The Crucial Role of Race in Twenty-First Century US Political Realignment

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Abstract Traditional realignment theory has fallen out of fashion among political scientists, yet the popular press talk about political realignments with great regularity. However, in this research note we show that political science should reconsider realignment theory because over the last decade American politics has dramatically realigned—but only for white Americans. Specifically, we demonstrate that income has gone from a highly polarizing factor to one in which there is little to no polarization at all, while at the same time education polarization has increased dramatically to become the prominent demographic cleavage in the white segment of the electorate. However, no such realignment has occurred among Black or Latino voters. These differences across racial groups show how it is essential to consider race in theories of realignment, particularly because of the different experiences across racial groups. Realignment theory is quite viable in the twenty-first century, but the lens of race is the key to seeing the white realignment.

Over the last two decades, political "realignments" seem to have occurred in nearly every election according to the popular press—and basically never according to political scientists. In 2004, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2018, and 2020, commentators and pundits announced that politics in America had realigned while political scientists simultaneously poured cold water on these announcements.[1] But do the pundits have a point, at least in some

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1. See, for example: https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/presidential-campaign/31810-2008-the-realignment-election, https://themonkeycage.org/2012/11/the-perils-of-democrats-euphoria-or-why-the-2012-election-is-not-a-realignment/, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/opinion/election-night-2016/is-2016a-political-turning-point-for-america, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/will-2020-bring-realignment-left/586624/, and https://www.

way? In many ways, American politics look very static: competition has been close between the parties for the past several years, and control of institutions shifts (almost regularly) between the parties (Lee 2016). But at the same time, many observers have noted that Donald Trump is either a cause or a symptom (or both) of a working-class shift that is plausibly tied to race. Does the national stability mask change that is significant in some way? And could that change reflect a significant realignment of American politics?

We believe that race is the key to understanding the latest significant realignment in American politics, and in this article we show that while traditional perspectives on realignment may not fit the twenty-first century, an updated version that uses the lens of race is not just viable, but essential. Racial attitudes have occupied the attention of political scientists to a far greater degree than realignment (Mendelberg 2001; Tesler and Sears 2010; Schaffner et al. 2018; Jardina 2019). While some thought the election of Barack Obama heralded an era of postracial democracy, most work on race has emphasized how racial identity has become more important to American voters and led to a world far from postracial. In this note, we argue that the best perspective on realignments marries the importance of race to the recently realigning cleavages of recent American politics, an important perspective that can help revive a literature that was seen as all but dead in previous decades (Shafer 1990; Mayhew 2002).

This realignment has occurred over the past couple of decades, but the contours of the shift are only visible when looking through the lens of race. Looking from 1980 to 2020, we show that in the most recent decade the dominant demographic cleavage of partisan preferences in the electorate has entirely shifted—but only for white Americans. Shifting cleavages is perhaps the classic claim found in many places, but most prominently with respect to realignment theory in both Schattschneider (1960) and Sundquist (1983). Sundquist goes so far as to declare that a "redefinition of the basis of party cleavage" is one of the key characteristics of a realignment. Mayhew (2002) supports this definition when he says that "in an electoral realignment, a new dominant voter cleavage over interests ... replaces an old one" (p. 22). Beginning in earnest in 2008, we show a dramatic shift in the partisan preferences among white voters along two important political divisions—income and education. Specifically, we demonstrate that income has gone from being the relatively highly polarizing factor to one in which there is little to no polarization at all. At the same time we show that education polarization has shifted from being a relatively weak division in the mid-1990s to becoming a political chasm in recent years, but just among whites.

washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/11/10/2016-was-an-ordinary-election-not-a-realignment/.

Consistent with past theory, there is no evidence for any such shift among Blacks or Latinos (Dawson 1994; Hajnal 2020); it is a white realignment.

This shift in white voting based on income and education has obscured the scope of the current realignment because the two factors are often grouped together to create a measure of the "working class" (Carnes and Lupu 2020). However, we believe that lumping the two variables together is both holding back our understanding of the changing American electorate as well as obscuring a realignment that is happening right now. Classic realignment theory may have paid attention to issues influenced by race, but to our knowledge never took the crucial step of focusing on only a subset of the electorate—white voters in this case. To clearly see the present realignment, we have to focus on each racial group separately, in part because each group sees political conflict in fundamentally different ways (Jefferson 2021). We argue that whites and non-whites appear to be having different political conversations rooted in different political cleavages (Green and McElwee 2019). This calls into question how well the party system currently represents Black and Latino voters. A white-centric political cleavage defined by educational polarization seems likely to eventually have feedback effects that could limit the popularity of the parties among non-white voters, and the parties would do well to consider this in their strategies.

To accomplish this, we rely on two large, publicly available surveys of Americans, the American National Election Study (ANES) and the Cooperative Election Study (CES, formerly CCES).[2] While the ANES survey has fewer respondents than the CES, it has the virtue of covering more time and extends back to the mid-twentieth century. On the other hand, the CES only extends to the early 2000s but includes tens of thousands of responses in each of the two-year waves, allowing for more detailed analysis of racial subgroups, which will be important for the analyses below.

Evidence for the Shift

Before looking at the specific divisions among voters, we note the importance of considering income separately from education. Figure 1 demonstrates that income and education have never been highly correlated among any demographic group. The largest value is 0.46 among Blacks in 2016. The largest value in the pooled sample is 0.43 in 1992. Perhaps more importantly, the two concepts have become less correlated in recent years, and

2. Our analyses used the ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File covering years from 1948 to 2020 (see Time Series Cumulative Data File [1948–2020]—ANES | American National Election Studies for details about methods and measures) and the CES cumulative data file including data from 2008 to 2020 (see Cumulative CES Common Content—CCES Dataverse [harvard.edu] for methodological details and measures; this file has been updated with 2022 data since the analyses reported here were conducted).
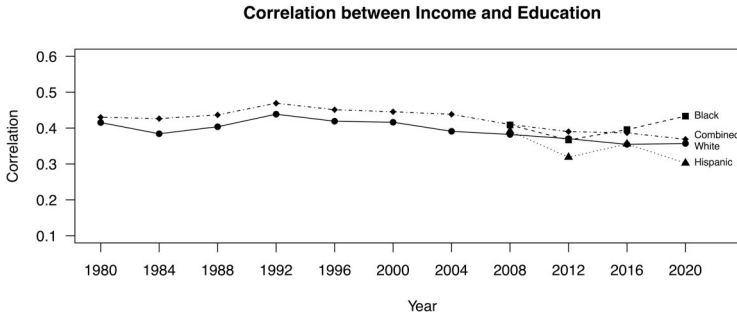
Correlation between Income and Education

Figure 1. ANES voters between 1980 and 2020. Correlations for Black and Latino voters are only shown from 2008 to 2020 because of insufficiently large samples in earlier years.

2020 was the lowest value for all groups aside from Blacks. Income has never been a simple function of education (or vice versa), and this is more true today than it has been in previous decades.[3]

Of course, even if education and income are relatively uncorrelated, it is still possible that the two factors correlate with partisan preferences in the same way. However, this is not the case—especially since 2012. Figure 2 presents the key evidence of a cleavage shift among white voters. The figure plots the presidential (left panel) and congressional (right panel) vote in each year for the "high" minus "low" income respondents and high minus low education white respondents.[4] Over the last forty years, the political preferences of white voters have undergone a massive shift as the education and income cleavages have swapped positions. During the 1980s and 1990s, political preferences among whites were divided much more by income than education, with low-income white voters preferring Democratic candidates by 10 to 20 points more than high-income white voters. The relationship between income and the vote and education and the vote has dramatically shifted, even changing signs. At the same time, the dominant vote predictor has shifted from being income to education—something that was not true before the early 2000s.

3. Income and education are coded using a five-category scale and correlated using the unweighted values for each year. Supplementary Material figures A.1–A.3 show the distribution of each variable according to these five categories across all years and note the specific survey questions used for each variable.

