

**The Polarization of Popular Culture:
Tracing the Size, Shape, and Depth of the Oil Spill**

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The Polarization of Popular Culture: Tracing the Size, Shape, and Depth of the Oil Spill

Recent research suggests that political polarization has spilled over into otherwise mundane areas of social life. And yet, the size, shape, and depth of that spillage into popular culture is generally unknown. Relying on a sample of 135 of the most widely known movies, TV shows, musicians, sports, and leisure activities, we investigate this question. We find the oil spill into popular culture is large but loosely organized into multiple fairly shallow pools. Cultural polarization is also asymmetric. Liberals like a wide variety of popular culture, do not dislike conservative popular culture, and their tastes are more rooted in their sociodemographics. Conservatives, on the other hand, like a much narrower range of popular culture, dislike the culture created and liked by Black and urban liberals, and their tastes are more directly rooted in their political ideology. Potential implications of an asymmetric culture war, and ideas for future research, are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Polarization is a central topic of academic (Bail 2021; Levin, Milner, and Perrings 2021) and public interest (Hetherington and Weiler 2018; Klein 2020). Social and legacy media are regularly preoccupied by a parade of divisive issues and events, both overtly political (e.g., abortion, school curricula) and seemingly absurd (e.g., Mr. Potato Head dolls, red Starbucks coffee cups). And indeed by some measures political polarization in the United States has been increasing. For example, party elites have polarized (Liu and Srivastava 2015; McCarty 2019; Moody and Mucha 2013), voters have sorted into the “correct” political parties that match their politics on key issues (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008), partisans increasingly dislike each other (Iyengar et al. 2019), and individuals’ political beliefs have become more interconnected and therefore likely constrained in their ability to change (Axelrod, Daymude, and Forrest 2021; DellaPosta 2020).

And yet, despite growing polarization among political elites, as well as among the general public according to some measures, evidence for everyday Americans becoming

increasingly polarized on political issues themselves remains scant, inconclusive, or contained to isolated and temporary “take-off” issues of political disagreement (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Park 2018). For example, some purported cases of polarization are instead just liberals and conservatives moving in the same political direction at different rates, suggesting that, at least on moral issues, Americans seem to be *depolarizing* (Baldassarri and Park 2020). Despite substantial concerns about political polarization, when it comes to disagreement on political issues, as Converse famously surmised, most Americans remain “innocent of ideology” (Converse 1962: 47).

The degree to which Americans have *culturally* polarized—that is, become divided over attitudes, beliefs, and tastes that are more symbolic in nature—is similarly muddy. Thirty years since its publication, Hunter's (1991) *Culture Wars* has maintained influence in popular discourse about culture and politics.¹ And yet, when it comes to culture wars, the empirical evidence overwhelmingly supports Layman and Green's (2006: 61) conclusion that “cultural wars are waged by limited religious troops on narrow policy fronts under special political leadership, and a broader cultural conflagration is just a rumor” (e.g., Baker 2005; Baldassarri and Park 2020; DiMaggio 2003). Despite this, while research on cultural polarization has mostly focused on the more cultural side of overtly political attitudes (e.g., marriage equality, abortion), there does seem to be an “oil spill” of political polarization into more mundane areas of social life (DellaPosta 2020).

Relying on a sample of 135 of the most widely known movies, TV shows, musicians, sports, and leisure activities, in this paper we trace the size, shape, and depth of this oil spill into popular culture. We also investigate if the pathways through which the polarization of popular culture occurs is more rooted in what Evans (1997) calls “worldviews” or “social groups”—that

is, if tastes are shaped by different ideological identities that are associated with different ways of understanding the world writ large, or if cultural tastes are shaped by the different experiences, environments, and dispositions associated with different sociodemographic niches in society. In what follows we find significant asymmetries in the polarization of popular culture across the political divide. Liberals' tastes—as is generally understood by sociologists of culture and their understanding of tastes and how they spread (e.g. Mark 1998, 2003)—operate more through their sociodemographics, are more crosscutting, more open, and generally wider overall. In contrast, conservatives' tastes are generally more filtered through their ideological worldviews, are narrower, and may display some of the political (Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2018) and racial (Már 2020) affective polarization and animus as more generally understood by political scientists. In closing we discuss limitations, extensions, and ideas for future research.

Background

Although scholarly work on cultural polarization has mostly focused on the more cultural side of overtly political attitudes (Baldassarri and Park 2020; DiMaggio 2003; DiMaggio et al. 1996; Park 2018), recent research suggests that there has been an “oil spill” of political polarization into even the most mundane areas of social life (DellaPosta 2020), such that “liberals and conservatives differ systematically on lifestyle dimensions that have no apparent substantive relevance to political ideology” (DellaPosta, Shi, and Macy's 2015: 1475). The proverbial “latte liberals” vs. “regular coffee conservatives” is one high-profile example of polarized American popular culture. In what follows we ask two questions. First, if political polarization has spilled over into otherwise mundane areas of social life, what is the size, shape, and depth of that spillage? And second, to the degree that popular culture has been polarized, is that polarization

more rooted in sociodemographic sorting into ideological camps, or more directly rooted in partisan political ideology?

