The Politicization of Disagreement: Assessing the Changing Structure of American Public Opinion

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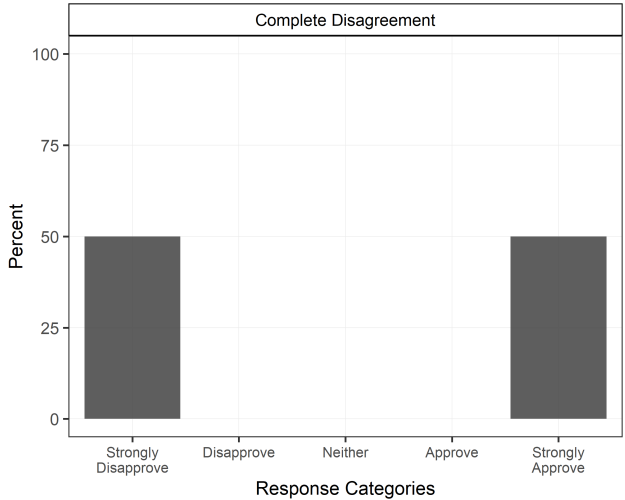
Research questions

1. Across a wide range of beliefs, what is the relationship between disagreement and political sorting?
2. How has this changed over time?

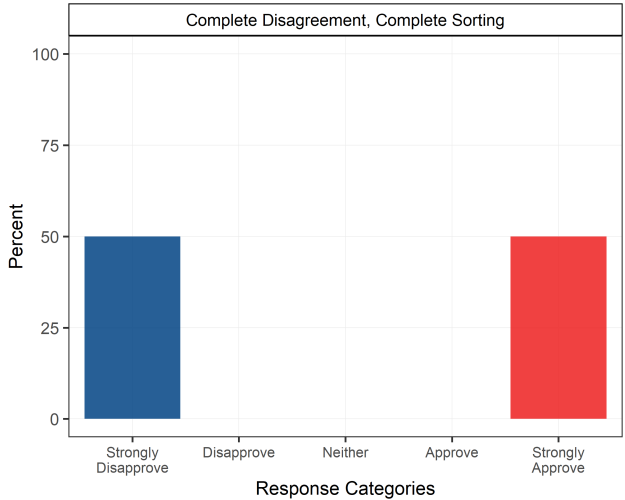
Prior research

- Measuring change in the structure of American public opinion. DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson (1996); Fiorina, Abrams and Pope (2005); Baldassarri and Gelman (2008); Levendusky (2011); Baldassarri and Park (2020)
  1. Disagreement: shape & spread of opinion distributions
  2. Sorting: extent opinion distributions of political groups differ

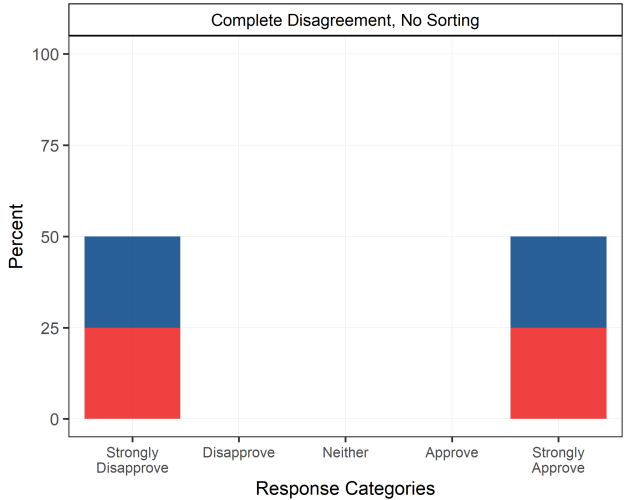
Conceptual relationship between disagreement & sorting