4. High income is defined as household income above the 67th percentile. Low income is defined as household income below the 34th percentile. High education is defined as having a bachelor's degree or more. Low education is defined as having a high school degree or less. Results are weighted by variable VCF0009z in the ANES. Supplementary Material figures A1–A3 show the proportions of each group in the electorate across time and provide details on variables used for these calculations.
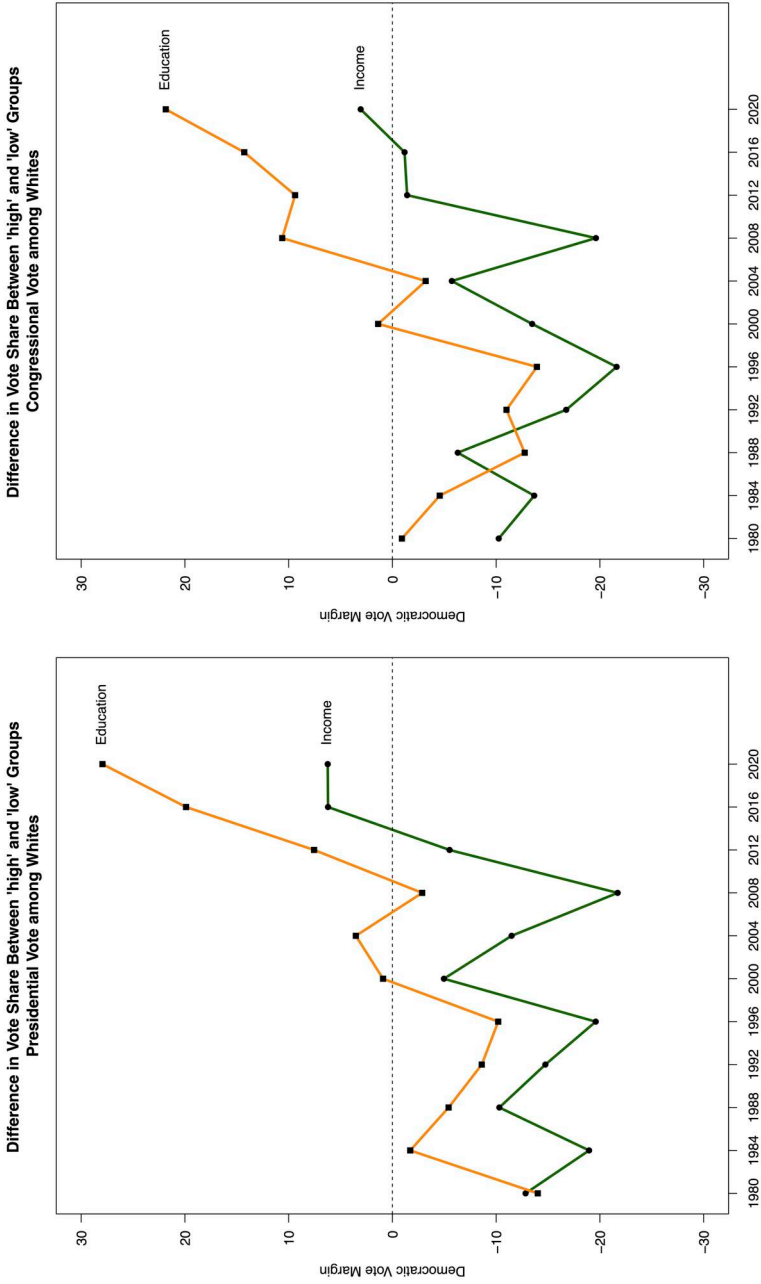
Figure 2. Realignment by education instead of economics among whites: both panels in the figure show the difference in Democratic vote shares between high- and low-education voters and high- and low-income voters from 1980 to 2020. The left panel shows this for presidential vote choice, and the right panel shows this for Congressional vote choice.

Regarding income, in 2012, 2016, and 2020 the difference in Democratic support between high- and low-income whites was quite small, with vote margins ranging between −6 percentage points and 6 percentage points for presidential vote and between −2 percentage points and 3 percentage points for congressional elections. In other words, the difference between high- and low-income whites' preferences for Democrats shifted by more than 20 percentage points and flipped signs, with high-income white voters now being *more* likely to support Democratic voters than low-income whites in 2020. However, the absolute size of that difference is much smaller in 2020 than in 2008 or any of the elections prior to 2008.

With respect to education, since 2008 the difference in support for Democrats between low- and high-education white voters has not only flipped signs but grown dramatically in absolute value. Between 1980 and 2008, the difference in preferences between low- and high-education whites was relatively small and leaned in the direction of low-education whites being more supportive of Democrats than high-education white voters. However, since 2008 this relationship has reversed and grown in magnitude substantially, to the point that in 2020 low-education white voters preferred Democrats by a 28- and 22-point margin in the presidential and congressional elections, respectively.

In just over a decade (2008–2020), the dominant cleavage between whites has entirely reversed from an electorate polarized along income but not along education to one where income is less divisive, while education polarization has grown to its largest size in forty years.[5] In fact, 2016 and 2020 are the only two years across the forty years of data shown here in which *both* high-income and high-education white voters favored the Democratic Party more than their low-income and low-education counterparts. Supplementary Material figures A.4 and A.5 explore this relationship by showing the correlation over time between the full range of income (education) values and vote choice rather than polarization between the "high" and "low" groups (as figure 2 does). Those figures also show that the trend holds even while controlling for racial composition and population density of the voters' county. Together, these figures show a dramatic realignment happening across the entire country among white voters of rising education polarization occurring in tandem with a depolarization and diminishment of the correlation between income and vote choice.

This dramatic realignment, however, is *only* true among the white respondents, illustrating the crucial role of race. There is no evidence of a realignment beyond the white segment of the electorate, among the broader set of all non-white voters. Figure 3 displays the same calculations for both

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5. Supplementary Material figures A.7 and A.8 display extremely similar results for congressional voting over the same time period.
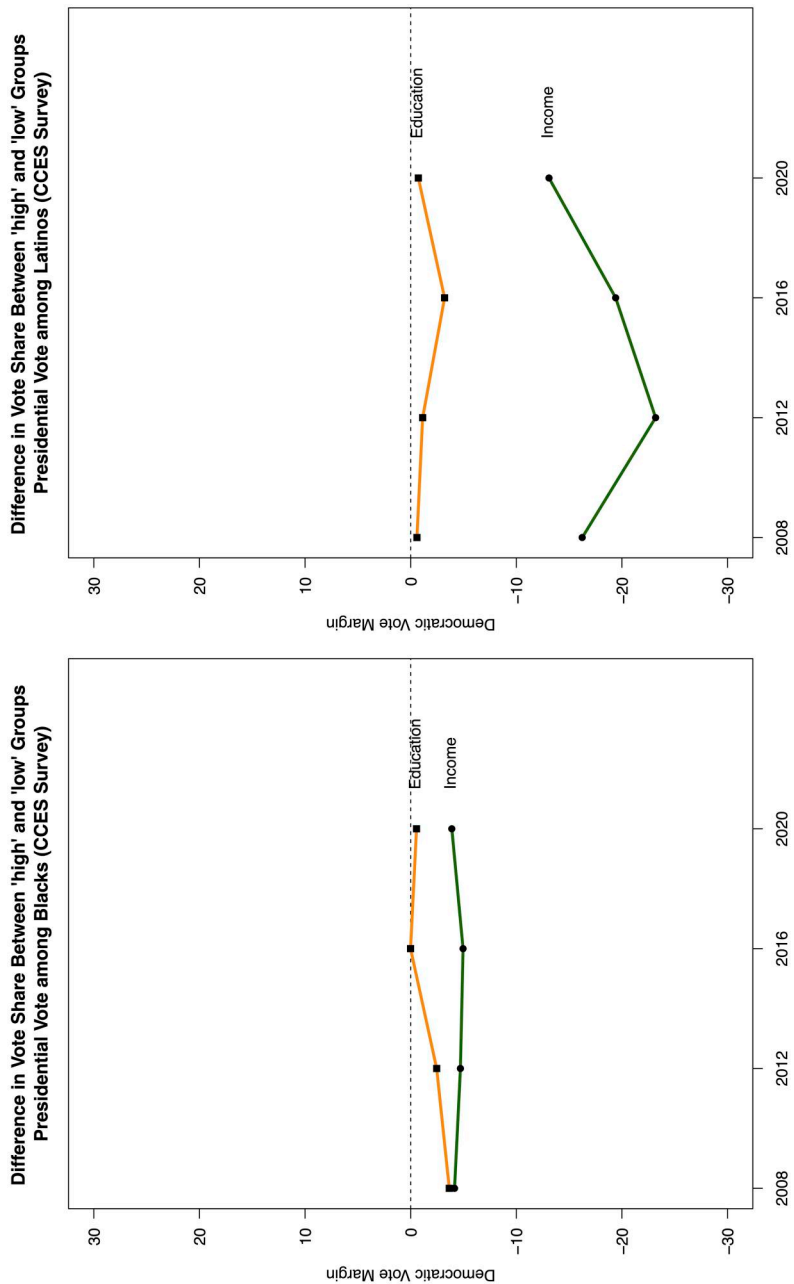
Figure 3. No realignment by education or income among Blacks and Latinos: the left panel shows results for Black voters in the CCES, and the right panel shows results for Latinos in the CCES. We use the CCES instead of the ANES due to a lack of sample size for minority groups in the ANES to make valid comparisons. Comparable figures for the ANES are included in Supplementary Material section 3.

Blacks and Latinos, and it is immediately clear that the picture is *very* different.[6] Focusing on the left-hand panel for a moment, the differences between high-income (high-education) and low-income (low-education) Black respondents are quite muted (never larger than 5 percentage points), indicating very little polarization among this group across either variable in these years. To the degree there is any polarization, the dividing factor is more recently about income than education. In both 2016 and 2020 there was almost no polarization at all based on education.

Latino respondents are different from both Blacks and whites. The right panel of figure 3 shows that there is substantial polarization in voting patterns among Latinos, but this polarization is almost entirely along the income dimension. There is no meaningful difference by education in any year (the largest value is −3.2 percentage points in 2016). High-education Latinos vote just as low-education Latinos do.

Given the results in figures 2 and 3, it would be a mistake to treat Latinos and Blacks as indistinguishable from whites. Each of the three groups are quite different. The dimensions of political conflict among whites have *entirely reversed* since the late 2000s. Education polarization has dramatically increased, while income polarization has diminished and is essentially negligible. Among whites, the role of these factors has reversed such that high-education whites are now much more likely to favor Democrats than whites with low education. Income has lost its predictive power (though a slight advantage among higher-income whites went to Democrats in 2020). Blacks display little polarization at all, and what does appear is mostly along the income dimension. Latinos, in contrast, have much more significant polarization, but only by income and not by education. Most importantly: *there is no evidence of a change in the dominant cleavage for either group*. Unlike whites, these two groups exhibit essentially the same voting patterns across the past several decades.[7]

Implications

The key implication of this data is a twenty-first-century realignment of whites that political scientists should take seriously. Though there is evidence that the parties have been shifting their bases of support for many years (Kitschelt and Rehm 2019), 2016 and 2020 still stand out as rather sharp breaks with the past, just as one expects from realignment theory.

