

# Partisan Joiners: Associational Membership and Political Polarization in America (1974–2004) \*

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## Abstract

Associational life may favor political integration or amplify division, depending on how individuals partition themselves into groups and whether their multiple affiliations embed them into concentric or crosscutting social circles. Using GSS data (1974–2004) on affiliations to 16 types of groups, I look at the interplay between associational membership and political polarization, and ask if there is any evidence of increased polarization in the associative patterns of Americans.

Results show that the often lamented decline in group membership affects primarily the category of single-group members and is limited to few types of groups. The density of the network of overlapping membership has remained stable over time and there are no real changes in the patterns of shared memberships between group types, nor Republicans and Democrats differ in their patterns of preferential affiliation.

While group types are not becoming more partisan, group joiners are becoming more so: group members have grown consistently more radical in their political identification, and group types are becoming ideologically more heterogeneous. This raises the hypothesis that civil society polarization is occurring at the level of actual groups, and not group types.

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# 1 Introduction

The academic and intellectual debate on the impoverishment of political and associational life, increased social isolation, and the threat of authoritarianism, reached its highest in the 1950s and 1960s, fueled by the dramatic experiences of World War II. A quite heterogeneous group of scholars, drawing from the European experiences of the previous decades as well as the changing nature of American community, reached discouraging conclusions about the rise of mass society and its consequences for democracy and social stability (Arendt 1958; Mann 1970; Kornhauser 1959; Linz 1967; 1978; see also Mills 1952; Converse 1964; Milgram 1967). In contrast, theorists of political pluralism suggested that, in practice, representative democracies do not necessitate large levels of mass participation, and that a multitude of interest groups, not a close circle, have access to power. In a more optimistic vein, they argued that crosscutting interests, intergroup competition and institutional differentiation secure the openness of the democratic process (Truman 1951; Dahl 1961; Olson 1965, Lowi 1969; Walker 1991; Galston 2002).

Although animated by less dramatic concerns, in the last two decades sociologists and political scientists have produced ample evidence of the fact that many symptoms of the same (alleged) democratic malaise still affect American society: from the polarization of the Congress and the end of the era of bipartisan politics (Brady and Han 2006; Poole and Rosenthal 2007), to the increasing social and political inequality (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006), the inconsistency and scarce participation of the mass public (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Eliasoph 1998; Patterson 2002), the decline in associational membership (Putnam 1996; 2000; Wuthnow 2002; Skocpol 2003), and increasing social isolation (Bearman and Parigi 2004; McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006).

Nonetheless, in recent years, scholars have failed to systematically relate dynamics of political division and polarization to changes in associational life and civic engagement.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, they have usually assumed that a vivid associational life will fosters democratic outcomes—taking for granted that bowling together is better than bowling alone—, thus failing to consider the actual consequences of the decline in civic participation on the level of political integration and social cohesion.

In this paper I look at the interplay between associational membership and political polarization, and ask if there is any evidence of increased political polarization in the associative patterns of Americans. The goal is to

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<sup>1</sup>As a consequence of disciplinary specialization, the research domains of public opinion and civil society have grown apart, somehow reducing our capacity to fully understand social trends and their political consequences.

assess to what extent the polarization trend observed among party members and political activists is complemented by a similar dynamic in civil society associative patterns.

To properly address this question, I look at time trends of (a) the ideological profile of associational groups, comparing the partisan allegiances of group members to those of non members, and (b) the network of inter-organizational relations generated by overlapping memberships. The analysis of group profiles will allow us to assess whether groups are becoming more partisan with respect to the population at large—that is, if they are becoming disproportionately more Republicans or Democrats—and whether they are internally more homogeneous/heterogeneous than the rest of the population. The analysis of inter-organizational relations would inform us about the density and level of polarization of the network of overlapping memberships. Analytically, the combination of these two aspects gives rise to a multiplicity of possible scenarios, some of which might potentially undermine the premises of liberal democracy.

This paper looks at the intersection of different social spheres from a macro-perspective and comes to the conclusion that American civil society is not becoming more polarized. The analysis shows that the decline in civic engagement has not reduced the overall level of civil society integration, and that there are no signs of increased polarization in patterns of overlapping memberships, nor alternative associational patterns emerges when comparing the subpopulations of Democrats and Republicans.

Nonetheless, while group types are not becoming more partisan, group joiners are becoming more so. Group members, especially those affiliated to multiple types of groups, have grown consistently more extreme in their political identities, and group types are becoming ideologically more heterogeneous. This suggests the possibility that civil society polarization is occurring at the level of actual groups, and not group types.

## **2 Crosscutting Circles, Political Pluralism and Political Subcultures.**

In his rejection of society as a holistic concept, George Simmel set the basis for an understanding of modernity that goes beyond classic antinomies such as Tonnies' *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* or Durkheim's mechanic and organic solidarity, or linear trends of historical development as in the accounts of Weber and Sombart. Instead, he provided a vivid picture of the divisive tensions that individuals experience in contemporary societies (Simmel 1908 [1950]).

For Simmel, society is a constellation of forms of sociation, a place where different, often alternative tendencies combine into unresolved, instable equi-

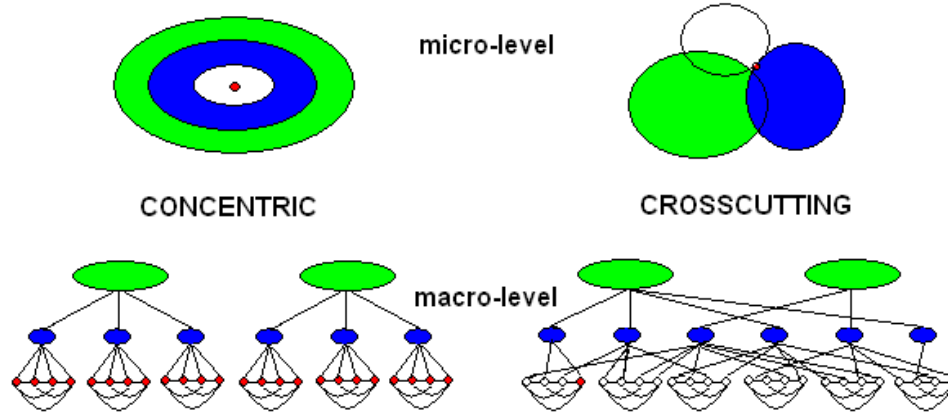


Figure 1: Concentric and Crosscutting Circles.

libria. Sociations are crystallized forms of interaction (like family, guild, church, social classes and organizations) as well as less conspicuous, stable forms of relations “that piece together the real life of society as we encounter it in our experience” (Simmel 1908 [1950] p. 9). Socialized individuals are in a dual relation with society. They are part of it and against it; they are acted upon and self-determined (Frisby 1984).

According to him, in traditional society, individuals were at the center of *concentric circles*, in which affiliation to one group was highly predictive of membership into other circles. In contrast, in modern society, individuals are at the intersection of a web of group affiliations in which membership in one group is less predictive of other affiliations. Individuals thus experience *crosscutting circles* that exert diverse and often counteracting pressures on them, simultaneously allowing their self-actualization and limiting alternative realizations (Figure 1). The more lines of social differentiation intersect, the more individuals experience freedom of choice, since groups’ power over the individual is weakened. Simultaneously, this very same process of individualization brings about social isolation, alienation, and a sense of displacement.

Peter Blau systematized and subjected Simmel’s suggestive notion of crosscutting social circles to empirical analysis.<sup>2</sup> Interested in the relationship between differentiation, inequality and social integration, Blau defined social integration not in terms of culture or shared values, but of actual patterns of intergroup relations based on personal associations. His idea was

<sup>2</sup>Although at the cost of sacrificing the dialectical power of Simmel’s argumentation, with respect to both the dualism between individual freedom and social integration and between consensus and conflict.

that increasing social heterogeneity and differentiation might actually induce greater social integration, in the case that the multiple lines of social differentiation and sources of inequality are crosscutting instead of overlapping.<sup>3</sup> Given that heterogeneity promotes intergroup relations and inequality enhances the probability of status-distant social relations, it follows the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that differentiation nourishes social integration (Blau 1974; Blau and Schwartz 1984).

While Blau never explicitly referred to the theme of pluralism (cf. Collins 1979), it is easy to envision the tight relation between his approach to social inequality and the classic liberal-pluralistic argument that inequalities and social divisions, as long as they unfold along non-overlapping dimensions, are good for social stability (Truman 1951; Dahl 1961; Olson 1965, Lowi 1969; Walker 1991; Galston 2002).