Mapping the Spill

First we ask what is the size, shape, and depth of contemporary cultural polarization. By *size* we mean proportionally how much of popular culture has become politically polarized? This question is of consequence as popular culture is generally understood by sociologists as having “generalized conversion value” which is rooted in its usefulness in “forming connections with heterogenous others,” and across otherwise salient sociocultural divides (Lizardo 2006a: 783-784; see also Erickson 1996; Gamson 1998; Pachucki and Breiger 2010; Schultz and Breiger 2010; Sokolova and Sokolov 2020). Due to the “mass” and “pluralistic” production model in which popular culture is made (DiMaggio 1977), an orientation toward attracting wide audiences also means that objects of popular culture overtly orient toward political neutrality (Gitlin 1983), suggesting they may generally be deliberately inhospitable sites for political polarization. And yet, in bivariate analyses liberals and conservatives seem to prefer different TV shows (Carter 2012; Katz 2016), books (Shi et al. 2017), chain restaurants (Bishop 2008), musicians, sports, movies, and cars (Hetherington and Weiler 2018). For this reason, we believe the size of the oil spill—be it large or small—is an open question.

By *shape* we question if—to the degree that popular culture has become politically polarized—cultural tastes and practices have become fully interconnected and bifurcated into two oppositional clusters, or if cultural division is occurring across multiple niches in some sort of structure that is also imbricated with political ideology. If the former, this type of oppositional social structure—which is consistent with being rooted in the dynamics of structural balance (Cartwright and Harary 1956; Heider 1946) as well as other social psychological models of

oppositional group formation (Sherif, Harvey, and White 1961)—would match culture wars claims that are regularly leveraged in the popular media and found in simulations (e.g. Axelrod et al. 2021; Stanton 2021). If the latter, a multi-clustered ridge structure of overlapping cultural niches would be more in line both with Noah Mark’s (1998, 2003) model for how tastes for popular culture spread, as well as Blau’s (1974: 615) framework for why society’s *don’t* polarize due to the “crosscutting lines of differentiation thus foster processes of social integration.” To perhaps state the obvious, we believe the former (two bifurcated and oppositional camps) presents a more troubling scenario of cultural polarization than would the latter.

By *depth* we mean how deep is the divide in tastes for popular culture, asking liberals and conservatives may simply have different preferences for different things, or if they actively dislike *each other’s* popular culture. In sociology it is widely understood that individuals use cultural tastes and lifestyles to differentiate themselves from outgroups. And while this research is often based on social class (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Veblen 1899), it extends to a wider variety of group boundaries (e.g., Hebdige 1979; Bryson 1996; Lamont and Fournier 1992), perhaps including politics as well. In political science, scholars have noted a sharp rise in what is termed “affective” polarization, meaning an increase in animus for partisan outgroups (Carlin and Love 2013; Iyengar et al. 2019; Landy et al. 2021; Mason 2018; Nicholson et al. 2016). In this latter framework the expression of outgroup animus is a driving force in the development of cultural bifurcation into two oppositional groups, such as when, say, the Eagles and Rattlers staked out antagonistic positions on cursing in the Robber’s Cave experiment (Sherif et al. 1961). And yet, tastes for popular culture may be particularly resilient to soaking up the oil spill of outgroup animus, given the widely documented rise of cultural openness in one’s taste as a more general mark of social status (Lena 2019; Peterson 2005; Peterson and Kern 1996). Put another way,

affective polarization may cause partisans to dislike each other, but they may still not disparage each other's movie tastes, as to do so would be a mark of one's own lower social status. In such a case, we might find a shallower oppositional structure in which one side is merely neutral toward the culture liked by the other side of the social divide. Again we see reasons for why the oil spill could reasonably be somewhat deep, or if present, still quite shallow.

Where is the Spill Coming From?

As a second question we ask, using Evans' (1997) terminology, if the oil spill of cultural polarization is more rooted in "worldviews" or in "social groups." By worldviews we question if there is a direct relationship between political ideology and cultural taste, such that independent of their sociodemographics the cultural tastes of individuals are driven by their partisan ideological identities. By social groups we therefore mean that cultural tastes are structured by more traditional sociodemographic measures, which due to increased sociodemographic sorting into political parties (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Bishop 2008; Levendusky 2009), *appear* to be ideologically driven in bivariate analyses (e.g. Hetherington and Weiler 2018: 114). As it stands, in sociology, cultural tastes and lifestyles are generally explained not through ideology, but through sociodemographic markers of social groups such as age (Ma 2021; Reeves 2014), gender (Christin 2012; Lizardo 2006b), race (Banks 2009; Thomas 2017), education (Bourdieu 1984b; Dimaggio and Useem 1978), income (Huddart Kennedy, Baumann, and Johnston 2019; Sherman 2017), geography (Griswold and Wright 2004; Silver et al. 2022) and so on. If this is still the case, some of the oil spill may just be the result of sociodemographic sorting into ideological camps, and ultimately reflective of bivariate measurement error.

Figure 1 summarizes the pathways through which tastes in popular culture may become associated with ideological identity. First, consistent with the worldviews argument, some of the

oil spill may be directly ideological in nature. Consistent with work on affective polarization, a direct ideological effect would be seen in disliking the “other side’s” culture because it is seen as representative of their perceived inhumanity or immorality (Kalmoe and Mason 2022). If the worldviews interpretation is correct, we would expect to see a robust set of associations between political identity and tastes *net of* sociodemographics. However, if the “social groups” argument is correct, then much if not all of the effects that appear to be ideologically-driven are actually spurious. In this case, as cultural sociologists have long argued, cultural tastes are rooted in different social groups who, due to different social environments (urban vs. rural) and background characteristics (age, race, education, etc.), are exposed to different tastes and learn to like (and dislike) different types of culture. Given that such background characteristics have increasingly become associated with different ideological identities through the large-scale dynamics of social sorting (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Bishop 2008; Levendusky 2009), it is reasonable to consider that sociodemographics remain the stronger anchor of tastes, and the oil spill is spreading through indirect channels. If true, then we would expect that sociodemographics would be robust predictors of tastes net of ideological identity.