6. Due to insufficient sample size in the ANES, these figures use data from the CCES cumulative data file, which only extends back to 2008, and are weighted by the variable "weight_cumulative."

7. We also consider alternative dimensions for a potential realignment on gender and/or age in the Supplementary Material. Supplementary Material figures A.17–A.19 show no discernible pattern of realignments on these factors across all races.

Of course, this is only true among white Americans, and race is the crucial lens for seeing this realignment. Will that pattern of white change continue? Only the future can tell and we make no strong claims here, but here we trace out the implications of this finding both for the parties' immediate electoral prospects, and also for our understanding of basic theories of political science, particularly those related to realignments, electoral coalitions, and representation.

Focusing on the parties, the results shown here suggest that the Democratic coalition has shifted from being a collection of non-whites and whites who are all low income and low education to a much more complicated arrangement of Blacks and low-income Latinos allied with high-education whites. It seems extremely likely that this is due to a shift in ideology or racial attitudes (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019).

This changed coalition may well present long-term tensions for the party, especially given the geographic concentration of their coalition: both racial and high-education voters tend to cluster in the largest cities of the country (Rodden 2019). It may also be true that socially liberal high-education whites may see greater conflict with more socially conservative Black and Latino voters (Lopez et al. 2016; White and Laird 2020), who may be more interested in the bread-and-butter issues associated with income redistribution and economics. These policy disagreements are likely to be quite different than the internal struggles of the Democratic coalition of the 1990s and early 2000s. Republicans face their own thorny set of issues and internal struggles over the traditional Republican policies of smaller government and lower taxes on the wealthy as low-income and low-education white voters come to dominate the party in a new way (Blum 2020).

The depolarization and reversal among high-income whites paired with the dramatic polarization along educational lines suggests a white Democratic coalition that is defined more by "social status" or cosmopolitanism than wealth. Political commentator Jane Coaston humorously described this in the following tweet: "Now you can be an elite while making virtually no money, while someone who owns like six car dealerships in Findlay, Ohio is not an elite, despite having a significant income. This is very strange to me!"[8] Though the future remains unknown, we think it is likely that both parties are going to see increased coalition tension of just the sort Coaston pokes fun at.

A natural question to ask is what gave rise to this shift in the political allegiances of white voters based on income and education. While we do not believe there is a monocausal answer for this white realignment, we do see a fairly clear shift that begins in earnest around the Obama presidency and accelerates rapidly during the two elections in which Trump is on the ballot.

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8. https://mobile.twitter.com/janecoaston/status/1442474198262116360.

Supplementary Material figures A.9 and A.14 show 2008 as a key year in which the realignment gains particular steam and the shift seems to broadly affect the entire distribution of income and education. Both race and views of multiculturalism among whites, particularly progressive whites, have become so salient as to lead white voters to change their partisan loyalties when voting. For example, Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck (2017) find that the election of Obama triggered a "racialization of politics" among the white electorate and Mason, Wronski, and Kane (2021) show that Trump built on this fact by further bringing whites with "animus toward minority groups" (both racial and sexual minorities) into the Republican coalition. Abrajano and Hajnal (2017) describe the phenomenon as white backlash. What our data show is that these same whites who are shifting tend to also be those with lower levels of education who have more racial and social conservatism (Kam and Burge 2019).[9] Regardless of the mechanism, whites are realigning and other racial groups are not.

The consequences for representation are profound. While it is known that racial and ethnic background help define people's attitudes and ideas, this data shows that the realignment is organized around race as well, and that is likely to change the basis of representation. The allegiances of Black voters have shifted in the past, and while there is no evidence of any such shift yet, it would be odd if the white realignment did not eventually have feedback effects on the political agenda. For voters who have concerns more directly related to economics, political parties heavily influenced by the white cleavages are going to be less likely to truly represent the views of non-white voters well, an obviously significant problem for any political system.

Many questions remain. Will white voters continue this pattern? Will other racial groups follow? And what does it mean for theories of realignments in political science? It is too early to answer these questions definitively, though we can say that political science needs to pay more attention to the possibility of electoral realignment—as such a realignment is clearly happening. Moreover, we can speculate that as income becomes less polarizing, future political fights may shift away from highly economic concerns like tax rates or deficits to other cultural matters or disagreements about exactly *who* receives benefits from a potentially more generous welfare state. Furthermore, issues like the environment and funding for higher education might be more dominant on the new axis of political disagreement. When politics was mostly a contest between white voters (something that was essentially true in the past because of a combination of group size and discriminatory policies), realignment theory could focus on which issues or

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9. See https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/11/16/the-education-gap-among-whites-this-year-wasnt-about-education-it-was-about-race/ for a deeper discussion of this idea.

demographics were divisive among the entire electorate because the entire electorate was overwhelmingly white. However, the inclusion of Black voters and the growing rise of Latino voters makes it essential to consider how issue preferences and demographics translate to partisan support separately for each racial group, especially since different races can experience politics and view particular issues quite differently (Jefferson 2021). We think representation is likely to get harder with changes to the coalitions.

Our theories and measures of political realignments must become more cognizant of how race may interact with the cleavages of politics. There is no reason to believe that realignments must be constant across racial groups, and the data flatly contradicts that assumption. For both theoretical and practical reasons, this research should significantly affect how we see American politics. It requires us to care more about racial differences in both perception and practical representation in the United States.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary Material may be found in the online version of this article: https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfad063.

Acknowledgements

Data Availability

Replication data and documentation are available at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CLRE3V.

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Online Supplemental Materials for: The Crucial Role of Race in 21st Century U.S. Political Realignment

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November 17, 2023

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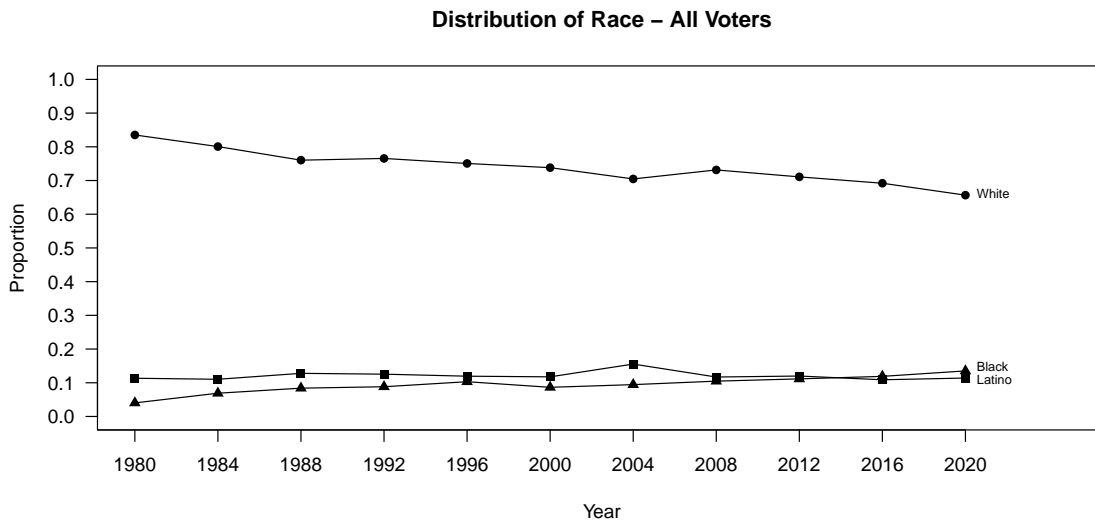
1 Descriptive Statistics of Electorate over Time

Distribution of Race – All Voters

Figure A.1: Distribution of Race among All Voters by Year in ANES. Race is from variable VCF0105a in the "ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File 1948-2020" and is weighted by variable VCF0009z.

Distribution of Income – All Voters
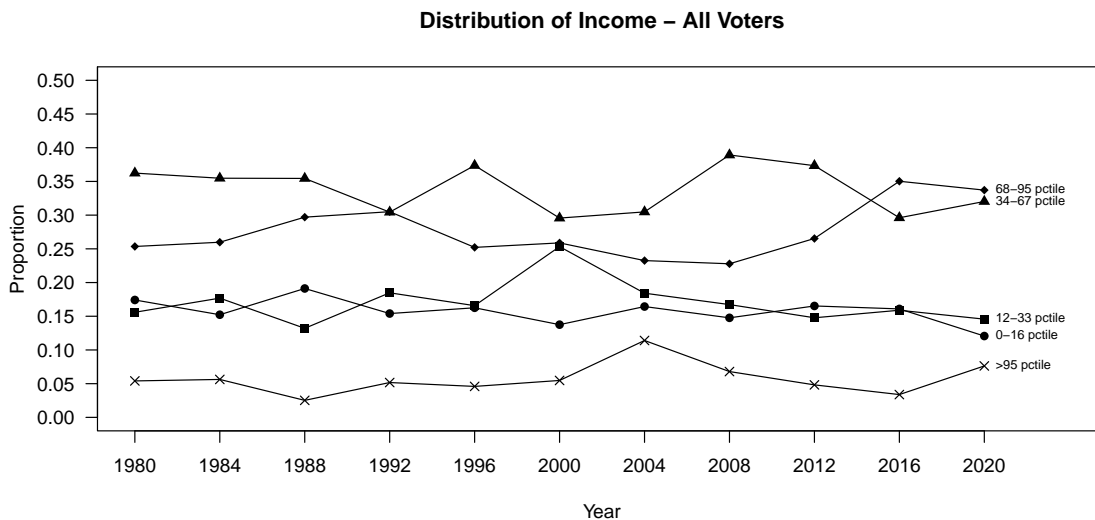
Figure A.2: Distribution of Income among All Voters by Year in ANES. Income is from variable VCF0114 in the "ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File 1948-2020" and is weighted by variable VCF0009z.

