" (D1, D4)

Claim. Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal documented that congressional polarization and income inequality moved together over the twentieth century: both were low from the 1940s to the 1970s and rose together afterward, as the parties diverged over redistribution.

What this project adds (computed for this paper). The pre-tax income share of the top 1% in the World Inequality Database bottomed out at 10.4% in 1978 and reached 20.7% in 2024. Two upward-trending series will correlate in levels whatever their relation, so Table 4 also correlates their two-year changes, which removes the shared trend.

Table 4 — Inequality and the distance between the House parties, by Congress.

Inequality measure	Years	Correlation of levels	Correlation of two-year changes	Inequality change leads by one Congress
Top 1% share (WID)	1913–2023	+0.48	+0.25 (p = 0.07)	+0.07
Top 1% share (WID)	1947–2023	+0.83	+0.47 (p = 0.003)	—
Household Gini (FRED)	1947–2025	+0.97	+0.25 (p = 0.13)	+0.31 (p = 0.06)

Notes: Each observation is a Congress, matched to the inequality value in its first year; n = 38 to 56. Changes are between consecutive Congresses. Computed for this paper.

The co-movement survives the removal of the common trend after 1947: Congresses in which the top 1% share rose faster were, on average, Congresses in which the parties pulled further apart. Neither series consistently moves first, so the data do not say which way any influence runs, and a third factor (the realignment of the South, for one) could drive both.

Evidence against. Across twelve democracies the trend in inequality correlates *negatively* with the trend in partisan hostility ($r = -0.52$, interval -0.84 to $+0.08$). Sweden had the fastest rise in inequality of the twelve and one of the steepest falls in hostility. Two outcomes are being compared here, though: McCarty and colleagues explain the distance between legislators, while the cross-national data measure mass hostility.

Verdict. *Consistent, not identified* as a driver of elite polarization in the United States; *weak or contrary* as a general driver of mass hostility across democracies.

4.2 Trade shocks and deindustrialization (D1, D4, D5, D6)

Claim. The surge of Chinese imports after 2000 hollowed out industrial communities and their moderate representatives.

Evidence. This is among the best-identified economic results. Districts more exposed to import competition "disproportionately removed moderate representatives," with the direction set by local demography: majority-white districts swung to conservative Republicans and majority-minority districts to liberal Democrats (David Autor, David Dorn, Gordon Hanson and Kaveh Majlesi). Manufacturing layoffs among white workers raised Trump's 2016 vote while layoffs among nonwhite workers lowered it (Leonardo Baccini and Stephen Weymouth), and in Western Europe the same shock lifted nationalist and radical-right parties (Italo Colantone and Piero Stanig).

Evidence against. Timing: the China shock began after 2000, when most of the congressional divergence had already happened. Cross-national fit: the trend in trade's share of GDP is unrelated to the trend in hostility ($r = -0.07$).

Verdict. *Identified contributor* to the replacement of moderates after 2000, acting through existing racial and partisan divisions; *not the origin* of the long-run trend. The essay calls such shocks "triggers, not engines," which fits.

4.3 Financial crises and the failure of elites (D4, D5, D6)

Claim. After the Iraq War and the 2008 crash, the implicit bargain in which citizens deferred to a governing class that delivered stability broke down, and voters turned to insurgents.

Evidence. In 20 advanced economies and more than 800 elections since 1870, far-right vote shares rose by about 30% in relative terms in the five years after a systemic financial crisis, an effect that ordinary recessions and nonfinancial shocks do not produce and that fades within about a decade (Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick and Christoph Trebesch). After 2008, rising unemployment in European regions went with rising support for populist and anti-establishment parties and falling trust in national and European political institutions (Yann Algan and colleagues). In 30 OECD countries surveyed in late 2023, only 39% of people had high or moderately high trust in their national government, and 44% had low or no trust

(OECD). In Gallup's data, trust in politicians fell from 66% to 49% between 2008 and 2009, the largest one-year fall in the series. Yotam Margalit cautions that economic insecurity can tip close elections while explaining a small share of the populist vote.

Evidence against. Crises raise support for insurgent parties; they are less clearly linked to *mutual* hostility. And American hostility was rising for three decades before 2008.

Verdict. *Identified contributor* to anti-establishment voting and to the fall in trust after 2008; *not the origin* of affective polarization. The Iraq War appears in the drafts only as an example; no source was cited for its effect.

4.4 A note on "economic anxiety"

The drafts move between material explanations (lost jobs and income) and status explanations (lost dignity and recognition). The project's CES modeling analysis gives one descriptive clue: in 2024, family income alone accounts for about 0.6% of the variation in party identification, union membership about 0.6% and financial precarity about 0.3%, while *perceptions* of the economy account for 35%. Perceptions of the economy are themselves shaped by party, so the large figure says more about partisan perception than about economic cause. The weak link between income and party is what the "Brahmin left, merchant right" realignment (Section 5.1) would predict.

5. Social and demographic sorting

5.1 The education realignment (D2, D4, D5, D6)

Claim. Across Western democracies, parties of the left moved from representing less-educated workers to representing graduates, while high earners stayed on the right. Amory Gethin, Clara Martínez-Toledano and Thomas Piketty call the result the "Brahmin left" and the "merchant right." Politics moved from bargaining over money, which can be split, to conflict over status and culture, which cannot.

Evidence. In the GSS, partisans without a four-year degree were 11 points *less* Republican than graduates in the 1970s and 14 points *more* Republican in 2021–24, 19 points among white partisans (computed in the essay). The reversal accelerated after 2012. Hanspeter Kriesi and colleagues and Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks describe the same shift in Europe as a cleavage between integration and demarcation.

Evidence against as a full explanation. The realignment is international; the American rise in hostility is not. And most of the American education reversal came after 2012, by which time about 70% of the 1978–2020 rise in the thermometer gap had already occurred (computed for this paper from the ANES series).

Verdict. *Consistent, not identified*: a real realignment and one strand of the sorting the essay describes, but not by itself an explanation of why hostility rose faster in the United States.

5.2 Immigration and cultural backlash (D4, D5, D6)

Claim. Rapid immigration, secularization and changing gender norms provoked what Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart call a cultural backlash among older, more traditional voters, a reversal of the "silent revolution" in values that they trace in an earlier article.

Evidence. The best-identified result comes from Denmark, which assigned refugees to municipalities quasi-randomly: larger refugee allocations raised support for anti-immigration parties in all but the most urban municipalities, where they had, "if anything," the opposite effect (Christian Dustmann, Kristine Vasiljeva and Anna Piil Damm). A survey of 9,105 adults in Chile, France, Italy, Romania and Britain found that economic distress and cultural backlash both predict populist attitudes and are not mutually exclusive. Radical-right parties grew across Europe: the Sweden Democrats went from 5.7% of the vote in 2010 to 20.5% in 2022 (International IDEA), and the Alternative for Germany rose after the 2015 refugee wave.

Evidence against. Those insurgencies rose in countries where mutual hostility *fell*. Sweden's hostility fell by about 3 thermometer points a decade and Germany's by 3.7, the steepest decline of the twelve (computed in the essay). Across the twelve, the trend in the foreign-born share is unrelated to the trend in hostility ($r = 0.00$). The growth of the nonwhite share has the second-strongest association ($r = +0.59$, interval -0.02 to $+0.88$, $n = 11$), but it does not survive adjustment for multiple tests and falls to $+0.46$ without the United States.

Verdict. *Identified contributor* to radical-right voting; *weak or contrary* as an explanation of rising mutual hostility. The nonwhite-share association, which would fit a racial-threat reading, is *consistent, not identified*.

5.3 The racial realignment, or "great alignment" (D1, D2, D4, D5, D6)

Claim. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, racially conservative white Southerners left the Democratic Party, the parties sorted by race, and later religious, ideological and geographic sorting followed the same line. Abramowitz calls the result *The Great Alignment*; Edward Carmines and James Stimson described its first phase as an "issue evolution."

Evidence. Defection among racially conservative whites explains the entire decline in white Southern Democratic identification from 1958 to 1980 (Ilyana Kuziemko and Ebonya Washington). In the GSS the Republican-share gap between white and nonwhite partisans widened from 25 points in the 1970s to 35 in the 1990s and has stayed near 34. In Congress, Southern Democrats sat between the parties until the 1970s and are now slightly to the left of Northern Democrats (computed in the essay).