--Insert Figure 1 Here--

Lastly, for both of our central questions we raise the possibility of potential asymmetries across the political divide. This means that the size, shape, and depth of the oil spill may be different for liberals than for conservatives, just as its rootedness in worldviews or social groups may be different for them as well. Justification for this possibility is found in the fact that both political elites (Fishkin and Pozen 2018; Thomsen 2014) and everyday Americans (Hacker and Pierson 2015; Morisi, Jost, and Singh 2019; Rawlings 2022) are asymmetrically polarized, ranging on everything from more foundational items like cognitive processing styles and

tolerance of uncertainty (Jost 2017a, 2017b), to how much animus is felt for the partisan outgroup (Bail et al. 2018; Gift and Gift 2015; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Kalmoe and Mason 2022). For example, racial like/dislike partially structures partisan logics (Brensing and Sotoudeh 2022), and as found by Már (2020) conservative affective polarization is particularly oriented around racial animus targeted at Black Americans. In turn, as found by Grossmann and Hopkins (2016), there is a fundamental asymmetry in how liberals and conservatives are socially organized, which, we believe, may also be mirrored in the structuring of their tastes. While liberals are a crosscutting coalition of social groups and their combinations—high education urbanites, women, non-whites—that hold multiple group values and interests, conservatives more coherently identify as conservatives, and are motivated and organized through a more unified and direct ideology. As a result of this “mismatched nature of the two partisan camps” (Grossman and Hopkins 2016: 4), it is reasonable to suspect not only that liberals and conservatives might be differentially polarized, but that they might be differently driven in *how* they are polarized as well. This too, we leave open with regards to both of our central questions.

DATA

Sampling Popular Culture

To gauge the extent of cultural polarization, we devise a sampling technique aimed at selecting a wide array of cultural objects and activities that may or may not be politically polarized. Our goal was to select items that—despite our own personal tastes or depth of awareness—were widely known (and therefore, broadly available for a national audience of conservatives and liberals to polarize around). We also selected items arrayed across the spectrum of consecration

in terms of status, prestige, or “brow,” which are widely known as central to likes, dislikes, and cultural tastes more broadly (Bourdieu 1984; Peterson and Kern 1996).

Our selection strategy was to first identify a variety of widely known popular cultural items across numerous genres of TV, movies, and music.² We did so first by scraping Metacritic for all TV shows, movies, and musical artists, and preserving the top quartile in breadth of review coverage (as one measure of knowness), and then separating objects by low, medium, and high levels of artistic consecration as based on average critic scores. As critics may unequally cover the entire swath of popular musicians, movies, and shows, we also used album sales, box office receipts, and Nielson ratings both to add and to cross-validate items. This was then supplemented and cross-validated with year-end and best-of lists. As a final step we then took 356 popular TV shows, musicians, and movies, and gauged their knowness and consecration among a sample of 500 U.S. respondents on MTurk with >95% HIT approval rates (a measure of respondent quality). We tested these items for (1) overall how well known they were, and (2) and how overall artistically respected respondents believed them to be.

Triangulating across all of these sources we then randomly selected five items from each of multiple genres for a total sample of 105 TV shows, musicians, and movies. To get a fuller picture of tastes, to these 105 items we also added preferences for watching 15 sports and ideal preferences for 15 vacation activities, again across a spectrum of cultural consecration, which had also been exogenously defined by our 500 U.S. respondents. This resulted in a total of 135 items in our final survey. As a validation check, in our final surveys (presented below) we also had respondents enter in from their online music accounts (e.g., Spotify, Apple Music) their ten most listened to songs of the past year, allowing us to confirm the effectiveness of our sampling strategy in deriving truly popular culture. From supplementary analysis of this data we confirmed

that for music, all 35 musicians in our sample were in the top 200 most listened to in the last year by our respondents, with 30 of the musicians in our sample in the top 100, and 16 in the top 30.

Survey Data

We use the Qualtrics Data Panel with quotas to match the US population for age, race, gender, and education. The Qualtrics Data Panel is a high quality data source that has shown high reliability in meta-analyses (Walter et al. 2019), is atypically representative of the U.S. population for both demographics and political ideology (Boas, Christenson, and Glick 2020), and has been used in research published in top journals in sociology (O'Brien 2017; Pedulla 2016; Quadlin 2018), political science (e.g. Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018), economics (Bhargava, Loewenstein, and Sydnor 2017), and management (e.g. Long, Bendersky, and Morrill 2011). Following best practices, we screened responses based on failed attention checks and unreasonably fast response times. These procedures resulted in 1,821 respondents, collected in January 2018. Due to missing data, our effective sample size is reduced to 1,432 in our final statistical models. Descriptive statistics can be found in the Appendix.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

The Oil Spill

Our first set of analyses focus on characterizing the size, shape, and depth of the oil spill of political polarization into our sample of popular culture.

