

# Culture wars, voting, and polarization: divisions and unities in modern American politics

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Talk at the American Politics Seminar, Columbia University, 20 Sept 2010

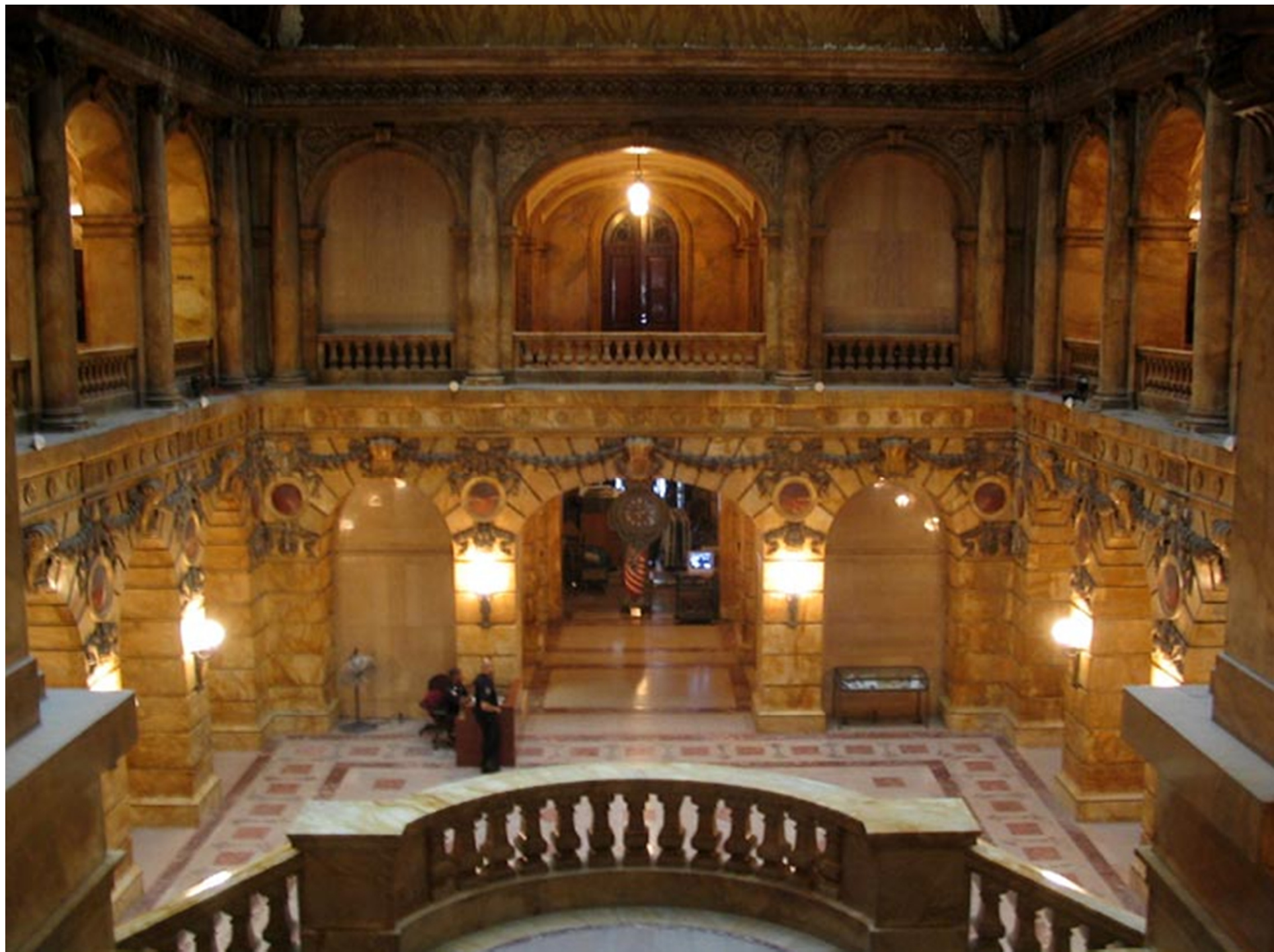
# Some stylized facts

- National elections are becoming closer, local elections are becoming less close
- Differences between rich and poor states are concentrated among upper-income voters
- In Republican states, the poor have become richer; In Democratic states, the rich have become richer
- Voters are becoming more polarized on issues, but much less than the parties have
- The median voter theorem is true . . . sort of. Being a moderate is worth 2% of the vote

# The “polarization” story

- First, the good old days of partisanship  
....







- Then, the unraveling of the consensus . . .





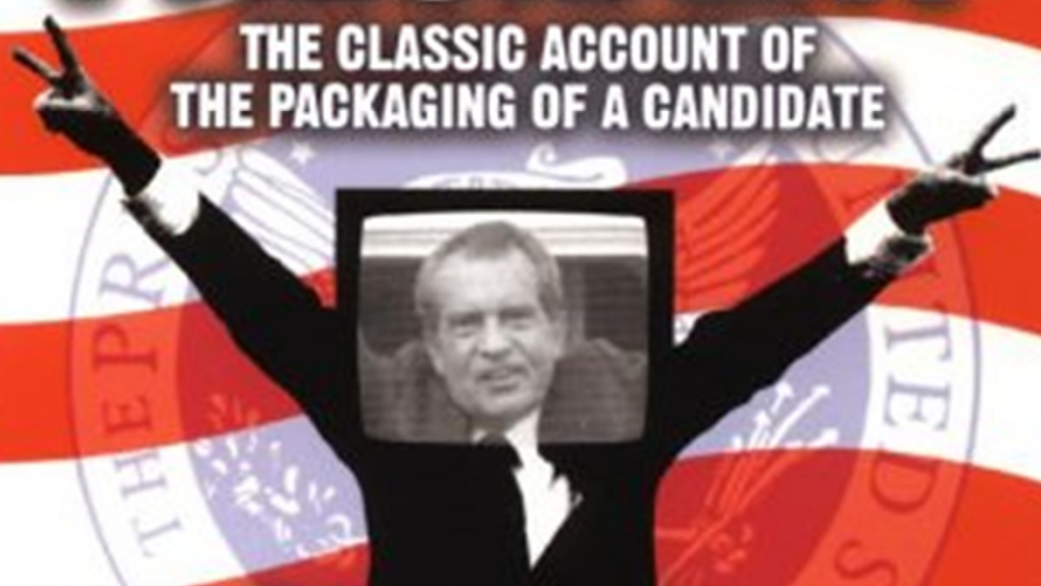
# “The Party’s Over”





# THE \$ELLING OF THE PRESIDENT

THE CLASSIC ACCOUNT OF  
THE PACKAGING OF A CANDIDATE





- Now, the new polarization . . .





# Bush: 'Our Long National Nightmare Of Peace And Prosperity Is Finally Over'

JANUARY 17, 2001 | ISSUE 37-01

WASHINGTON, DC—Mere days from assuming the presidency and closing the door on eight years of Bill Clinton, president-elect George W. Bush assured the nation in a televised address Tuesday that "our long national nightmare of peace and prosperity is finally over."

 ENLARGE IMAGE



President-elect Bush vows that "together, we can put the triumphs of the recent past behind us."

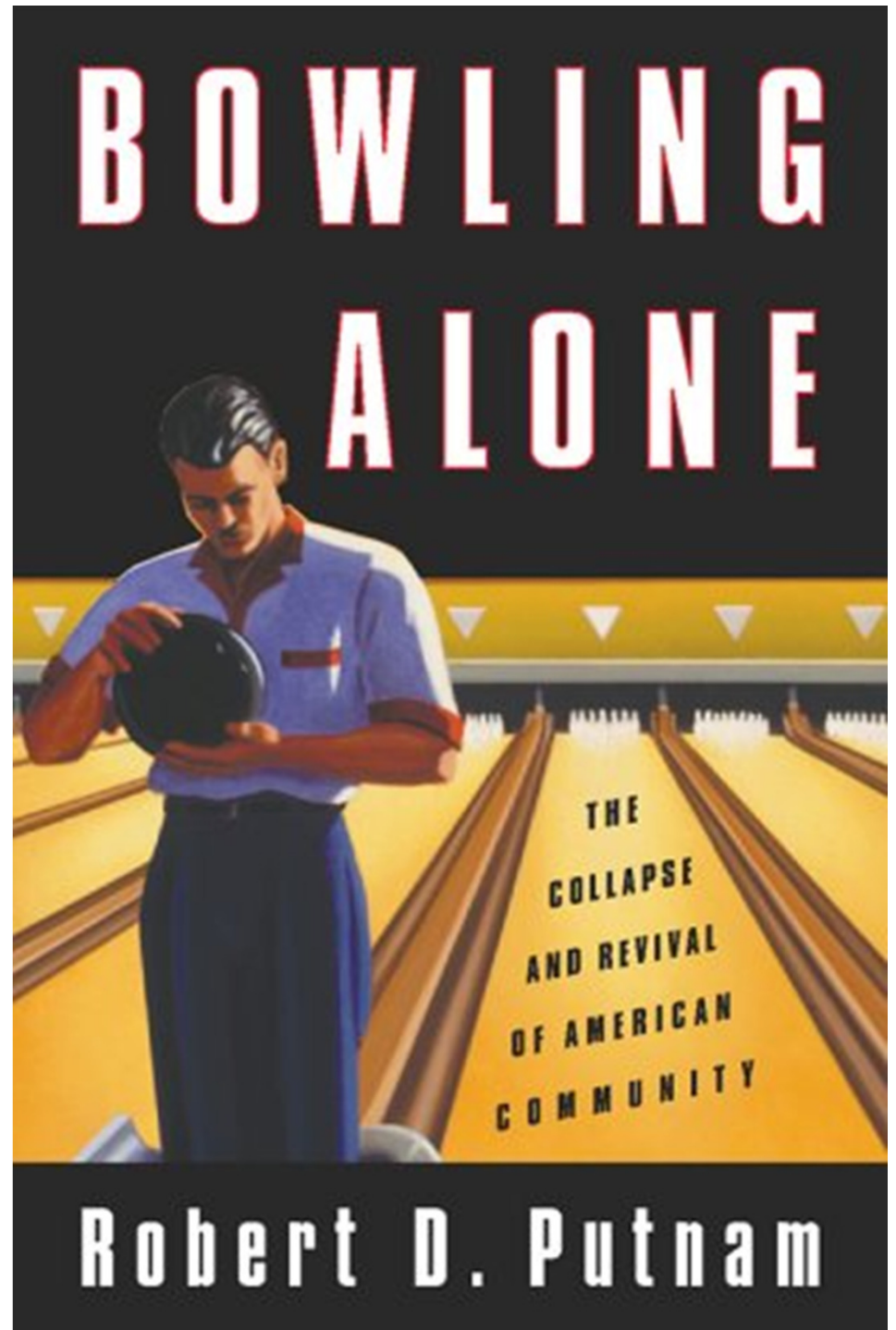
and sustained peace overseas. The time has come to put all of that behind us."

"My fellow Americans," Bush said, "at long last, we have reached the end of the dark period in American history that will come to be known as the Clinton Era, eight long years characterized by unprecedented economic expansion, a sharp decrease in crime,

- Then . . .



- And now . . .



- Then . . .



And now . . .





# Polarization and politics

- From the left: focus on economic polarization (“two Americas”)
- From the right: focus on cultural polarization (“red America vs. blue America”)
- “The common lament over the recent rise in political partisanship is often nothing more than a veiled complaint instead about the recent rise of political conservatism.”

*—former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, 2006*

# Polarization and inequality

- Compared to poorer people, those in the upper third of income are:
  - Twice as likely to vote
  - More likely to vote Republican
  - Much more likely to give \$
  - Much more likely to directly know an elected official (or to be one)

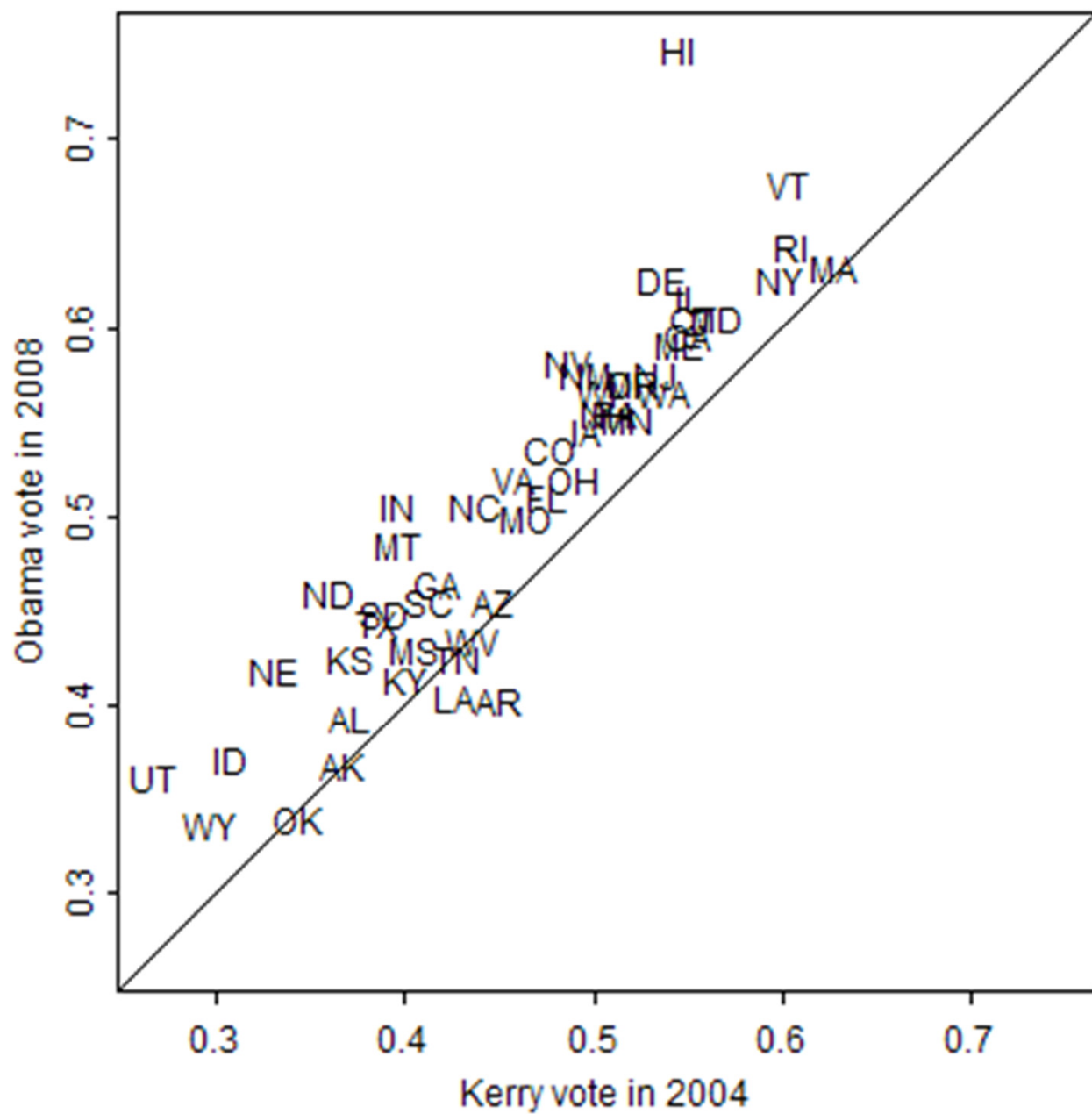
# Ordinary Americans

- “Pat doesn’t have a mink coat. But she does have a respectable Republican cloth coat.” —*vice presidential candidate Richard Nixon, 1952*
- “Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald’s-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas.” —*Toni Morrison, 1998*