Verdict. *Identified contributor* to the realignment of the South; the race gap opened first and has been stable since the 1990s, so it cannot by itself explain the later rise in hostility. The drafts' fuller claim, that race was the axis two parties could not absorb, is *consistent, not identified*.

5.4 Religious sorting (D2, N7)

Claim. Beginning with Reagan's 1980 campaign, Republicans allied with newly mobilized conservative evangelicals, and moral issues that had cut across the parties became partisan tests (Geoffrey Layman).

Evidence. Two historical markers in D2 check out, one with a correction. As governor of California, Reagan signed the 1967 Therapeutic Abortion Act, one of the first state laws to liberalize abortion (D2's "one of the country's most permissive" is not supported); and the 1980 Republican platform, for the first time in 40 years, did not endorse the Equal Rights Amendment. In the GSS, weekly churchgoers were 5 points more Republican than those who rarely or never attend in the 1970s and 25 points more in 2021–24, and on abortion for any reason the parties' partisans were within a few points of each other until the late 1980s (computed in the essay). D2's stronger claim, that the correlation between party identification and abortion attitudes was "effectively zero until the early 1990s," follows Neil O'Brian, who draws on Greg Adams's account of abortion as an issue evolution led by elites. It holds for party identification and agrees with the GSS. But O'Brian also shows that antiabortion attitudes already went with conservative views on civil rights, Vietnam and feminism by 1970, and with Republican presidential voting by 1972, so the cultural sorting of voters began before their party labels caught up.

Verdict. *Consistent, not identified.* The religious gap widened steadily from the 1980s, in step with the rise in hostility.

5.5 Social sorting and the "mega-identity" (all drafts)

Claim. When race, religion, education and place all point to the same party, partisanship becomes what Lilliana Mason calls a mega-identity, and losing an election feels like losing on everything at once. Mason's experimental and survey work links sorted identities to anger and bias even among people whose policy views are moderate.

What this project adds. Scoring each partisan by four Republican-leaning traits (white, weekly churchgoer, no degree, small town or countryside), each additional trait multiplied the odds of being Republican by 1.26 in the 1970s and by 2.63 in 2021–24 (computed in the essay). The review sharpened what this shows. It measures how strongly today's trait combination predicts party, not how often the traits co-occur: the correlation between having no degree and living in a small town barely changed (about 0.09 in the 1970s, 0.08 recently). And because no degree predicted *less* Republican identification in the 1970s, the fixed count understates early structure;

coding each trait in its contemporaneous direction gives 1.52 in the 1970s. The GSS does not measure hostility, so the link from sorting to animosity rests on Mason's studies.

Verdict. *Consistent, not identified* at the national level. This is the essay's preferred mechanism, and it receives the same verdict as its rivals: the associations are strong and fit the timing; no design isolates the effect of sorting on hostility.

5.6 Geographic sorting (D4, D5, D6)

Claim. Americans sorted themselves into partisan places, emptying swing districts.

Evidence. The urban–rural gap in the GSS nearly doubled, from 15 points in the 1970s to 29 in 2021–24. The Cook Political Report attributes 45 of the 77 swing seats lost between 1997 and 2023 to voters' sorting and 32 to redistricting. But Americans rarely move for partisan reasons (Jonathan Mummolo and Clayton Nall), movers' partisanship is far too weak to produce today's map (Gregory Martin and Steven Webster), and the divide follows economic geography and density (Jonathan Rodden). Many Americans now have almost no partisan neighbors of the other side.

Verdict. Geographic polarization is *consistent, not identified* as a sustaining mechanism through safe seats; *weak or contrary* in its "Big Sort" form, in which partisans choose where to live.

6. The two-axis rotation (D2, D3, N7)

6.1 The claim

D2 and D3 make the boldest structural argument in the archive. Political disagreement has two largely independent dimensions, economic (how much inequality to accept) and cultural (order and tradition against openness and change). For most of the twentieth century the line between the parties cut only the first. Between 1964 and 2000 it "turned 45 degrees" onto the diagonal, so that a country that used to fight about two things on shifting teams now fights about everything on the same two teams. The rotation also orphaned two quadrants: economic progressives who are cultural traditionalists, and economic conservatives who are cultural liberals.

6.2 The premise: two axes in the mind

The drafts ground the two axes in political psychology. John Jost and colleagues found that "the core ideology of conservatism stresses resistance to change and justification of inequality." John Duckitt's dual-process model ties the two to different worldviews: seeing the world as dangerous breeds right-wing authoritarianism, which prizes security and conformity, and seeing it as competitive breeds social dominance orientation, which accepts hierarchy. The drafts cite a five-month panel test by Chris Sibley, Marc Wilson and Duckitt that supports it. N7 adds Shalom Schwartz's circle of values, whose two axes are self-enhancement against self-transcendence and conservation against openness to change. Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler's "fixed" and

"fluid" worldviews, in *Prius or Pickup?*, map onto the cultural axis. And Stanley Feldman and Christopher Johnston conclude that two dimensions, economic and social, are the minimum needed to account for Americans' domestic policy preferences, and identify six distinct ideological types. D2's figure that "only 45% of Americans fit on a single left-right line" could not be found in the paper and is not used here.

6.3 The congressional evidence

In Poole and Rosenthal's scaling of roll-call votes, one dimension, the role of government in the economy, suffices except in two periods, roughly 1829–1851 and 1937–1970, when race-related issues introduced a second dimension that split members by region (Poole and Rosenthal, *Daedalus*, 2007). During the second period, a "conservative coalition" of Republicans and Southern Democrats blocked liberal economic bills while Northern Democrats and Republicans passed the civil rights laws. The second dimension then faded; in the 109th Congress (2005–06), a single liberal–conservative dimension accounted for about 93% of nonunanimous roll-call voting choices. Gary Miller and Norman Schofield model such realignments in two dimensions, with candidates who depend on activists making "flanking" moves; over the twentieth century, they conclude, "the party cleavage line is much as it was a century ago—but the parties have switched sides."

6.4 What this project adds (computed in the essay's scripts; summarized for this paper)

The GSS allows a direct test. Using four economic items (income differences, help for the poor, help with medical bills, welfare spending) and four cultural items (abortion, same-sex relations, premarital sex, marijuana), each averaged from items standardized over 1972–2024, the angle of the line from the average Democrat to the average Republican can be computed for each period.

Table 5 — The rotation measured in the General Social Survey.

Period	Angle of the line between the parties	Correlation of the two axes in the public	Partisans consistent on both axes	Democrats culturally conservative	Republicans culturally liberal
1974–84	12°	0.04	30%	48%	43%
1985–94	16°	0.07	33%	47%	46%
1996–2004	25°	0.10	37%	43%	39%
2006–14	28°	0.12	38%	37%	33%
2016–24	31°	0.28	48%	36%	30%

Notes: The angle is measured from the economic axis; 0° would mean the parties differ only on economics, 45° that they differ equally on both. "Consistent" means on one's own party's side of the public median on both axes; "culturally conservative" means above the public median on the cultural index. Weighted;

leaners counted as partisans. Source: `results/gss.json`*; the angle depends on how each index is scaled, so its exact value should not be pressed.*

Three findings follow. First, the rotation is real but about 19 degrees, from 12° to 31°, not 45°. The parties' cultural gap grew from a fifth of their economic gap to three-fifths. Second, it happened mostly between the late 1980s and the mid-2000s, and continued after 2016. Third, and not in any draft: the premise itself has eroded. In the 1970s the two axes were essentially independent in the public ($r = 0.04$). By 2016–24 they correlate at 0.28 in the GSS, and in the 2024 CES, with eight economic and nine cultural questions, at 0.74. Some of the second figure reflects the CES's longer scales, which measure each axis more reliably, but both surveys say the same thing: the public has partly rotated too. Voters did not only sort into the parties that matched their two positions; their two positions have come to match each other.

6.5 The orphaned quadrants

D2 and N7 cite Lee Drutman's analysis of the 2016 electorate, reported by CBS News, for the size of the quadrants: 44.6% of 2016 voters liberal on both axes, 28.9% populist (left on economics, right on culture), 22.7% conservative and 3.8% libertarian; "the Obama to Trump voter was overwhelmingly a populist." The Niskanen Center objected that the scales are truncated and the zero lines are not a true center, and that re-centering them puts many more voters in the libertarian corner. The 2024 CES gives a smaller populist corner: 11% of adults are left of center on economics and right on culture (8% to 13% depending on where the line is drawn), and 9% are the reverse. The review adds that these are respondents cross-pressured on the chosen questions; calling them "orphaned" would require showing that no party represents them, which the survey cannot do.