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Distribution of Education – All Voters
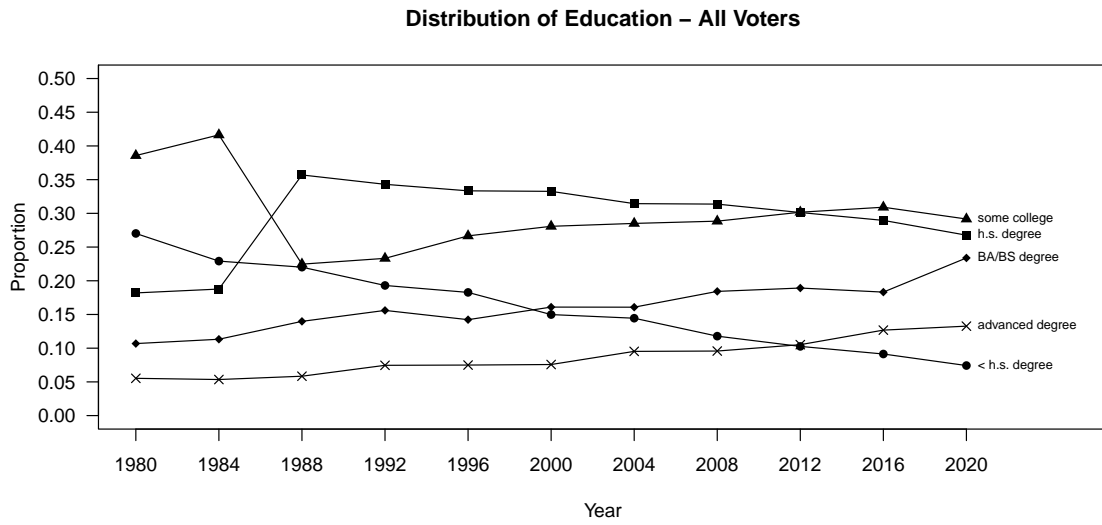
Figure A.3: Distribution of Education among All Voters by Year in ANES. Education is from variable VCF0140a in the "ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File 1948-2020" and is weighted by variable VCF0009z.

2   Correlations Across Time by Subgroups

The following figures show the correlation among white voters between income and voting for the Democratic candidate (left panel) and the correlation between education and voting for Democrats (right panel). In A.4 we break the data into three categories based ont he racial composition of white voters' county. We divide counties based on whether they are 1.) less than 50% white, 2.) between 50-75% white, and 3.) greater than 75% white. Each category contains roughly the same proportion of voters. Figure A.5 also divides counties, but based on their population density rather than racial composition. Here we divide counties based on whether they have a population density of 1.) rural, less than 200 people per square mile, 2.) suburban, between 200-1,000 people/square mile, and 3.) urban, greater than 1,000 people/square mile. We find that all parts of the country are experiencing white de-polarization on income and simultaneously rapid education polarization. This is particularly the case in suburban parts of the country.
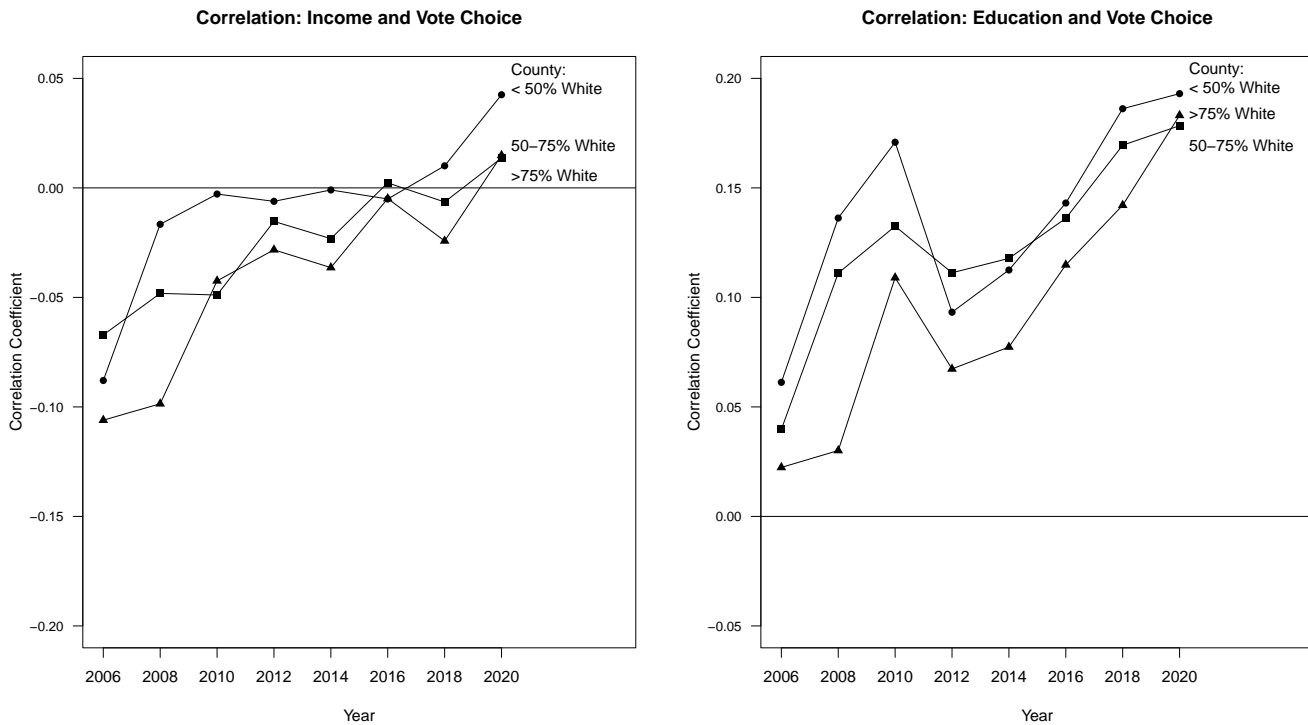
Figure A.4: Correlation between vote choice and income (left panel) and vote choice and education (right panel) among White voters. In each panel the data are divided into three categories based on the racial characteristics of the voter's county. The left panel shows a steady movement in the value of the correlation with income towards zero, and and eventual turn to a positive correlation in 2020. The right panel shows a steady increase in the value of the correlation with education across all three groupings of counties.
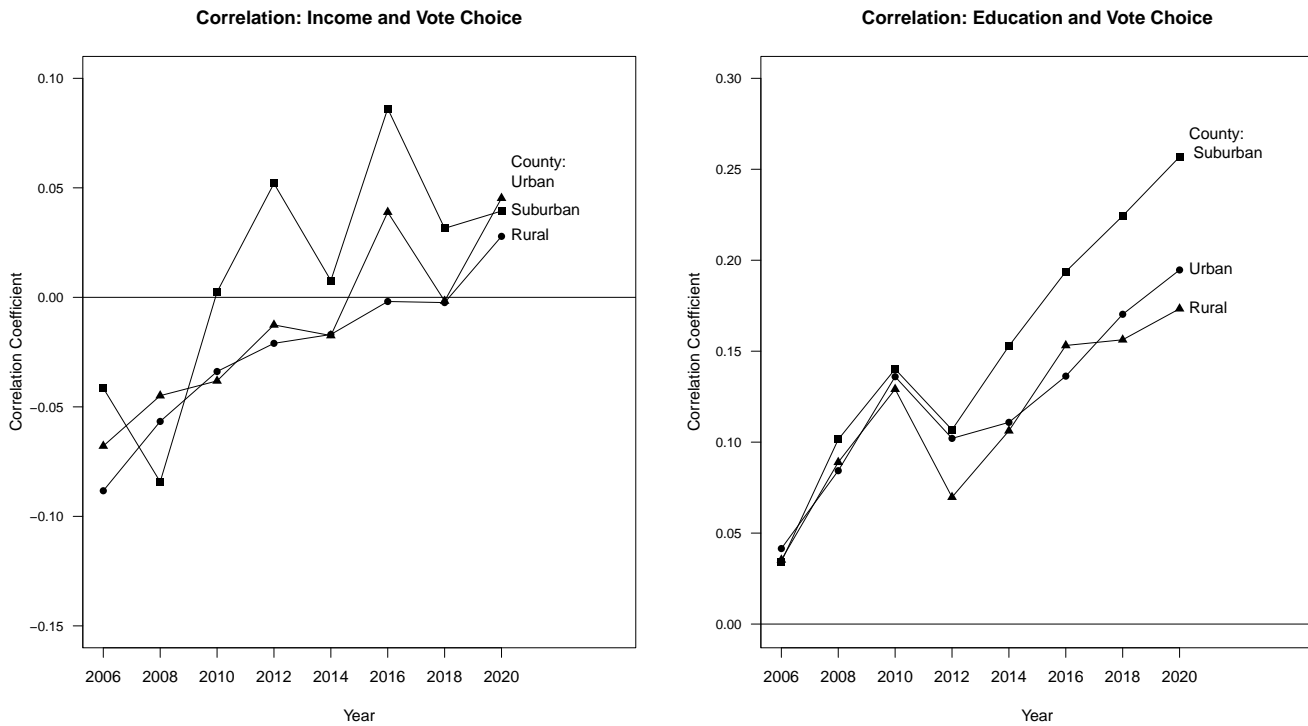
Figure A.5: Correlation between vote choice and income (left panel) and vote choice and education (right panel) among White voters. In each panel the data are divided into three categories based on the population density of the voter's county. The left panel shows a steady movement in the value of the correlation with income towards zero, and and eventual turn to a positive correlation in 2020. The right panel shows a steady increase in the value of the correlation with education across all three groupings of counties. However, the relationship between education and vote choice has grown fastest in suburban counties.