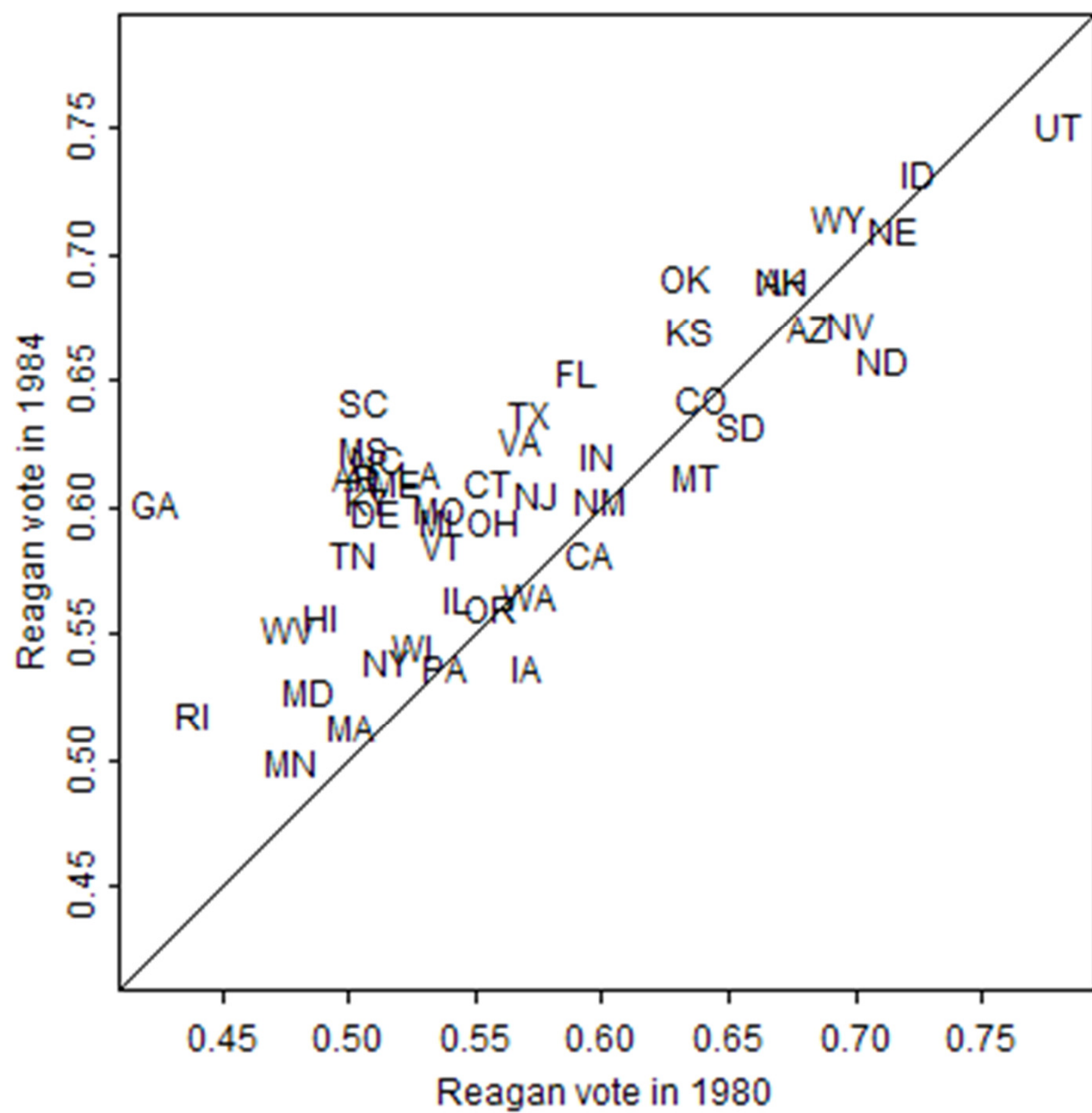
# Some stylized facts: voting

- National elections (usually) depend on the economy
- Uniform partisan swing—now more than ever
- National elections are closer
- Local elections are less close

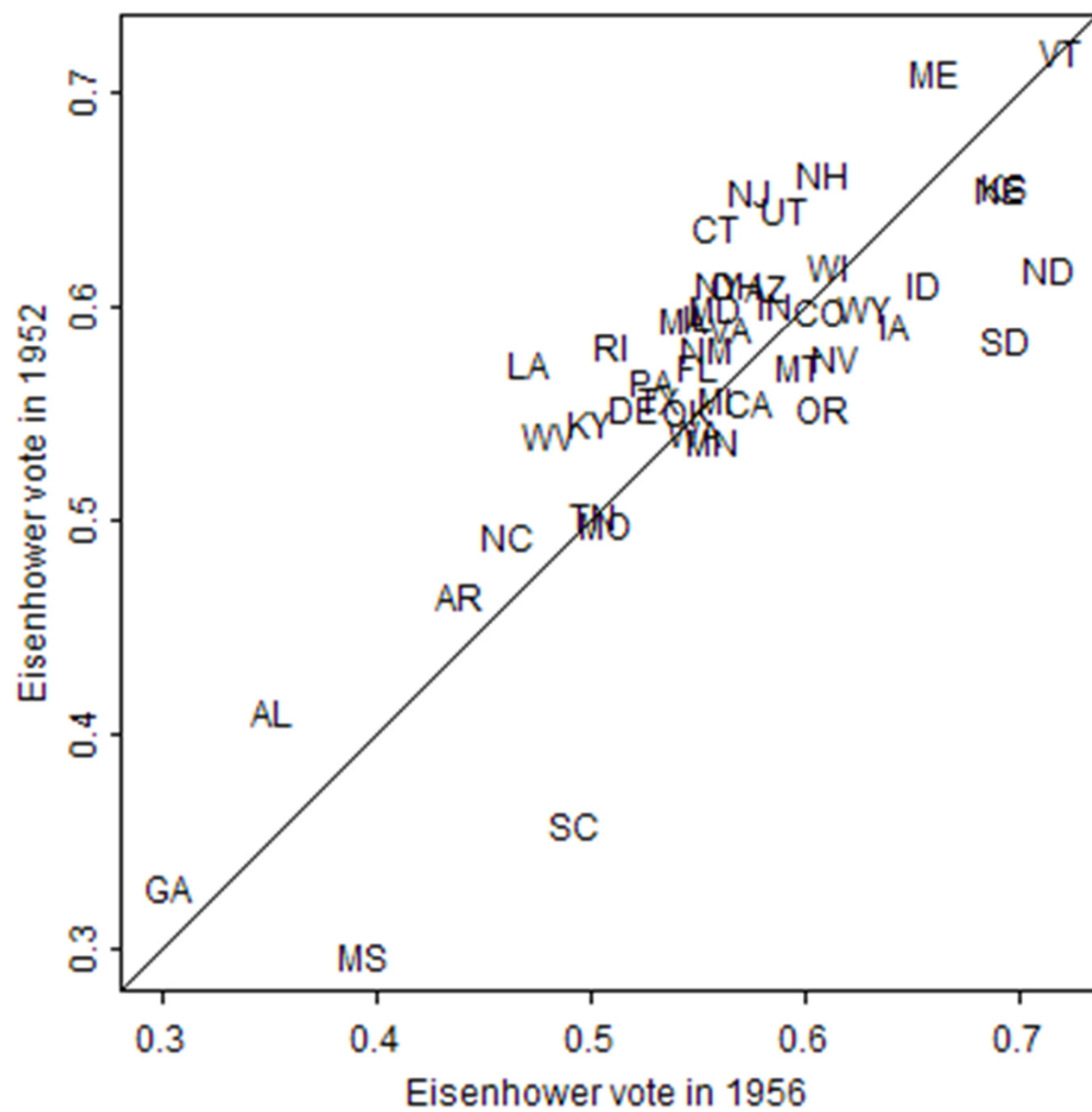
The swing from 2004 to 2008 was pretty uniform



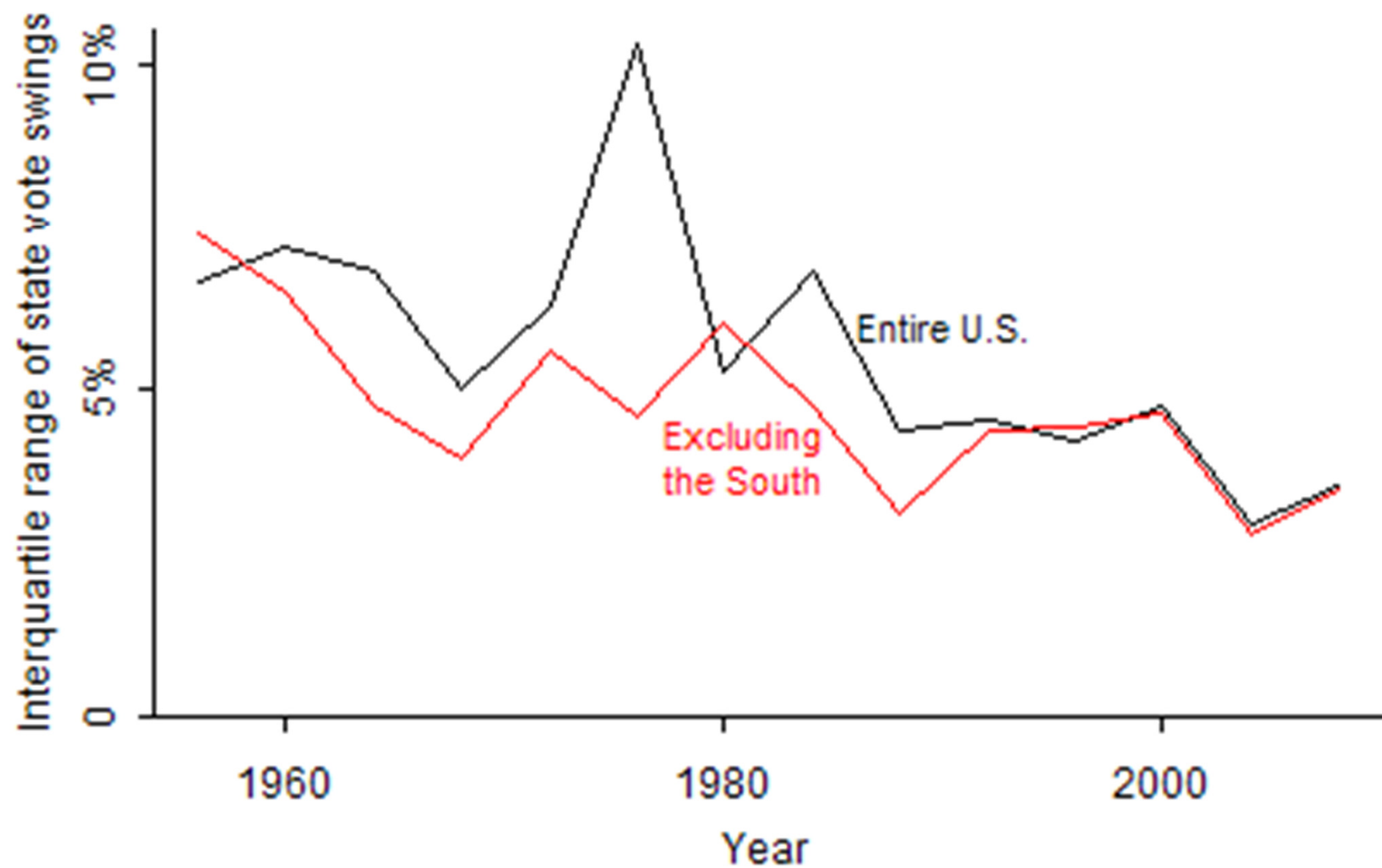
1984 vs. 1980



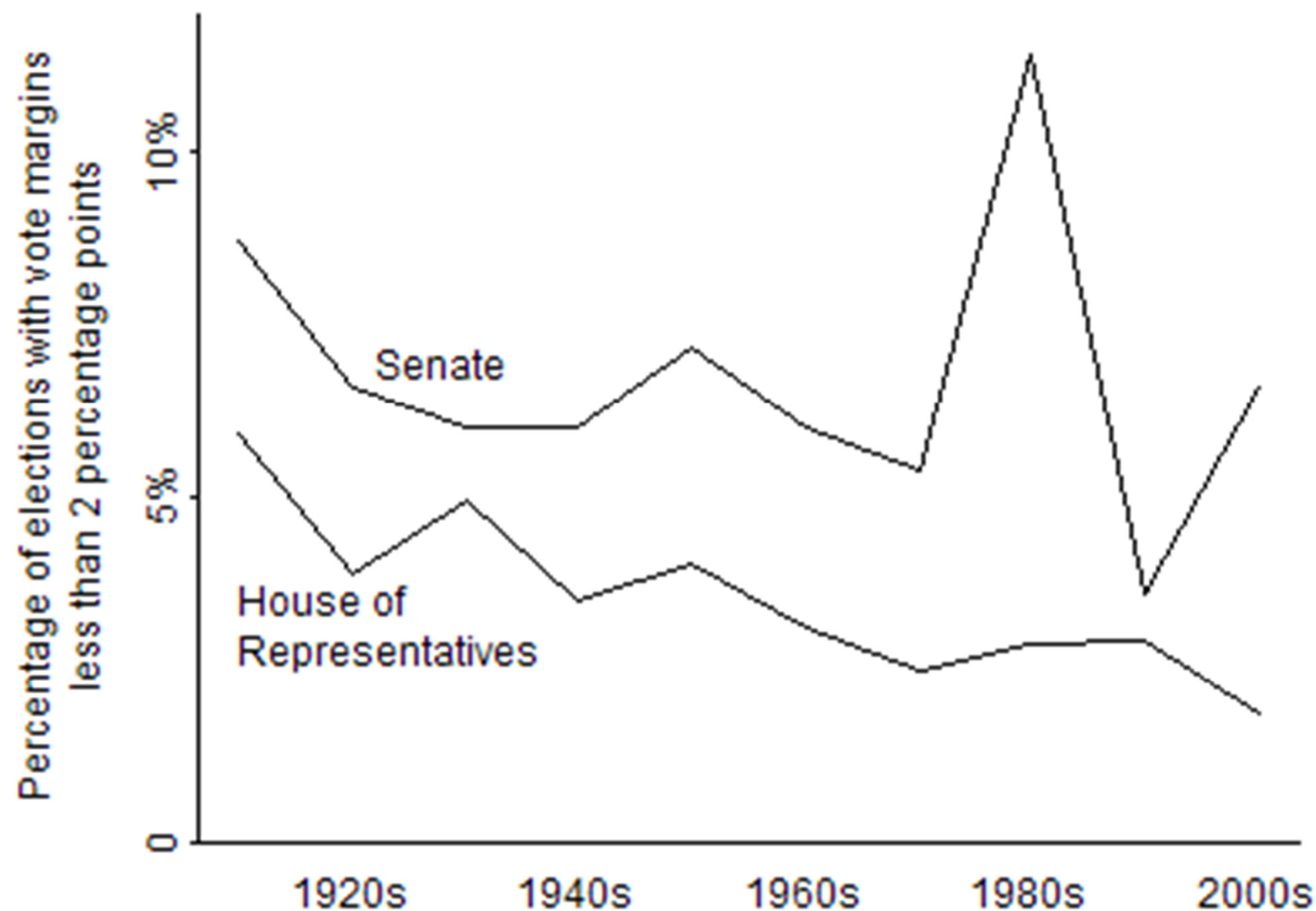
1956 vs. 1952



Gradual decline in state-by-state variation  
of presidential vote swings



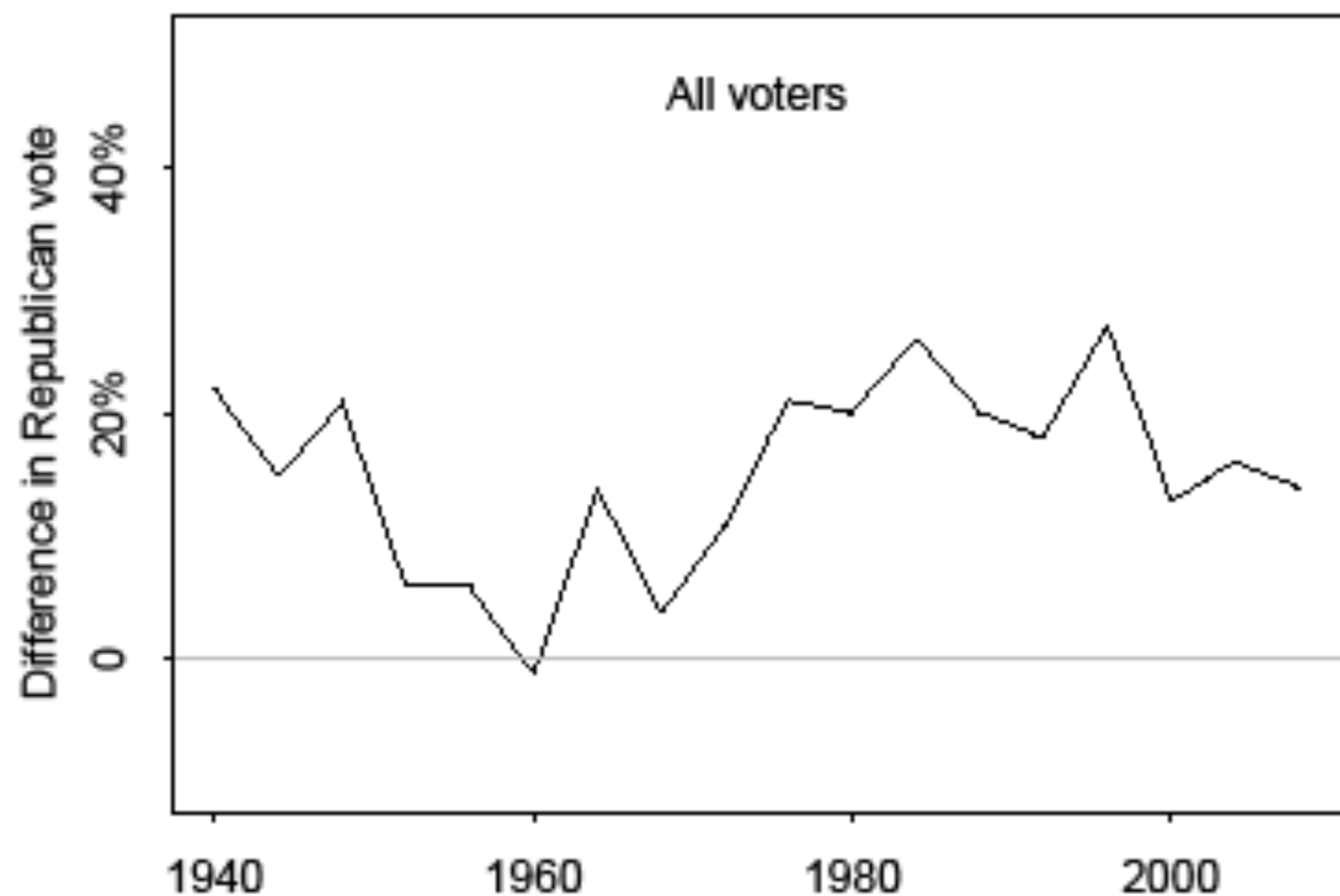
Close elections (in percentage terms) are increasingly rare in the House but are more common in the Senate