Verdict. *Consistent, not identified.* The rotation is a good description of what happened to party positions and the drafts' psychology fits it, but the drafts' magnitude is overstated, and the rotation's effect on hostility is untested. The essay measures the realignment mainly through the four divides (Section 5), which capture it through identities rather than attitudes; it keeps the two axes as its frame but does not use the angle.

7. Elites, activists and entrepreneurs

7.1 Elite-led polarization (D1, D4, D5, D6)

Claim. Leaders polarized first, and voters followed their cues.

Evidence for. Congress began diverging in the late 1970s, before most mass trends (Section 2). Experiments and panels show that voters take cues: clearer elite positions revived mass partisanship, voters adopt their leaders' positions more often than they choose leaders by their positions, and many self-described conservatives follow Trump to liberal positions when told he holds them. When elites polarize, partisans rely more on party cues. In the Netherlands,

voters polarized as soon as a radical-right party entered parliament. Across ten democracies, the trend in expert ratings of elite polarization is the strongest correlate of the trend in mass hostility ($r = +0.73$).

Evidence against or limiting. That correlation is fragile. It rests on ten countries; it is not significant after adjustment for the nine drivers tested (Holm-adjusted $p = 0.15$); it falls to +0.50 without the United States; and the elite series has only three to five readings per country, all between 1982 and 2003. Restricting each country's hostility trend to the years its elite series covers gives $r = +0.65$ across ten countries and +0.69 across the nine with at least three surveys. Elites may also polarize because their voters or activists do.

Asymmetry. In the House, Republicans moved from +0.25 to +0.52 on the first dimension between 1971 and 2025 and Democrats from −0.31 to −0.39 (computed in the essay), the pattern Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins attribute to an ideological Republican movement facing a coalition of Democratic interest groups. Geoffrey Skelley of 538 finds that every third of the House Republican conference moved right after 1981, while Democrats' movement left came mostly from their least liberal members. Mass hostility is nonetheless roughly symmetrical: Democrats and Republicans dislike and dehumanize each other about equally.

Verdict. *Consistent, not identified* nationally; cue-taking itself is *identified* experimentally. Elite leadership is the essay's "probable proximate driver," and that is the strongest verdict the evidence allows.

7.2 Activists rather than leaders (D3)

D3 cites Miller and Schofield, whose model gives the leading role to party activists rather than to officeholders: activists supply money and effort, and candidates move toward them. This is a genuine alternative ordering to "leaders led," and the data here cannot separate the two. The comparison of newly elected and continuing House members (essay Section 8) is consistent with either: since 1981, Republicans first observed in a Congress have sat to the right of those already serving in almost every Congress, while since 1995 newly observed Democrats have sat closer to the center. As the review notes, that is a descriptive difference in career-long scores, not a measure of positions on arrival or of how they were nominated.

Verdict. *Untested* as a rival to elite leadership.

7.3 Populist entrepreneurs and "pernicious polarization" (D1, D4, D5, D6)

Claim. In many democracies, polarization is engineered from the top by political entrepreneurs who reorganize politics around a single "us versus them" cleavage, often religious or ethnic, and then bind supporters through fear of the other side.

Evidence. Murat Somer and Jennifer McCoy introduce, and McCoy and Somer compare, eleven cases in a special journal issue, among them Hungary, Venezuela, the United States, Poland,

which Hubert Tworzecki calls "a case of top-down polarization," and Turkey. Kenneth Roberts observes that populist movements often arise in societies that are not yet deeply divided and then divide them. In nine countries from Bangladesh and Brazil to India, Poland, Turkey and the United States, Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue find leaders such as Narendra Modi, Jarosław Kaczyński and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who "have relentlessly inflamed basic divisions and entrenched them throughout society"; their edited volume, *Democracies Divided*, collects the country studies, including India's, which the journal issue lacks.

Verdict. *Consistent, not identified*: comparative case studies, which select on the outcome.

8. Institutions

8.1 Two parties, winner take all (all drafts)

Claim. America's single-member plurality districts force every conflict into two parties, so the other party becomes the home of everything one rejects. In multiparty systems, today's opponent may be tomorrow's coalition partner, and one can loathe a party without loathing half the country (Lee Drutman).

Evidence for. Comparing the United States with 19 other Western publics, Noam Gidron, James Adams and Will Horne find partisan dislike more intense in countries with majoritarian electoral institutions, and Kamil Bernaerts and colleagues find consensus democracies less polarized. Warm feelings toward parties that have governed with one's own "linger long after the coalition itself has dissolved" (Horne, Adams and Gidron). The great exception is the radical right, whose parties "both radiate and receive high levels of dislike" across 103 elections in 28 European countries (Eelco Harteveld, Philipp Mendoza and Matthijs Rooduijn).

Evidence against. The electoral system is close to a constant, so on its own it can explain why American hostility is high, not why it *rose* after 1978. Andres Reiljan finds several proportional systems in Southern and Central-Eastern Europe more hostile than America. Among the twelve countries, Switzerland, the archetypal consensus democracy, had the second-steepest rise (+5.1 points a decade), while majoritarian Britain and Australia had small declines. Their declines are not distinguishable from zero (computed for this paper; Appendix C), so D1's statement that Britain and Australia "saw polarization fall" should read that they did not polarize.

Verdict. *Consistent, not identified*, and only as an interaction: two parties plus a newly sorted electorate. That interaction is the essay's interpretation; no analysis here tests it.

8.2 Insecure majorities (D3, D4, D5, D6)

Claim. Frances Lee argues that when control of Congress is perpetually in play, denying the other side a legislative win matters more than legislating, so confrontation becomes rational. She contrasts the era of a seemingly permanent Democratic majority, from the 1930s through the 1970s, with the increasingly competitive period after 1980.

What this project adds (computed for this paper). The timing depends on how the era of insecure majorities is dated. Lee dates it to 1980, when the Senate changed hands and competition for national control resumed; on that dating, 90% of the House's widening between 1977 and 2025 came afterward. But Democrats held the House continuously until 1995, with an average majority of 87 seats in 1955–93 against 30 in 1995–2025, and 55% of the widening happened before 1995, while the House majority was secure.

Verdict. *Consistent, not identified.* Insecure majorities fit the period after 1980, but the House began polarizing while its majority was safe.

8.3 Gerrymandering (D4, D5, D6)

The Senate, which is never redistricted, polarized almost exactly as much as the House (0.59 to 0.92 against 0.57 to 0.91, 1977–2025, computed in the essay); simulations with neutral districts reproduce most of the House's polarization; and Cook attributes fewer lost swing seats to redistricting than to sorting. D6 already proposed fairer maps "with modest hopes."

Verdict. *Not the origin*; a minor contributor to safe seats.

8.4 Primaries and the candidate pipeline (all drafts)

Claim. With most seats safe, the decisive election is a low-turnout primary, whose voters reward fighters; and polarized voters no longer punish extreme nominees in November.

Evidence. By Unite America's estimate, 87% of House seats in 2024 were effectively settled in primaries in which about 7% of eligible Americans voted. In the 2018 midterm primaries, by the Bipartisan Policy Center's count, turnout was 19.9% of eligible voters, so D4's "roughly 80% skip primaries" is right for that year, which was itself a high-turnout one (14.3% in 2014). Primary voters are not much more extreme than their party's other voters but are more engaged and more drawn to insurgents (John Sides and colleagues). From 1980 to 2010, nominating the more extreme candidate in a close House primary cost the party 9 to 13 points of the general-election vote and 35 to 54 points of win probability (Andrew Hall); voters' accountability for candidates' positions has since declined gradually.

Evidence against as a cause of the trend. The introduction of primaries, primary turnout and the threat of a challenge are not associated with partisan roll-call voting over the century, and the openness of a state's primaries has little effect on the extremity of its legislators. D5 and

D6 also call for restoring "peer review" of candidates by party colleagues, as in parliamentary democracies; no source in the drafts measures what such review would do in the United States.