Size. How far has political polarization spread into mundane cultural tastes? To measure political ideology, we reproduce the seven-point scale that has been used in the National Election Study

since 1972. We do so not only because “ideology is one of the workhorse variables used by students of mass behavior” (Fiorina and Abrams 2008: 569), but also because “ideological identity” has been found “to be more central than party identity” in anchoring attitudes (Boutyline and Vaisey 2017: 1413; DellaPosta et al. 2015), although they have of course also increasingly converged (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008). As with previous research on the spread of polarization into non-ideological attitudes, we gauge if a taste is politically polarized through bivariate correlations. Here, we perform pairwise correlations between the seven-point disliking/liking of each of our 135 cultural objects and the seven-point political ideology variable. Cultural objects with positive or negative correlations that are statistically significant ($r < .05$) are considered politically polarized.

Shape. In addition to examining the size of the oil spill through bivariate correlations, we explore its shape in the extent to which tastes in popular culture can be divided into two distinct lifestyle clusters that are respectively correlated with liberal and conservative identities. If popular culture is truly polarized this should be reflected both in how many cultural items are correlated with ideology *and* in how taste in one item implies tastes (both likes and dislikes) across items and domains. In short, cultural tastes should be organized around a clear “us vs. them” pattern (Baker 2005). However, if politicized cultural objects form into clusters that have mixed political leanings (i.e., “purple” clusters of both liberal and conservative objects), or if there are many distinct liberal and/or conservative clusters (rather than two distinct positions), such results would indicate a less constrained form of cultural polarization in which one’s taste for one polarized item does not clearly imply one’s tastes for others.

We use *k*-means clustering to determine the extent to which a two-cluster solution is optimal. We first create a pairwise correlation matrix of all cultural items based on their profiles of likes, dislikes, and neutrals for the 1,821 individuals in our sample. This correlation matrix is the input for a repeated *k*-means clustering algorithm that employs a modularity maximization routine to determine the optimal number of clusters. To assess the results, the clusters and their relative positions are visualized in a two-dimensional space that maps the popular cultural items as points based on the first two principal components. If ideology is strongly constraining the pattern of tastes, we would expect the first dimension to correspond with a left-right political identity, and cultural items to be arrayed largely at opposing ends of this space.

Depth. How politically divided are cultural tastes? If the oil spill of political polarization is deep, then we would expect strong bivariate correlations. However, more concretely, we would expect, on average, individuals on one end of the political spectrum will tend to have *negative* orientations toward those items that individuals on the other end of the political spectrum tend to have *positive* orientations toward. Moderates should tend to be neutral on such items. Consequently, we gauge the depth of polarization by using OLS models predicting the average liking/disliking of items within the derived clusters. We consider tastes to be deeply polarized when the slope of the predicted tastes crosses the neutral score of 4 on the Likert scale. These models also control for the number of cultural items known within each cluster.

The Pathways of the Oil Spill

Our second set of models seeks to examine the extent to which polarized tastes are more rooted in worldviews or social groups—that is, the extent to which political ideology is a net predictor

of tastes, or how much such an association can be explained through the direct and mediated effects of sociodemographics on tastes.

Our dependent variables in these models are each individual's average tastes in (1) popular culture that leans liberal, and (2) popular culture that leans conservative. Here, we have omitted items that have no significant bivariate correlation with the measure of political ideology to focus only on those items that are at least somewhat polarized. The question we address is the extent to which the bivariate correlations with political ideology are robust to the inclusion of numerous sociodemographic variables that are likely correlated with ideological identity, and which are generally treated as being predictive of cultural tastes.

In addition to the ideological identity variable already discussed, our key independent variables gauge several core sociodemographic characteristics, using common metrics. These include *age*, *gender*, *race*, *education*, *income*, and *urban-rural residence* (see Appendix for summary statistics). We also asked respondents to indicate their *childhood arts exposure* based on the regularity of their arts exposure in childhood on a 7-point measure ranging from “never” to “all the time.” We do so because childhood arts exposure is a key measure of the socialization into a culturally open disposition that is expressed later in life through liking a wide variety of cultural objects across more traditional social boundaries (Childress et al. 2021; Lena 2019; Lizardo 2018). Once again, in these models we control for the number of lean-liberal or lean-conservative cultural items known by each respondent.

When predicting each individual's average tastes in liberal-leaning and conservative-leaning culture, we estimate three models: (1) bivariate models with political ideology, (2) models with sociodemographics alone, and (3) saturated models with both political ideology and sociodemographics. Based on comparisons in the magnitude of effects across these models, we

can discern the extent to which ideological identity or sociodemographics provide stronger pathways to polarization. If, for example, the coefficient for ideological identity is heavily reduced when controlling for demographics, this would suggest that ideology does not have as much of a direct effect on tastes as suggested in bivariate models, and that sociodemographic differences in socialization and social location that are correlated with political ideology are better explanations. In contrast, if the magnitudes of sociodemographic variables are reduced when including ideological identity as a predictor of tastes, then this would suggest that some of the effects of sociodemographics are mediated by political ideology. We perform Sobel mediation tests for each sociodemographic predictor in order to gauge the total proportion of its effects that are mediated by ideological identity (Mize, Doan, and Long 2019; Sobel 1982).

RESULTS

Tracing the Oil Spill and Its Contours

We begin by examining the overall size, shape, and depth of polarization of popular culture in our sample.