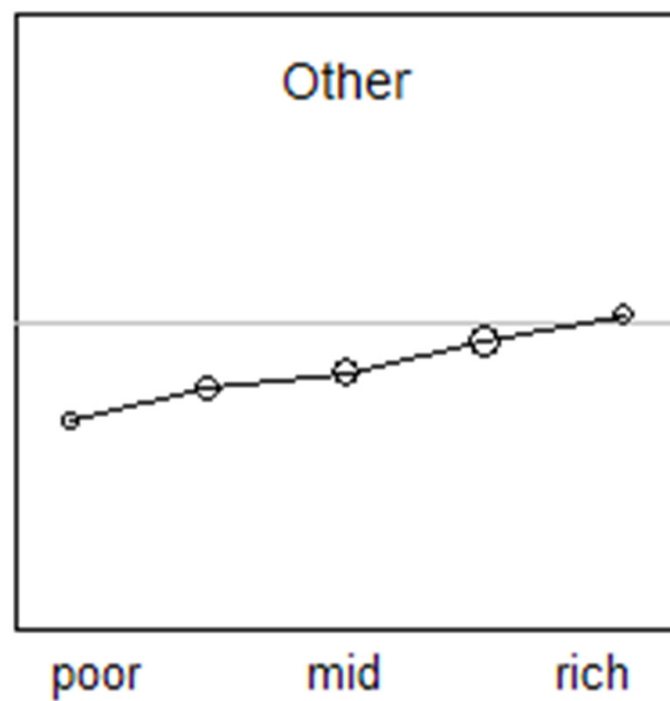
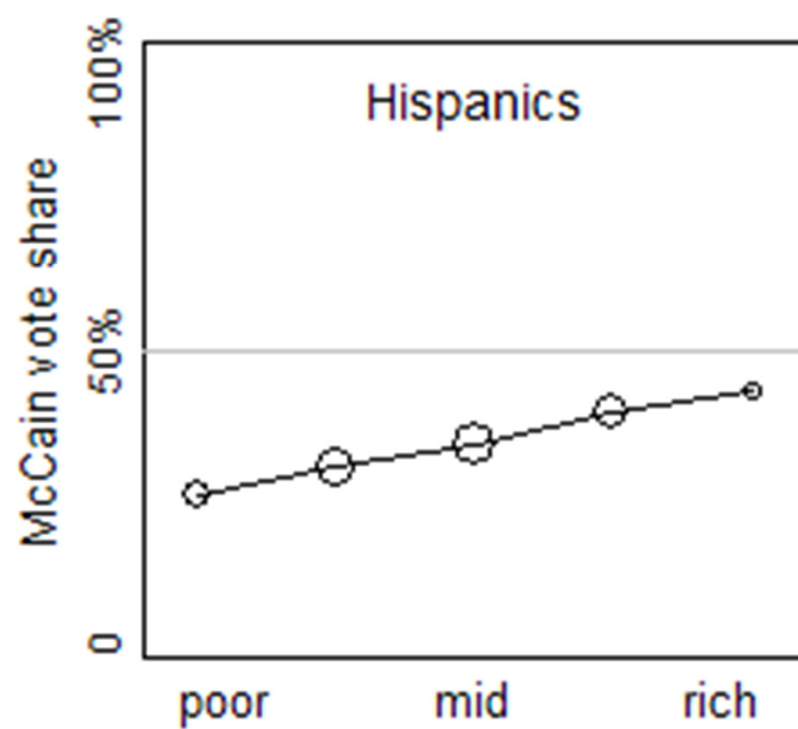
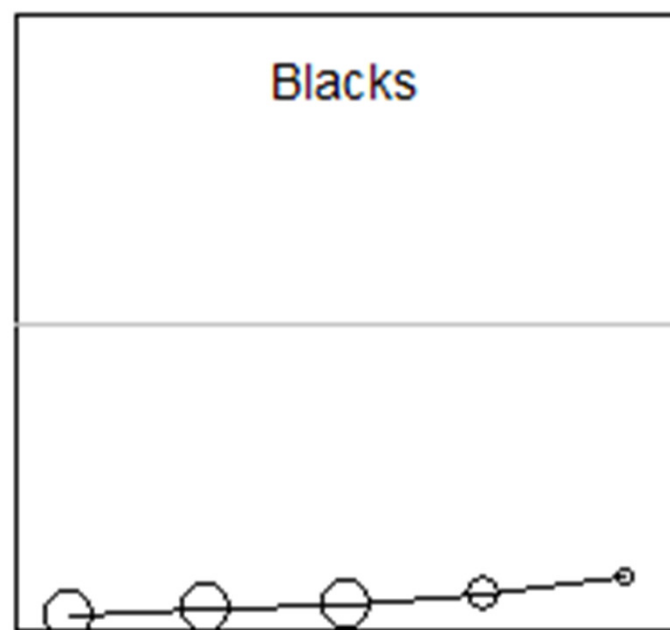
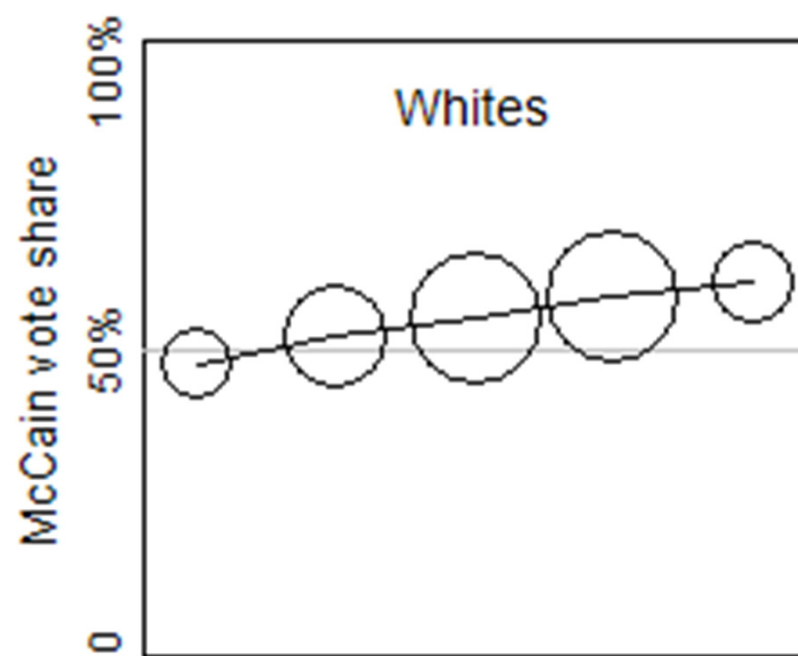


# Rich people vote Republican

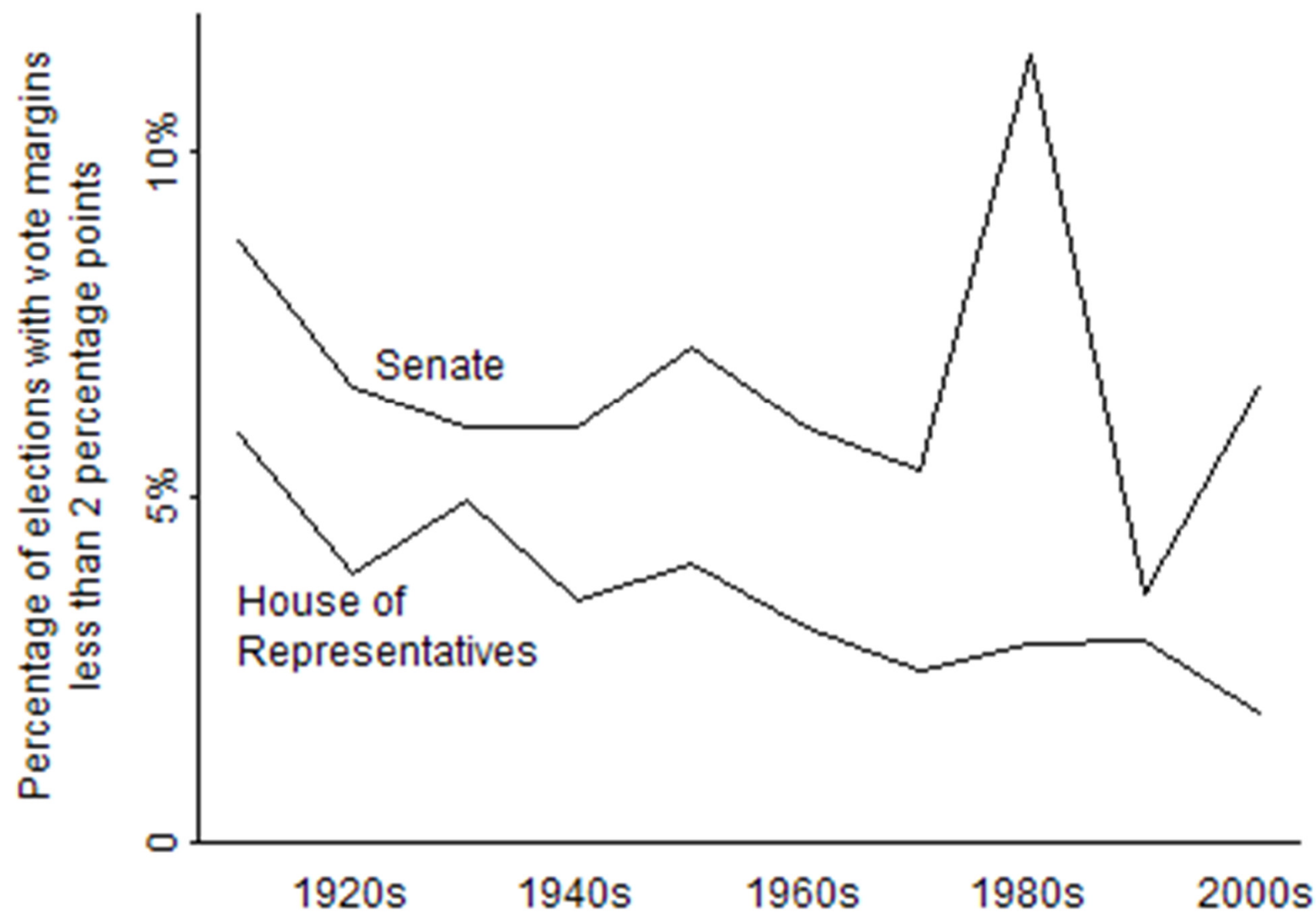
- A fact not always realized:  
“OK, but here’s the fact that nobody ever, ever mentions—Democrats win rich people. Over \$100,000 in income, you are likely more than not to vote for Democrats. People never point that out. Rich people vote liberal. I don’t know what that’s all about.” — TV commentator *Tucker Carlson*, 2007

Republican vote among upper-income voters, minus  
Republican vote among lower-income voters

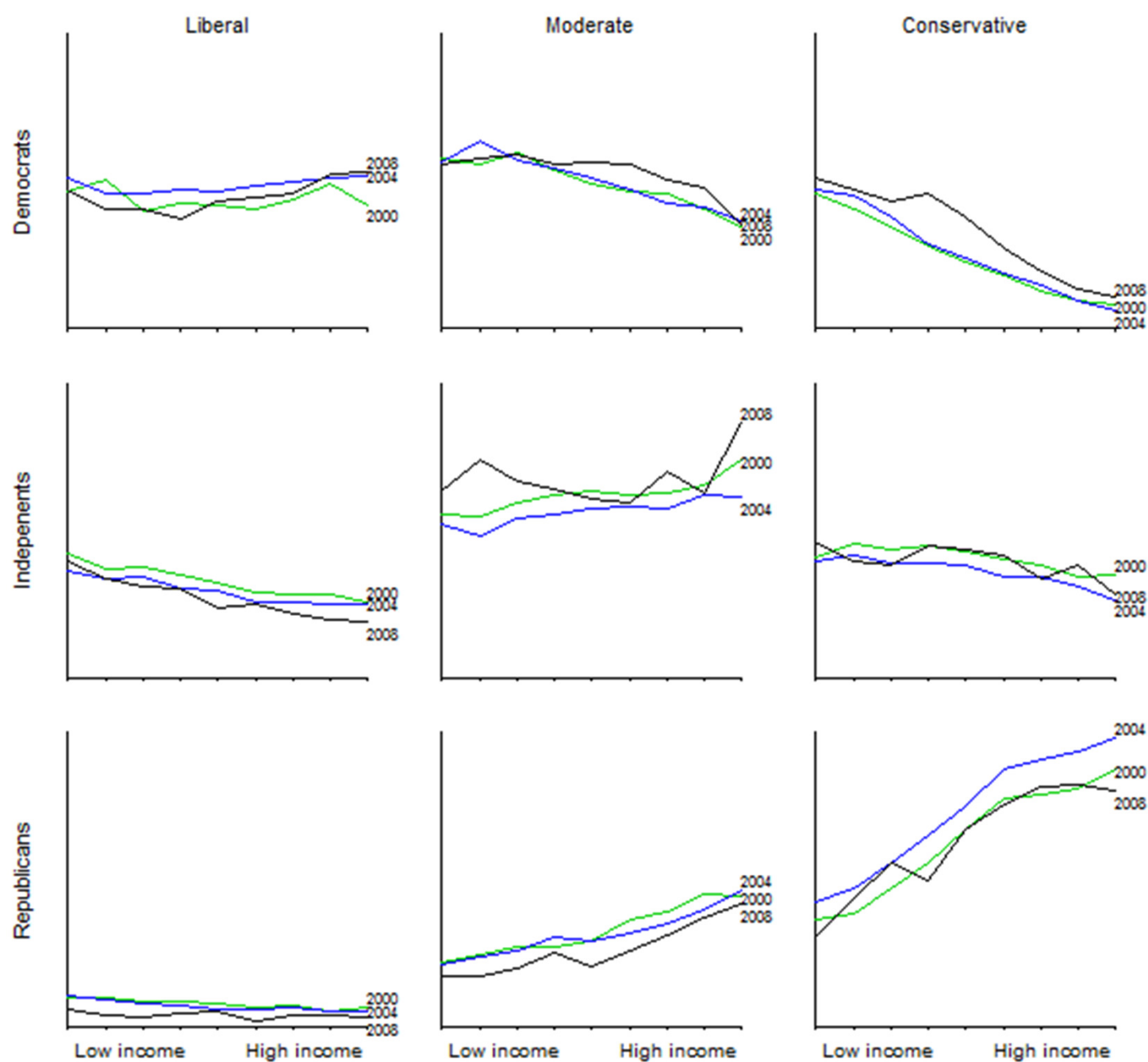




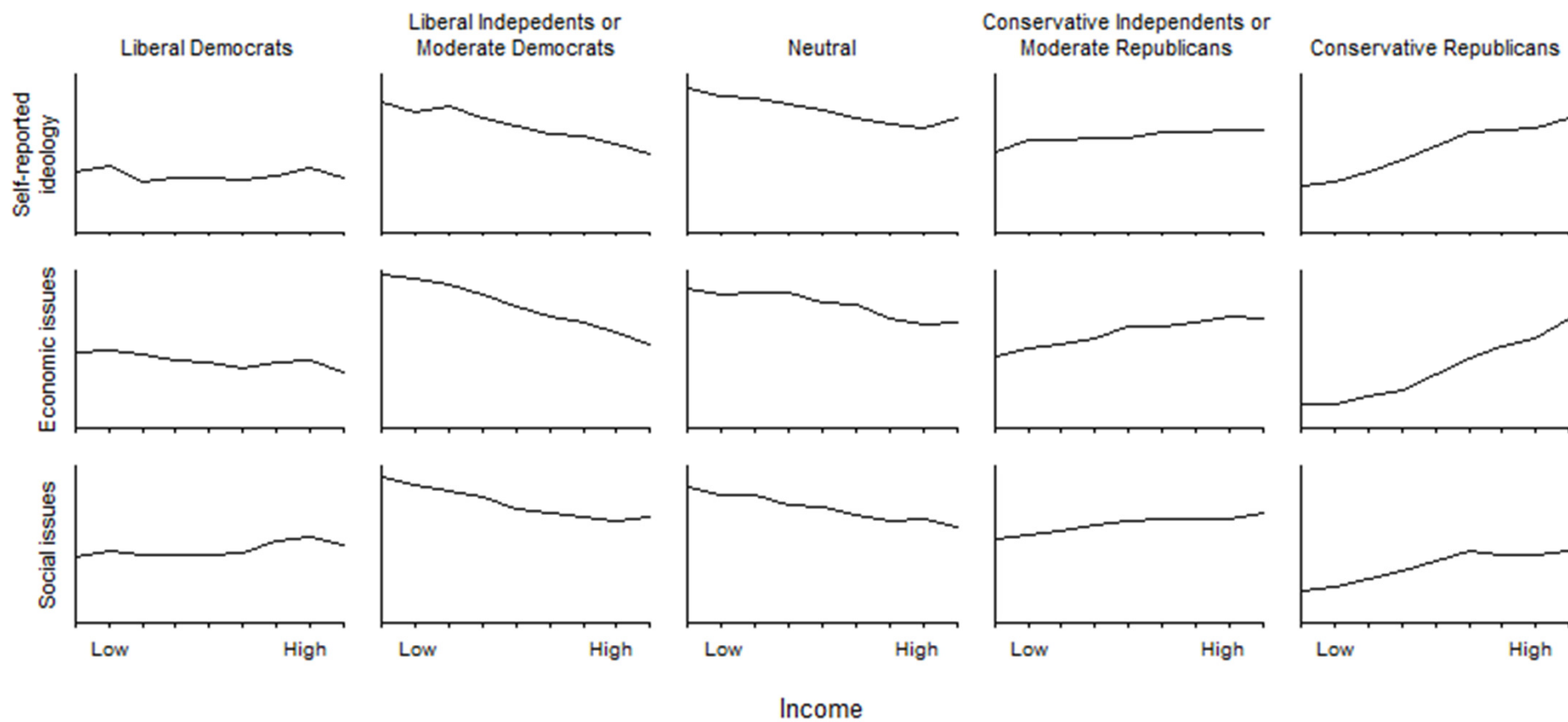
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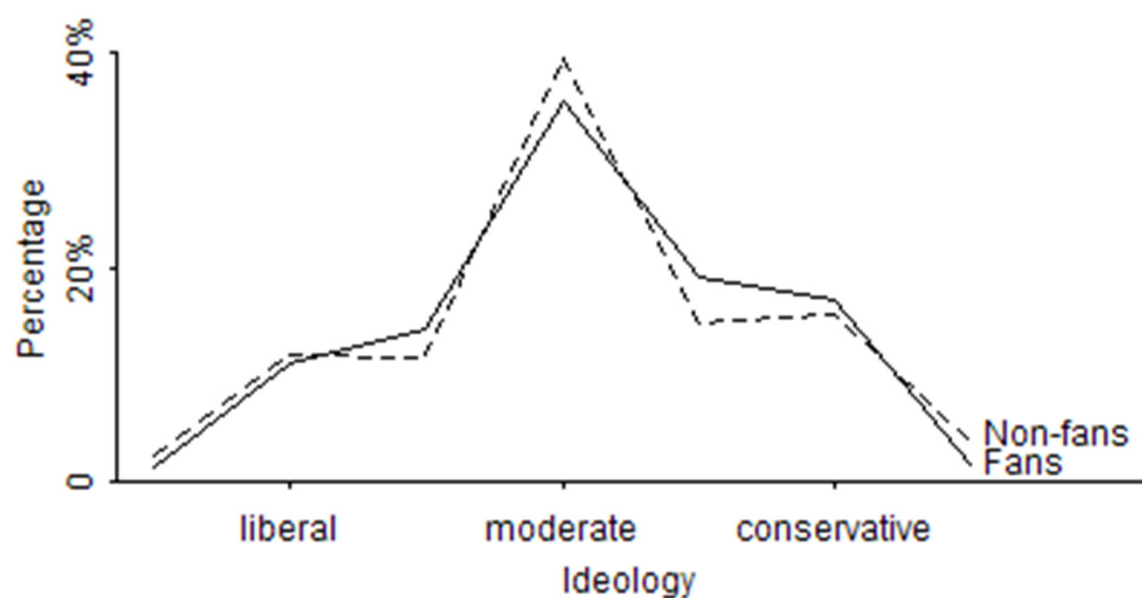
# Income distributions within self-reported political categories