Verdict. *Not the origin* (primary rules predate the trend and their variation does little); *consistent, not identified* as a sustaining mechanism once seats became safe.

8.5 The collapse of local news (D3, D4, D5, D6)

Nearly 40% of local newspapers disappeared between 2005 and 2025. Where a paper closed, the gap between the Democratic presidential and Senate vote shares fell by 1.9 points as voters split their tickets less (Joshua Darr, Matthew Hitt and Johanna Dunaway); D4's "split-ticket voting fell by 1.9%" misstates the unit. Where voters got more in-state television coverage, they knew more and split more. But districts splitting their presidential and House votes had already fallen from 44% in 1984 to 19% in 2008, about 60% of their decline to 3.7% in 2020 and 2024, before most of the closures (Brookings, *Vital Statistics on Congress*, Table 2-16).

Verdict. *Identified contributor* to the nationalization of voting; *not the origin*.

8.6 Public service broadcasting (D1)

D1 offers a second institutional buffer, which the essay dropped: strong, trusted public broadcasters such as the BBC and Germany's ARD and ZDF sustain a shared information commons. In 27 EU countries, "the stronger the broadcaster, the smaller the gaps between the most and least politically engaged individuals" in exposure to cross-cutting views (Laia Castro-Herrero, Lilach Nir and Morten Skovsgaard). That is an association with exposure, not with hostility, and D1 itself notes that neither buffer is decisive alone.

Verdict. *Untested* as a cause of the cross-national pattern; the twelve-country data have no measure of public broadcasting.

9. Explanations of falling trust

D4, D5 and D6 make trust the outcome to explain, and they consider four explanations.

9.1 Institutional failure came first

Claim. Trust in government collapsed decades before intense partisan hostility, through Vietnam, Watergate and stagflation, so hostility cannot have started it.

Evidence (computed for this paper from Pew's compilation and the ANES). Trust in the federal government stood at 77% in 1964; individual polls in 1980 range from 25% to 39%, and Pew's smoothed trend is about 30%. In 1978 the thermometer gap between own and other party was 27 points, 49% of its 2020 level. D4's "25% in 1980" is the lowest of the 1980 polls and matches Pew's own summary ("by 1980, only about a quarter"); the average of that year's polls was closer to 30%.

Verdict. The order of events holds, so mass hostility is *not the origin* of the collapse in trust in government. This says nothing about what drove the later fall in horizontal trust.

9.2 The broken competence bargain

Claim. In the 2000s the governing class visibly failed (Iraq, 2008, the pandemic), and trust in the people followed trust in politicians down.

Evidence (D4's statements checked against Gallup's topline, computed for this paper). Trust in the people's judgment averaged 85% in the two 1970s readings and stayed between 70% and 78% from 2001 to 2009; it was 73% in 2009, first fell below 60% in 2014 (59%), and has been below 60% in every survey since 2018. Trust in politicians fell from 66% to 49% in 2009. D4's claim that "when trust in politicians briefly ticked up in 2017–18, trust in the people rose with it" holds only for 2017: in 2018 trust in politicians rose again (48% to 55%) while trust in the people fell (62% to 58%).

Verdict. *Consistent, not identified.* The sequence fits; Section 9.3 explains why it proves little.

9.3 Distrust as a verdict on the elected

Claim. Nobody meets "the American people" in the abstract; we meet the leaders they elect. Gallup suggested in 2013, when trust in the people stood at 61%, that "the decline in trust in 'the people' may reflect the fact that it is the American people who elected those poorly regarded representatives." Because 53% of Democrats, 51% of Republicans and 49% of independents now trust the public, D4 argues the pattern looks like losing elections to people one thinks chose badly, not like the manipulation of one side.

Evidence. The two Gallup series are strongly correlated in level ($r = 0.82$, 2001–2026), but both trend down. Year-to-year changes are only weakly correlated ($r = 0.12$ in the same year, 0.26 with a one-year lag), so the evidence is the sequence and the turning points, not co-movement.

Rival explanations the drafts acknowledge. An information environment that shows each side its worst members (Smith's view, and Section 3.2d); unhappiness and social distrust, which a chapter of the World Happiness Report 2025 by Algan, Blanc and Senik links with anti-system voting (low-trust, unhappy voters drift to the far right and high-trust, unhappy ones to the far left; D4's "financial insecurity" is not the chapter's claim); and, raised by the review rather than the drafts, measurement. The GSS's "most people can be trusted" item moved to web interviews and new formats after 2020, and in 2024 the original wording has no web respondents, so the latest *levels* of interpersonal trust are less certain than the long trend. The drafts' figure (46% in 1972, 34% now) is Pew's: 34% is the GSS reading for 2018, matched by Pew's own 2023–24 survey. The essay's lower 2024 figure (25%) comes from the GSS after the change of mode.

Verdict. *Consistent, not identified*: a plausible mechanism with a suggestive sequence and no test.

9.4 The partisan seesaw

Trust in government now flips with the party in the White House: between May 2024 and September 2025, Democrats' trust fell from 35% to 9% while Republicans' rose from 11% to 26% (Pew). Confidence in institutions is near Gallup's lows: the 14 institutions it has tracked since 1993 averaged 27% in 2026, a point above the 2023 record (Gallup, 2026), and in 2025 Democrats' average confidence across the nine institutions tracked since 1979 fell to a record-low 26% (Gallup, 2025). D4 cites the second figure through a local news site and sets it beside the first; the two averages cover different sets of institutions and are not a trend. The pattern of partisan reversal recurs across administrations and is well documented. The review warns against reading the 2025 swing as pure partisanship: the government's personnel and organization changed substantially that year, and trust can respond to policy as well as to party.

Verdict. The seesaw itself is well documented; as an effect of partisan identity rather than of policy it is *consistent, not identified*.

10. The self-sustaining loop

10.1 The claim

D4, D5 and D6 argue that polarization would fade if nothing fed it, and that extreme politics feeds it. Five mechanisms appear: leaders polarize voters (Section 7.1); fear buys loyalty, so voters cannot punish their own side; polarized voters stop punishing extreme nominees, and each surviving extremist teaches the next that extremism is safe; referees such as courts, election officials and statistical agencies become weapons; and each side's loudest champion confirms the other side's caricature. D5 calls the result a "political business model," a collective-action problem in which individual politicians and media figures profit from a division that leaves society worse off.

10.2 What has been measured

Several links have evidence. The perception gap is measured (Section 3.2d). Correcting partisans' exaggerated beliefs about the other side's support for violence reduced their own support. In a megastudy of 25 interventions, 23 reduced partisan animosity, but only six reduced support for undemocratic practices and five support for partisan violence, so animosity and antidemocratic attitudes are not the same thing. The November penalty for extremism has shrunk (Section 8.4). The newcomer comparison (Section 7.2) fits a Republican nominating process that rewards the party's ideological wing.

10.3 What has not

No study in the drafts or the project traces the loop end to end, and its links run in both directions, which is what makes it a loop and also what makes it hard to test. A rival reading fits the same facts: hostility, rooted in sorting, produces both the factional nominees and the distrust, and the nominees add little. The two readings differ in testable ways. If nominees drive distrust, horizontal trust should fall more among voters exposed to a factional nominee in their own district or state than among comparable voters who were not; if sorting drives both, exposure should not matter once identity is held fixed.

10.4 The candidate "menu"

The drafts' rhetorical center is that a system whose most prominent figures are Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has a selection problem. Each draft insists, rightly, that the three are not equivalent: Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez have competed within constitutional rules, while Trump tried to overturn the 2020 election. Their prominence illustrates the menu thesis; it does not test it. The drafts' supporting facts check out: Ocasio-Cortez led a May 2026 AtlasIntel poll of the 2028 Democratic field with 26%, ahead of Pete Buttigieg (22%), Gavin Newsom (21%) and Kamala Harris (13%), though other polls that month put Harris ahead (Newsweek); and Sanders is 85.

Verdict. *Consistent, not identified* as a whole; several links *identified* individually.