The link between concentric or crosscutting micro-environments and the theory of political pluralism becomes even more intelligible when we look at the macro-level structure that emerges from these two alternative micro-experiences (Figure 1). In fact, at the macro-level, concentric social circles translate into hierarchical vertical networks, in which individuals affiliations are nested in a cumulative fashion. While in a context in which people experience crosscutting pressures, the emergent macro-structure is likely to be an integrated one, where individuals span across different social circles.

Lipset and Rokkan (1967) used a similar conceptualization discussing the consolidation of social cleavages into exclusive political subcultures from which the ideological parties in western democracies have emerged: exclusive political subcultures are created through the development of vertical networks of associations that ensure maximum loyalty to the party (or church) and protect the supporters from cross cutting communications and pressures (Diani 2000).

[Socialist parties and churches] tended to isolate their supporters from outside influence through the development of a wide variety of parallel organizations and agencies: they (...) developed confessionally distinct trade unions, sports clubs, leisure associations, publishing houses, magazines, newspapers, in one or two cases even radio and television stations. (Lipset and Rokkan 1967:15)

In sum, the origin and reinforcement of political identities is intertwined with the configuration of the web of group affiliation and associational mem-

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<sup>3</sup>According to him,

[...] the macrosocial integration of the diverse groups in modern society rests on its multiform heterogeneity resulting from many crosscutting parameters (Blau 1974:615).

bership in which individuals are embedded. Civil society associations are a constitutive part of the political culture and serve as a “transmission belt” (Riley 2005:290) between parties and citizens, contributing to the integration of local interests into the broader national political context (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). In this perspective, associational life contributes to the social organization of political consent, a consent that can foster support for democratic or authoritarian regimes alike, depending on how people partition themselves into groups (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Gramsci 1971; Allen 1984; Kosher 1986; Riley 2005). This approach therefore differs from those understandings of civil society as a sphere separate and alternative to state, family and market (Hegel 1820 [1942], Parsons 1951; Cohen and Arato 1992), and, moreover, challenges the Tocquevillian idea(l) that civic engagement univocally triggers democratic outcomes.

Looking at the contemporary debate, substantial scholarship has been produced regarding the increased partisanship and polarization of American politics. Similarly, different views concerning the decline in civic engagement and political participation have been articulated. Differently from the past, in recent years these two dynamics have been rarely addressed together.

## 2.1 Political Polarization and Interest Groups

There is virtually full agreement among scholars on the fact that political parties and politicians, in recent decades, have become more ideological on a broad set of political issues (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Layman, Carsey, and Menasce Horowitz 2006). A similar dynamic has been observed among party activists (Stone and Rapoport 1994; Saunders and Abramowitz 2004). Both mechanisms of persuasion and mechanisms of selective recruitment/derecruitment seem to be at work. The more political leaders “emphasize ideological appeals, the more likely that party will be to attract ideologically motivated activists. The involvement of these ideologically motivated activists may, in turn, reinforce ideological extremism among party leaders” (Saunders and Abramowitz 2004:287). In addition, the growth, starting from the 1970s, of single-issue-based interest groups and activists has had a radicalizing effect on party’s primaries and legislative behavior in Congress (Brady and Han 2006; see McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal (2006) for a different view).

Given leaders and activists’ increased polarization, many observers have concluded that similar polarization dynamics characterize public opinion at large. Indeed, after a period of decline in the importance of party identification and ideology, partisan loyalties have started to count more, to the point that, in the middle of the 1990s, their impact on voting behavior reached its highest value in at least fifty years (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998, Bartels 2000; Hetherington 2001; Bafumi 2004). Nonetheless, the fact that self

identified Republicans (or Conservatives) are more likely to vote for the Republican Party today than they were thirty years ago—and the same applies to Democrats—should not be interpreted per se as a sign of public opinion polarization. Simply, “elite polarization has clarified public perceptions of the parties’ ideological differences” (Hetherington 2001:619) and therefore “the public may increasingly come to develop and apply partisan predispositions” (Bartels 2000:44).

In fact, there is scarce evidence of increased public opinion polarization: with respect to a large set of political issues, American public opinion has remained stable or become even more moderate over the last forty years. Mass opinion is more divided only with respect to certain moral issues and the Iraqi war (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Evans 2003; Fiorina et al. 2005; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2006). Similarly, there is no evidence of growing issue constraint and alignment between different issue domains (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008). In contrast, we find systematic polarization if we look at the subgroup of citizens who are politically active, or identify themselves with a party or ideology: they tend to have more extreme and consistent positions than the rest of the population.

In conclusion, public opinion has been characterized by a consistent growth in issue partisanship—the correlation of issue attitudes with party ID or ideology—more than issue constraint—the correlation between pairs of issues. This suggests that changes in people’s attitudes correspond more to a re-sorting of party labels among voters than to greater constraint on issue attitudes: since parties are more polarized, they are now better at sorting individuals along ideological lines (Hetherington 2001; Fiorina et al 2005; Levendusky 2004; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008).

Increased issue partisanship might have the effect of handing over greater voice to political extremists and single-issue advocates, and amplifying dynamics of unequal representation (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006; Bartels 2008; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008). Such effect would be magnified if dynamics of increased partisanship and polarization were to occur along the lines of civic associations and organized groups. Thus, it is crucial to turn our attention to patterns of associational affiliation and assess to what extent these have changed over time.

## **2.2 Associational Life, Democracy and Social Capital**

The recent debate on the changes in American associational life took off with Putnam’s alarmed assessment of the decline in civic engagement and political participation (1996; 2000; see also Andersen, Curtis and Grabb 2006) and was followed by Skocpol’s investigation of the changing role of voluntary groups and associations (2003; 2004). In the latter she argues that the increasing level of professionalization, specialization and differentiation

of civic associations may result in the deepening of social and economic divisions in American society, as interests representation tends to cluster along class lines. Other scholars, instead, reached less dramatic conclusions, showing the overall stability of institutional forms of trust and social capital (Paxton 1999; Wuthnow 2002), as well as the rise of new participatory forms (Minkoff 1997; Wuthnow 2002) and the continuity of collective action at the community level (Sampson et al. 2005).

Both those who are and those who are not concerned about current trends in civic engagement tend to take for granted that a vibrant associational life brings positive outcomes for the collectivity, although admitting that associational membership is not in itself a guarantee of democratic outcomes (Gramsci 1971; Allen 1984; Kosher 1986; Powell and Clemens 1998; Riley 2005; Tilly 2005). Even Putnam, often labeled as an uncritical supporter of the equation between associations and democracy, has recognized that not all associational (social) capital is necessarily good for civic life (Putnam 2000; see also Portes 1998).

Nonetheless, attempts to relate associational life to democratic outcomes have mainly searched for the organizational characteristics most conducive to democracy, addressing questions like: Which associations are good for democracy? Which associational practices improve citizens' democratic attitudes? (Fung 2003; Warren 2001; Kaufmann 2002). While scarce attention has been devoted to the meso-level mechanisms that coordinate, synchronize and transform the versatile, sometimes quixotic contributions of individual citizens and more or less formalized groups into collectively good achievements (with the possible exception of Paxton 2002; 2007; Perrin 2005).

More specifically, scholars usually proceed as follows: they map changes in associational life at the individual level—describing trends in membership—and at the organizational level—accounting for the professionalization and bureaucratization of civic associations—, and then speculate about the consequences of such associational patterns on democracy, according to some (often implicit) notion of democracy. The debate concentrates on what kinds of associations are good for democracy, without taking into account the interplay between associations and the overall web of inter-organizational relations they generate. While a focus on the associations and their members is effective in pointing out the integrative and educative effect of associations on individuals (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) and the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion of certain social categories, it is more debatable to what extent one can really understand the creation of trust and social capital, and moreover dynamics of interest representation and democratic deliberation, without taking into account the meso-level structure of interorganizational relationships and its changes over time.

Paxton has moved in this direction in her research on the impact of associ-

ational memberships on social capital and generalized trust by distinguishing between associations that are *connected* to other associations through their members' multiple membership and *isolated* associations (which are associations whose members do not belong to any other group). In her comparative research, she shows that individual's membership in connected associations, by virtue of its linkages to other groups, is more likely to foster generalized trust than membership in isolated associations (2007) and that, while connected associations are likely to foster democratic outcomes, isolated associations can have a detrimental effect on democracy (2002).