Size. In support of the oil spill perspective, Table 1 shows that polarization has spread quite extensively into popular culture—in fact, the *majority* of popular culture items drawn from a wide sample (80 of 135, or 59%) are significantly correlated with political ideology ($r < .05$). Of these 80 polarized cultural objects, 62 are positively correlated with identifying as liberal, while the remaining 18 are positively correlated with identifying as conservative. Clearly, either liberals like more widely known popular culture than do conservatives, or our sampling

procedure of identifying the most widely known popular culture derived more liberal-leaning items than conservative-leaning ones. We return to this in the discussion.

--Insert Table 1 Here--

While the extent of this polarization may be surprising from the standpoint of treating popular culture as purposefully apolitical “mass” culture that serves as weak force of social cohesion (DiMaggio 1977; Erickson 1996; Gitlin 1983; Lizardo 2006a), we do find evidence for the existence of such weak culture. Non-polarized objects and activities that are generally popular (i.e., have average liking scores above 4.5) include watching television, going sightseeing and visiting amusement parks while on vacation, as well as two Steven Spielberg films. Americans are also largely unified in their dislikes of widely known but perhaps less widely engaged with objects, be they either very lowbrow (e.g., *Insane Clown Posse*) or very highbrow (e.g., rowing). In short, we find that popular culture does have a cohesive center and that Americans remain weakly united through shared tastes in leisure, feel-good blockbuster films, some classic rock artists, and football. However, the majority of items in our sample have some political charge to them, suggesting that the oil spill of polarization may have substantially seeped into popular tastes.

Results on the size of the oil spill support other research using bivariate correlations as the window into polarization (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; DellaPosta 2020; DellaPosta et al. 2015; Kozlowski 2022; Kozlowski and Murphy 2021). However, by extending these findings into non-opinion based tastes across a wide swath of cultural domains, we offer stronger evidence of a shift in attitude structures in which political identity is playing an increasingly central role (Boutyline and Vaisey 2017). Popular cultural tastes, as with numerous opinions not

previously identified with a political leaning, seem to have become pulled into this correlational structure in which political identity is a central node.

Shape. Moving beyond pairwise correlations, we next examine the shape of the oil spill. In an ideal-typically polarized scenario, we would expect two incommensurate lifestyles and worldviews, one liberal and the other conservative. Figure 2 shows the results of the *k*-means cluster analysis. In contrast to the completely bifurcated ideal-type, the modularity maximization routine found a ten-cluster solution as optimal. Clusters in Figure 2 are shaded according to their average correlations with ideological identity: darker shades of blue indicating stronger liberal correlations, purple indicating a mix of liberal and conservative items, and red indicating conservative correlations. The first dimension, running along the x-axis, shows a left-right split, and represents the largest principal component (20% of variance explained). The y-axis shows that the clustering is also shaped by the degree of cultural consecration of an object, with objects higher on this dimension being more generally held in higher esteem. Put in another way, while being fully “innocent of [political] ideology” (Converse 1962: 47) in selecting items and instead deliberately selecting them as based on how widely known they were and the spread in their level of cultural consecration, it is political ideology which most structures the space of popular culture. Yet within this two-dimensional space we find that the clustering of the 135 tastes does not easily divide into two oppositional positions. Instead, we find five clearly liberal but distinct clusters (Clusters 2, 4, 5, 9, and 10), several wide clusters that have liberal and conservative ends, and one clearly conservative (Cluster 7) taste cluster.

--Insert Figure 2 and Table 2 Here--

The overall shape of the oil spill suggests an incomplete ideological bifurcation of tastes and lifestyles. Cultural items that at the bivariate level are polarized do not always fall into clusters within the same ideological domain—for example, individuals who like Kid Rock (the most conservative taste at the bivariate level) also tend to like other Rock artists, several of whom have politically liberal correlations at the bivariate level (e.g., U2). Here, again, we see an asymmetry: for liberals, tastes are clustered within domains with some overlap, whereas, for conservatives, tastes are clustered within a single domain.

Depth. Results so far indicate that the oil spill of polarization into popular culture is wide but also somewhat unconsolidated. While we have found multiple overlapping clusters, we still do not know how deeply polarizing these regions of popular culture may be. Are some areas of the oil spill more polarizing than others? To answer this question, we take each individual's average tastes within each of the ten clusters, and, controlling for the number of items known to that individual within each cluster, we predict tastes for each cluster based on one's ideological identity. Table 3 shows results from these regression models.

--Insert Table 3 Here--

To better illustrate these findings, Figure 3 uses coefficients from these models to predict average tastes for each cluster along the ideological spectrum. We consider the oil spill of polarization to be deep to the extent that (1) the slope of the effect is steep, and (2) the predicted tastes cross the point of neutrality. Results show that, on average, the oil spill of polarization into popular culture is fairly shallow within most clusters. Even where the slopes are steeper they generally do not cross the point of neutrality. For example, on average both liberals and conservatives tend to like restricted leisure activities and genre TV shows, even though liberals

tend to like them more. Somewhat more surprising, both conservatives and liberals tend to like items in the white-rural cluster, while conservatives clearly like them more. In general, one might see these results as supporting the view that most polarization of popular culture comes from fleeting “take-off” issues that spark attention (Baldassarri & Bearman 2007). However, there is one cluster that fits the definition we set forth as indicating being more deeply polarized—namely, the items in the nonwhite-urban cluster. Here, we see a strong correlation in which one can infer political identity through tastes: on average, liberals like these items, moderates are neutral, and conservatives *dislike* them.