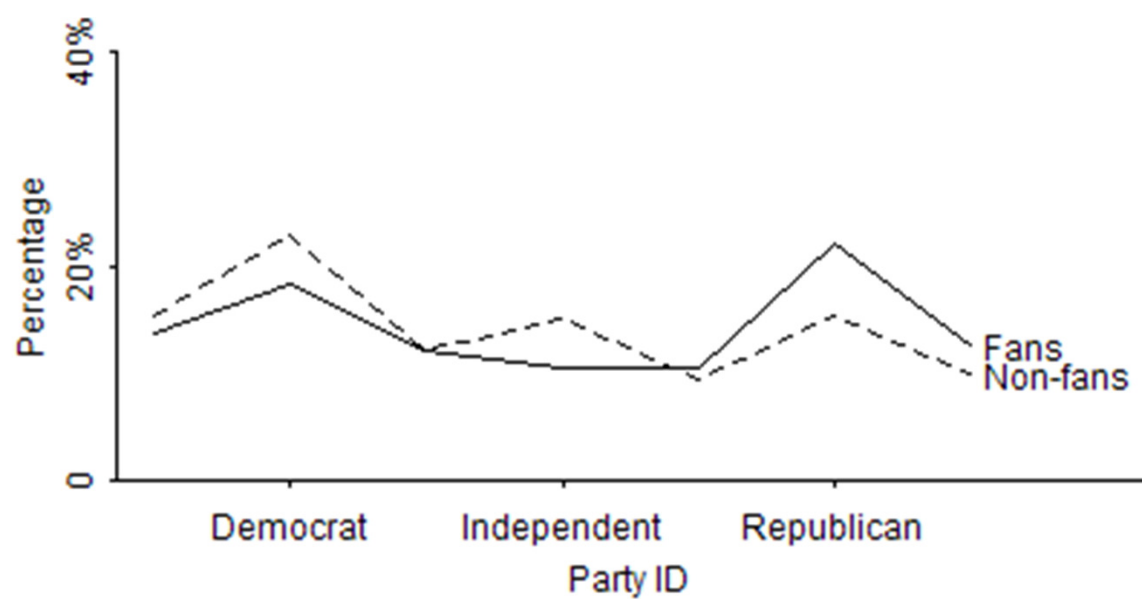
Income distributions within self-reported political categories



Distribution of Ideology among sports fans and non-fans

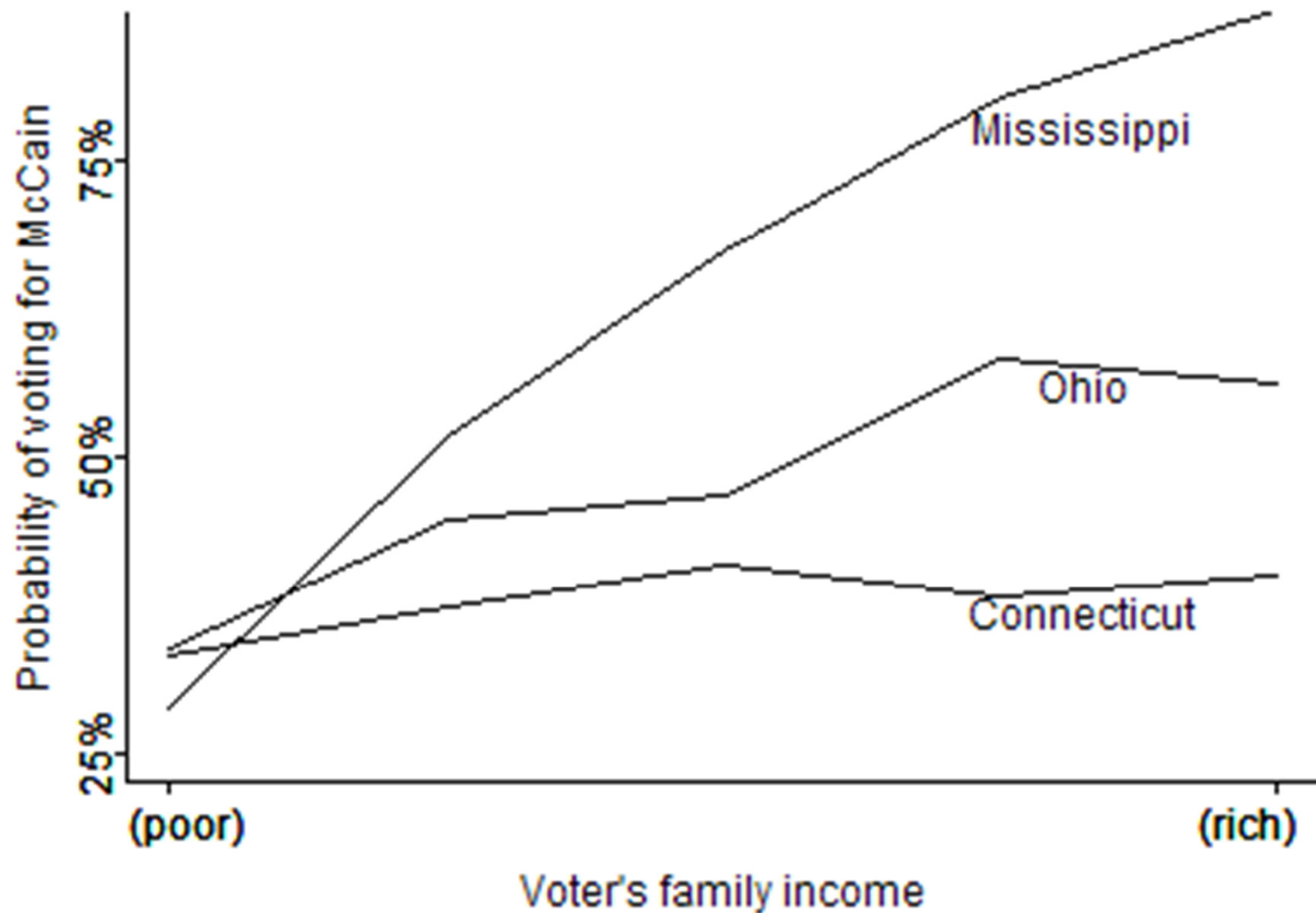


Distribution of Party ID among sports fans and non-fans

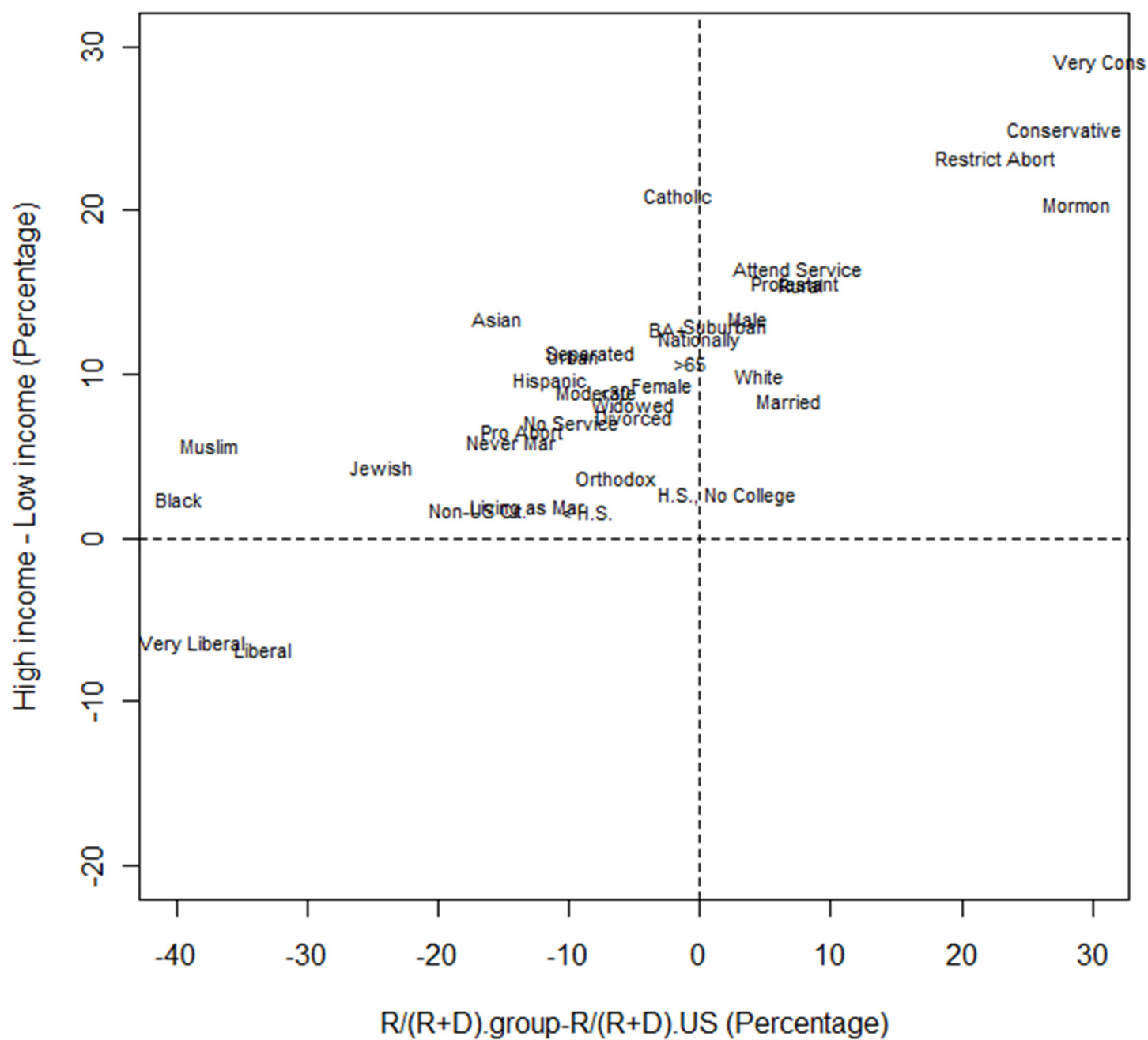


# Income and voting

McCain vote by income in a poor, middle-income, and rich state



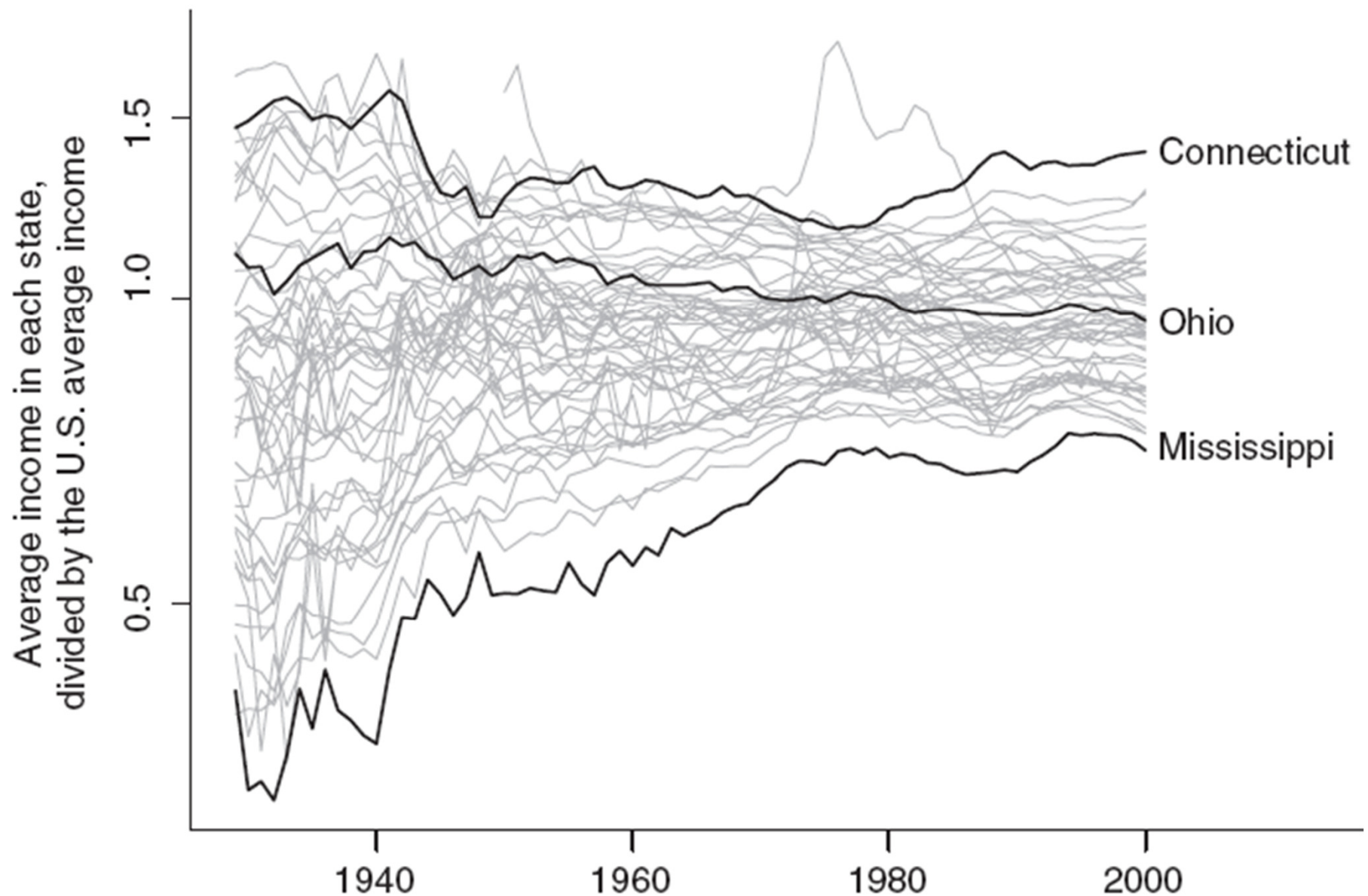
## Voting Patterns in 2004



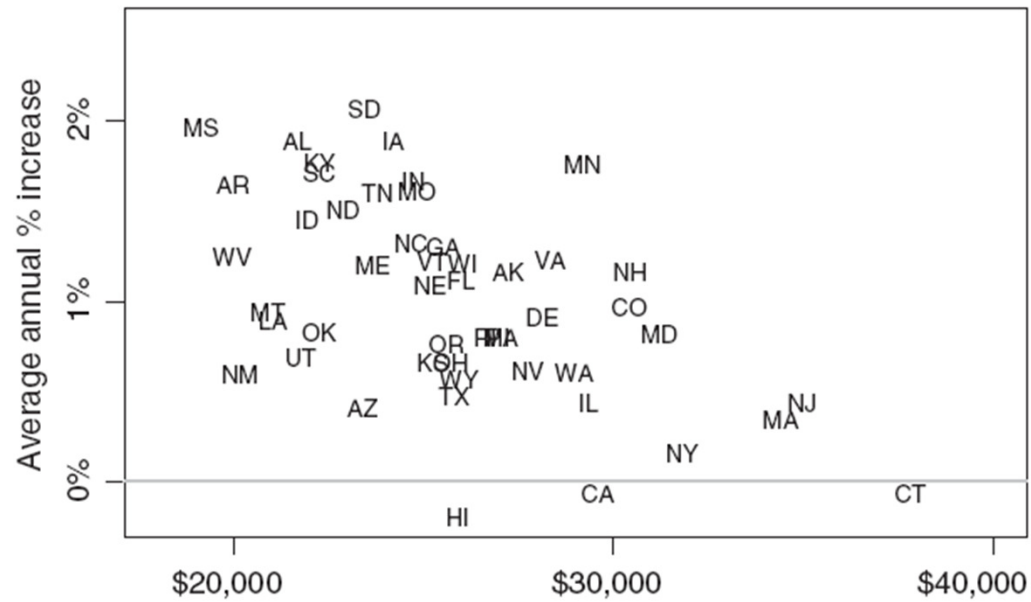
# Some stylized facts: networks

- The average American “knows” 750 people and “trusts” 100 people
- Dems know mostly Dems, Reps know mostly Reps, regardless of whether you live in a “red” or “blue” state
- People overestimate how much their friends agree with them