Historical research (Allen 1984; Berman 1997; Bermeo 2003; Riley 2005) has similarly dismissed simplistic models that equates associational life to democratic outcomes. For instance, in his *The Nazi Seizure of Power*, Allen shows how a democratic regime characterized by a vivid associational life could drift toward undemocratic outcomes. The shift of a small German town towards massive support for the Nazis did not depend on the shortage of associations, rather, on the absence of forms of participation connecting individuals across class, and/or ideological lines. Civil society did not collapse because it could not provide a strong organizational basis for collective interests, but because it lacked settings and opportunities for the mediation of those interests and for the development of mutual recognition and broader solidarity between holders of opposite stakes and worldviews. It was, in other words, based on concentric circles rather than crosscutting ones (Simmel [1908]1955).

The link between associational patterns at the individual level and macro-outcomes is contingent on the web of group affiliations. In fact, similar levels of civic engagement can generate either concentric or crosscutting social circles depending on 1) the level of fragmentation (number of organizations), 2) integration (political heterogeneity of the organizations and density of the inter-organizational relations) and 3) civic networks polarization (absence of consistent overlaps between clusters of associations). Changes in each of these factors are likely to induce changes in the others and thus in the overall feature of civic networks. In this paper I will consider the last two aspects, while the data unfortunately do not allow any speculation about the level of fragmentation.

### 3 Methodology and Data

Civic society associations engage in multiple relations. They exchange resources, promote common activities and campaigns, and, moreover, they share members. In general, there are two strategies to study civic networks. One is to focus on *actual groups* and map the web of shared members and inter-organizational activities between them (Diani 2003; Baldassarri and

Diani 2007). The other, and the one I follow here, is to refer to *types of groups*, instead of concrete associations, and look at patterns of overlapping memberships between group types (McPherson 1983; McPherson and Ranger-Moore 1991; Cornwell and Harrison 2004; Diani 2005). The former captures the concrete web of organizational affiliations and the richness of the social and political context in which individuals and groups are embedded, but, due to constraints in the data collection, it is necessarily confined to the extensive study of local communities, thus making it difficult to transcend the specificity of the context and claim the generalizability of the findings. In contrast, mapping affiliations to group types allows researchers to take full advantage of standard sampling techniques, thus facilitating the generalizability of the findings, but to the cost of substituting actual groups with abstract categorizations of voluntary activities (i.e. fraternal, churches, sport, etc.).

While to the purpose of structural analysis (Breiger 1974; Galskiewicz 1989; Knoke 1990a) it is generally preferable to have data concerning the affiliation to specific groups, since dynamics of social selection and interpersonal influence occur at the level of actual groups, scholars sensitive to the dualism between persons and groups and organizational interdependency have taken advantage of both data structures, using extant dataset in creative ways or collecting new ones.

In this tradition, McPherson's ecological model of group adaptation represents, to date, the most powerful attempt to model the growth, decline and demographic dynamics of a population of voluntary groups (McPherson 1983; McPherson and Ranger-Moore 1991). According to this model, network based selection processes at the individual level produce adaptation in communities of organizations: social organizations compete for members in ecological niches that are defined by the sociodemographic composition of their members and by their geographical and temporal location.

Consistent empirical evidence has been provided to show that mechanisms of selection and retention based on homophilous recruitment networks are capable of predicting actual changes in the sociodemographic characteristics of groups' members over time and trends in group affiliations at the aggregate level (McPherson and Ranger-Moore 1991; McPherson and Rotolo 1996). Empirical findings also support the micro-foundative assumptions of this model, thus accounting for the overall stability of groups in their niches: voluntary groups are very homogeneous with respect to many sociodemographic characteristics, thus unlikely to facilitate relations between socially distant individuals. Moreover, organizational homogeneity is maintained by structural mechanisms that increase the risk for atypical members and people that are in high demand to leave the group (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987; Popierlarz and McPherson 1995). In these terms, homogeneity

in voluntary groups constitutes a barrier to social integration.

Complementary to the study of groups interdependence based on this ecological model of group competition and adaptation, is a structural analysis of the web of overlapping memberships between groups. While the first accounts for population dynamics, the second casts some lights on the level of interpenetration and cooperation potential between associative types. Cornwell and Harrison (2004) moved in this direction by looking at the structural embeddedness of Unions in the broader context of civil society organizations. Focusing on the connectivity capacity of rank-and-file members, they documented the increasing isolation of Labor organizations in America. Namely, they showed that union membership provides few opportunities of connection to other social groups and that, as a consequence, Unions have come to occupy a peripheral position in the emergent interorganizational network.

In this paper, I move a step forward, by investigating the effect of changing patterns of group affiliation on the structure of interorganizational networks that emerges from patterns of multiple membership. Instead of focusing on the relative position of a group type, I intend to capture changes in the emergent interorganizational structure, with a specific focus on patterns of political polarization.

To this goal, the General Social Survey provides consistent information about associational participation in 16 different types of organizations covering a time period of 30 years, from 1974-1994 and then 2004. The question asked is the following:

I would like to know something about the groups and organizations to which individuals belong. Here is a list of various kinds of organizations. Could you tell me whether or not you are a member of each type?

*List of groups:* Fraternal groups; Service groups; Veterans' groups; Political clubs; Labor Unions; Sports groups; Youth groups; School service groups; Hobby or garden groups; School fraternities or sororities; Nationality groups; Farm organizations; Literary, art, discussion or study groups; Professional or academic societies; Church-affiliated groups; any other group.

Technically, since the survey asks for group type, respondents who belong to more than one group of the same type are considered as members of only a single group. With respect to the goal of this paper this does not constitute a real problem, since we are interested in the capacity of individuals to span across multiple social circles (see also Smith (1990); McPherson and Rotolo (1996) and Wuthnow (2002) for further discussion). Moreover, despite this and other possible shortcomings, this dataset allows for the study of a complete typology of group affiliations over a long period of time,

providing detailed individual level information as well as an exhaustive categorization of group membership. This aspect is central to research agendas that conceive the web of group affiliation as emerging from the duality and interdependence of persons and groups (Breiger 1974).

Two analytical dimensions are relevant here: the group profiles and the web of inter-organizational relations.

### 3.1 Group Profile

We can look at group membership in terms of *representation bias*: certain social categories can be over or under-represented in the group with respect to the entire population (or some other population subgroups). For instance, the proportion of males who are members of union, professional, sport or fraternal associations is larger than their proportion in the population at large. One can also be interested in the *within-group variation* of certain characteristics and attitudes. A group can be homogeneous, i.e. hosting members with similar social status.<sup>4</sup>

In general, representation biases can trigger power asymmetries in the population: i.e. males over-representation in professional or union associations might induce these groups to favor mild (or no) regulatory legislation on gender discrimination. The paper focuses on representation biases in political partisanship, starting from the assumption that if the membership profile of a group is disproportionately Democratic or Republican, it is likely that the group itself, through its leaders, will tend to support more openly certain political issues.

But this is also function of within groups variability: if a group is internally homogeneous with respect to a certain characteristic or attitude such aspect is likely to have greater prominence in defining the group strategy and collective preferences.<sup>5</sup>

While the representation bias has to do with differences between members and non members, within group variance has to do with differences among group members. This distinction is of primary interest for the study of partisan polarization and how it has affected group membership. First, we might find that certain group types are (or have become) dispropor-

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<sup>4</sup>Similarly, McPherson defines *generalization* the process whereby groups become more diverse along a sociodemographic dimension, and *specialization* the process whereby groups become more homogeneous (McPherson 1983).

<sup>5</sup>For instance, consider two situations in which professional groups have the same average level of prestige, but in one case almost all members have prestige scores around the average of the group (low variance), while in the other there is a consistent difference (high variance) between members with high and low levels of prestige. It is easy to foresee that in the first case prestige is an aspect that is likely to aggregate group members and define the interest of the group, while in the second it would not, since the group is heterogeneous in that respect, and prestige might potentially be a source of conflicting interests.

tionally more Republican or, alternatively, Democratic than the rest of the population. Second, we might find that group types are (or have become) internally more homogeneous, in such a case the ideological distance between group members will be smaller than that observed in the general population, or heterogeneous, meaning that they are ideologically more polarized than the population at large.