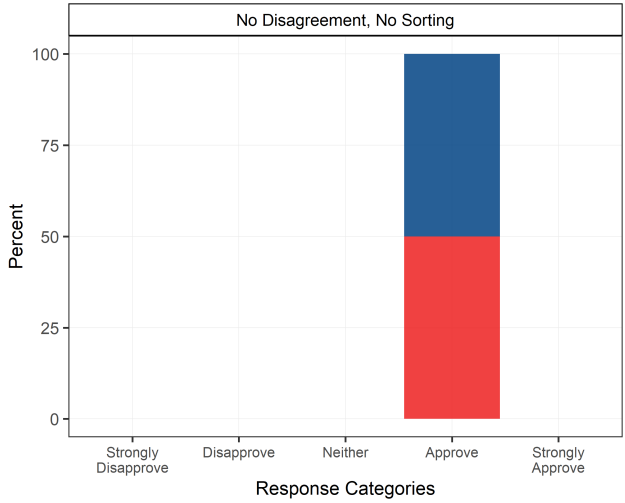
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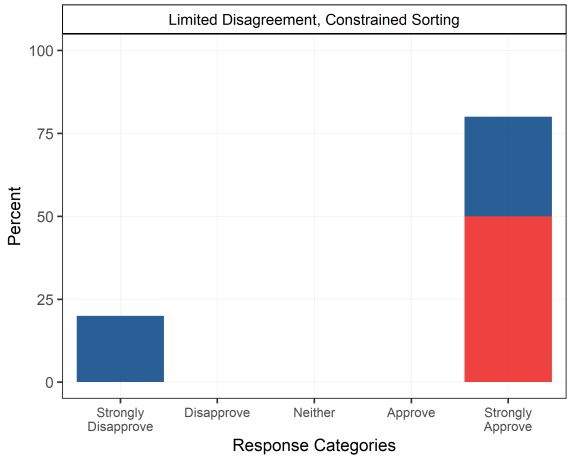
Conceptual relationship between disagreement & sorting



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Conceptual relationship between disagreement & sorting



Data – General Social Survey

- 32 cross-sectional, mostly face-to-face, surveys representative of non-institutionalized adults living in U.S. households.
- 1972–2018.
- $N = 64,814$.

Data – My sample of items

- 350 ordinal, subjective items (not including party & ideological identification):
  1. Fielded in three or more decades
  2. Non-factual Alwin (2007)
  3. Non-binary
- Classified into 15 substantive domains. Hout and Hastings (2016)

Measures – Disagreement

Input: distribution of responses to item j with K possible values, $j_1, j_2, \ldots, j_K$, which occur with probabilities $P(j_1), P(j_2), \ldots, P(j_K)$.

$$D_j = -\sum_{k=1}^{n} P(j_k) \log_2 \left(1 - \frac{|j_k - \mu_j|}{j_K - j_1}\right)$$

Output: a value between 0 (complete consensus) and 1 (complete disagreement).

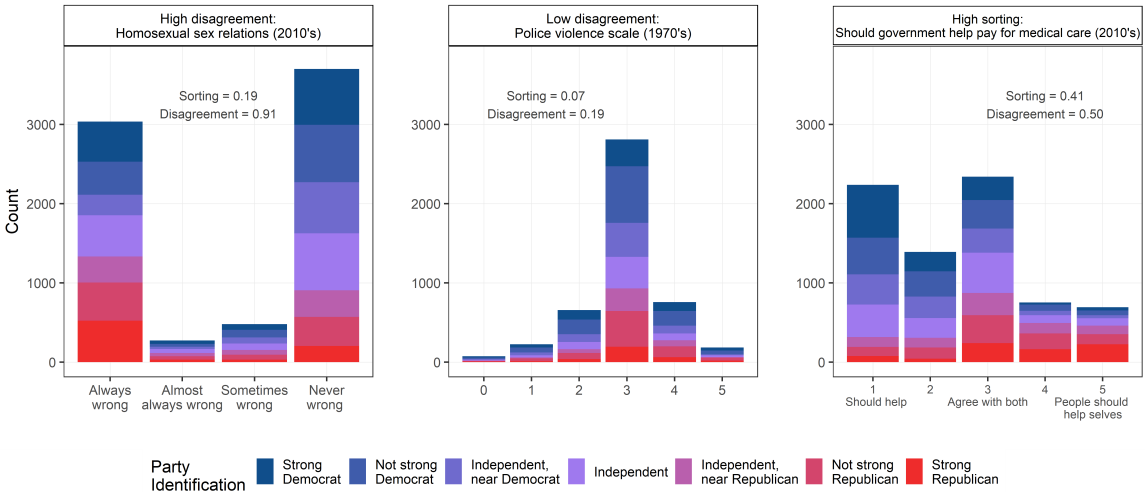
Tastle and Wierman (2007)