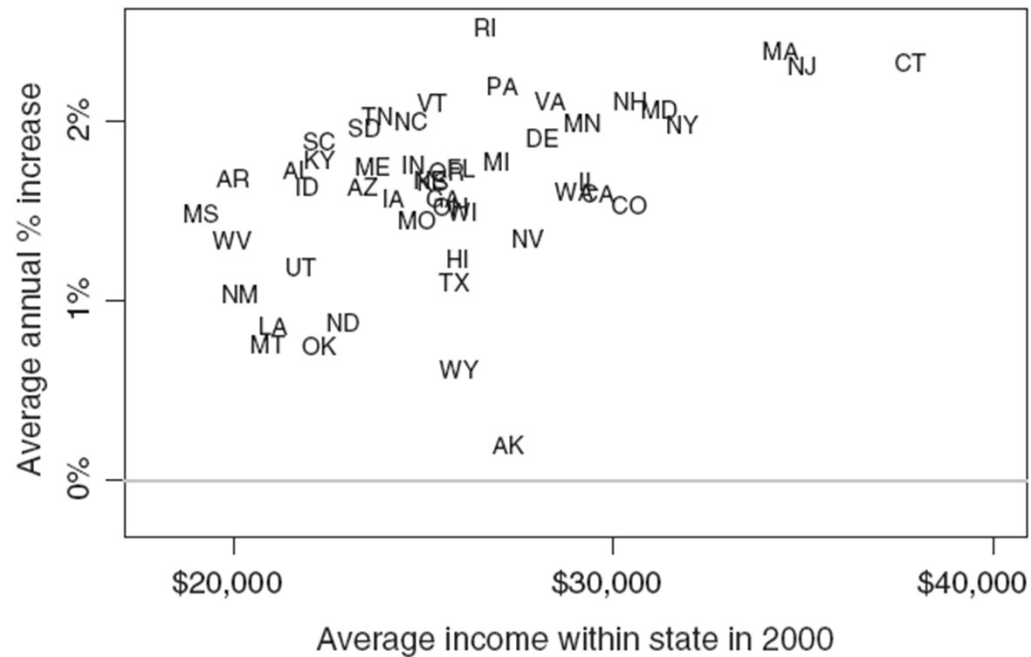
# Rich and poor states in the 20<sup>th</sup> century



Trends in income of 10th percentile in each state, 1981–2004



Trends in income of 90th percentile in each state, 1981–2004

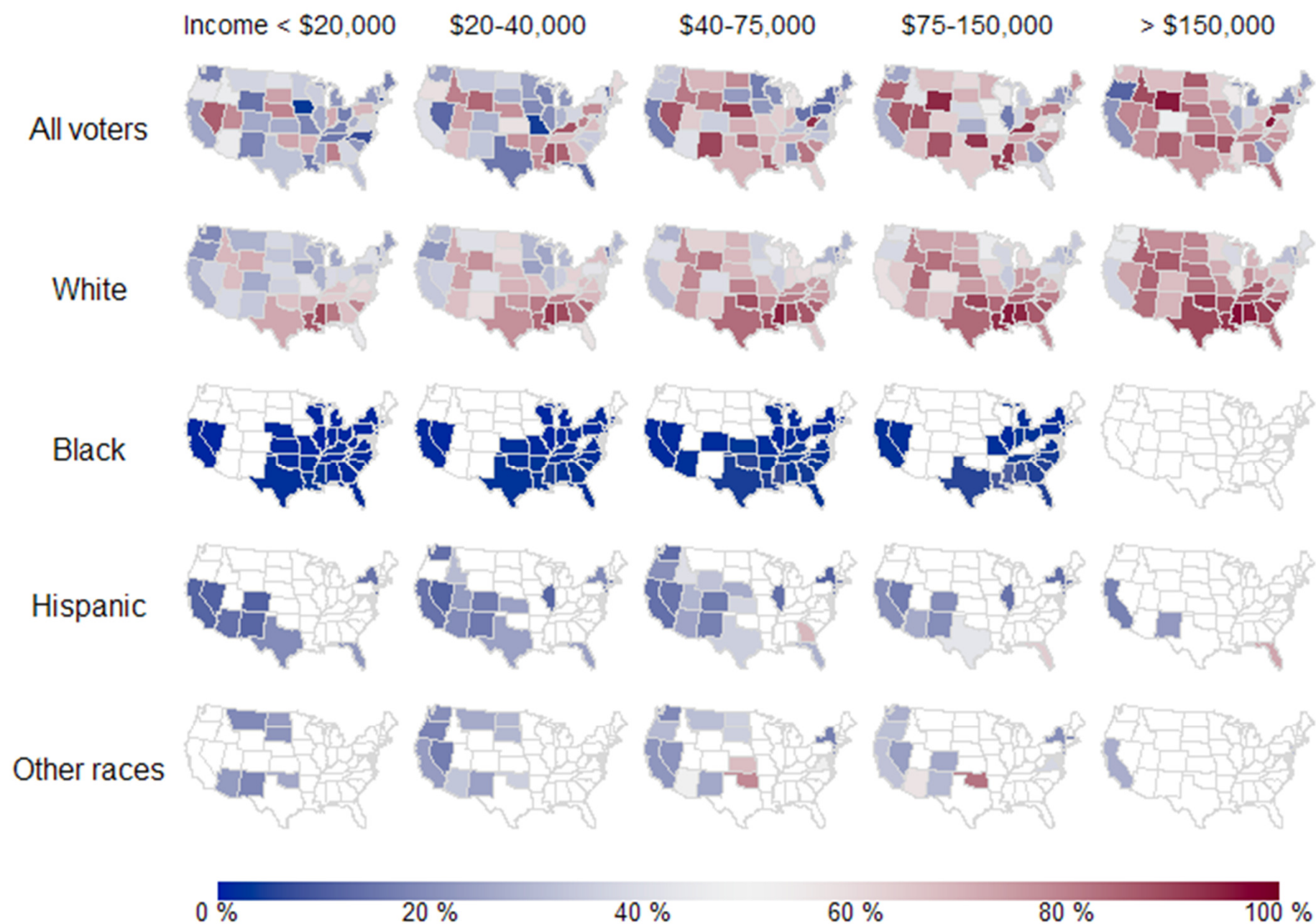


# The pundits speak

“Who are the trustfunders? People with enough money not to have to work for a living, or not to have to work very hard.... These people tend to be very liberal politically. Aware that they have done nothing to earn their money, they feel a certain sense of guilt.... They are citizens of the world with contempt for those who feel chills up their spines when they hear ‘The Star Spangled Banner.’” —

*Michael Barone, author of the Almanac of American Politics, 2005*

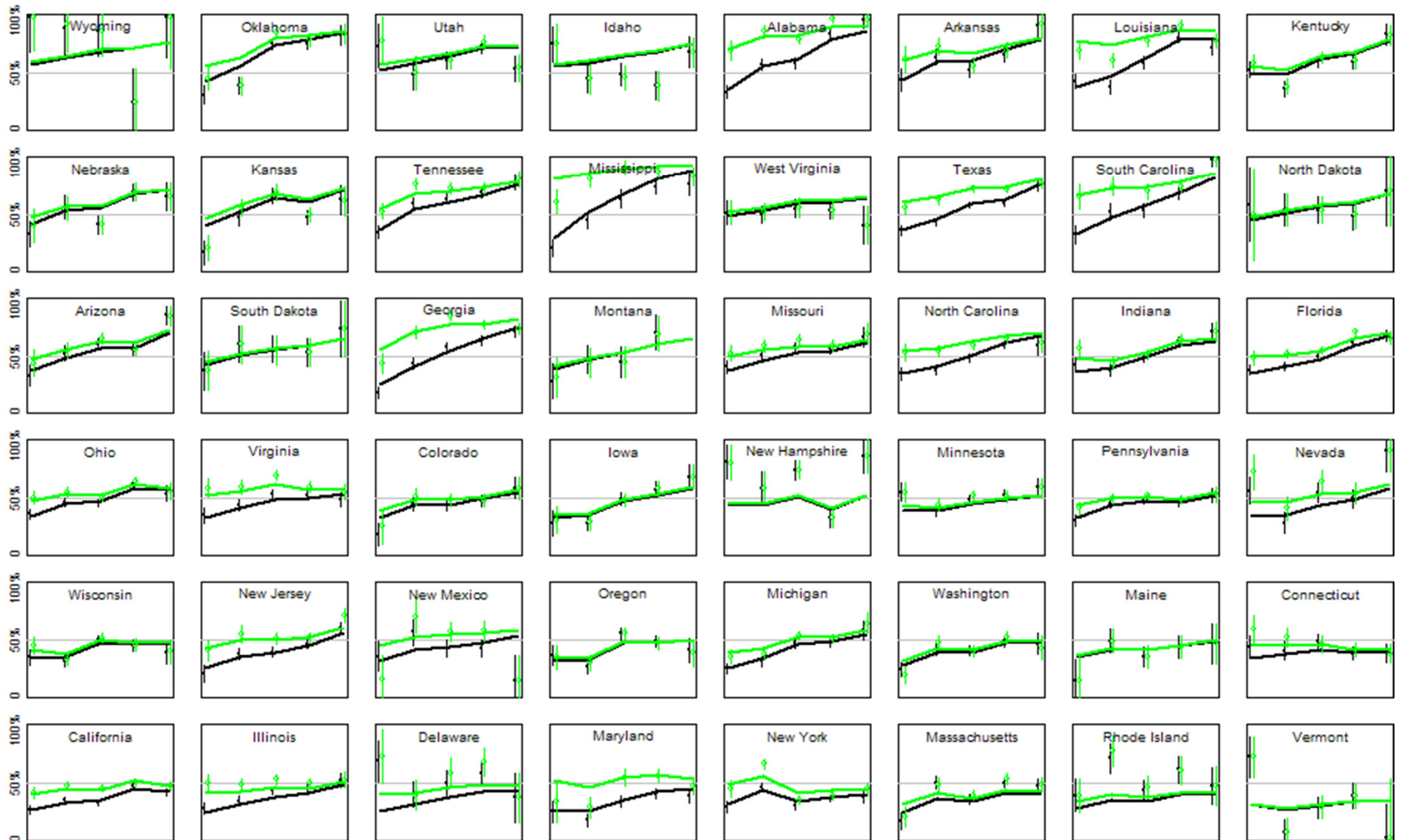
# Did you vote for McCain in 2008?



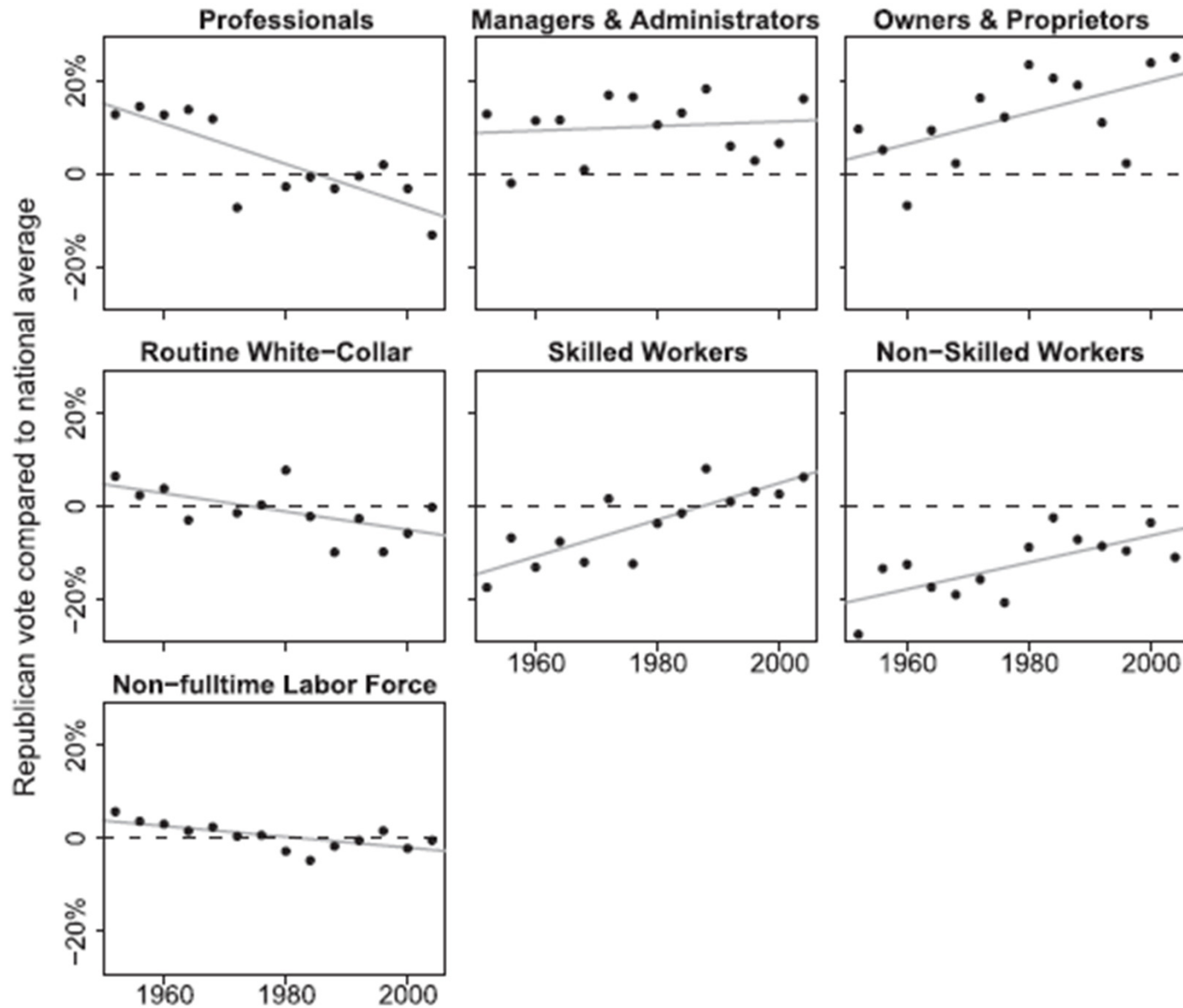
When a category represents less than 1% of the voters in a state, the state is left blank

# Model checking

2008 election: McCain share of the two-party vote in each income category within each state among all voters (black) and non-Hispanic whites (green)