If partisan polarization is happening along the line of group membership, and therefore, for instance, church members are becoming increasingly more Republican, or union members more Democratic, I would conclude that the intersection of associative patterns and political partisanship resembles the image of concentric social circles, where individuals' affiliations consistently cumulates into a strong identity. In contrast, the finding that political polarization is occurring among members of the same group type, will support the alternative image of crosscutting social circles, where individuals stand at the intersection of different, even conflicting affiliations, and accommodate their (weak) identities accordingly. Nonetheless, no conclusion can be drawn looking exclusively at groups' profile, since this aspect intersects with patterns of multiple affiliations.

### 3.2 The Network of Overlapping Memberships

Respondents' multiple memberships in types of associations can also be used to investigate patterns of preferential attachment between groups, that is, whether certain types of associations are likely to share members and others, instead, tend to be mutually exclusive. According to the conditions of public life in a liberal democracy, one might expect civic networks to situate in between two extreme societal types: on the one end, one can imagine a society characterized by strong sectarian fragmentation, with strong cliques and without bridges, on the other end one can think of a society in which associational patterns are completely individualized and the resulting inter-organizational network resembles a random network without any tendency toward preferential attachment (Baldassarri and Diani 2007). While both extremes make the notion of civil society largely meaningless, it is worth investigating the range of possible network configurations that lie in between.

Starting from a bipartite (member by group) matrix that connects members to the groups they belong to, I built a group by group matrix based on the number of members each pair of groups share in common. The number of shared members is, first of all, a function of the overall size of the groups. Secondly, and more interesting to us, the product of patterns of preferential affiliation. The bad news is that it is very difficult to tell people's preferences and group size effects apart, and, in general, to derive a network structure from affiliation data. One strategy would be to draw a tie between two group types in case the number of shared members passes a certain threshold. Of

course, the problem then becomes how to determine the threshold. Alternatively, one can compute a measure of preferential relation between group types.

For instance, Cornwell and Harrison (2004) defined a measure of structural embeddedness of two groups as the proportion of all the people that could have been in both groups, by dividing the number of shared members by the number of members in the smaller group.<sup>6</sup> To our goal, the main problem with this and other non-directional measures is that the measure is affected by the relative difference in the size of each pair of groups and by changes in group size.

Since the primary interest of my analysis is to look for variations in affiliation patterns, I use here a *directional* measure of preferential relation between groups, namely, I use the proportion of shared members that each group shares with any other group. Formally, the proportion of shared members that group  $A$  shares with group  $B$  ( $Prop_{AB}$ ) is defined as the number of members that group  $A$  and group  $B$  have in common divided by the overall number of members that group  $A$  shares with other groups:

$$Prop_{AB} = \frac{num.shared.memb_{AB}}{num.tot.memb_A - num.single.memb_A} \quad (1)$$

The measure of overlapping membership is directional, and therefore  $Prop_{BA}$  is different from  $Prop_{AB}$ :

$$Prop_{BA} = \frac{num.shared.memb_{AB}}{num.tot.memb_B - num.single.memb_B} \quad (2)$$

A few specifications here: I opted for a *directional measure* and used *proportions* instead of row numbers in order to control for group size: consider two groups, the first has 100 members, the second 10. They share 5 members. This means that the first shares the 5% of its members with the second while the latter shares the 50% of its members with the former. Non-directional measures do not capture this difference. Secondly, I used the proportion of *shared* members instead of the overall proportion of members because groups differ in their ratio of single and multiple members: there are some groups (like churches and unions) that have a large number of single members, others a few.

Substantively, the proportion of shared members that a group receives from other groups depends on the overall size of the group itself and is indicative of its capacity to attract members from other groups and it can be viewed as a measure of group appeal in the web of civil society interorganizational relations.

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<sup>6</sup>Specifically, they measure structural embeddedness as “the number of individuals in organization  $i$  who also are members of organization  $j$  divided by the number of members in the smaller of the two organizations” (Cornwell and Harrison 2004:867).

## 4 Analysis I: a Look at the Aggregate Picture

Scholars have often based their concerns about the decline in civic engagement on the trend in participation to voluntary groups and associations. At a first glance, survey data confirm this picture. Panel A in Figure 2 plots the proportion of respondents to the General Social Survey who declare being member of at least one association: in 1974, they were 75% of the population; by 2004, this number went down to 62%. A consistent, even though not dramatic, drop.

Nonetheless, a closer analysis suggests a more compelling story. While the number of people that do not belong to any association has increased, the average membership per capita does not show any real pattern, fluctuating between 1.6 to 2 over the 1974-2004 period (Figure 2, panel B). The explanation for this finding is simple, and it is shown in panel C: the decline in membership has occurred mostly among those who belong to a single group, while for those who are affiliated to different types of groups, there is no instance of real decline, and even some instance of growth in the mid 1990s. Therefore, while there are fewer joiners, those who actually join, are more likely to be affiliated to more than one group. With respect to the volume of group affiliations this has an interesting property: a one percent increase in the group of those who belong to five groups, makes up a five percent decrease among single-group members. Moreover, since the decline in membership has occurred among single-members, this decline has virtually no impact on the web of interorganizational relations, since people who belong to only one group do not have any role in spanning across different associational types.

Finally, the decline in membership did not occur evenly across the board. In fact, most groups do not show drastic variations in size, with the exception of the steep decline in church and union, and to a lower extent fraternal membership, and the growth in professional membership: panel D reports the trends of the proportion of members of these four groups and relative regression lines. In addition, the gray lines show the time trend (regression line) for each of the remaining twelve types of groups. While the trend for the majority of groups is flat, churches' decline is quite substantial, dropping from 42 to 31 percent in the last three decades. Similarly Unions have gone from 16 percent of the population in 1974, to 10 percent in 2004. In contrast, professional groups have grown from 13 percent in 1974 to 19 percent in 1994, and then shown a three points decline in 2004.

In conclusion, the decline in group membership is not a generalized pattern; indeed, it involves almost exclusively some specific types of association, namely churches, unions and fraternal groups, and, moreover, affects only the category of single-group members. Nonetheless, significant changes

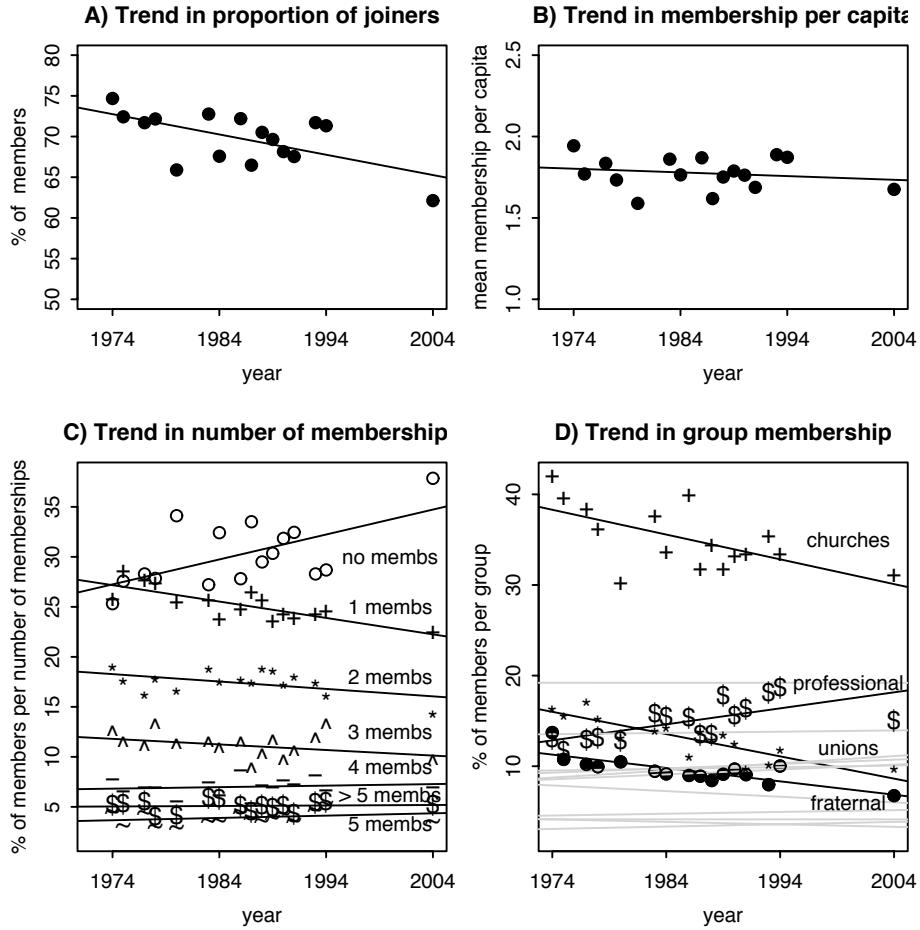


Figure 2: Time trends in associational membership. x-axis: time (1974-2004) (A) Time trend of the proportion of respondents that belong at least to one group-type; (B) Trend of the average membership per capita; (C) Time trend in the number of memberships; (D) Time trend in group membership by group. Unweighted data. Similar results are obtained using standard sociodemographic weights.

might have occurred in the distribution of the political attitudes of groups members. Next section considers this aspect.