11. Polarization elsewhere

D1, D4 and D5 survey countries outside the American pattern to show that the same pressures produce different results. Their main cases, with what was checked:

- **Western Europe's fragmentation.** Proportional systems turned discontent into new parties rather than a two-camp war. Germany absorbed a large refugee wave in 2015 and saw the AfD rise, yet its partisan hostility fell faster than any other country's in the twelve-country data; Sweden's hostility fell while the Sweden Democrats grew (Section 5.2).
- **Britain.** Brexit, in NatCen's 2024 reading of the British Social Attitudes survey, "divides libertarians from authoritarians, not those on the left from those on the right," so a cultural identity divide now sits alongside the old economic one. D4 and D6 add that it cut across class; NatCen's release does not say so.
- **Brazil.** Polarization pits supporters of Lula's Workers' Party against a deep anti-PT sentiment that David Samuels and Cesar Zucco document, and that Jair Bolsonaro channeled in 2018. A European Parliament briefing places inequality "at the root" of the divides and says the Car Wash investigations "sowed great distrust in the Brazilian political system"; D4's "shattered faith in traditional parties" is a paraphrase, not a quotation. Public WhatsApp groups, not cable or ranked feeds, carried much of the misinformation.

- **India, Turkey and Poland.** Polarization has centered on religious nationalism, secularism and control of the referees. For Turkey and Poland the journal issue edited by Somer and McCoy has case studies (Section 7.3); for India, *Democracies Divided*. On Poland's 2023 election, OSCE observers reported the ruling party's "undue influence over the use of state resources and the public media"; the report does not discuss the courts, which D4 also cites it for.
- **Romania.** A foreign influence campaign is alleged to have reshaped an election (Section 3.3).

The lesson the drafts draw, and the evidence supports, is that the same fuel burns differently, and that top-down entrepreneurs are a common thread. As the comparison of America with 19 other Western publics shows, America's *level* of hostility is not exceptional, but it has risen "more rapidly since the mid-1990s than in most other Western publics" (Gidron, Adams and Horne).

12. Remedies the drafts proposed

Every draft but D1 ends with remedies. Table 6 lists them with the mechanism each targets and the strength of the evidence that it works.

Table 6 — Remedies considered in the drafts.

Remedy	Drafts	Mechanism targeted	Evidence that it works
Civility, dialogue and psychological interventions	D4, D6 (rejected)	Mass affect	Weak and short-lived: 77 interventions raised out-party warmth about 5 points on a 101-point scale, three-quarters of it gone within a week (Derek Holliday, Lelkes and Sean Westwood)
Regulating feeds or algorithms	D2, D4, D6 (rejected)	Social media	Short-run effects on hostility are small (Section 3.2); long-run effects untested
Correcting misperceptions of the other side	D4, D5, D6	Perception gap	Moderate, short-run: corrections cut support for partisan violence (Mernyk and colleagues); durability weeks, not years
Top-two or top-four nonpartisan primaries	D2–D6	Primary bottleneck	Mixed: more moderate legislators in one California study, no gain in representation in another

Remedy	Drafts	Mechanism targeted	Evidence that it works
Ranked-choice general elections	D2–D6	Breadth in November	Little direct evidence in the drafts; Alaska's top-four and ranked-choice system survived a 2024 repeal vote by 737 votes as certified (743 after the recount) and faces another on November 3, 2026
Fusion voting; proportional multimember House districts	D2	Two-party container	Correlational evidence that consensus institutions go with less hostility (Section 8.1). Proportional House elections need only a federal statute, Drutman and Farbod Faraji argue; fusion voting is a matter of state law
Party peer review of candidates	D2, D4, D5, D6	Candidate supply	None cited
Independent redistricting	D6	Safe seats	Modest by construction: sorting cost more swing seats than maps (Section 8.3)
Cushioning the losers of economic shocks	D4, D5, D6	Triggers	Indirect: "failures in addressing the distributional consequences of economic shocks are a key factor" behind nationalist and radical-right success (Colantone and Stanig)
Delivering competent government	D2–D6	Trust	Plausible; no source cited
Rebuilding local news	D3, D4, D5, D6	Nationalization	Moderate: closures and coverage change how people vote (Section 8.5)
A non-negotiable constitutional boundary	D5	Referees as weapons	Normative; no evidence needed or offered

Two cautions run through the drafts and deserve to survive into any revision. In 1950 the American Political Science Association complained that the parties were too alike to give voters a real choice, so the goal is not to restore the muddled mid-century parties, whose bipartisanship rested partly on keeping Jim Crow off the national agenda. And moderate establishments made the Iraq War and the 2008 crisis; the drafts' target is selection for governing competence, not for centrism.

13. Synthesis

13.1 Scorecard

Table 7 collects the verdicts. It applies one standard to every explanation, including the essay's.

Table 7 — Verdicts on all explanations considered in the drafts.

Explanation	Outcome it explains	Timing	Causal evidence	Cross-national fit	Verdict
Partisan cable news (3.1)	Vote shares; some elite behavior	After most House divergence	Natural experiments on votes; none on hostility	r = +0.35, interval includes zero	Identified contributor (votes); not the origin
Echo chambers (3.2a)	Issue and affective polarization	After the trend	Exposure experiments contradict the premise	—	Weak or contrary
Feeds that rank outrage up (3.2b)	Affective polarization	After the trend	Small effects when hostile content is varied; none from chronological feeds	Internet growth r = −0.48	Identified contributor, small
Deactivation (3.2c)	Affective and issue polarization	—	Issue polarization fell (2018); affective effects small	—	Weak (affective)
Perception distortion (3.2d)	Misperception	—	Measured; source not identified	—	Consistent, not identified
Candidate supply via platforms (3.2e)	Nominees	Fits post-2008	None	—	Untested
Foreign influence (3.3)	Attitudes, votes	After the trend	Near-zero measured effects	—	Not the origin; weak
Inequality (4.1)	Elite polarization	Fits the US	None; US changes co-move (r = +0.47 since 1947)	r = −0.52	Consistent (US elites); weak (mass, cross-national)
Trade shocks (4.2)	Replacement of moderates	After 2000	Strong, local	r = −0.07	Identified contributor; not the origin

Explanation	Outcome it explains	Timing	Causal evidence	Cross-national fit	Verdict
Financial crises (4.3)	Anti-establishment votes; trust	2008 fits trust	Strong, historical	Fits populism, not hostility	Identified contributor (trust, votes)
Education realignment (5.1)	Sorting	Mostly after 2000	None	International, so cannot explain US exceptional-ism	Consistent, not identified
Immigration and backlash (5.2)	Radical-right votes	—	Strong (Denmark)	Foreign-born r = 0.00; nonwhite r = +0.59	Identified (votes); weak (hostility)
Racial realignment (5.3)	Sorting, Southern realignment	1964–1990s	Strong for the South	US-specific	Identified contributor (sorting)
Religious sorting (5.4)	Sorting	1980s–2000s	None	—	Consistent, not identified
Mega-identity (5.5)	Affective polarization	Fits	Individual-level studies; no national design	Sorting r = +0.32	Consistent, not identified
Geographic sorting (5.6)	Safe seats	Fits	Partisan migration weak	—	Consistent (safe seats); weak (Big Sort)
Two-axis rotation (6)	Party positions	1985–2005 mostly	None	—	Consistent, not identified; magnitude overstated
Elite leadership (7.1)	Mass hostility	Fits	Cue-taking experiments; national link correlational	r = +0.73, n = 10, fragile	Consistent, not identified
Activists (7.2)	Elite polarization	—	None here	—	Untested
Populist entrepreneurs (7.3)	Pernicious polarization	—	Case studies	Many cases	Consistent, not identified

Explanation	Outcome it explains	Timing	Causal evidence	Cross-national fit	Verdict
Two-party system (8.1)	Level of hostility	Constant	Correlational	Switzerland and Britain cut against it	Consistent, as an interaction only
Insecure majorities (8.2)	Elite conflict	Fits from 1980; 55% of House widening before 1995	None	—	Consistent, not identified
Gerrymandering (8.3)	Elite polarization	Senate test fails it	Simulations	—	Not the origin
Primaries (8.4)	Nominees	Rules predate trend	Mostly null on rules; Hall on penalties	—	Not the origin; sustaining
Local news (8.5)	Nationalization	Late	Quasi-experimental	—	Identified contributor; not the origin
Public broadcasting (8.6)	Shared exposure	—	Correlational	Not measured	Untested
Institutional failure first (9.1)	Vertical trust	Fits	—	OECD-wide fall in trust	Order holds; hostility not the origin
Broken competence bargain (9.2)	Trust after 2008	Fits	Crisis studies abroad	OECD-wide fall in trust	Consistent, not identified
Distrust as a verdict (9.3)	Horizontal trust	Fits	Weak change correlations	—	Consistent, not identified
Partisan seesaw (9.4)	Trust in government	Recurs with each change of party	None separating identity from policy	—	Pattern documented; cause not identified
Self-sustaining loop (10)	Persistence	Fits post-1995	Individual links only	Resembles pernicious cases	Consistent, not identified

13.2 What the scorecard says

Four conclusions follow, and they are narrower than any single draft.