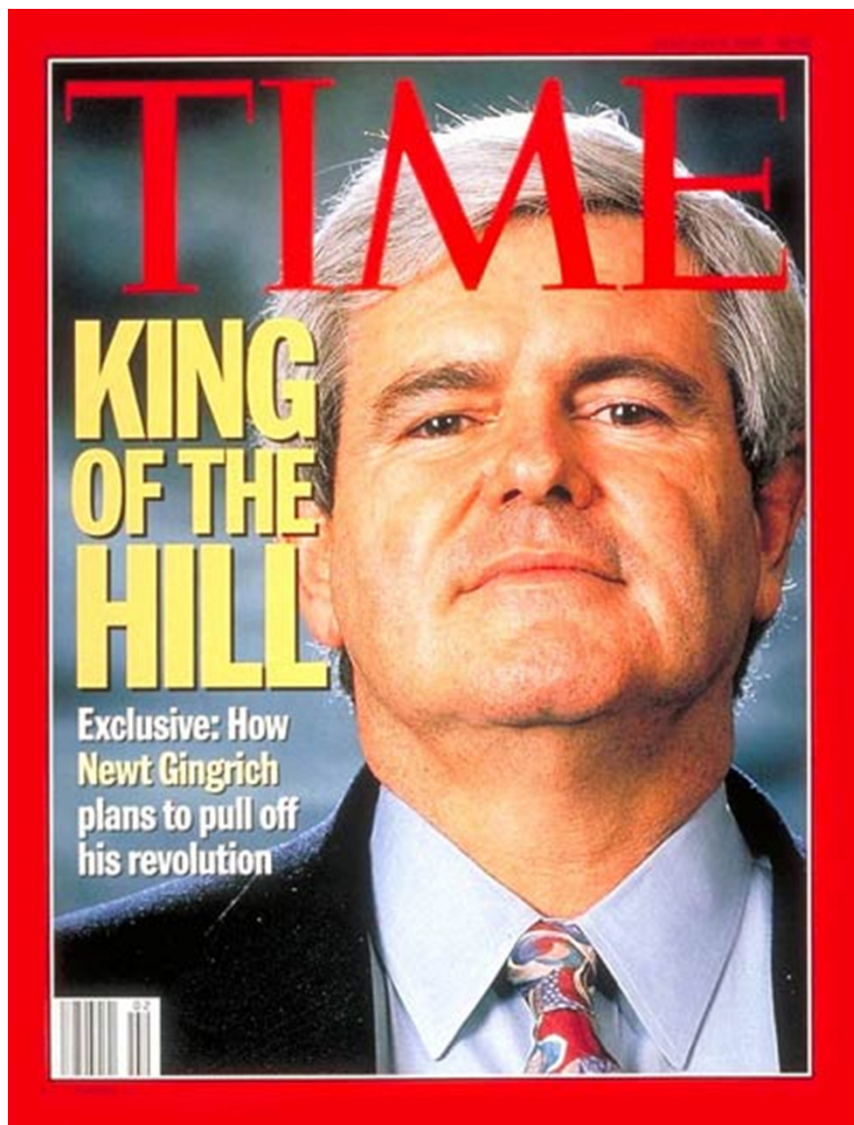
# Voting trends by occupation



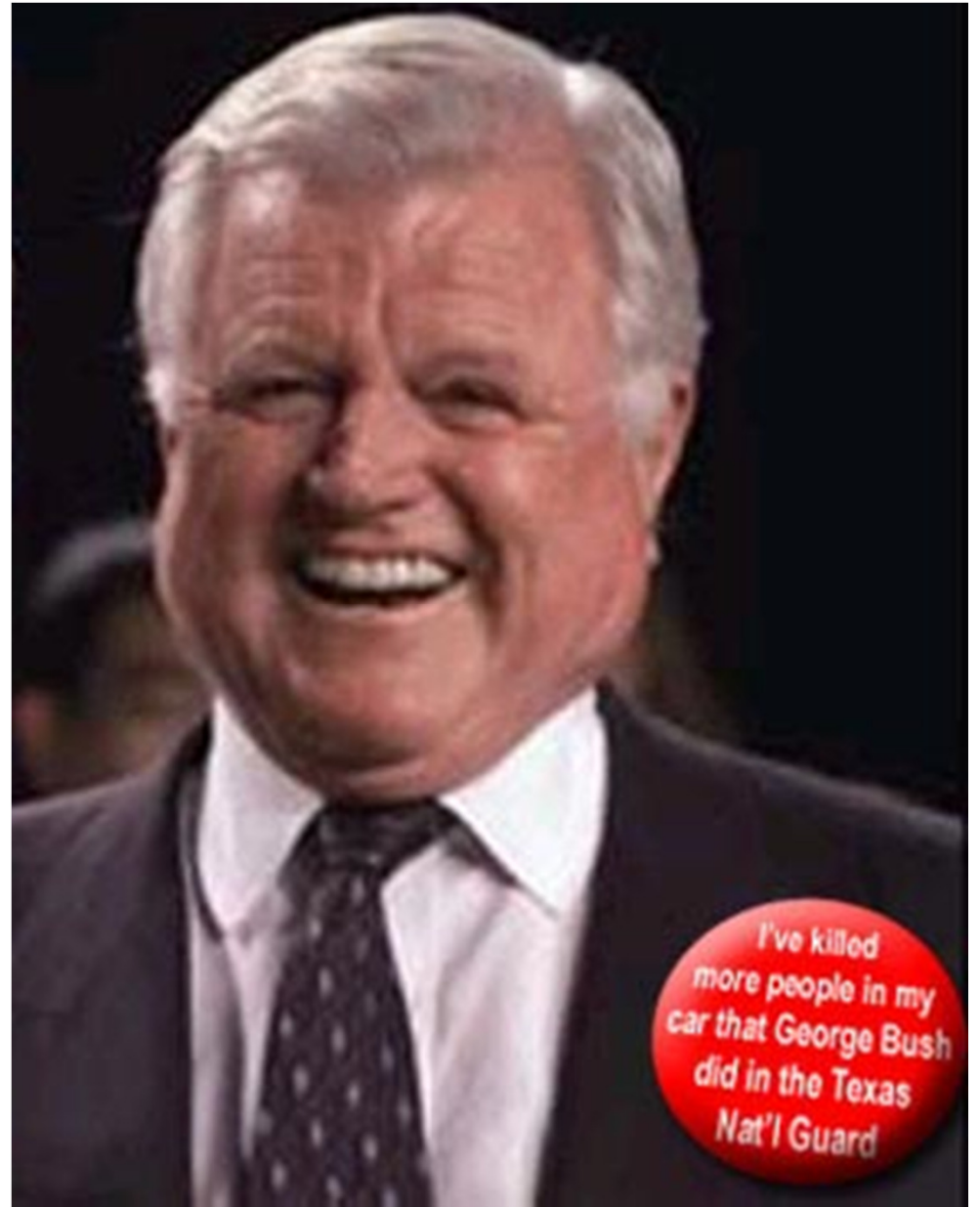
# Perceptions and reality

- Political pundits misunderstand income and voting
- Ordinary Americans are biased in views of the economy
- Misperceptions about demographics, foreign policy . . .
- Increasing partisanship on foreign policy

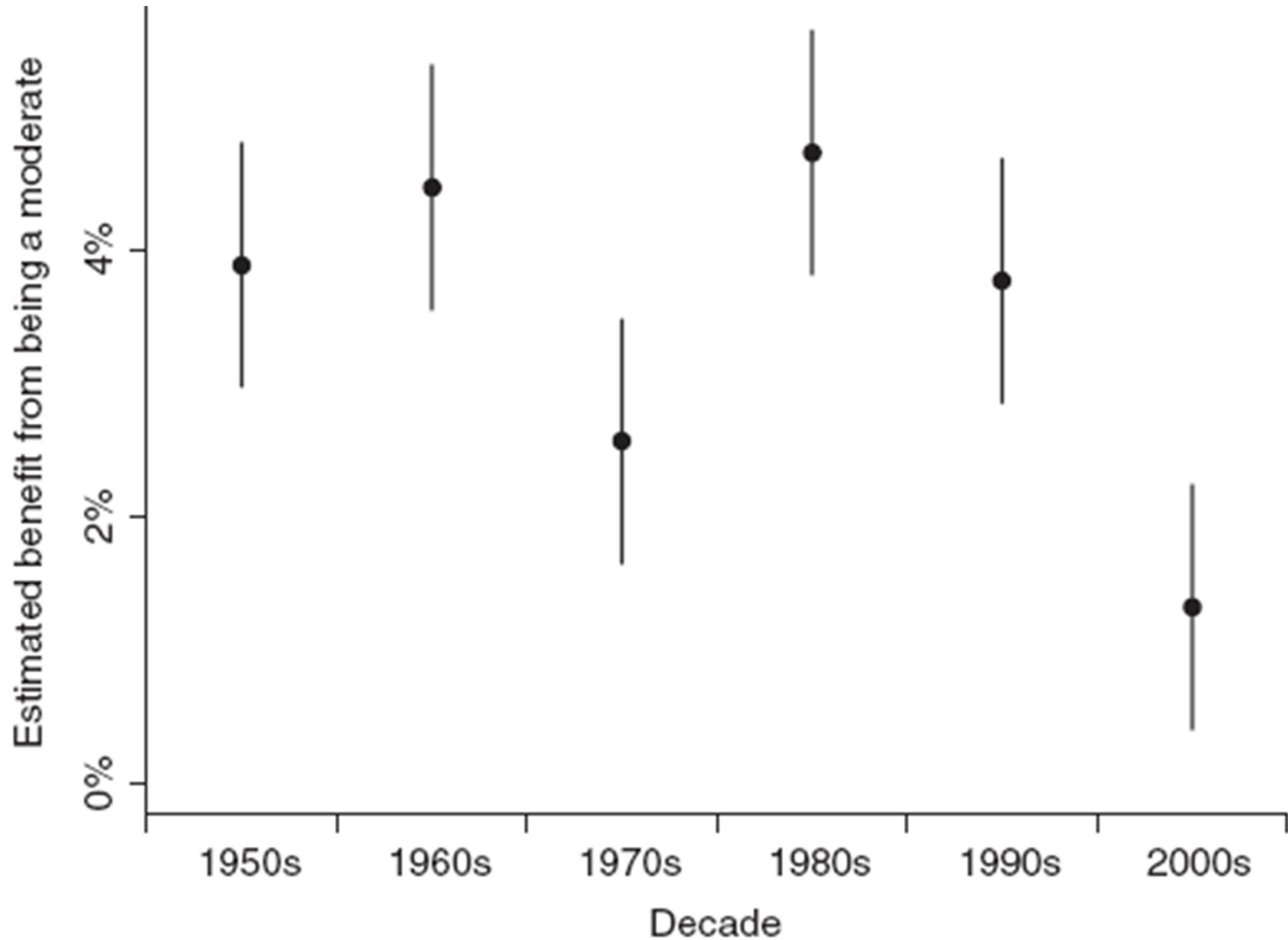




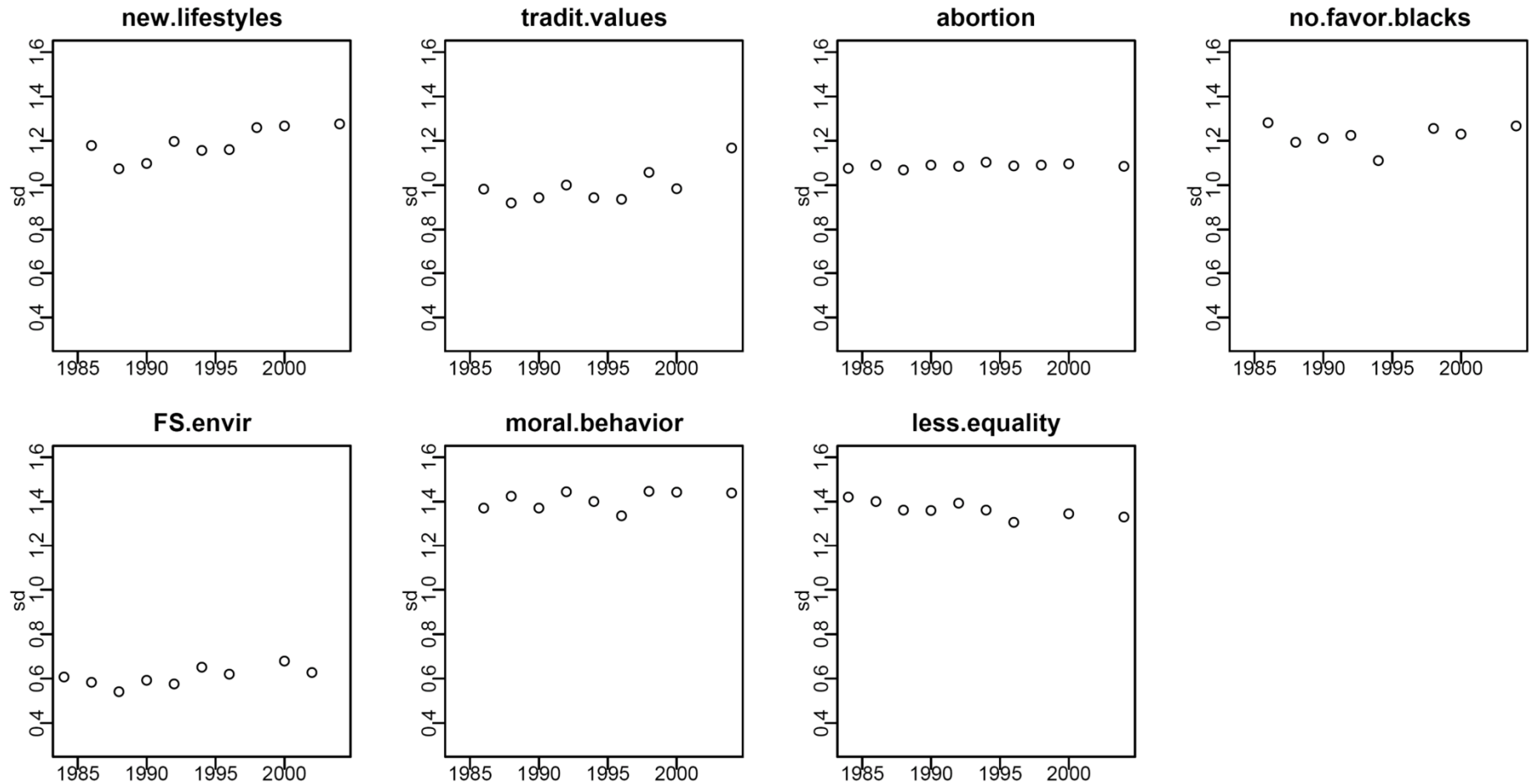




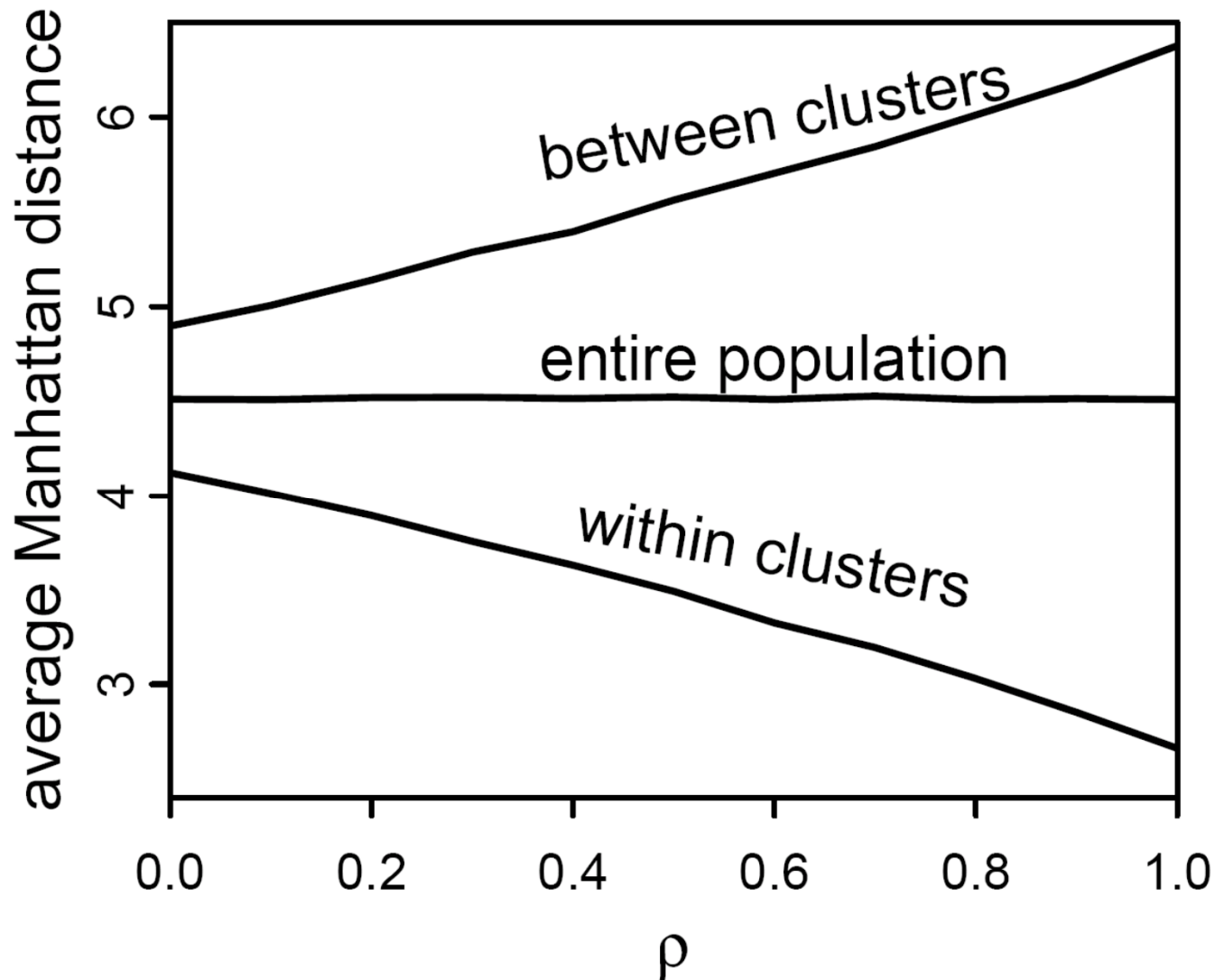
# The moderate benefits of moderation



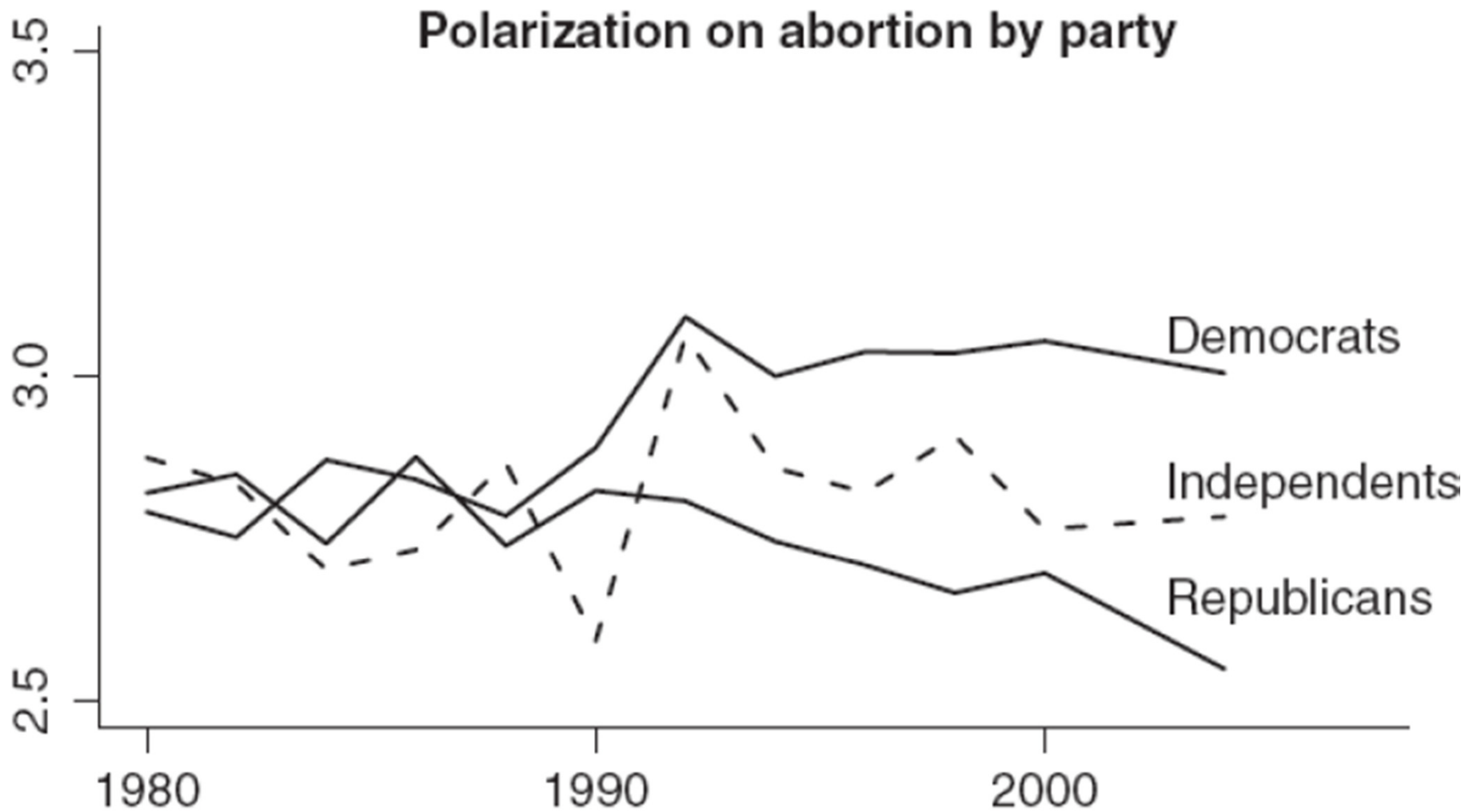
# On individual issues, Americans have not become more polarized