## 5 Analysis II: Group Profile

I measure the ideological partisanship and homogeneity of groups by looking at the mean and variance of the party identification of their members—party identification is measured on a seven points scale, from strong Democrat (0) to strong Republican (6). The graphs on the left column of Figure 3 show the time trend of the average ideological position (selfplacement on the party identification scale) respectively of members (circles), non-members (asterisks) and the entire group of respondents (gray line). The first graph shows the trend considering any possible group affiliation, while the graphs from the second to the sixth row consider membership in specific groups, namely parties, unions, professional organizations, churches and sport associations.<sup>7</sup> The second column shows the time trends of the variance in party identification, again distinguishing between members, non-members and the entire population.

In general, these graphs tell a simple, but interesting story: there is little difference between members and non-members with respect to their average ideological position, and, moreover, there are no visible patterns suggesting increasing partisanship within group types. For instance, at any point in time, the average ideological distance between churchgoers and unchurched people is always less than .3 (on a seven points scale), between members and non-members of professional associations the average distance is .4, and so on. In contrast, the difference becomes substantial when considering the extremism of people's political identifications. In general, the variance among group members is larger than among non-members. Moreover, joiners seem to have become more extreme over time. The within group distance has grown in general, and more neatly among churchgoers, from 1.5 in the 1980s to 2.3 in 2004, professionals, starting in the 1990s, and, as previous research has already documented, among party members (note that the scale for this latter group is different). Unions are the only exception. Union members are disproportionately Democrats and increasingly becoming more so; they are also more homogeneous (lower variance) than non-members.

To take this observation to the next level, I tested whether the relation between associational membership and ideological polarization—here understood as the joiners' tendency to have more extreme political allegiances—

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<sup>7</sup>These groups were selected because particularly relevant to our discourse. They cover a large variety of substantive interests—going from political, to vocational and leisure activities. In addition, their group size is large enough to reduce the impact of sample variability. Trends for the remaining groups are available from the author.

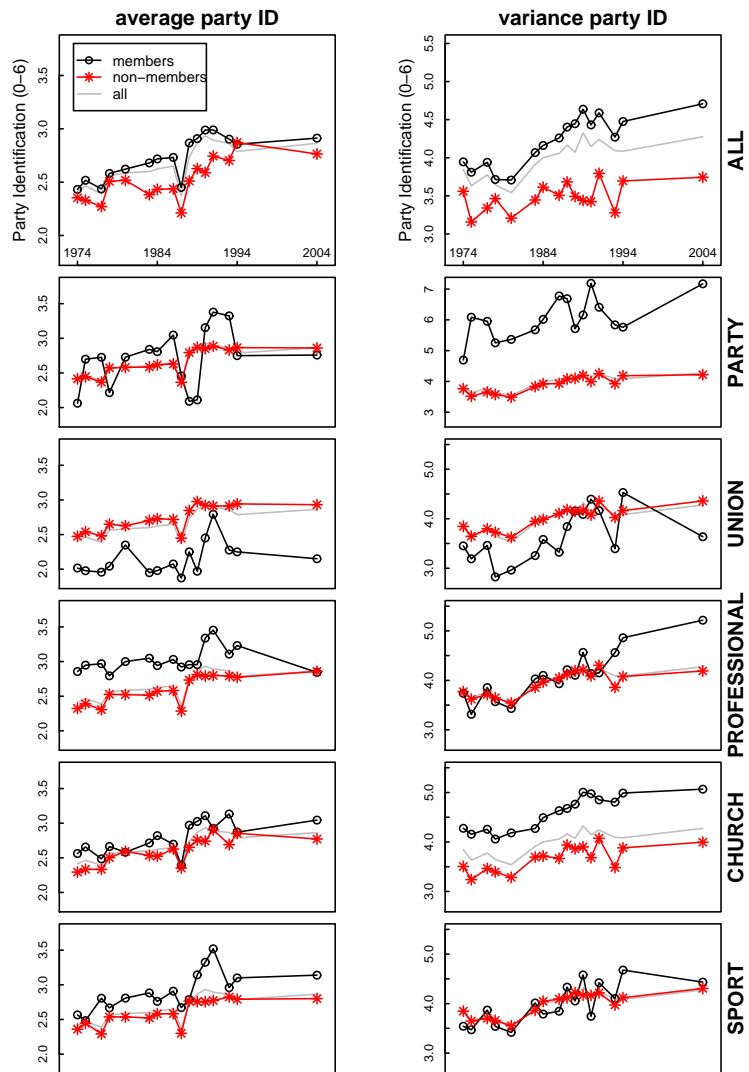


Figure 3: Group profiles: trends in average (left) and variance (right) Party identification (0-6) for members and non-members.

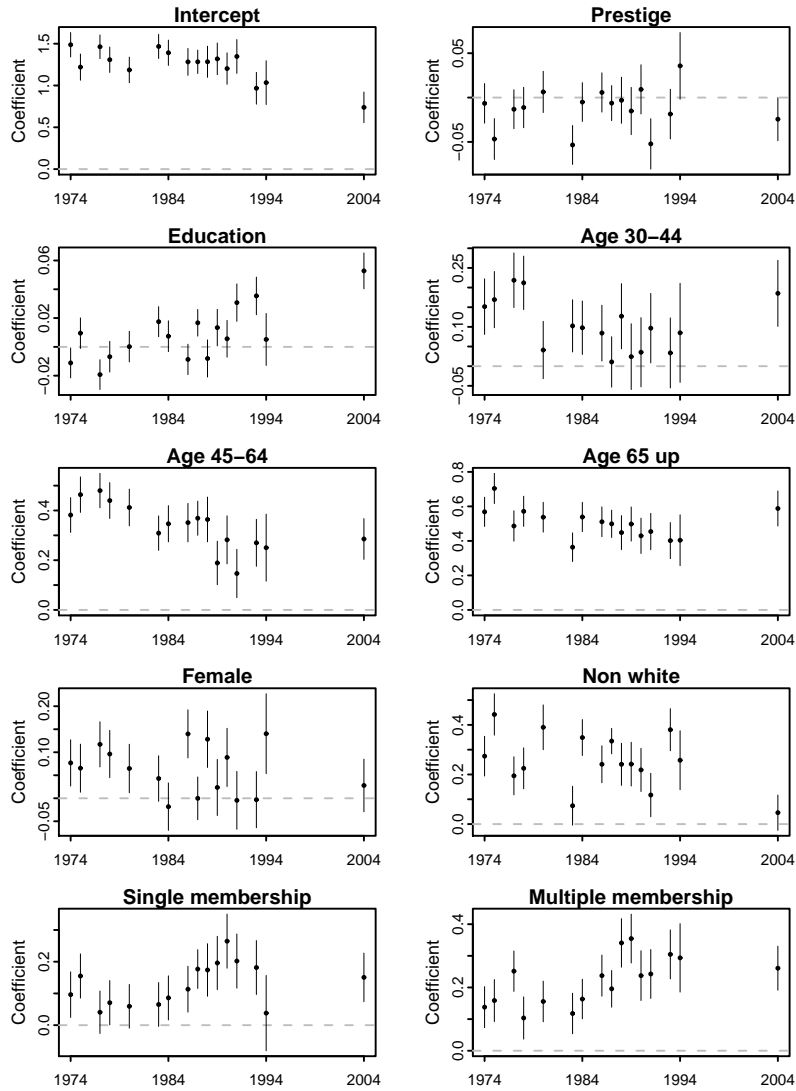


Figure 4: Regression of political extremism on associational membership and socio-demographics. Estimates and 95% intervals for the linear regression coefficients of political extremism (0-3) on prestige (occupational prestige/10), years of education, age (18:29; 30-44; 45-64; 65 up), gender, race (white/non-white), and intensity of associational membership (no-membership, single membership, and multiple membership). The model was fit separately for each year. The plots are on different scales and the gray line is set at zero.

still holds once we take into account basic sociodemographic characteristics. In fact, it might be the case that both associational membership and strong political partisanship are the byproduct of a socially central and politically more committed citizenry, who is disproportionately white, well educated, more affluent, male etc. I therefore regressed, for each year, the level of political extremism (computed as a 0 to 3 scale, where 0 is assigned to those respondents who took a central position on the Democratic-Republican 7 points scale, while 3 to the most extreme—strong Democrat/Republican—self-identifiers) on the occupational prestige, years of education, age (four categories), gender, race (white, non-white)<sup>8</sup> and finally intensity of associational membership, distinguishing between no-membership, single membership, and multiple membership.