3 Replications of Main Results with Alternative Data

The following figures show the same results as Figures 2-3 in the main paper, but use alternative sources of data. These include presidential and congressional voting in the CCES and ANES surveys. The results are nearly identical to those presented in the main paper.
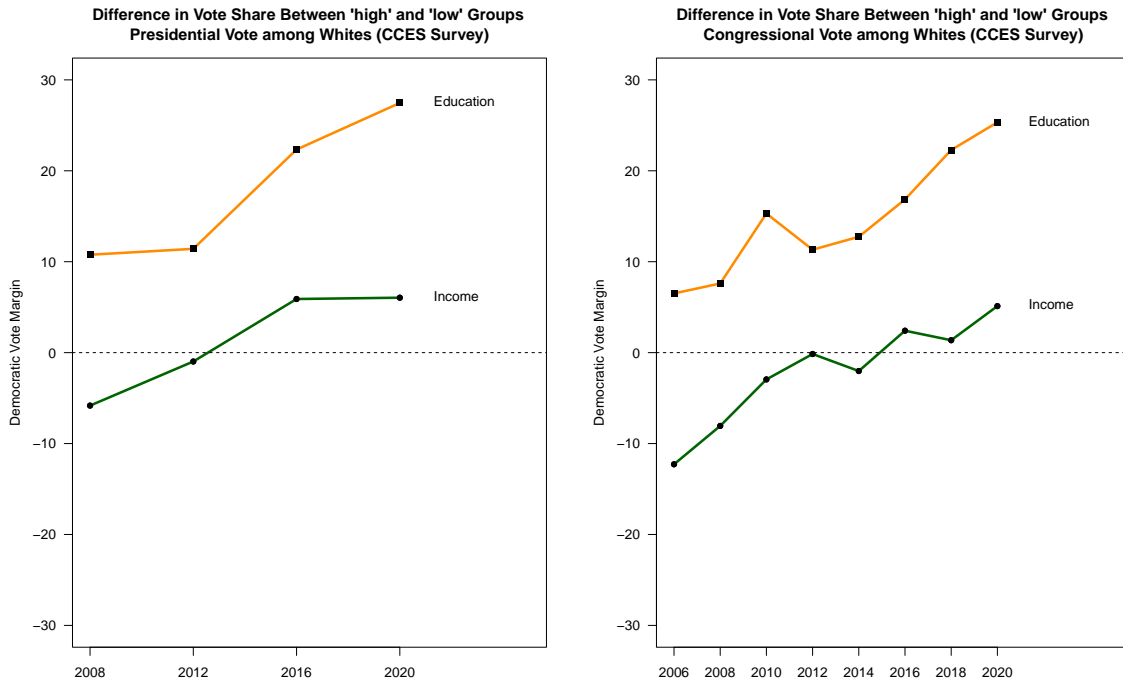
Figure A.6: Replication of Figure 2 - White reversal of income polarization and simultaneous education polarization. Here we use CCES data instead of the ANES. In the CCES, race is from variable 'race', income from variable 'faminc', and education from variable 'educ' and is weighted by variable 'weight_cumulative'.

**Difference in Vote Share Between 'high' and 'low' Groups
Congressional Vote**

**Difference in Vote Share Between 'high' and 'low' Groups
Congresional Vote**
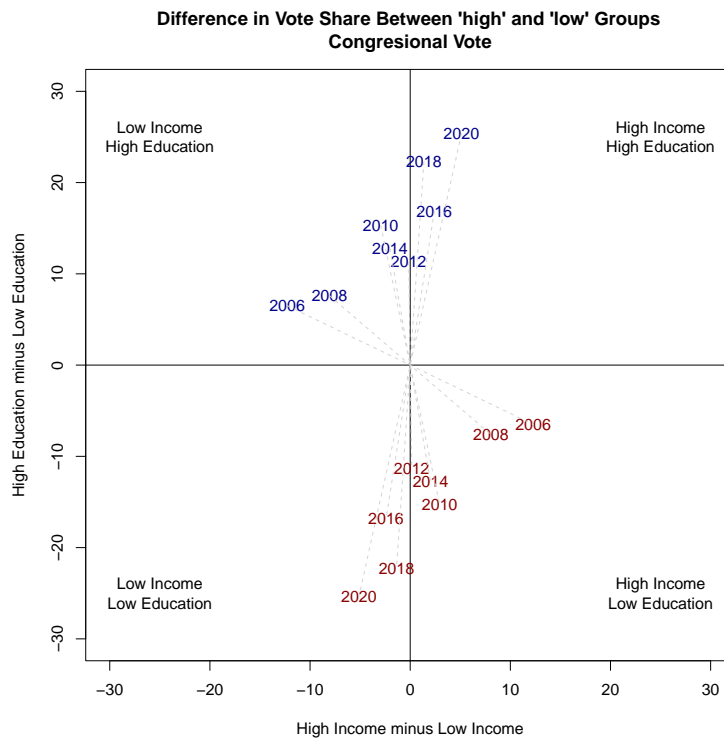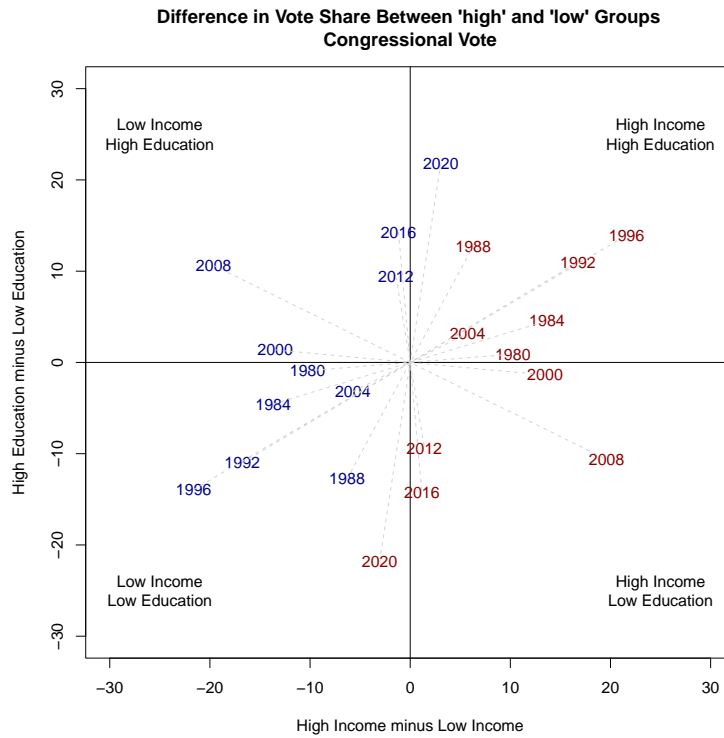
Figure A.7: White voter realignment, but looking at congressional elections rather than presidential elections. Top panel is ANES (1980-2020) and bottom panel is CCES data (2006-2020). In the ANES, congressional vote is from variable VCF0707, race is from variable VCF0105a, income from variable VCF0114, and education from variable VCF0140a and is weighted by variable VCF0009z . In the CCES, race is from variable 'race', income from variable 'faminc', and education from variable 'educ' and is weighted by variable 'weight_cumulative'. We see a similar pattern across survey and election type (president vs. congressional) of white voter de-polarization on income (x-axis) with simultaneous polarization on education (y-axis).

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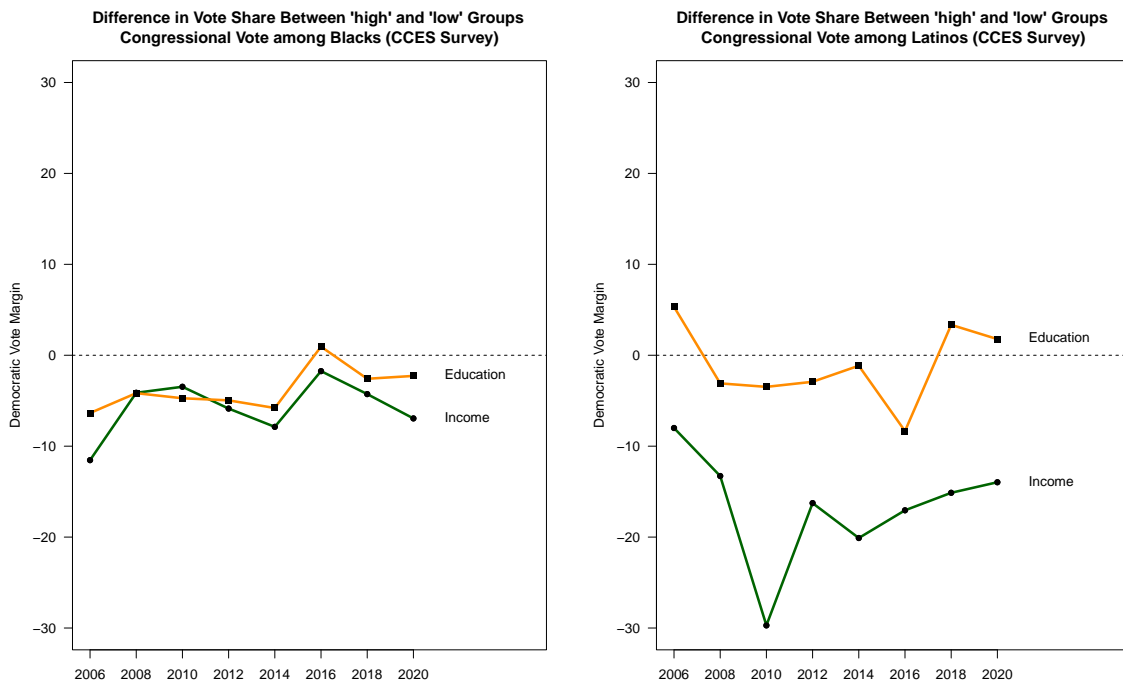
Figure A.8: Replication of Figure 3 in the main text among Black voters (left panel) and Latino voters (right panel) but for congressional elections rather than presidential elections. Data are from CCES survey (2006-2020).