1. **The well-identified effects are mostly on the wrong outcomes or arrived late.** Fox News moved votes, trade shocks replaced moderates, financial crises lifted the far right and newspaper closures nationalized voting. Each is real; none was measured against mutual hostility, and most came after the trends were under way. They are best read as accelerants and triggers.
2. **The explanations that fit the timing and the comparative pattern are the least identified.** Sorting, elite leadership, the rotation and the two-party interaction all fit; none has a design that isolates its effect. The essay's synthesis is assembled from these, and it should be presented, as the review asked, as the best-fitting proposal rather than an established chain.
3. **Media explanations should be split, not dismissed.** The echo-chamber version fares badly and foreign influence shows no measured effect. But feed content that expresses hostility moves animosity a little, and the candidate-supply channel, which the drafts themselves thought most important, has not been tested at all.
4. **Several drafts' strongest numbers did not survive checking** (Appendix B): the 45-degree rotation is about 19 degrees; "four" distinguishable country trends are six; Britain and Australia did not clearly depolarize; the 2017–18 co-movement of the trust series held for one year only; and an article cited in three drafts as Mason's is Drutman's review of her book.

13.3 Alternative syntheses

The essay's account is one combination of these pieces. At least two others fit the same evidence about as well, and they imply different priorities.

- **Elites and activists first.** Party activists and officeholders, especially on the right, moved first for their own reasons (ideological movements, insecure majorities, the end of the Southern Democrats); voters followed their cues, and the social sorting of the 2000s and 2010s is a consequence of party polarization rather than its root. This reading gives more weight to Sections 7 and 8.2 and less to Section 5. It predicts that issue positions and identities should change *after* elite cues in panel data.
- **Media-accelerated sorting.** The realignment began with race and religion, as the essay says, but its speed after the mid-1990s owes much to the cable era and, after 2010, to platforms that rewarded hostile content and let insurgents bypass parties. This reading takes the timing test at its proper strength (media cannot be the origin) while allowing a substantial role after the mid-1990s, when three-quarters of the 1978–2020 rise in the thermometer

gap occurred. It predicts that areas and groups with earlier exposure should show faster growth in hostility after 1996, holding prior trends fixed.

The data assembled here cannot choose among the three. Tests that could do so include panels that measure identities, issue positions and hostility in the same people over time; designs that exploit differences in the timing of cable, broadband or platform access, with hostility as the outcome; and district-level links between primary competitiveness, the nominees it produces and changes in local trust.

Appendix A: Reference ledger

Every work cited in the seven archived pieces, grouped by the section of this paper that discusses it. *Drafts* gives where it appears. *Status*: **Essay** — also cited in the essay or its Methods appendix and checked there; **Verified** — the work exists and the drafts' use of it matches the source; **Corrected** — the work exists but a detail in the drafts was wrong (see Appendix B); **Link replaced** — the drafts linked a proxy, retailer or secondary page and this paper cites a stable record instead; **Unverified** — the work exists but the specific claim could not be confirmed.

Table A.1 — Every source cited in the archived drafts.

Work	Drafts	Section	Status
What is being explained			
Tajfel and Turner (1979), integrative theory of intergroup conflict	D1	2	Corrected: the DOI is a 2004 reprint (B.27)
Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012), *POQ*	D1	2	Essay; quotation verified (p. 405)
Iyengar et al. (2019), *Annual Review of Political Science*	D1	2	Verified (citation); thermometer figures taken from Finkel et al.
Finkel et al. (2020), "Political Sectarianism in America," *Science*	D1	2	Corrected: own-party warmth 70–75°; 2020 point not ANES (B.26)
Fiorina, Abrams and Pope (2005), *Culture War?*	D1	2	Essay
Abramowitz and Saunders (2008), "Is Polarization a Myth?"	D1	2	Essay
American National Election Studies (electionstudies.org)	D1	2	Essay (data via the Boxell–Gentzkow–Shapiro files)
University of Arizona Voter Project, 2024 ANES values	D1	2	Essay

Work	Drafts	Section	Status
Pew (2017), political values gap and immigration views	D4, D6	2	Corrected title: "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider"; numbers verified
PBS *Frontline* on the 2017 Pew report	D4	2	Link replaced by Pew's report
Pew (2014), "7 Things to Know about Polarization in America"	D2	2	Verified
Pew (2022), "As Partisan Hostility Grows"	D2–D6	2	Essay
Voteview, "Party Polarization" article	D4, D6	2	Verified against Voteview member data (no House overlap since 2001–02)
Voteview (2015), "The Polarization of the Congressional Parties"	D1	2	Verified against Voteview data (2025 distance is the highest since 1879)
Voteview, House polarization file, 46th–114th Congresses	D2	2	Link replaced by the member file the project uses
DeSilver (2022), Pew, "The Polarization in Today's Congress Has Roots That Go Back Decades"	D1, D3	2	Verified
Skelley (2024), 538, "uniparty" article	D4	7.1	Verified; both parties moved, Republicans further
Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2024), *REStat* (DOI, author PDF, NBER w26669, RePEc)	D1–D6	3–8	Essay (four links to one work)
Media and technology			
DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007), "The Fox News Effect"	D1	3.1	Essay; verified
Martin and Yurukoglu (2017), "Bias in Cable News" (DOI, AEA page)	D1, D4, D6	3.1	Essay; corrected: vote share, not probability (B.6)
Sawhill and Krause (2017), Brookings	D1	3.1	Verified
Prior (2007), *Post-Broadcast Democracy*	D1	3.1	Verified
Levendusky (2013), *How Partisan Media Polarize America*	D1	3.1	Verified
Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), *Personal Influence*	D1	3.1	Verified; the DOI is the 2017 Routledge edition
Druckman, Levendusky and McLain (2018), "No Need to Watch"	D1	3.1	Verified
Pew, average prime-time cable news audience chart	D1	3.1	Verified (6.48 million in 2020)

Work	Drafts	Section	Status
Sunstein (2017), *#Republic*	D1	3.2	Verified
Pariser (2011), *The Filter Bubble*	D1	3.2	Verified (catalog record)
Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2017), *PNAS* (DOI, PMC, NBER w23258)	D1–D6	3.2	Essay; corrected: eight measures, not nine; "and 75" (B.4, B.5)
Allcott et al. (2020), "The Welfare Effects of Social Media" (DOI, AEA page)	D1, D4, D6	3.2	Essay
Allcott et al. (2024), deactivation experiment, *PNAS*	D1, D5	3.2	Essay; corrected: 27% deactivated for six weeks (B.8)
SIEPR (2024), "Facebook Went Away. Political Divides Didn't Budge"	D4, D6	3.2	Verified (news summary of Allcott et al. 2024)
Bail et al. (2018), "Exposure to Opposing Views," *PNAS*	D1	3.2	Verified
Törnberg (2022), *PNAS*	D1	3.2	Verified; a simulation
Rathje, Van Bavel and van der Linden (2021), *PNAS*	D1	3.2	Essay; verified
Guess et al. (2023), *Science* (DOI, Stanford GSB page)	D1, D4, D5	3.2	Essay
Nyhan et al. (2023), *Nature*	D2, D4	3.2	Essay; corrected: D2 credits it with the chronological-feed test (B.7)
UT Austin News (2023), first findings of the 2020 election studies	D4	3.2	Verified (news summary)
Stanford GSB Insights, "A Surprising Discovery about Facebook's Role in Driving Polarization"	D6	3.2	Verified (news summary)
Unnamed "later experiment involving X"	D3	3.2	Identified as Gauthier et al. (2026); essay
More in Common (2019), *The Perception Gap*	D2, D4–D6	3.2	Essay; figures verified against the report
Resende et al. (2019), WhatsApp misinformation, WWW '19	D1	3.2	Verified; "no ranking algorithm" is D1's inference
Senate Intelligence Committee (2019), Report, Vol. 2	D4, D6	3.3	Corrected: under way by 2014; content pro-Trump (B.10, B.11)
NPR (2024), RT payments to U.S. influencers (via KPBS)	D4	3.3	Verified
Eady et al. (2023), *Nature Communications* (SSRC MediaWell link)	D4, D6	3.3	Essay; link replaced by DOI