Figure 4 shows the regression coefficients and one standard deviation intervals for these linear regression models. Among the sociodemographic characteristics, age, race and partly gender have an impact on people’s partisanship. More important, even taking into account these background characteristics, associational membership remains strongly related to political extremism, and apparently this relation has increased in the last two decades. Moreover, multiple membership shows substantially higher coefficients than single membership, suggesting that not only members differ from non members, but also that those members who engage in multiple activities have a more extreme political ideology than single-members.

Of course, it might be the case that those who have multiple memberships are also more likely to be members of political groups, thus their greater extremism can easily be accounted for by the specific groups they belong to rather than due to their multiple affiliations. To control for group type, one strategy would be to add binary predictors (member/non-member) for each of the sixteen groups to the regression models. Unfortunately, this would not provide reliable estimates for membership in sixteen different groups and for the variable capturing multiple membership. In addition, fitting a separate model for each year is not the proper strategy to capture time trends. To handle these aspects I computed a varying intercept multilevel model with two levels of grouping: the year and group membership for each of the sixteen groups.<sup>9</sup>

The model comprises a set of unmodeled individual-level predictors ( $\beta^0$ )—such as prestige, education, age, etc.—whose coefficients do not vary by time or group.<sup>10</sup> The model includes the tricotomic variable for multi-

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<sup>8</sup>These are the dimensions of social differentiation most commonly used in the literature (Blau 1974; McPherson and Ranger-Moore 1991; McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987)

<sup>9</sup>All the models were run in R, using the *lmer* package. I am grateful to Andrew Gelman and Masanao Yajima for their help.

<sup>10</sup>This is sometimes called *mixed-effects* regression where the set of individual level predictors are the *fixed* effects while the variable that varies by group (in our case time

Model 1		
	coef.est	coef.se
(Intercept)	1.29	(0.05)
Prestige	-0.01	(0.01)
Education	0.01	(0.00)
Age 30-40	0.11	(0.02)
Age 45-64	0.35	(0.02)
Age 65 up	0.50	(0.02)
Female	0.05	(0.01)
Non white	0.24	(0.02)
Single membership	0.11	(0.02)
Multiple membership	0.17	(0.03)
Time	-0.04	(0.02)
Single memb*time	0.05	(0.02)
Multiple memb*time	0.10	(0.02)
Political	0.50	(0.04)
Church	0.08	(0.02)
Professional	-0.05	(0.02)
Union	0.04	(0.02)
Service	0.00	(0.03)
Veteran	-0.02	(0.03)
Youth	-0.01	(0.03)
School	0.02	(0.02)
Sport	0.00	(0.02)
Farmer	-0.02	(0.04)
Fraternal	-0.01	(0.03)
Greek	0.12	(0.03)
Hobby	-0.05	(0.03)
Literary	-0.06	(0.03)
National	-0.06	(0.04)
Other	0.01	(0.02)

Table 1: Estimates from the varying intercept multilevel model. Dependent variable: political extremism (0-3); Independent variables: unmodeled individual level sociodemographic predictors; two levels of grouping: years and groups; Variables of interest: tricotomic membership (no, single, multiple membership) and its interaction with time; 18181 observations. See text for further description.

membership ( $\beta^1$ ) and its interaction with time.<sup>11</sup> Formally

$$y_{gr.t[i]} = \alpha_{gr.t[i]} + \beta^0 x_i + \beta^1 * t_i x_i + \epsilon_{gr.t[i]} \quad (3)$$

I report the results in Table 1. As expected, affiliation to some groups is more conducive to partisanship than others. Namely, other things being equal, members of political groups are half a point more extreme than non members, followed by members of Greeks (.12) and churches (.08). Nonetheless, even taking into account specific affiliations, the distinction between non-members, single members and multiple members remains valuable. While single members are .11 points more extreme than people with no affiliations, individuals who are involved in multiple groups are significantly more extreme than both non-members and single members (.17). Moreover, the time trend shows that the level of partisanship among non-members is decreasing (-.04 per decade), while it remains essentially stable among single-members (.01) and is increasing among multiple-members (.05). Finally, with respect to sociodemographic characteristics, people in their mid forties and older, non-whites and, to a lesser extent, women, tend to be more partisans, while the relation between prestige and education, and political extremism is mild.

In this section I investigated trends in groups' profiles, concluding that there is no evidence of increased group partisanship, aside from Unions. Instead, there is substantial evidence of increased polarization within groups. That is, the average ideological distance between two individual that are members of the same type of group is higher than the average distance between two non-members. Further analyses have shown that this is actually more true in the case individuals belong to certain groups, like parties, but, even controlling for any specific group type, the relation between political extremism and membership remains substantial (and statistically significant). While both single membership and multiple membership are important predictors of political extremism, multiple membership is stronger and its impact has increased over time. In sum, while group types are not becoming more partisans, joiners are becoming more so. It is therefore natural to ask if this increased partisanship has shaped patterns of group affiliation.

## 6 Analysis III: Overlapping Memberships

People with multiple memberships are tendentially “partisan joiners”. It is therefore reasonable to expect that, if any dynamic of polarization has occurred in the network of interorganizational relations, we would see it.

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and groups) is the *random* part of the model (cfr. Gelman and Hill 2007: 285-6).

<sup>11</sup>The variable time  $t$  is expressed in decades and centered in 1988 so that the intercepts and slopes can be more directly interpreted. Formally,  $t = (\text{year} - 1988)/10$ .