These results suggest the spillage of politics into popular culture is occurring along multiple lines and perhaps through multiple channels (as we examine in the next results section). Several of the clusters are collections of cultural elements within the same domain (i.e., leisure activities, sports, consecrated films, etc.). Areas that are more clearly aligned with stereotypically male tastes—sports and rock music, and an assortment of generally lower-status objects—as well as sports like basketball and shows like *Jerry Springer* do not strongly signal one’s tastes in either liberal or conservative culture. And yet, the clustering does clearly show a left-right split in tastes and two clusters in particular (7 and 9) where tastes most strongly correlated with liberal and conservative identity, respectively. Thus, we find some evidence that the oil spill is organizing around two ideological poles; albeit asymmetrically in terms of negative attitudes. And yet, the ramifying structure and multiple niches derived from the clustering algorithm suggest a more complex set of pathways through which cultural items become polarized.

Gauging the Pathways of Polarization

We now turn to examining the pathways through which popular culture becomes correlated with ideological identity. Bivariate associations tend to suggest that polarization is driven by ideological identity itself directly spilling over into popular culture—i.e., some cultural items have taken on an ideological meaning. However, two other pathways are also possible: (1) direct sociodemographic effects on tastes, and (2) indirect sociodemographic effects on tastes that operate through ideological identity.

Results presented in Table 4 adjudicate these three pathways by looking at average tastes in the cultural items that were found to be liberal- or conservative-leaning (see Table 1). These results indicate that both sociodemographics and ideological identity are important in shaping the oil spill. When considering both liberal-leaning and conservative-leaning cultural items, ideological identity and sociodemographics are significant predictors of one's average tastes. However, as was also the case with the size, shape, and depth of the oil spill, results also show a clear asymmetry. For liberals, sociodemographics play a much greater role in shaping one's tastes than for conservatives. Comparing across models, it is clear that education, childhood arts exposure, age, race, and region have strong direct effects in shaping liberal tastes in popular culture. The effect size for ideological identity is greatly reduced in the saturated model, whereas the effects of sociodemographics remain largely unchanged. The results of the Sobel mediation tests show that only a small amount of the effects of sociodemographics are mediated by ideological identity. In other words, for liberals, the bivariate correlations of tastes and ideology are to a substantial degree spurious, and ideological identity is picking up on liberals' sociodemographics.

In stark contrast, results for conservative tastes show a different overall pathway to

polarization. Comparing across models, we can clearly see that ideological identity plays a more direct role in shaping one's tastes. The coefficient for ideological identity remains unchanged between the bivariate and saturated models (Models 1 and 3, respectively). Moreover, the direct effects of sociodemographics on tastes are fewer and weaker than when considering tastes for liberal-leaning items. The Sobel mediation tests also reveal that a substantial proportion of the effects of sociodemographics on conservative tastes are mediated by ideological identity. In fact, surprisingly, 40% of the effect of the urban-rural residency is mediated by more rural people being more conservative, and when controlling for ideological identity the rural-urban effect is rendered non-significant. In short, conservatives in urban and rural areas likely share cultural tastes as based on their shared political ideology, whereas liberals in urban and rural areas likely have different culture tastes, as based on differences in where they live.

--Insert Table 4 Here--

How do these different pathways to polarization help explain the shape and depth of polarization found in the cluster analysis? To address this question, we re-estimated models from Table 3, including the full complement of sociodemographic variables. Table 5 shows coefficients from these models. Results support the view that liberal tastes are rooted in sociodemographics. The magnitude of the coefficient for ideological identity is clearly reduced in the case of the liberal clusters. For Clusters 4 and 10, once controlling for sociodemographics, the association between ideological identity and taste disappears. In other words, much of what appears to be an ideological clustering of tastes is epiphenomenal to popular culture appealing to younger and more diverse audiences who also tend to be more liberal. The association between ideological identity and tastes remains significant for several clusters, especially Cluster 7 (White-Rural items) and Cluster 9 (Nonwhite-Urban items). Note that the sports cluster shows a

slightly positive association with conservative identity after controlling for demographics.

However, as in the previous models, the only cluster that is truly divisive in terms of crossing the neutral divide is Cluster 9.

--Insert Table 5 Here--

DISCUSSION

Recent research suggests there has been an “oil spill” of political polarization into otherwise mundane areas of social life (DellaPosta 2020). The existence of an oil spill may or may not draw into question findings that suggest fear of cultural polarization is generally overstated (Baker 2005; Baldassarri and Park 2020; DiMaggio 2003). Here, we have investigated the size, shape, and depth of the oil spill into tastes for popular culture across a wide array of cultural domains: tastes for television, music, movies, sports, and leisure activities. While the size of the oil spill into popular culture is extensive, we find its shape to be only loosely organized into a bifurcated “us vs. them” structure, and to contain only one deeply divisive pocket. We also find evidence of asymmetric cultural polarization across the political divide. Liberals generally like more popular culture, like culture across many different domains, do not actively dislike the popular culture conservatives do like, and have tastes that are more rooted in their sociodemographics. Conservatives, on the other hand, like less popular culture, are less heterogenous in their tastes for popular culture, are more likely to dislike other groups’ popular culture, and are more ideologically rooted in their tastes.