Work	Drafts	Section	Status
Bail et al. (2020), *PNAS*, Internet Research Agency on Twitter (Duke page)	D4	3.3	Corrected: late 2017, not 2016 (B.9)
OCCRP (2024), Romanian court annuls election	D4, D6	3.3	Verified; D6's "Russia denies it" is not in the linked text
Economic explanations			
McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal (2016), *Polarized America*	D1	4.1	Essay
Autor, Dorn, Hanson and Majlesi (2020), *AER* (DOI, AEA page)	D1, D4–D6	4.2	Essay
Bocconi news (2017), "Europe's Malaise Has Origins in Beijing"	D4–D6	4.2	Link replaced by Colantone and Stanig (2018), the study it reports
Colantone and Stanig (2019), *JEP* (Bocconi IRIS record)	D4, D6	12	Verified
Funke, Schularick and Trebesch (2016) (VoxEU column, CEPR DP10884)	D4–D6	4.3	Essay; verified
Algan, Guriev, Papaioannou and Passari (2017), *BPEA*	D4, D6	4.3	Verified
OECD (2024), Survey on Drivers of Trust	D4	4.3	Verified
Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty (2022), *QJE* (PSE page)	D2, D4–D6	5.1	Essay
Social and demographic sorting			
Inglehart and Norris (2017), *Perspectives on Politics* (HKS page)	D4, D6	5.2	Corrected: the link is this article, not the backlash book (B.18)
"2025 Five-Country Study" (PubMed 38468397)	D4	5.2	Corrected: a five-country survey with no finding about older voters (B.19)
Dustmann, Vasiljeva and Damm (2019), *REStud* (UCL Discovery)	D4, D6	5.2	Verified; link replaced by DOI; "all but the most urban"
International IDEA (2022), Sweden	D4, D6	5.2	Verified
Kuziemko and Washington (2018), *AER* (AEA page)	D2, D4, D6	5.3	Essay; verified
Abramowitz (2018), *The Great Alignment*	D1	5.3	Verified
Mason (2018), *Uncivil Agreement* (DOI, Chicago page)	D1, D3	5.5	Essay
"United We Fall," *Washington Monthly* (2018)	D2, D4, D6	5.5	Corrected: by Lee Drutman, a review of Mason's book (B.12)
Cook Political Report (2023), swing seats	D4, D6	5.6	Essay

Work	Drafts	Section	Status
Cook Political Report (2025), Cook PVI count	D2, D4, D6	8.4	Essay (hand-entered data)
The two-axis rotation			
Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski and Sulloway (2003), *Psychological Bulletin*	D2	6.2	Verified ("justification of inequality")
Sibley, Wilson and Duckitt (2007), *Political Psychology* (Auckland record)	D2	6.2	Verified; the drafts gave a description, not the title
Hetherington and Weiler (2018), *Prius or Pickup?* (OverDrive page)	D2, N7	6.2	Verified through reviews; link replaced by a catalog search
Feldman and Johnston (2014), *Political Psychology*	D2	6.2	Unverified: the 45% figure (B.13)
Poole and Rosenthal (2007), *Daedalus*	D2, N7	6.3	Corrected: 93% of voting choices in the 109th Congress (B.15)
Miller and Schofield (2003), *APSR*	D3	6.3	Verified
O'Brian (2020), "Before Reagan," *Perspectives on Politics* (Cambridge page; library-proxy link in N7)	D2, N7	5.4	Partly verified; link replaced (N7 used a university proxy)
Adams (1997), "Abortion: Evidence of an Issue Evolution" (cited via O'Brian)	D2	5.4	Partly verified
Drutman (2017), Voter Study Group, via CBS News	D2, N7	6.5	Essay; shares verified
Smith (2017), Niskanen Center, "Libertarians Just Might Exist"	D2, N7	6.5	Essay; argument restated
Elites, activists and entrepreneurs			
Somer and McCoy (2019), *ANNALS* introduction	D1	7.3	Corrected: the issue has no India case (B.17)
Roberts (2022), *Government and Opposition*	D4, D6	7.3	Essay
Carnegie Endowment, "How to Understand the Global Spread of Political Polarization"	D4, D6	7.3	Corrected: Carothers and O'Donohue, 2019, not 2024 (B.16)
Carothers and O'Donohue, eds. (2019), *Democracies Divided*	D1	7.3	Verified
Levendusky (2010), "Clearer Cues, More Consistent Voters"	D2, D4, D6	12	Essay
Institutions			
Drutman (2020), *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop*	D1	8.1	Essay

Work	Drafts	Section	Status
Drutman (and Faraji) (2024), "The Two-Party Doom Loop," *Boston Globe*	D2	12	Corrected: co-author; fusion is state law (B.23)
Gidron, Adams and Horne (2020) (DOI, Cambridge page, Cambridge bookshop)	D1, D4, D6	8.1	Essay; wording checked
Horne, Adams and Gidron (2023), *Comparative Political Studies*	D1	8.1	Essay; verified
Harteveld, Mendoza and Rooduijn (2022), *Government and Opposition*	D1	8.1	Verified
Castro-Herrero, Nir and Skovsgaard (2018), *Political Communication*	D1	8.6	Verified
Lee (2016), *Insecure Majorities*, and LA Review of Books interview	D4–D6	8.2	Essay; "nearly half a century" is a paraphrase
Unite America (2024), primaries	D2, D4–D6	8.4	Essay
Bipartisan Policy Center (2019), 2018 primary turnout	D4	8.4	Verified
Sides et al., via PAC.org	D4, D6	8.4	Essay
Hall (2015), *APSR* (Stanford GSB page)	D2–D6	8.4	Essay
Canes-Wrone and Kistner (2022), *QJPS* (Now Publishers page)	D2, D4–D6	8.4	Essay
Darr, Hitt and Dunaway (2018), via Journalist's Resource	D4, D6	8.5	Essay; corrected unit (B.22)
"Grose, via JPIPE" (JPIPE 5(3))	D4, D6	12	Corrected: the link is Micatka, Tolbert and Boatright (2024), on turnout; the claim is Grose (2020) (B.24)
Alaska Beacon (2024 brief; 2026), Alaska Public Media (2026), electionline (2026)	D2, D4, D6	12	Verified; 737 votes as certified, 743 after the recount
Trust			
Gallup (2026), trust in government, and topline	D2–D6	9	Essay
Gallup (2026), confidence in institutions	D4	9.4	Verified
Gallup (2025), Democrats' confidence in institutions, via TNND	D4	9.4	Verified; link replaced by Gallup's release; different basket (B.25)
Gallup (2013), trust in the American people	D4–D6	9.3	Essay; quotation verified
Pew (2025), "Public Trust in Government: 1958–2025"	D4–D6	9	Essay; verified

Work	Drafts	Section	Status
Pew (2025), "Americans' Trust in One Another"	D2, D4	9.3	Corrected: 34% is the 2018 GSS and Pew's 2023–24 survey (B.20)
World Happiness Report 2025, ch. 7	D4	9.3	Corrected: unhappiness and distrust, not financial insecurity (B.21)
Holliday, Lelkes and Westwood (2025), *PNAS* (DOI, PMC)	D4, D6	12	Essay; verified
Newsweek (2026), AtlasIntel poll (two articles)	D4, D6	10.4	Essay; verified
Polarization elsewhere			
Samuels and Zucco (2018), *Partisans, Antipartisans, and Nonpartisans*	D1	11	Verified
NatCen (2024), British Social Attitudes release	D4, D6	11	Corrected (B.28)
European Parliamentary Research Service (2023), Brazil briefing	D4	11	Corrected: a paraphrase, not the briefing's words
OSCE/ODIHR (2024), Poland 2023 election report	D4	11	Corrected: public media and state resources, not courts (B.29)
Named without a source			
Noah Smith, "Social media really messes with liberal democracy"	all	3.2	A social media post; not located
Lyman Stone on the Gallup chart	D2, D4–D6	—	A social media post; not located
Shalom Schwartz's circle of values	N7	6.2	Source added: Schwartz (1992)
Peer review of candidates in parliamentary democracies	D2, D4–D6	8.4	No source given or found
The Iraq War as a failure that broke trust	D4–D6	4.3	No source given

Appendix B: Corrections to the drafts

Table B.1 — Claims in the drafts that the sources or this project's data do not support as written.