Measures – Sorting

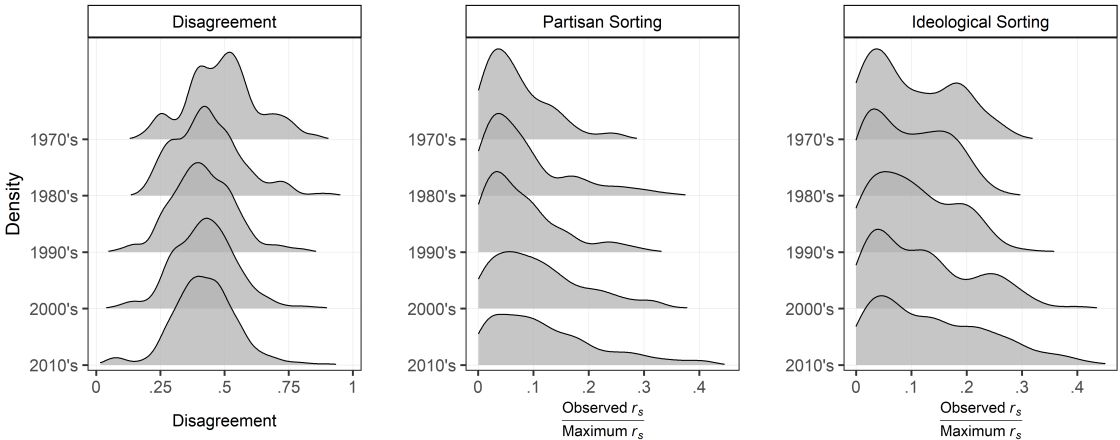
$$S_j = \frac{\text{Observed } r_s}{\text{Maximum } r_s}$$

where r_s is the Spearman correlation between item j and the measure of political identification in a given decade. Demirtas and Hedeker (2011)

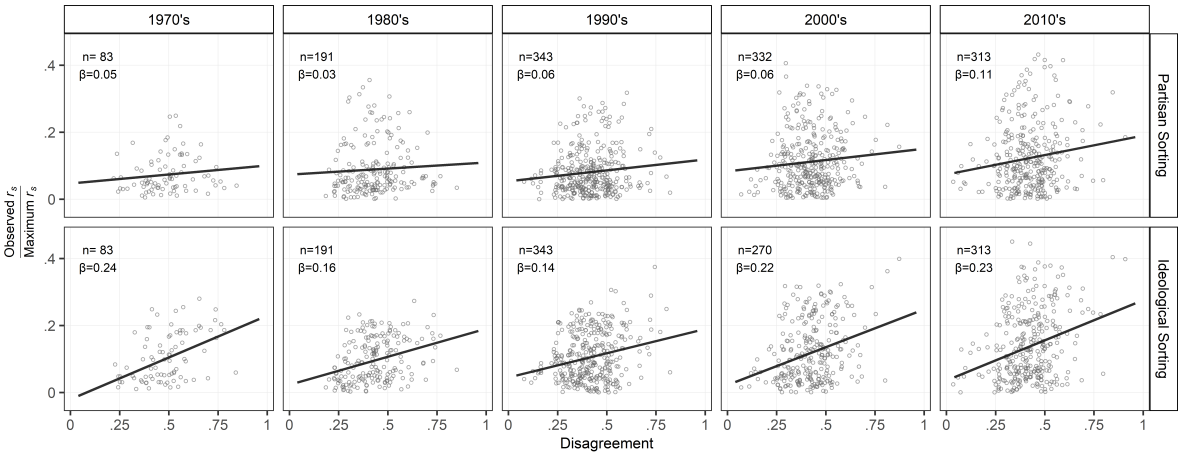
Example item distributions



Results – Disagreement & sorting over time



Results – Association between disagreement & sorting



Conclusions

- Some contentious items remain unsorted.
- Stability in disagreement.
  1. Overall level
  2. Domains/items that are contentious

- Broad range of items increasingly sorted by partisan or ideological identification.
- Positive association between disagreement & partisan sorting growing.