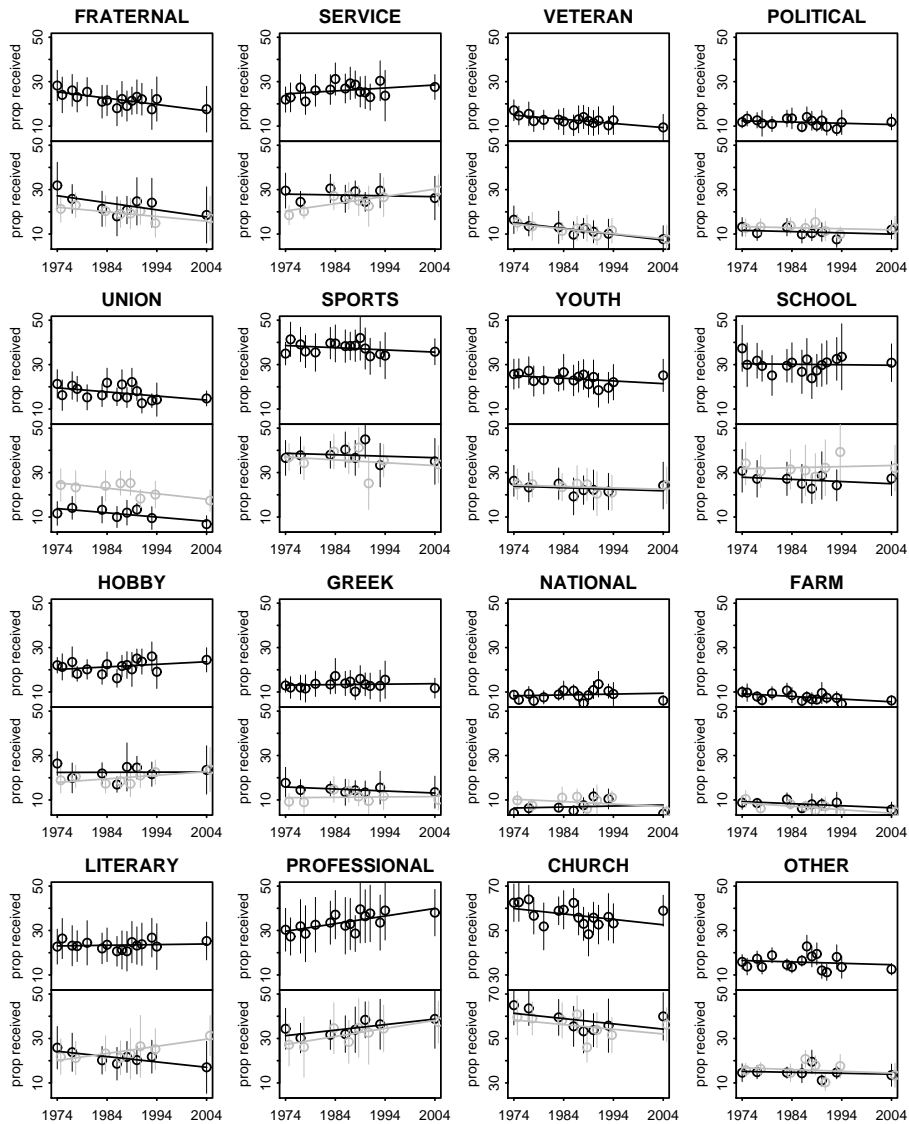


Figure 5: Time trend of the average proportion of shared members by group. The top graph shows the trend of the average proportion of shared members that a group receives from other groups. The bottom graph shows the same measure as computed in the subpopulation of Democrats (gray) and Republicans (black). Because of the lower number of observations, I aggregate results for two consecutive years in order to reduce the variation in the average proportion of shared members for the subgroups. As a consequence, for each subgroup, there are only eight data points. The plot for the Democrats is shifted to the right to better visualize the trend. x-axis: proportion of shared members received (25 to 70 for church, 5 to 50 for all other groups). y-axis: years (1974-2004).

Namely, in this section I model the tendency of each group to share members with any other group in order to understand if there are changes in the patterns of preferential affiliation of American citizens.

I consider the proportion of shared members that each group shares with any other group as previously defined (cfr. equations 1 and 2). The proportion of shared members that group  $A$  receives from group  $B$  should be interpreted as indicative of its centrality in the web of civil society interorganizational relations. Our interest goes to the trend over time, with the goal of revealing if there is a tendency toward increasing or decreasing interorganizational share of members. The top graphs in Figure 5 shows the trend over time of the average proportion of shared members that each group receives from other groups. In general, the plots show that time variations are rare, and confined to a decline in churches, unions and fraternities and a growth in professional groups. Not surprisingly, this trend closely resembles the trend observed in the overall proportion of members for each group (Figure 2.d).

Nonetheless, it might be the case that Republicans and Democrats have different associational patterns. For instance, one hypothesis could be that Republicans are connected to parties through churches or fraternal groups, while Democrats are more likely to combine activism in union or school associations and party affiliation. If this was the case, we would expect the webs of overlapping membership generated by the two subpopulations of Republicans and Democrats to be different. Looking at the average proportion of shared members per group within the two subpopulations, we conclude that this is not the case. The bottom graphs in Figure 5 show the proportion of received members for each group type distinguishing between the civic networks generated by the associational patterns of Republicans (black) and Democrats (gray).

In general, there are no real differences between the two subnetworks with respect to the capacity of groups to attract shared members, with the only exception of Unions, that seem to play an important role of interconnection among Democrats, and, to a lesser extent, school associations and, only recently, literary groups (maybe an ironic consequence of the ‘No Child Left Behind’ policy?). While church, professional, youth, political and all the other groups attract virtually the same average proportion of other groups’ members in both Republican and Democratic civic networks, suggesting that there is very little difference between the affiliation patterns of these two subpopulations. Moreover, a closer inspection of the time trends in the proportion of shared members for each single group pair (this analysis is not reported here but available from the author) allows us to definitely conclude that there are no substantial differences in the patterns of preferential affiliation of Republicans and Democrats. This does not necessary

mean that Republicans and Democrats join these groups at the same rate (actually, they do not); it means that the webs of overlapping memberships they generate are structurally similar.

In sum, if instances of polarization exist, they cannot be found in the alternative associational patterns of Republicans and Democrats, rather, perhaps, in the changes that have occurred in patterns of preferential attachment in the population at large. Whether the chance that members of group A will also belong to group B has increased, decreased or remained stable over time, combined with the trends observed for other group pairs, might induce patterns of strengthened social integration or division. More specifically, in order to conclude that changes in affiliation patterns have induced more polarized civic networks we would expect groups in a certain subset to become increasingly more likely to exchange members among each other and simultaneously less likely to exchange members with another subset of groups. In other words, we would expect groups to isolate into internally cohesive clusters with scarce overlapping memberships with groups that belong to other clusters.

In contrast, we might instead find that, over time, certain groups become more (less) embedded into a broader, cohesive civic network, meaning that they are acquiring a greater (lower) proportion of other groups' shared members from most of the other groups, without necessarily losing members to some other groups.<sup>12</sup>

To assess between alternative tendencies in the patterns of preferential affiliation, I ran a multilevel model with varying-intercept and varying-slope in which the unit of analysis is the proportion of shared members between each group pair  $\times$  year and the second level are group pairs. This model allows the average proportion of members shared (intercept) and the time trend of this proportion (slope) to vary for each group pair. In this way, the time trend in the proportion of shared members can be found positive for some group pairs and constant or negative for others.

Patterns of affiliation can be influenced by changes in the sociodemographic characteristics of group members. To properly account for these alternative sources of variation that might affect the proportion of shared members, I included in the regression model a set of predictors that capture the extent to which groups differ in their sociodemographic and attitudinal composition. Namely, for each group pair I computed the difference between the two groups (in absolute values) in the average prestige level, years of education, age, party identification and level of extremism, and the difference

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<sup>12</sup>In this case, the relation is not expected to be reciprocal: it might be the case that group A increasingly (or decreasingly) shares more members with group B without group B moving in the same direction. Differently, in the case of increased network polarization, we would expect strengthened relations to occur both ways.

Multilevel model for group pairs		
	coef.est	coef.se
(Intercept)	27.78	(0.94)
diff.prestige	-0.21	(0.05)
diff.edu	-0.94	(0.23)
diff.age	-0.24	(0.04)
diff.sex	-9.21	(1.29)
diff.race	-0.45	(1.86)
diff.partyID	0.06	(0.32)
diff.extremism	-2.78	(0.81)
decade	-0.65	(0.14)
Error terms:		
Groups	Name	Std.Dev. Corr
pair	(Intercept)	13.01
	decade	1.52 -0.02
Residual		4.56

Table 2: Estimates for the varying intercept varying slope multilevel model. 16 years, 240 group pairs, 3840 observations. See text for a description.

in the proportion of female and non-white members. The expectation, with respect to these factors, is that the greater the difference between two groups on any of these dimensions, the lower the ratio of shared members between the groups. Formally,

$$Prop_{t,pair} = \alpha_{pair} + \beta^0 X_t^0 + \beta_{pair}t + \epsilon_{t,pair} \quad (4)$$

where  $Prop_{t,pair}$  is the proportion of shared members between any group pair at time  $t$ ,  $\beta^0$  are estimates coefficients for the individual level variables  $X_t^0$  (differences in prestige, education, age etc.) and  $\alpha_{pair}$  and  $\beta_{pair}$  are respectively estimates of the average proportion of shared members (intercept) and time variation<sup>13</sup> in the proportion of shared members (slope) for each group pair. Table 2 reports results from the model.

In general, results show an ample variation in the average proportion of shared members, with about two thirds of the pairs falling in the interval between 15 and 41% (Intercept  $\pm 1s.d.$ ). As expected, sociodemographic similarities between groups are related to a greater ratio of shared members. Two individuals that belong to the same pair of groups are likely to be significantly more similar with respect to their education, age, gender and level of prestige, than any two other randomly chosen pair of people. This result is consistent with previous scholarship (e.g. McPherson 1983;

<sup>13</sup>The variable  $t$  is expressed in decades and centered in 1988 so that the intercepts and slopes can be more directly interpreted. Formally,  $t = (\text{year} - 1988)/10$ .

McPherson and Ranger-Moore 1991). Quite surprisingly, this is not true for their party identification, suggesting the scarce relevance of the political creed in defining the types of groups to which people belong.