4   Vote Shares by Group

The following four figures show the vote shares for subgroups of the electorate rather than the *differences* between those groups.
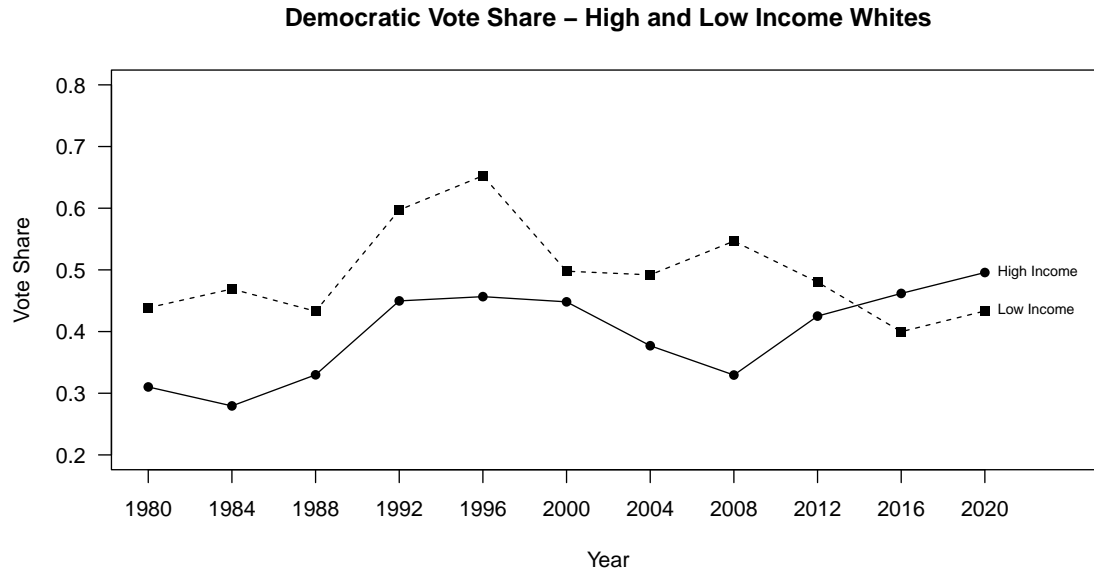
Democratic Vote Share – High and Low Income Whites

Figure A.9: Democratic Vote Shares for High and Low Income Whites. Data are from ANES (1980-2020). Race is from variable VCF0105a. Income is from variable VCF0114. Vote shares are for presidential vote using variable VCF0704a in the ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File 1948-2020 and are weighted by variable VCF0009z.

Democratic Vote Share – by Income Category, Whites
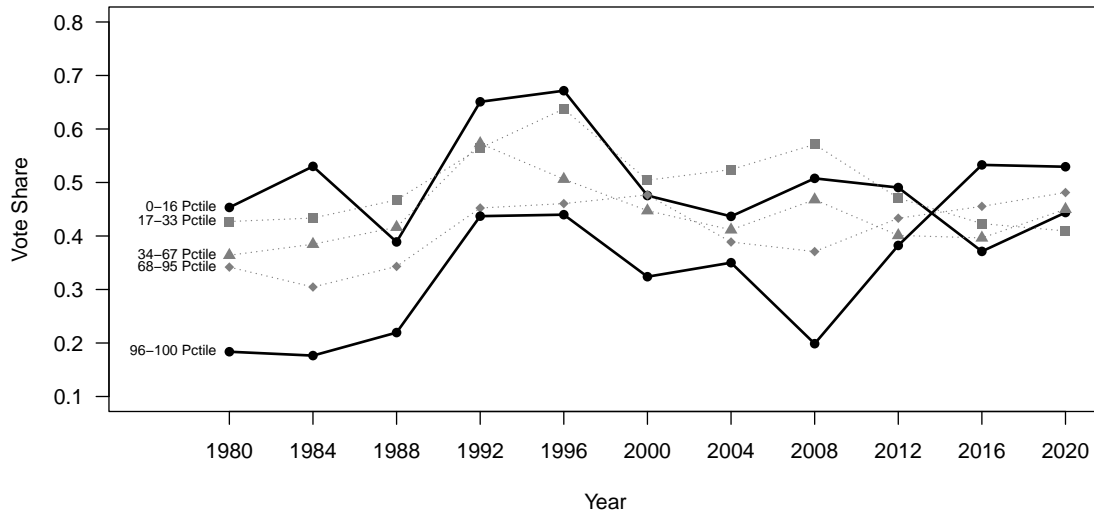
Figure A.10: Democratic Vote Shares for Whites, including all 5 income categories. Data are from ANES (1980-2020). Race is from variable VCF0105a. Income is from variable VCF0114. Vote shares are for presidential vote using variable VCF0704a in the ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File 1948-2020 and are weighted by variable VCF0009z.
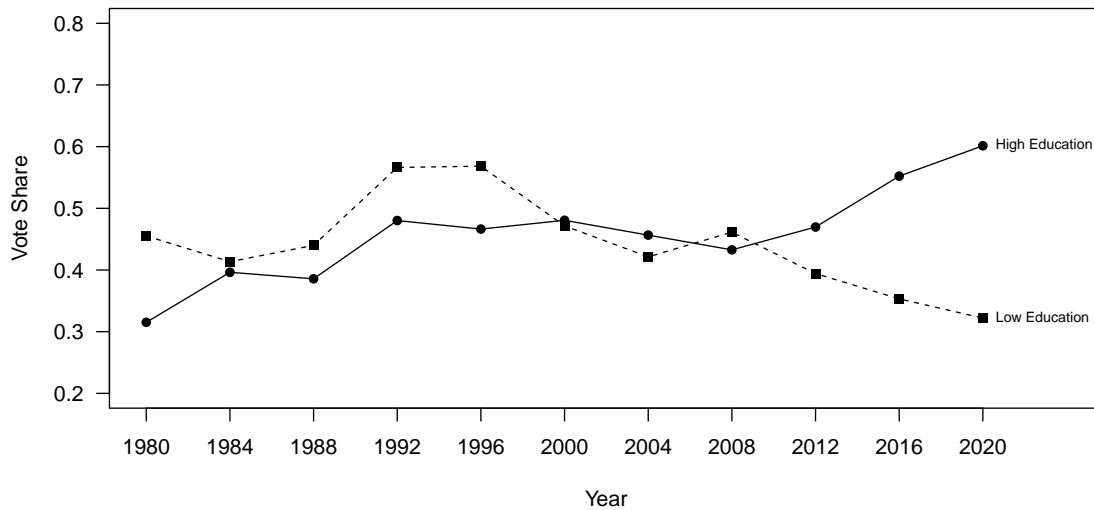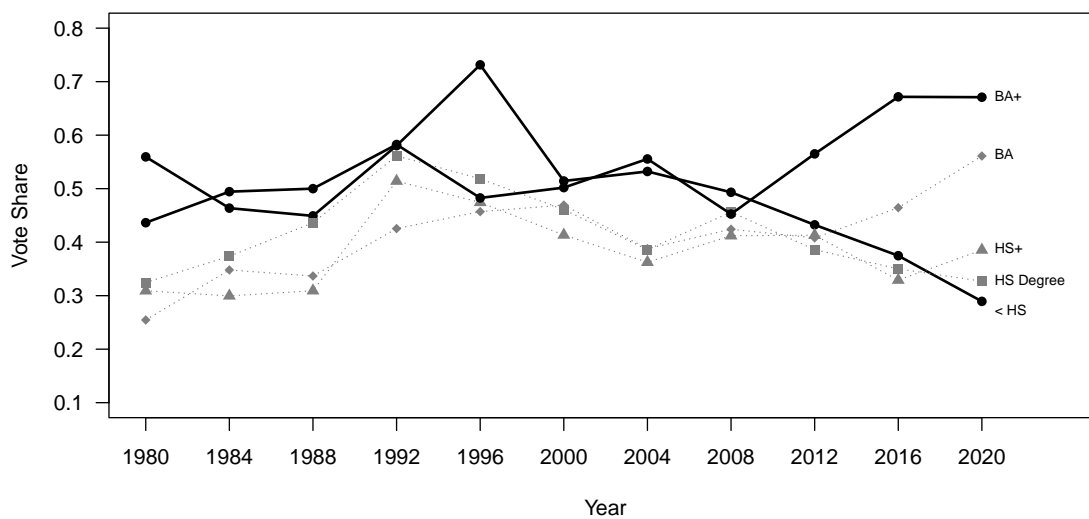
Democratic Vote Share – High and Low Education Whites

Figure A.11: Democratic Vote Shares for High and Low Education Whites. Data are from ANES (1980-2020). Race is from variable VCF0105a. Education is from variable VCF0140a. Vote shares are for presidential vote using variable VCF0704a in the ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File 1948-2020 and are weighted by variable VCF0009z.