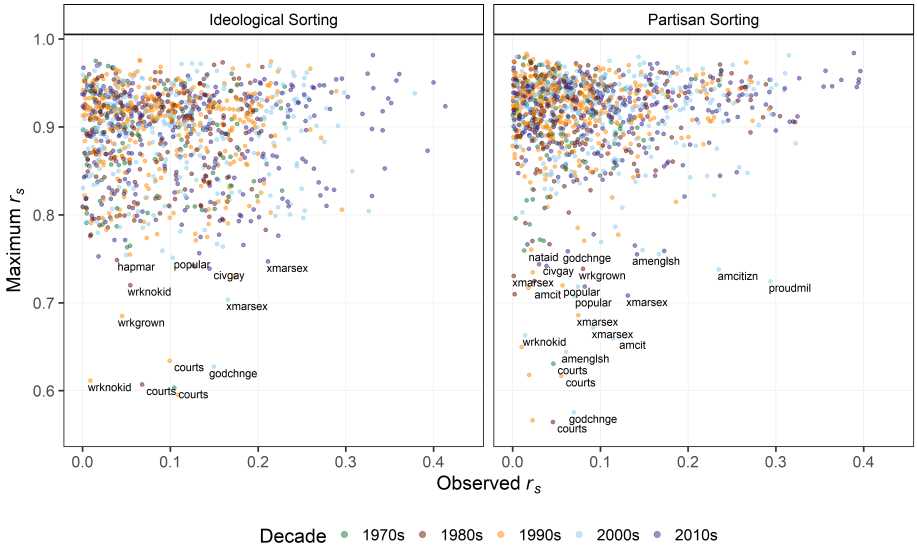
Thank you

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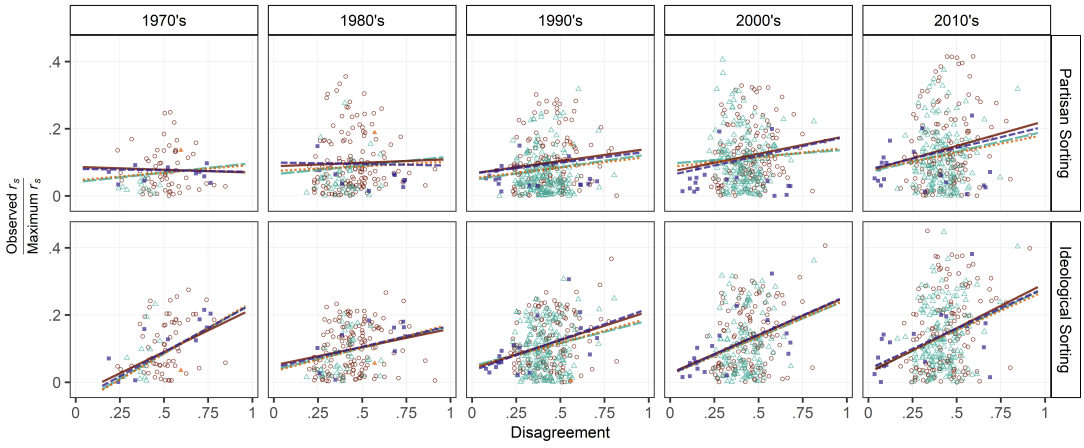
Additional Slides

1. Maximum vs. observed sorting
2. Different item samples
3. Trends over time by domain and item
4. Voter–non-voter differences