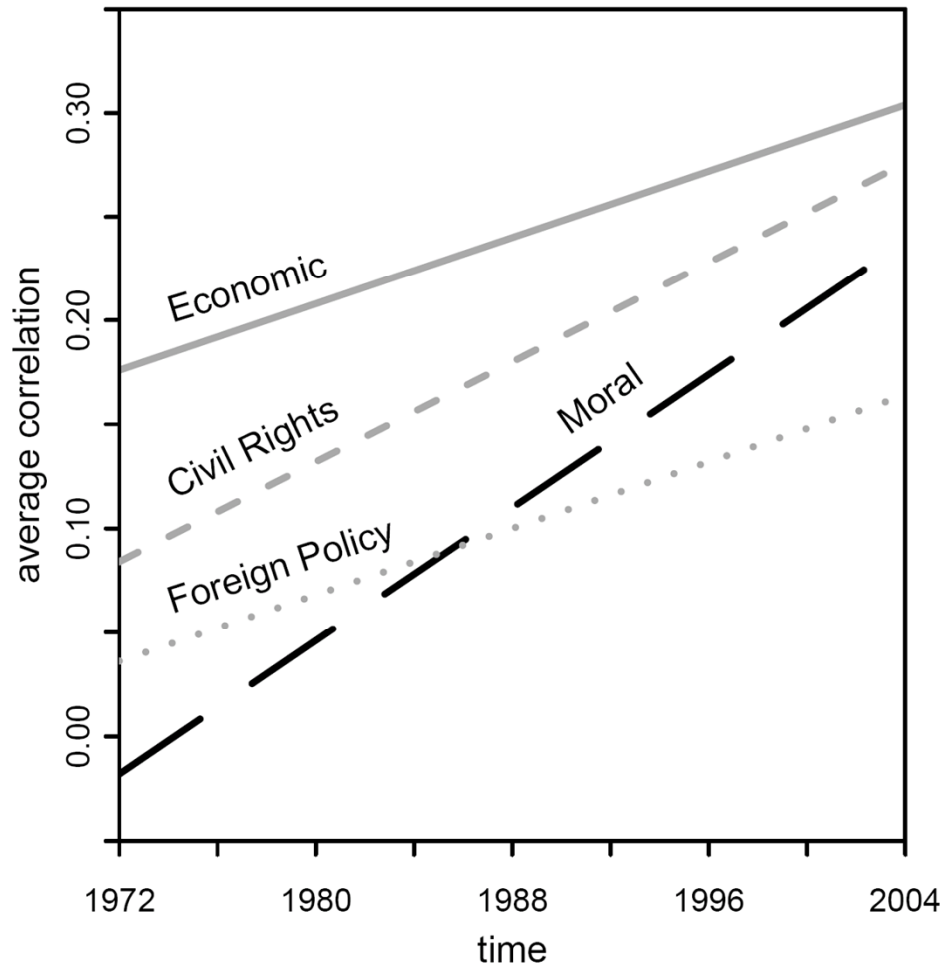
But . . . correlation in issue attitudes  
can yield clustering and polarization