Democratic Vote Share – by Education Category, Whites

Figure A.12: Democratic Vote Shares for Whites, including all 5 income categories. Data are from ANES (1980-2020). Race is from variable VCF0105a. Education is from variable VCF0140a. Vote shares are for presidential vote using variable VCF0704a in the ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File 1948-2020 and are weighted by variable VCF0009z.

Democratic Vote Share – High and Low Income Blacks
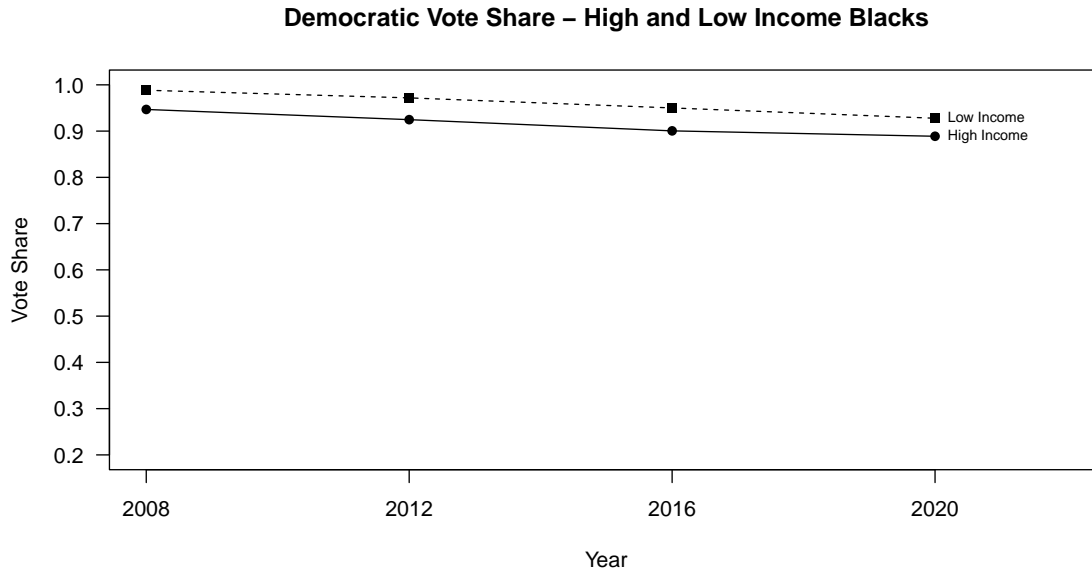
Figure A.13: Democratic Vote Shares for High and Low Income Blacks. Data are from CCES (2008-2020)

Democratic Vote Share – High and Low Education Blacks

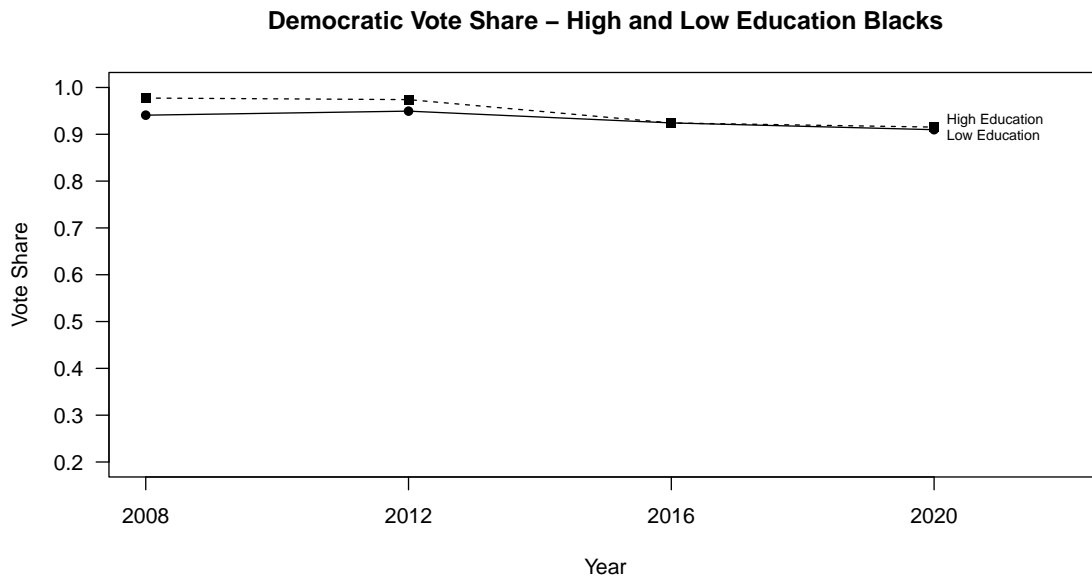Figure A.14: Democratic Vote Shares for High and Low Education Blacks. Data are from CCES (2008-2020)

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Democratic Vote Share – High and Low Income Latinos
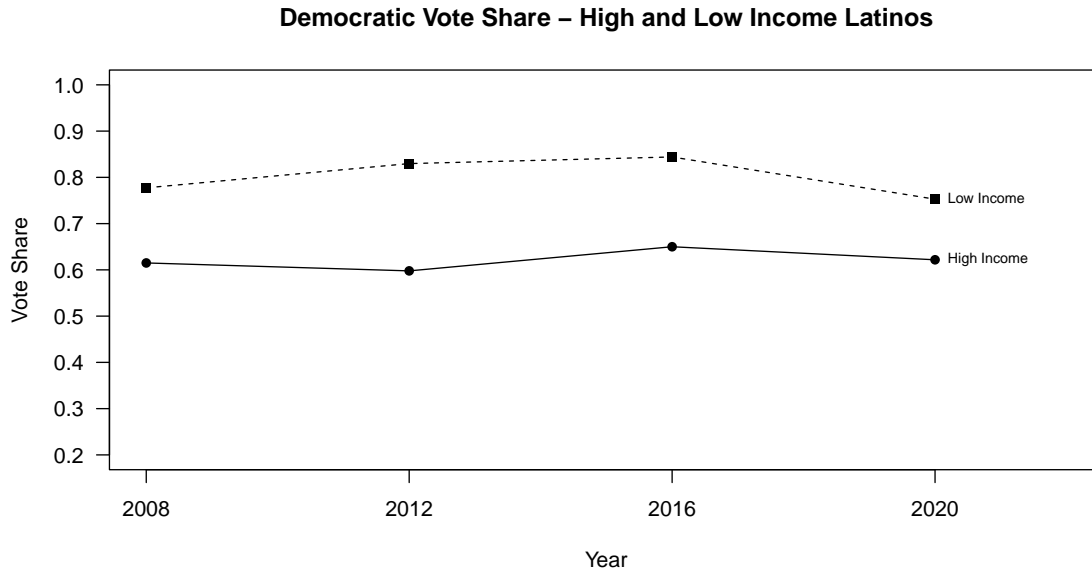

Figure A.15: Democratic Vote Shares for High and Low Income Latinos. Data are from CCES (2008-2020)

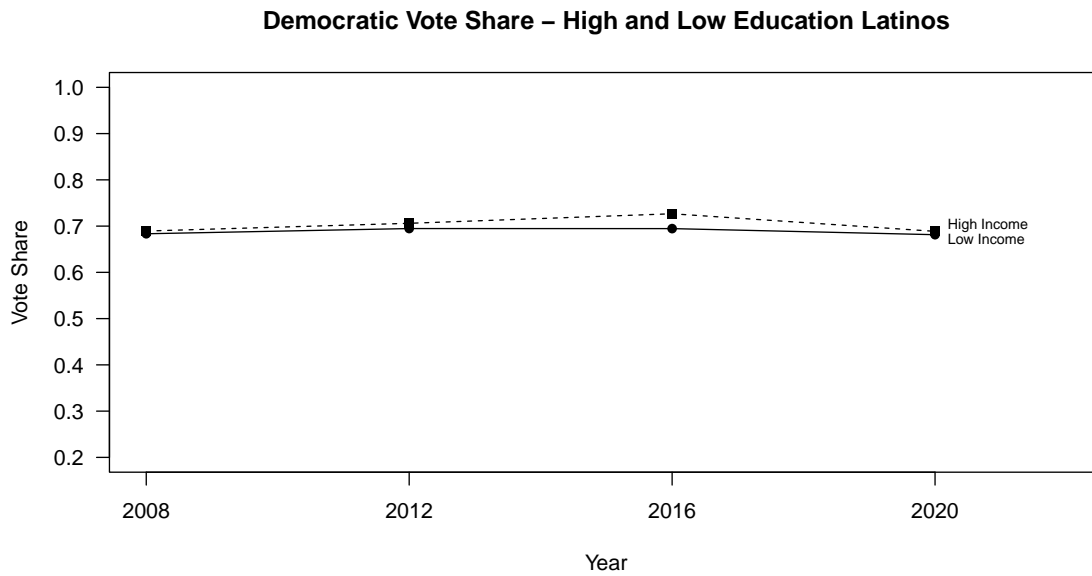**Democratic Vote Share – High and Low Education Latinos**