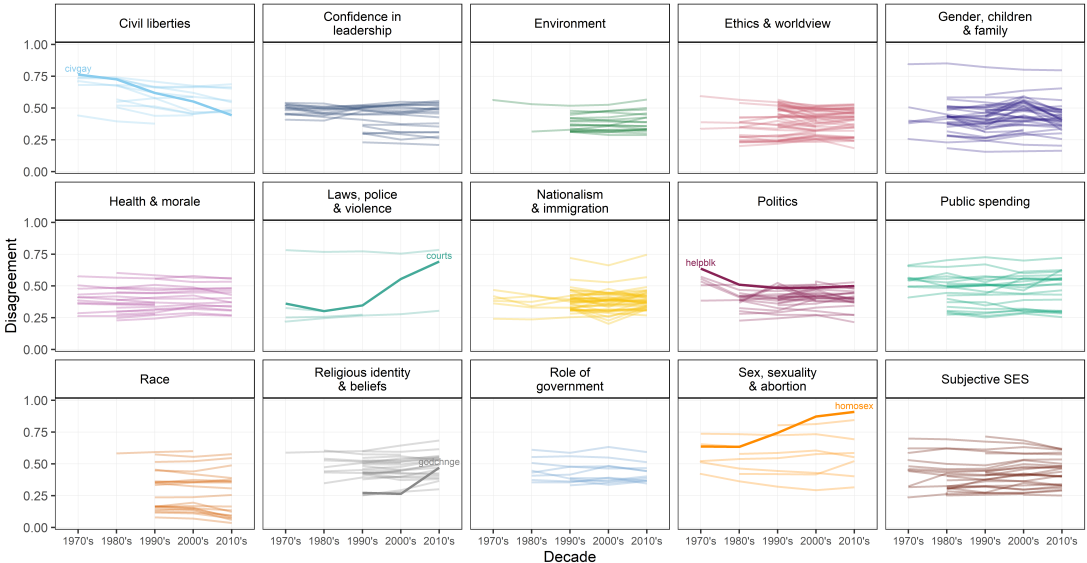
Maximum vs. observed sorting



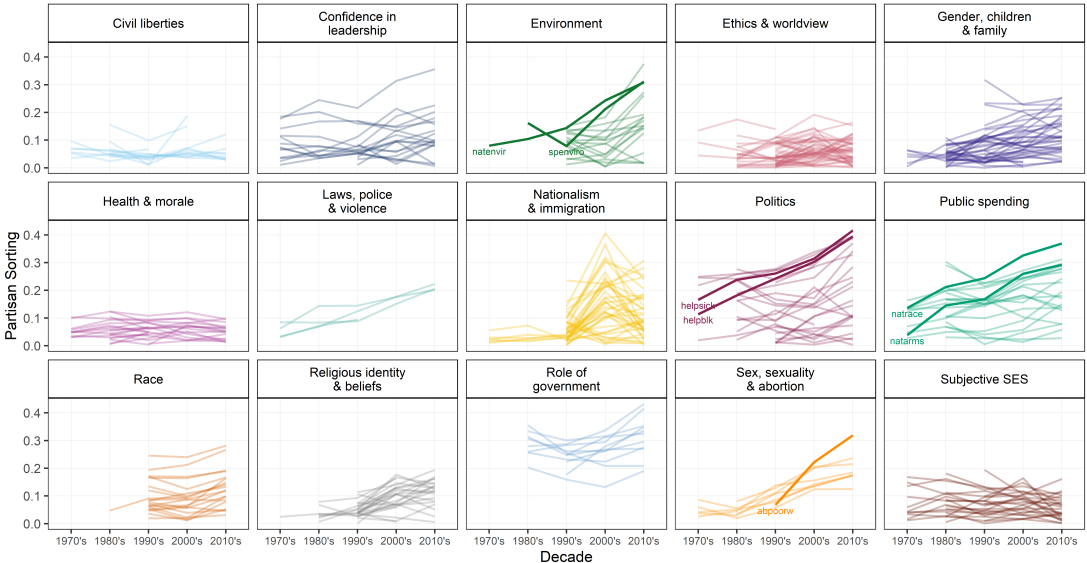
Different item samples



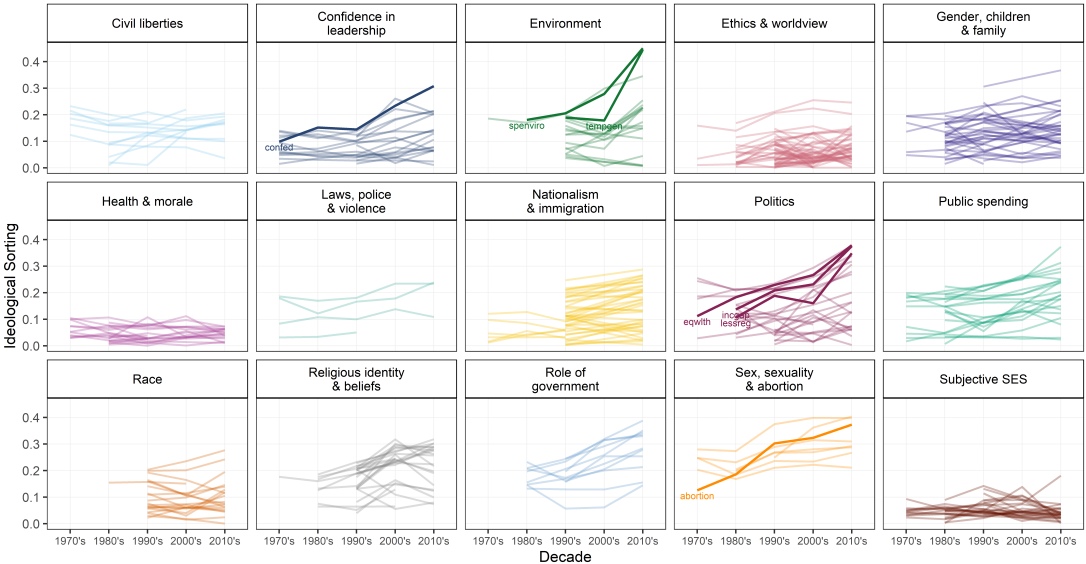
Disagreement over time by domain and item