We see this work as contributing to multiple literatures. To begin, for general research on cultural polarization, we note that our findings occur at a time when Americans are *depolarizing* on some of the issues that make up the usual culture wars hypothesis (Baldassarri and Park 2020). We think this inconsistency—polarized taste for popular culture and depolarizing political

beliefs on cultural items—may be explained by the same juxtaposition of rising rates of affective polarization despite more generally flat rates of issue polarization (Mason 2015). While fairly narrow bands of highly educated, highly engaged “political hobbyists” are polarizing on political issues (Hersh 2020), for most Americans (who are not politically engaged), and particularly for those who may feel they lack “political competence” (Bourdieu 1984; Laurison 2015), polarizing around popular culture may be a low-barrier form of quasi-political engagement along a different if parallel track from political elites. For liberals in particular, sociodemographic sorting into parties has also perhaps given the false impression of political polarization, meaning that bivariate analyses, convenience samples, and so on may be becoming increasingly blunt and inaccurate instruments in trying to measure the existence of a culture war.

Our work also contributes to a growing literature—still largely in political science and political psychology—on asymmetric polarization. While within the realm of cultural tastes liberals may more embody Blau's (1977, 1977) vision of the types of crosscutting sociodemographic communities and interest groups that buffer against sectarianism, at least within the realm of cultural tastes conservatives seem to be more of a singular Weberian status group oriented toward defending its (perhaps declining) honor and prestige. More generally our findings on the foundations of cultural polarization are consistent with Grossmann and Hopkins' (2016) characterization of the form of asymmetrical organization across party lines, as well as Már's (2020) finding that conservatives' outgroup animus is particularly anti-Black. For studies of polarization, we believe sensitivity both to potential asymmetries and ideological and sociodemographic roots are useful advancements in the sociological literature.

For the sociology of culture, as identities and tastes have become politically polarized, we believe cultural sociologists must be central to analyses of and conversations about these

processes. For example, culture and networks scholars generally orient toward the “generalized conversion value” of popular culture, which is rooted in its usefulness in “forming connections with heterogenous others,” and across otherwise salient sociocultural divides (Lizardo 2006: 783-784; see also Erickson 1996; Gamson 1998; Pachucki and Breiger 2010; Schultz and Breiger 2010; Sokolova and Sokolov 2020). And yet, in our sample of popular culture, the most widely known cultural objects are also the most polarized, suggesting that at least within the context of political polarization conversion value across an ideological divide may come through other means. Culture and networks scholars have both the backgrounds and the tools to best answer this question. In turn, we find that childhood arts exposure is a powerful predictor of *not* polarizing around popular culture. This is consistent with the finding that childhood arts exposure is one of (if not *the*) key predictor in inculcation of an omnivorous disposition (Childress et al. 2021; Dumais 2019; Lena 2019; Lizardo 2018). While omnivorousness is perhaps the most widely documented finding of the last 30 years in the study of cultural tastes, it has largely been sequestered within the culture literature, and makes comparatively few appearances outside of the subfield. Our findings have the potential to bring omnivorousness to bear on a new literature and debate.

More generally the non-polarized culture in our sample is a mixture of widely known and overtly banal items (e.g., watching TV, the band Coldplay) and (albeit still widely known) much more specialized and niche objects and activities (e.g., the band Insane Clown Posse and the sport of rowing). For two reasons we believe that cultural items and objects that usually hold a more restricted conversion value may serve well in crossing partisan divides. First, because most Americans do not care about items like rowing or Insane Clown Posse, they may be less likely to polarize around them. Second, given that these are not the types of items that attract broad,

casual fandom, shared interests in the niche items may be powerful enough to supersede or override partisan animus in a way that shared tastes in more generalized culture—such as liking the movie *E.T.* or going to the amusement park—cannot. Rather than treating certain types of culture as effectively serving in the establishment and maintenance of certain types of ties, we believe culture and networks scholars could also pay more attention to the type of underlying divisions that are being crossed through shared specialized cultural tastes.

We also note that sampling is a particular challenge in studying tastes for popular culture. This is particularly true when sampling on individual cultural items (of which there is a massive oversupply) rather than only genres, which is more typical. We raise this concern about sampling given our finding that conservatives like *less* popular culture, or at least less widely known popular culture (although it is reasonable to question what one means by popular culture if it is not widely known). We leave it to future work to decide if our finding that conservatives like less popular culture is a methodological artifact. Here, however, we suggest two reasons why it may not be.

First—with the exception of Nashville and country music (Mann 2008)—since the “rural purge” in television in the 1970s, American media industries have more oriented programming (and market segmentation) around diverse, younger, and more urban audiences, perhaps lending credence to the regular conservative complaint of not feeling represented in mainstream entertainment media. This may mean that media industries, in targeting these sociodemographic groups, may be making popular culture that is concomitantly (and indirectly) more popular among liberals. In turn, liberals may just be just generally unfamiliar with the popular culture liked by conservatives. For example, if liberals have not heard of the very widely watched conservative prestige drama *Yellowstone* or comedy *The Ranch*, the Christian Rock bands Mercy

Me or Counting Crowns, or the late night satirical news show *Gutfeld!* (which regularly gets higher ratings than Fallon, Kimmel, and *The Daily Show*), they definitionally cannot polarize around them. Conservative likes for specific cultural items, unlike liberal likes for specific cultural items, may therefore remain unpolarized in part because they are not widely known enough across the political spectrum for a national sample of liberals to actively dislike them.