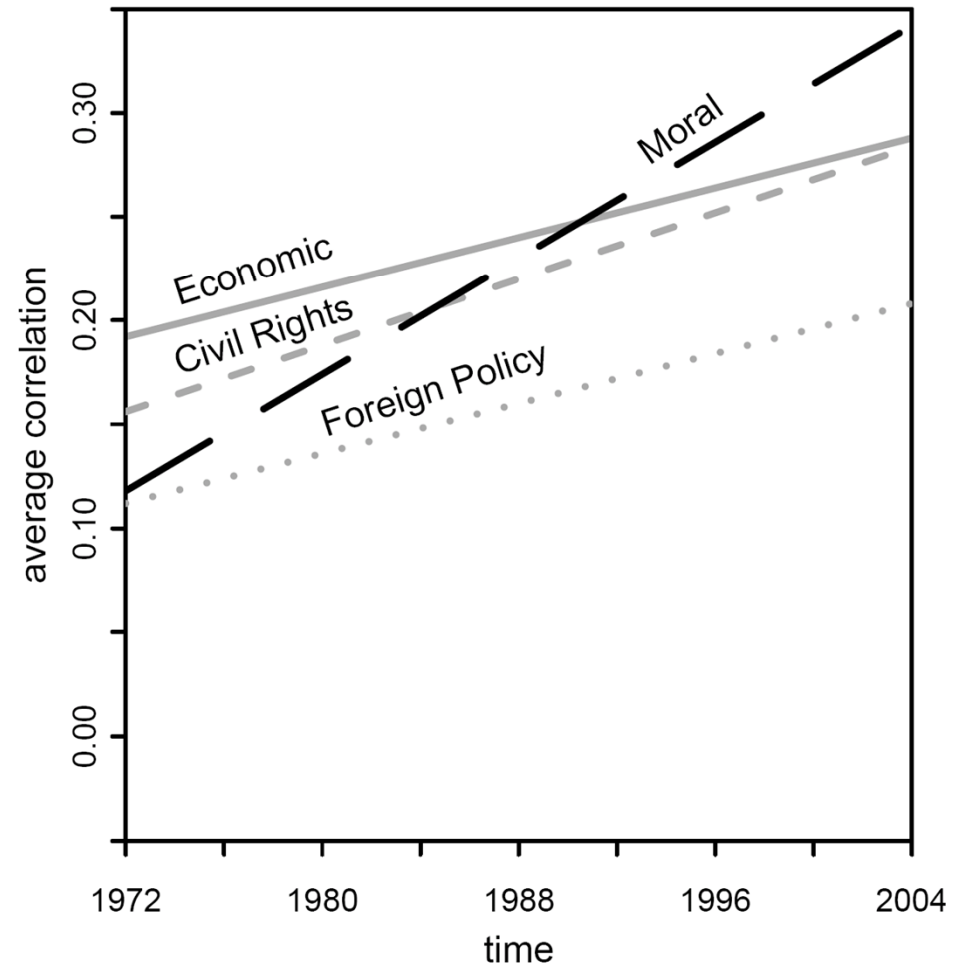
# Example: abortion



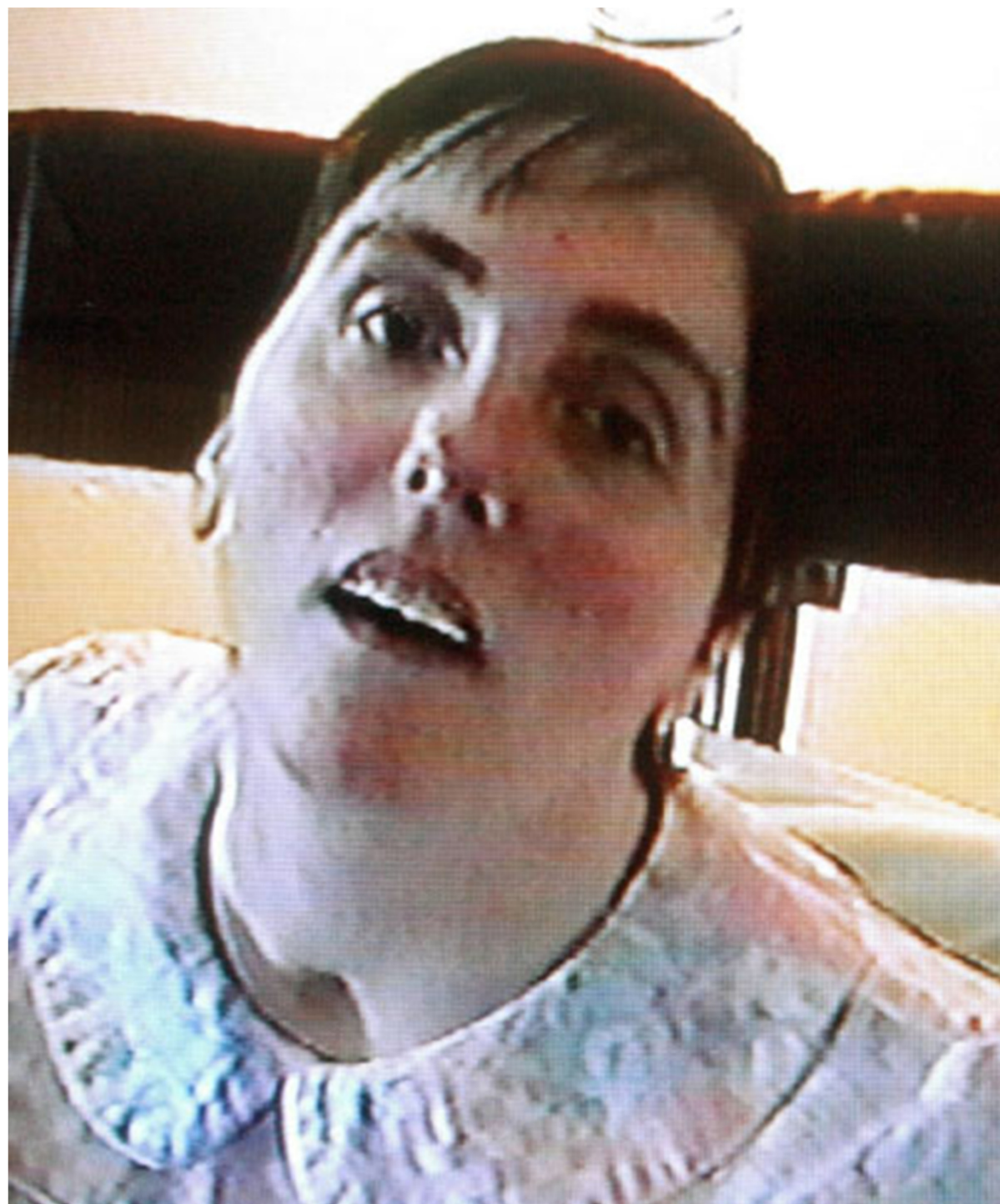
issue x party identification



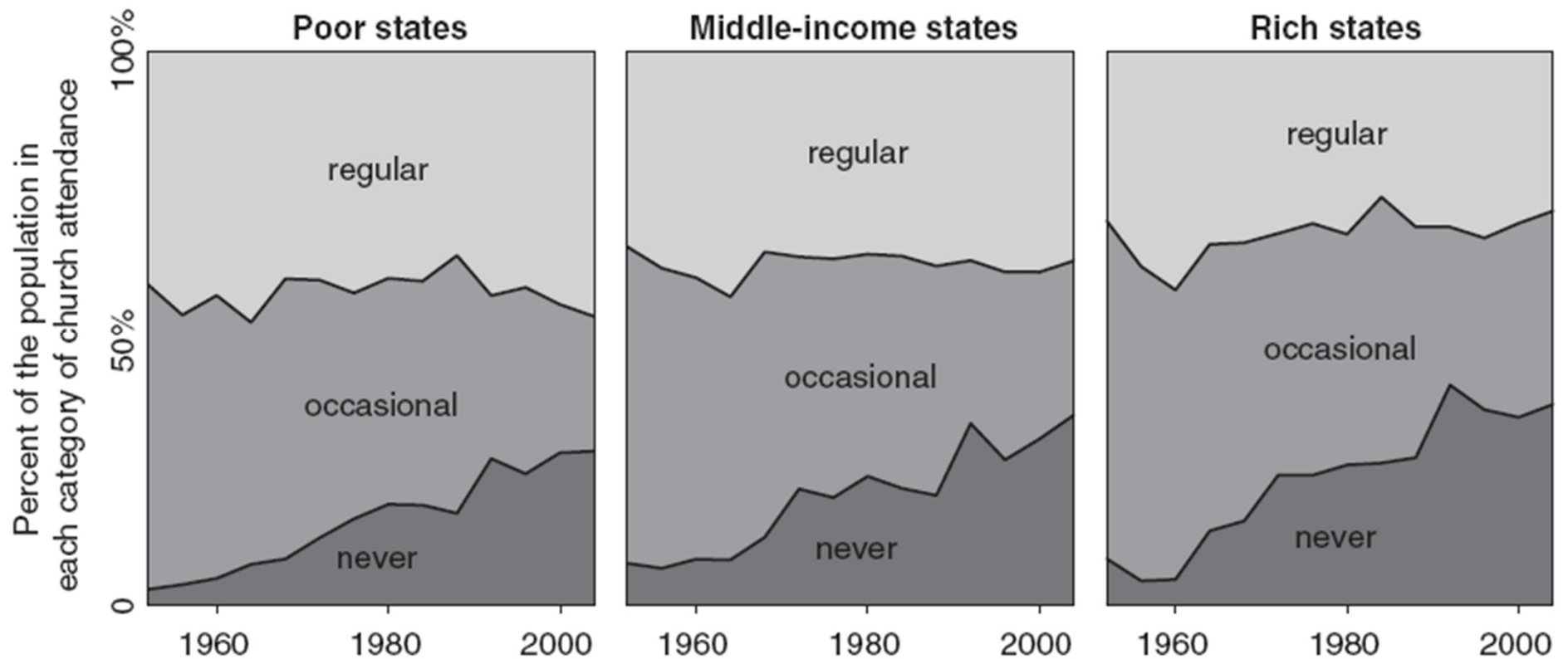
issue x liberal-conservative







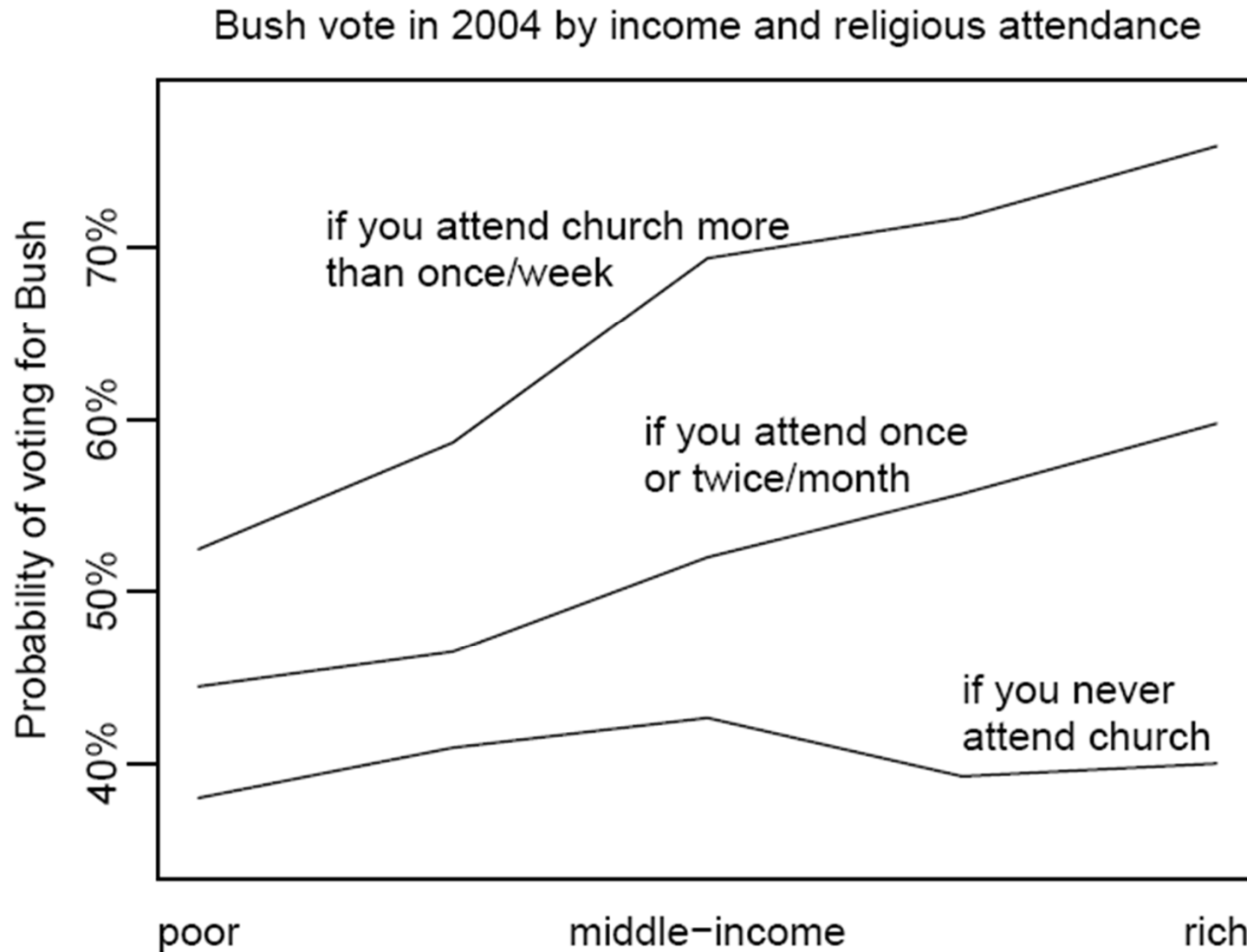
# Churchgoers and others



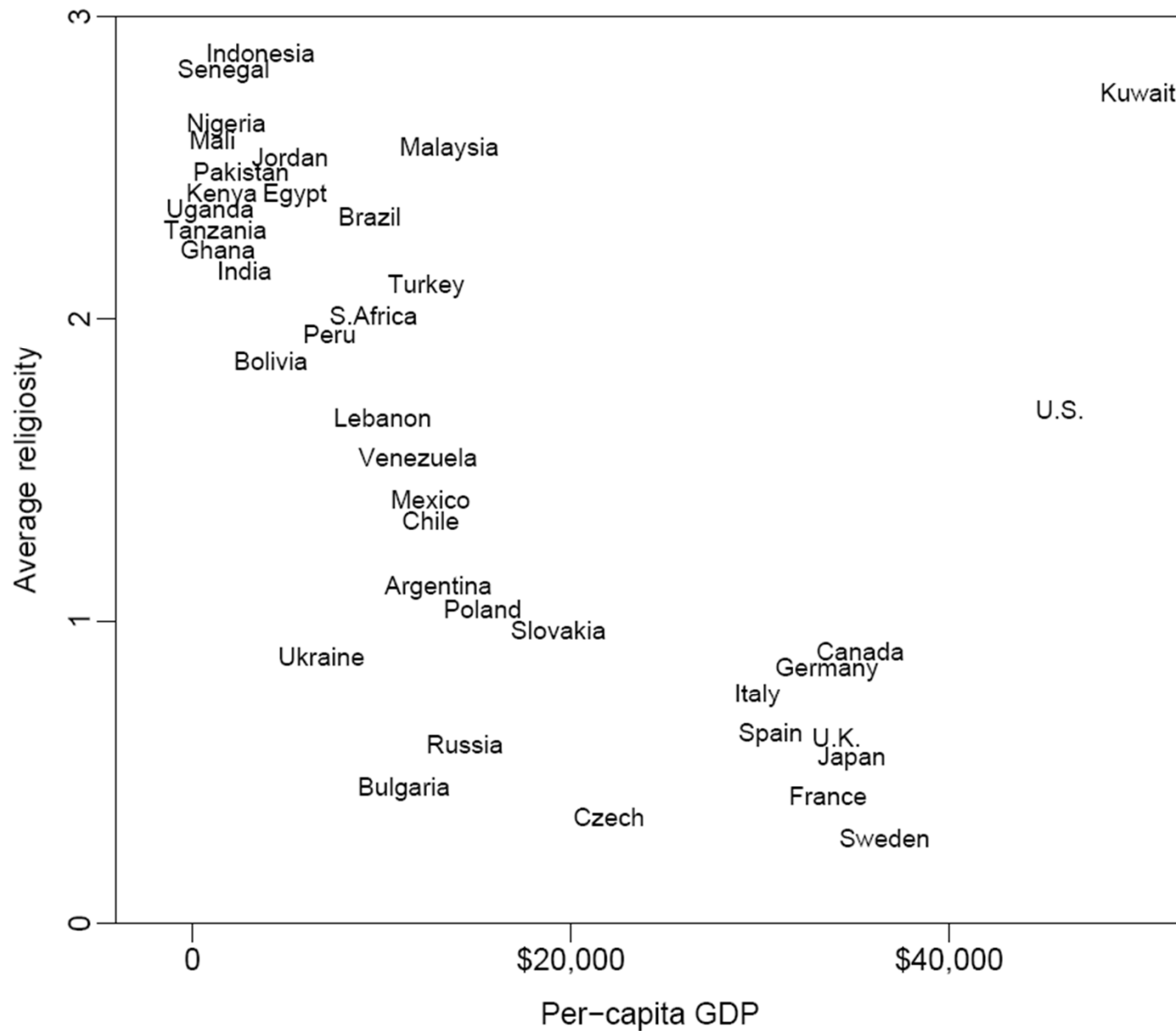
Republican vote for regular church attenders minus  
Republican vote for nonattenders



# The opiate of the elites



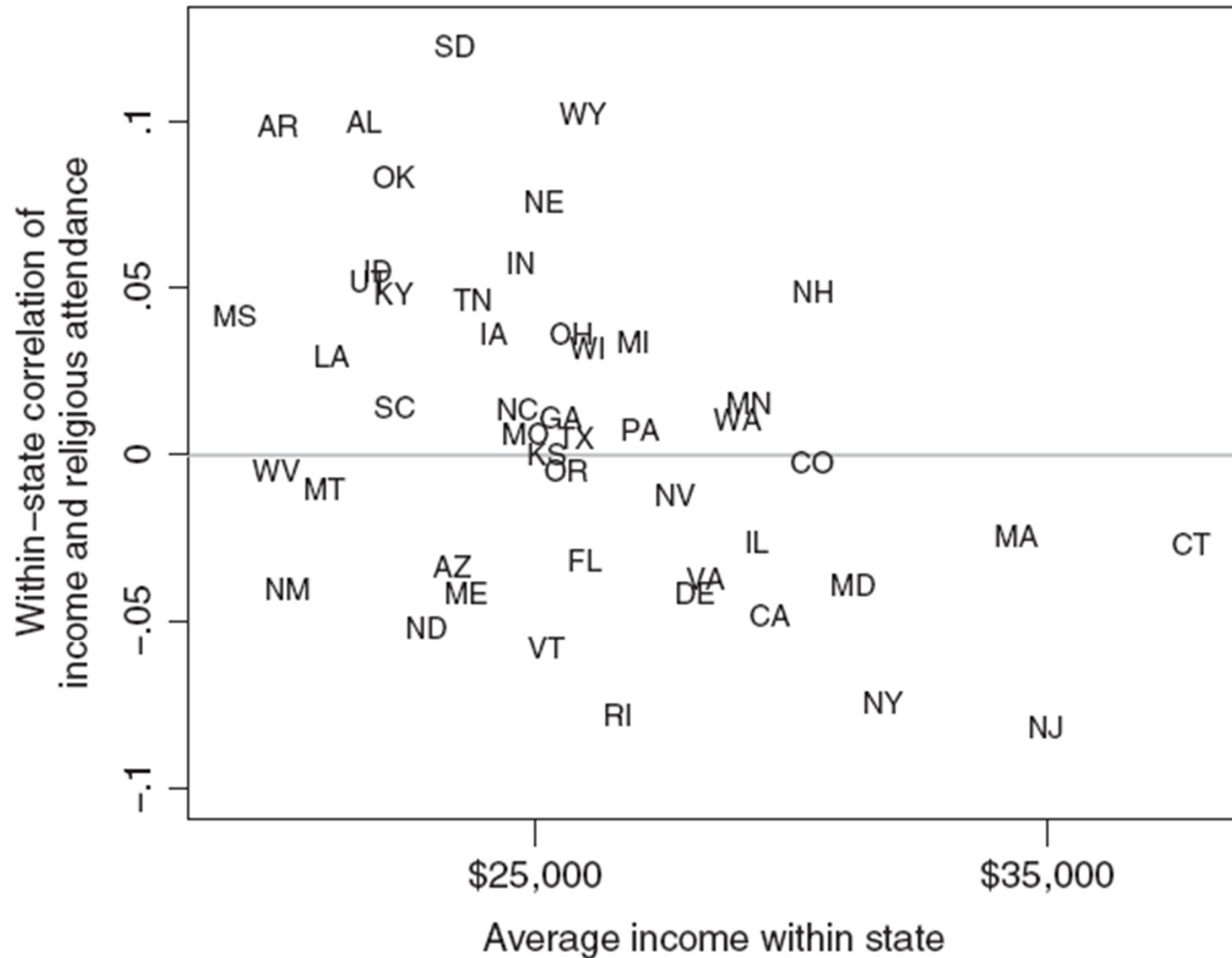
# Religious and nonreligious countries



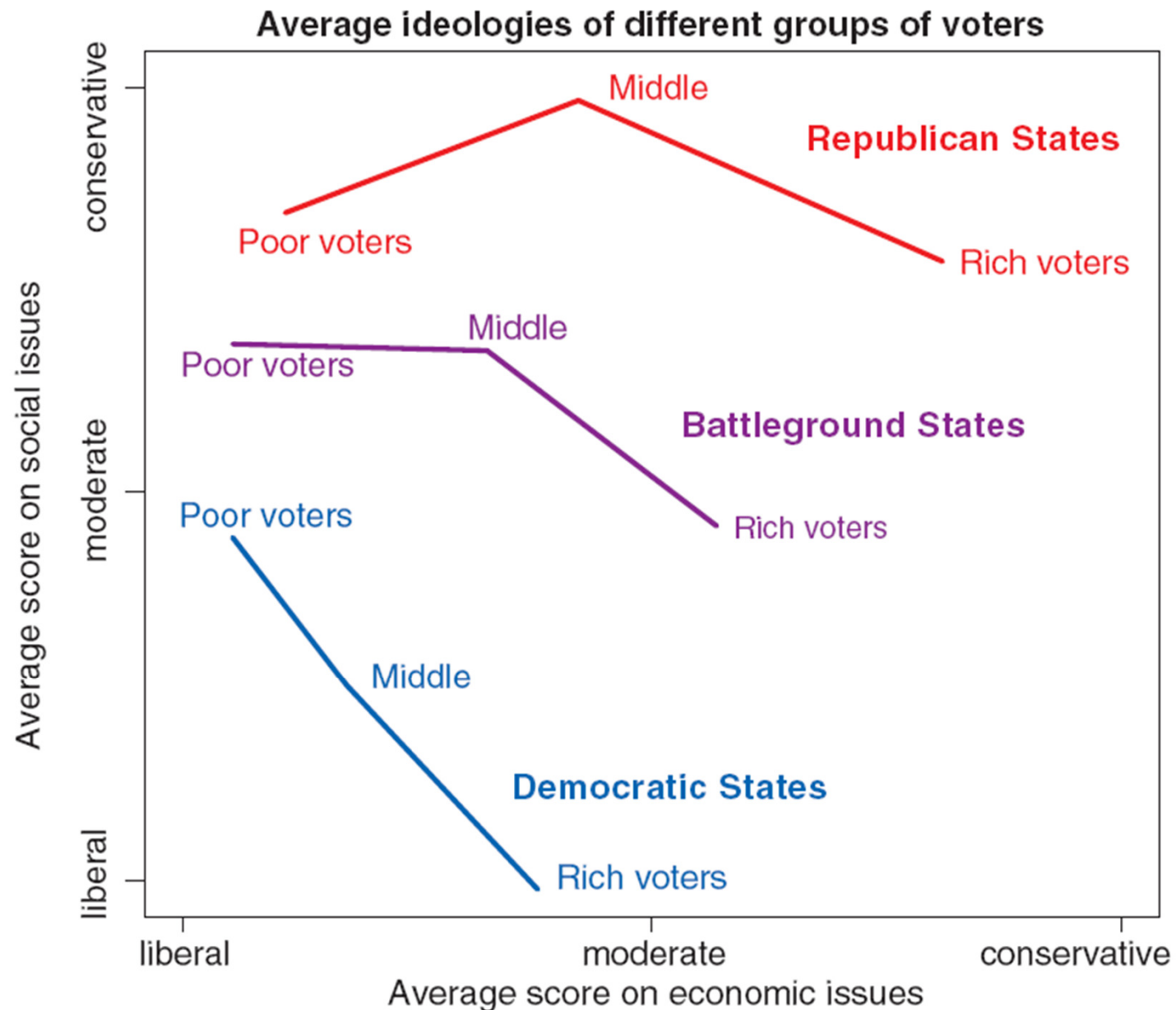
# Religious and nonreligious states



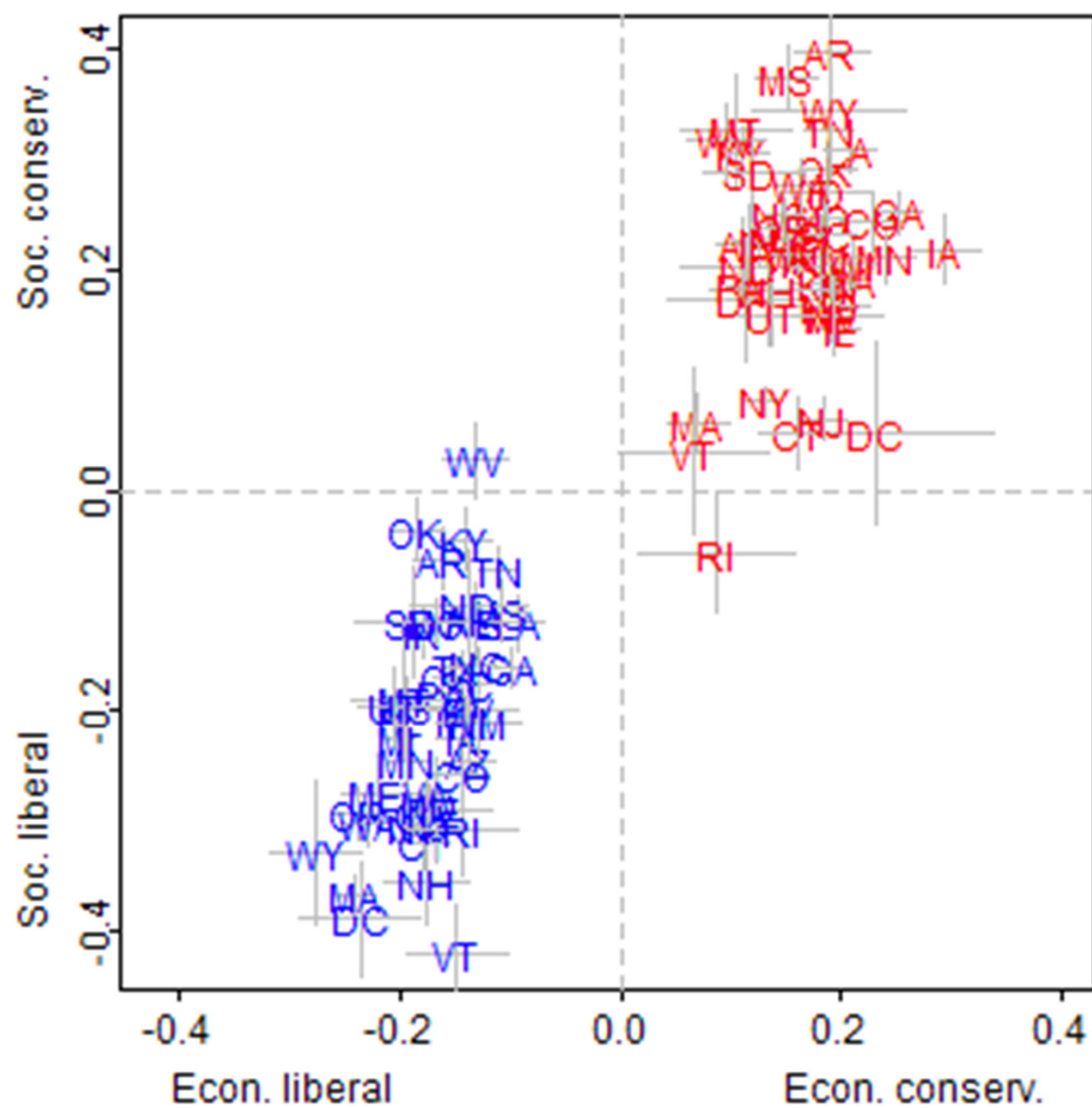
# Religion and income within states



# Rich and poor in Red and Blue America



Average economic and social ideology scores  
among Bush voters (red) and Gore voters (blue) in each state



# Open questions

- What about politics?
- What about policy?
- Primary elections
- How politically polarized *are* our social networks, really?

# Take-home points

- To explain **why**, it can often be helpful to know **what** is actually happening
- Vote swings tend to be uniform (more so than ever before)
- Interaction of geography and political differences