No.	Drafts	As drafted	What the source or the data show
B.1	D2	The line between the parties "turned 45 degrees"	In the GSS it turned about 19 degrees, from 12° in 1974–84 to 31° in 2016–24 (Section 6.4)
B.2	D1	Only four country trends are distinguishable from zero: rises in the U.S. and Denmark, falls in Sweden and Germany	Six are, with small-sample intervals: rises also in France and, barely, Switzerland (Appendix C)
B.3	D1, D4–D6	Britain and Australia "saw polarization fall"	Their trends are negative but not distinguishable from zero; they did not polarize
B.4	D1	Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro's index has nine measures	Eight
B.5	D4	Polarization grew fastest "among Americans over 65 and 75"	Over 65; the 75-plus group appears only in the paper's internet-use figures
B.6	D1	Fox raised "the probability of voting Republican by 0.3 percentage points"	Raised Republican vote *shares* by 0.3 points among viewers induced to watch 2.5 more minutes a week
B.7	D2	The *Nature* paper switched users to chronological feeds	The *Nature* paper (Nyhan et al.) reduced like-minded sources; chronological feeds are Guess et al. in *Science*
B.8	D1	Nearly 20,000 Facebook and 15,000 Instagram users deactivated for six weeks	27% did; the rest deactivated for one week
B.9	D4	Bail et al. (2020) is a 2016 study linking surveys to Twitter feeds	It studies Twitter users in late 2017; only Eady et al. covers 2016
B.10	D6	The Russian campaign "began around 2015"	It was under way by 2014; English-language tweets aimed at Americans began in 2013
B.11	D6	IRA content was mostly about divisive issues "rather than candidates"	The focus was divisive issues, but its electoral content was "almost invariably supportive" of Trump
B.12	D2, D4, D6	"United We Fall" (*Washington Monthly*) is by Lilliana Mason	It is Lee Drutman's review of Mason's book
B.13	D2	Feldman and Johnston: "only 45% of Americans fit on a single left-right line"	Not found in the paper, which concludes that two dimensions are the minimum and identifies six types
B.14	D2	Reagan's 1967 law was "one of the country's most permissive"	One of the first liberalized state abortion laws (after Colorado and North Carolina)

No.	Drafts	As drafted	What the source or the data show
B.15	D2, N7	"Today" one dimension explains about 93% of roll-call votes	93% of nonunanimous voting choices in the 109th Congress (2005–06)
B.16	D4, D6	Carnegie Endowment, 2024	Carothers and O'Donohue, October 2019 (the 2024 address is a re-indexed copy)
B.17	D1	Somer and McCoy (2019) for India	The journal issue has no India case; use *Democracies Divided*
B.18	D4, D6	The Harvard Kennedy School link is Norris and Inglehart's cultural backlash work	It is their 2017 *Perspectives on Politics* article; the backlash book is Norris and Inglehart (2019)
B.19	D4	A "2025 five-country study" of backlash among older, traditional voters	A survey in Chile, France, Italy, Romania and Britain that finds economic and cultural paths together, with no finding about age
B.20	D2, D4	"Most people can be trusted" fell from 46% to 34% (as a current figure)	34% is the GSS reading for 2018, matched by Pew's 2023–24 survey
B.21	D4	*World Happiness Report*: interpersonal distrust and financial insecurity feed anti-system voting	The chapter's drivers are unhappiness and social distrust
B.22	D4, D6	Where a paper closed, "split-ticket voting fell by 1.9%"	The gap between Democratic presidential and Senate vote shares fell by 1.9 *points*
B.23	D2	Drutman: fusion and proportional representation "need only a statute"	Op-ed by Drutman and Faraji; proportional House elections need a federal statute; fusion is state law
B.24	D4, D6	"Grose, via JPIPE" for California's top-two primary	The linked article is a 2024 study of turnout by Micatka, Tolbert and Boatright; the finding is Grose (2020)
B.25	D4	Gallup's 2025 average across "nine major institutions" (28%) beside the 2026 average across 14 (27%)	Two different baskets of institutions; not a trend
B.26	D1	Own-party warmth "held near 70"; out-party 48 to 20 on the ANES	Finkel et al.: 70–75°; their 2020 point is not from the ANES
B.27	D1	Tajfel and Turner (1979), with a DOI	The DOI is a 2004 reprint (Hatch and Schultz, eds., pp. 56–65)
B.28	D4, D6	Brexit identities "cut across traditional party and economic lines" or class	NatCen: Brexit divides libertarians from authoritarians, a divide alongside the economic one; class is not discussed
B.29	D4	OSCE observers on Poland's courts, agencies and public media	The report covers state resources and public media, not the courts

No.	Drafts	As drafted	What the source or the data show
B.30	D4	When trust in politicians rose in 2017–18, trust in the people rose with it	Only in 2017; in 2018 trust in politicians rose (48% to 55%) and trust in the people fell (62% to 58%)
B.31	D2	"In ordinary people, the two axes are only loosely tied"	True in the 1970s GSS ($r = 0.04$); by 2016–24, $r = 0.28$ in the GSS and 0.74 in the 2024 CES

Appendix C: Reproducing the new checks

`code/alternatives.py` computes the six checks marked "computed for this paper" and writes `results/alternatives.json`. It reads the Voteview, GSS, CES, cross-national and Gallup results written by the other scripts, plus the World Inequality Database series, the FRED household Gini and the hand-entered Pew and House-majority files, so it runs after them in `code/run_all.sh`.

1. **Inequality and House polarization** (`inequality_dance`): each Congress's distance between the House party means, matched to the inequality value in its first year; Pearson correlations of levels, of changes between consecutive Congresses, and of each series' change with the other's change one Congress later.
2. **House majorities** (`majorities`): the share of the 1977–2025 rise in House party distance completed by 1981 and by 1995, and mean House majority margins in 1955–93 and 1995–2025.
3. **Country trends** (`country_trends`): each country's least-squares slope of affective polarization on year, ×10, with 95% intervals from the normal (1.96) and $t(n-2)$ critical values. With t intervals, six trends exclude zero: rises in the United States, Switzerland (barely), France and Denmark, and falls in Germany and Sweden. With normal intervals Canada's rise also does. Britain's and Australia's do not under either.
4. **Gallup statements** (`gallup_checks`): the 1970s mean, the 2001–09 range, the first reading below 60% and the 2016–18 readings of trust in the people and in politicians.
5. **The rotation** (`two_axes`): the angle between the parties, the public correlation of the two axes and the cross-pressured shares from `gss.py`, and the 2024 CES correlation and quadrants from `ces.py`.
6. **Trust before hostility** (`trust_before_hostility`): Pew's 1964, 1978 and 1980 trust readings (range of individual polls and smoothed trend) against the 1978 and 2020 thermometer gaps.

All six are descriptive. The country slopes treat survey-to-survey noise as independent and ignore changes in survey measurement; the inequality correlations use 38 to 56 overlapping observations of two slow-moving series and should be read as patterns, not tests.

Sources

Every work linked in this paper, grouped by topic.

Data

- **Voteview:** Lewis, Jeffrey B., Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal, Adam Boche, Aaron Rudkin, and Luke Sonnet. *Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database: DW-NOMINATE Scores*. voteview.com
- **General Social Survey:** NORC at the University of Chicago. *GSS Cumulative File 1972–2024, Release 3a*. gss.norc.org
- **Cooperative Election Study:** *Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2024*. Harvard Dataverse. doi:10.7910/DVN/X11EP6
- **Cross-national affective polarization:** Boxell, Levi, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro. *Replication Data for "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization."* Harvard Dataverse. doi:10.7910/DVN/E8Q4BX
- **Gallup:** *Governance Poll Topline*, September 2026. news.gallup.com
- **Pew Research Center:** *Public Trust in Government: 1958–2025*, December 4, 2025. pewresearch.org
- **World Inequality Database:** *Income Share of the Top 1% before Tax*, via Our World in Data. ourworldindata.org
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What is being explained

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