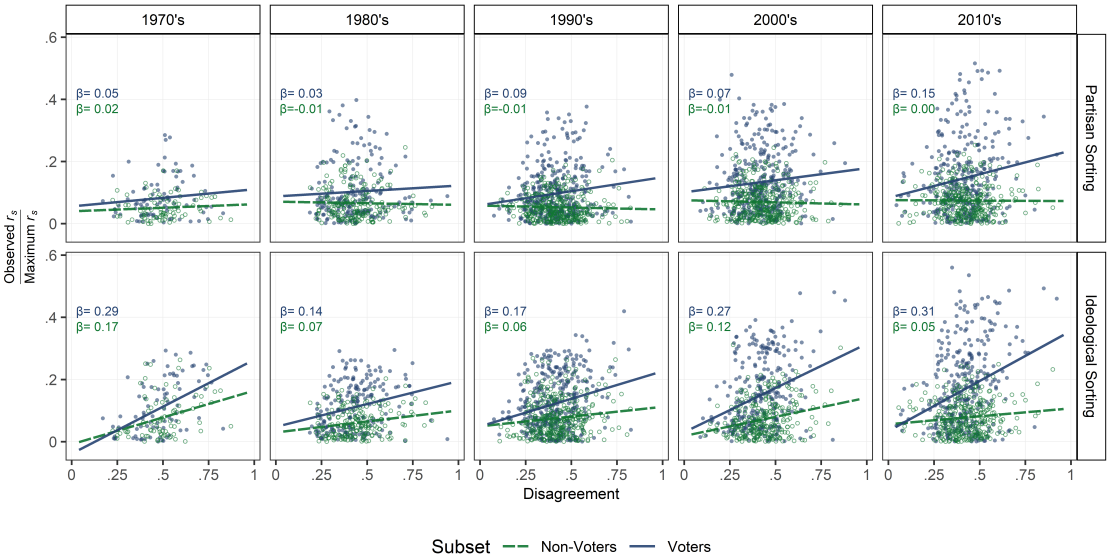
Partisan sorting over time by domain and item



Ideological sorting over time by domain and item



Association between disagreement & sorting by voting behavior



Voter–non-voter differences