Finally, let us consider the changes in the trend of shared members for different pairs. In average, the time trend is negative, although quite modest: the proportion of shared members decreases by .65 points per decade. There is nonetheless a certain variation between group pairs, since about two thirds of them are in the interval -2.2 and .87. To answer our main question relative to changes in the strength of the overlapping ties between groups and relative consequences on the structure of the web of group affiliations we need to examine the estimated time variation at a broader level of detail. Figure 5 plots the time trend estimates for the 240 group pairs. Different shades of gray represent the intensity of the change: light gray for values that are  $> .5$  or  $< -.5$ , gray if  $> 1$  or  $< -1$ , dark gray if  $> 2$  or  $< -2$  and black if  $> 3$  or  $< -3$ . The arrow shows the directionality of the change; thin arrows for estimates larger than one standard error; thick arrows for estimates larger than two standard errors. Reading by the row, cells report the trend in the proportion of shared members received by each group; by the column, the trend of the proportion of shared members that each group share with other groups. As already anticipated, most of the trends are negative (although few of them are significant at the 95% interval).

With the only exception of professional groups, that have increasingly attracted members from other groups, most of the groups are either stable or show a decline in the proportion of shared members. More important, whatever the trend is, it is generalized. Church, union and fraternal groups and partly youth associations are experiencing a decline in popularity that is consistent across the board. Similarly, professional groups are gaining members from most other groups. This observation, along with the fact that the trends here observed essentially reproduce general trends in the popularity (size) of the groups, induces us to conclude that there have been no real changes in the patterns of preferential association of American citizens, and thus in the civic network they generate.

## 7 Discussion

An integrated society is not a society in which conflict is absent, rather one in which conflict expresses itself through non-encompassing interests and identities. Associational life may favor political integration or instead amplify division, depending on how individuals partition themselves into groups and the web of overlapping membership they generate. The crosscutting, bridging function of civil society associations can be either boosted or constrained by the structure of inter-organizational relations in which they are embed-

### Time trend estimates of the proportion of shared members

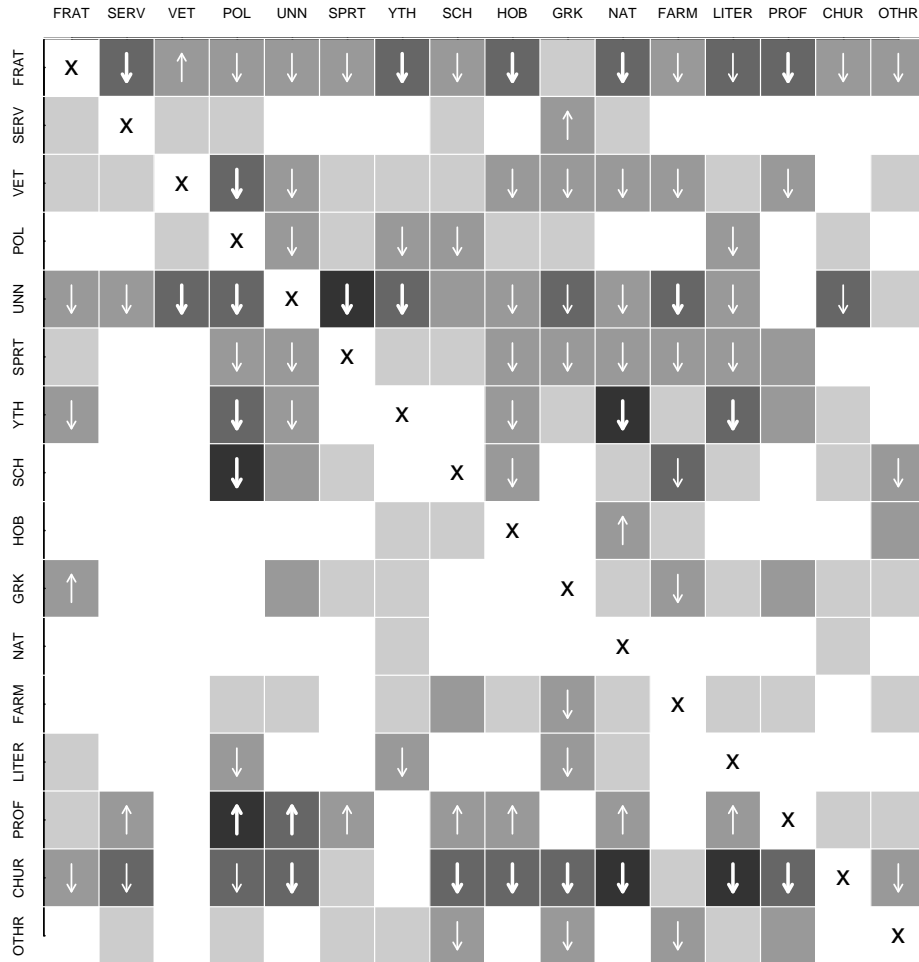


Figure 6: Time trend estimates of the proportion of members shared between group pairs. The group by group matrix shows the estimates from the multilevel varying-intercept and slope model for the time change in the proportion of shared members for each pair of groups. Reading by the row, the trend in the proportion of shared members received by each group; by the column, the trend of the proportion of shared members given to other groups. Different shades of gray represent the intensity of the change: light gray for values that are  $> .5$  or  $< -.5$ , gray if  $> 1$  or  $< -1$ , dark gray if  $> 2$  or  $< -2$  and black if  $> 3$  or  $< -3$ . The arrow shows the directionality of the change; thin arrows for estimates larger than one standard error; thick arrows for estimates larger than 2 standard error.

ded.

Starting from this premise, in this paper I looked at the relation between trends in associational membership and ideological polarization of American citizens over the last four decades. The main goal was to assess if civil society associational patterns show evidence of increased political polarization; namely, whether groups have become more partisan and/or the web of inter-organizational relations more polarized.

The news is that not very much has changed in the last forty years in the associational patterns of American citizens. The study confirms the decline in group membership denounced by other scholars, but with two important caveats: it involves almost exclusively some specific groups, namely churches, unions and fraternal groups, and affects only the category of single-group members. This latter aspect is very important: the fact that the volume of multiple membership has not declined guarantees that the overall relational density of civic networks has remained stable. In other words, there are as many group members connecting different types of groups today as there were forty years ago. Secondly, an extensive analysis of the evolution of overlapping memberships over time has revealed that there are no real changes in the patterns of association of American citizens, nor that Republicans and Democrats differ in their patterns of preferential affiliation.

“Much ado about nothing” then? Maybe not. The analysis of group profiles based on the partisan allegiances of their members has shown that, while group types are not becoming more partisan, group joiners are becoming more so. Specifically, group members, and especially those with multiple memberships, have grown consistently more extreme in their political identities, while group types are becoming more ideologically heterogeneous.

The more plausible explanation of this phenomenon—although, sadly, one that available data do not allow us to consider—is that *partisan alignment is occurring at the level of groups, and not group types*. Namely, to use the categories of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), it might be the case that vertical networks are becoming more insulated, and therefore better at protecting “(...) the supporters from cross cutting communications and pressures.” (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 15-16). Greater levels of vertical networks insulation can in fact explain the increased partisanship of group members:

In a [loosely insulated] system there is *low membership crystallization*; most of the participants tend to be tied to organizations and environments exposing them to *divergent* political pressures. By contrast in a highly [insulated] system there is *high membership crystallization*; most of the participants tend to be exposed to messages and persuasive efforts in the *same* general direction in *all* their “24-hour-7-day environments (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 17).

This picture is consistent with my findings. While, in the aggregate, group types show little variation with respect to their partisan orientation, parallel dynamics of insulation along party lines are likely to induce increasing partisanship at the individual level among group members, due to mechanisms of self-selection and reinforcement typical of insulated systems.

This can simultaneously explain why group members are more likely to hold extreme political views in a context in which group membership is declining. According to Simmel, individuals in contemporary societies are exposed to the risk of being ‘pulled apart’ by their different, and unique, memberships, allegiances or identities. The very same trend toward greater individual freedom increases the possibility of social isolation: those who are at the intersection of conflicting social circles might be induced to withdraw from social life. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that those individuals whose interpersonal networks involve greater heterogeneity/political disagreement, have lower levels of political participation (Lipset 1963; Knoke 1990b; Mutz 2002).

The working hypothesis for future research is the following: individuals who are ideologically more moderate because of their intersecting, and sometimes even conflicting interests and allegiances, will tend to withdraw from civic engagement at a faster pace than subjects embedded in more consistent associational experiences. Two mechanisms are expected to drive the observed growth in the level of political extremism of group members: a mechanism of *self-selection* according to which politically moderate individuals are more likely to opt out than their more extreme counterpart, and a mechanism of *reinforcement* in which the group experience itself is likely to nurture political extremism, since members’ ideological commitment is strengthened by the extreme positions of the (remaining) members.

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