Figure A.16: Democratic Vote Shares for High and Low Education Latinos. Data are from CCES (2008-2020)

5   No Similar Realignments on Age or Gender

Difference in Vote Share Between Men/Women and Old/Young Groups
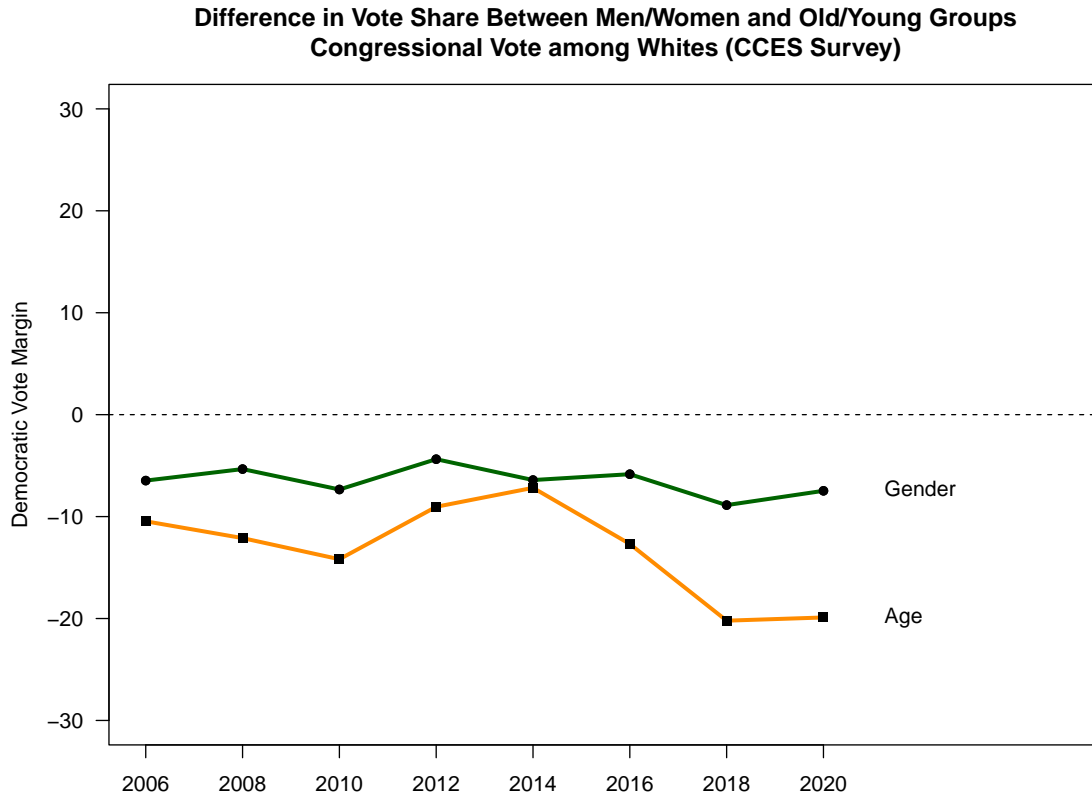**Congressional Vote among Whites (CCES Survey)**

Figure A.17: Across the time period considered (2006-2020) we see that among white voters, women and younger voters are more likely to vote for Democrats. While age-based polarization has increased in the most recent two elections, there has not been any discernible change in the direction of the polarization in voting among whites between old versus young whites or between men versus women over this time period. Data source: CCES

Difference in Vote Share Between Men/Women and Old/Young Groups
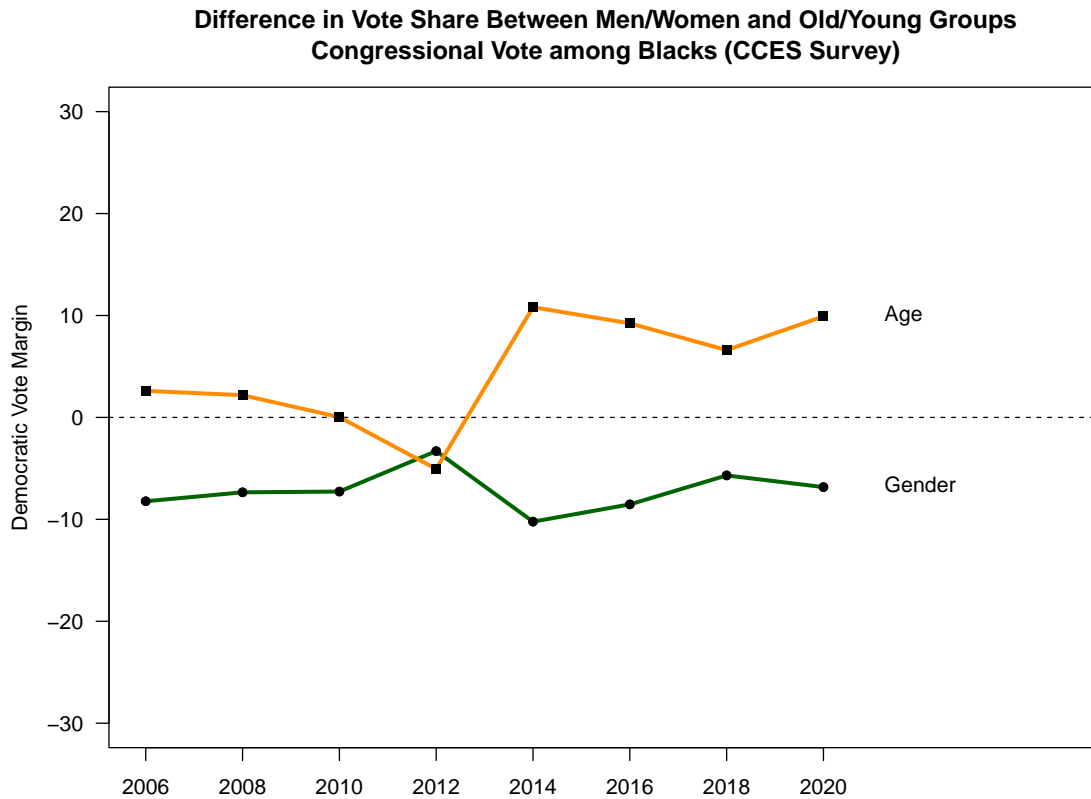**Congressional Vote among Blacks (CCES Survey)**

Figure A.18: Across the time period considered (2006-2020) we see that among Blacks, women and older voters are more likely to vote for Democrats. There has not been any significant change in the direction or magnitude of the polarization in voting among Blacks between old versus young or between men versus women over this time period. Data source: CCES

Difference in Vote Share Between Men/Women and Old/Young Groups
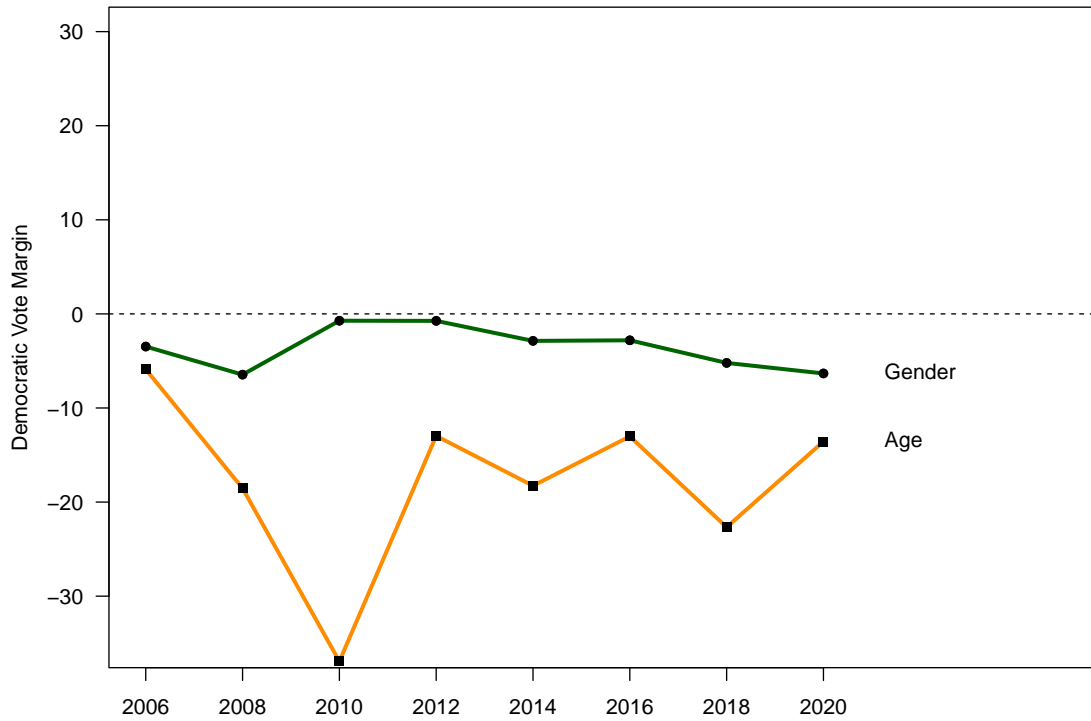**Congressional Vote among Latinos (CCES Survey)**

Figure A.19: Across the time period considered (2006-2020) we see that among Latinos, women and younger voters are more likely to vote for Democrats. There has not been any discernible pattern in the change in the direction or magnitude of the polarization in voting among whites between old versus young whites or between men versus women over this time period. Data source: CCES