A second non-artifactual explanation for our finding about conservatives liking less popular culture may be found in the fact that even controlling for age, in our data the popular culture conservatives like is older.³ Consequently, conservatives liking less popular culture may not be because of shifts in media industries and targeted audience demographics, but rather because conservatives are more oriented toward tradition and nostalgia, and the “constant revolution” (Bourdieu 2017) of popular culture is incongruent with a more conservative disposition that disfavors the cycling through of stylistic fads and fashions. For example, in our data, conservatives in 2018 like Bob Dylan, whereas he was subjected to conservative backlash in the 1960s, and it is likely he has done little more than age to cause today’s conservatives to adopt him. To be clear, our sample is not intended to address this issue, or to state definitively that conservatives do in fact like older objects. We believe this could probably be best investigated with experimental data (e.g., gauging interest in watching an “old, traditional, and very good show,” versus a “new, experimental, and very good show”) or through some other means.

Possible future elaborations of this work abound. We close with two ideas. First, researchers might attempt to tease out the mechanisms driving conservative dislikes for the culture produced and liked by Black and urban Americans. Is the target racial animus expressed through tastes, or is it racial animus aimed at qualities of the objects themselves or their creators

and consumers? We make no predictions here, but believe this is a question worth answering, as it may provide better insights into the mechanisms of conservative animus. Second, as cultural tastes can be used as fences or bridges, we also believe future work could and must look to the microfoundations of partisan cultural tastes. Cultural objects provide a unique window into these microfoundations, particularly because the cultural “power” of cultural objects is usually understood as existing in the “ambiguity” (Griswold 1987), meaning their ability to generate multiple meanings across different groups (Rawlings and Childress 2019). Given high degrees of political animus, the question of if that ambiguity would generate interactional consensus or divisiveness across political divides is a particularly salient and important question. Researchers could use assorted red, purple, and blue items from our data and use them as prompts in politically homogenous and heterogenous focus group settings, looking at the relationship between evaluation and interpretation, and if partisans polarize or converge on both or either. In line with our key findings, even on the micro-level those results may too be occurring asymmetrically.

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APPENDIX

Table A1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Variables Used in Models

	Obs	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
(1) Ideological Identity	1,525	4.08	1.88	1	7	1.00									
(2) Education	1,525	4.41	1.43	1	7	-0.05	1.00								
(3) Childhood Arts	1,518	3.25	1.65	1	7	-0.14	0.13	1.00							
(4) Income	1,467	5.54	3.12	1	12	0.05	0.33	0.04	1.00						
(5) Sex=Male	1,523	1.52	0.50	1	2	0.01	0.04	-0.01	0.10	1.00					
(6) Age Years Old	1,496	47.41	16.41	18	90	0.14	0.22	-0.20	0.06	0.00	1.00				
(7) Race White	1,525	0.61	0.49	0	1	0.13	0.02	-0.13	0.05	-0.26	0.33	1.00			
(8) Race Black	1,525	0.12	0.33	0	1	-0.14	-0.01	0.08	-0.08	0.07	-0.06	-0.46	1.00		
(9) Race Hispanic	1,525	0.12	0.32	0	1	-0.04	-0.13	0.06	-0.02	0.21	-0.30	-0.45	-0.13	1.00	
(10) Race Asian	1,525	0.05	0.22	0	1	0.01	0.17	0.00	0.07	0.05	-0.05	-0.30	-0.09	-0.09	1.00
(11) Race Other	1,525	0.02	0.12	0	1	0.04	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.04	-0.01	-0.16	-0.05	-0.05	-0.03
(12) Urban-Rural	1,525	1.94	0.73	1	4	0.15	-0.02	-0.09	-0.01	-0.15	0.16	0.30	-0.20	-0.15	-0.09
(13) Cluster 1 Tastes	1,524	3.70	1.30	1	7	0.03	0.04	0.25	0.07	0.24	-0.15	-0.23	0.17	0.14	0.05
(14) Cluster 2 Tastes	1,518	4.86	1.17	1	7	-0.14	0.21	0.38	0.08	-0.10	-0.03	-0.05	0.05	0.02	0.01
(15) Cluster 3 Tastes	1,521	5.18	1.03	1	7	-0.07	0.10	0.13	0.06	0.14	0.09	-0.03	0.09	-0.02	-0.03
(16) Cluster 4 Tastes	1,516	4.38	1.18	1	7	-0.07	0.02	0.19	-0.02	-0.06	-0.19	-0.10	0.13	0.05	0.02
(17) Cluster 5 Tastes	1,509	4.50	1.24	1	7	-0.18	0.14	0.23	0.08	0.02	-0.08	-0.07	0.10	0.02	0.02
(18) Cluster 6 Tastes	1,523	4.88	1.01	1	7	-0.02	-0.04	0.22	0.01	-0.01	-0.23	-0.10	0.10	0.08	-0.04
(19) Cluster 7 Tastes	1,521	4.85	1.20	1	7	0.13	0.06	0.05	0.02	-0.14	0.22	0.21	-0.07	-0.17	-0.02
(20) Cluster 8 Tastes	1,521	4.65	1.21	1	7	0.01	-0.01	0.14	0.01	0.05	-0.03	0.06	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03
(21) Cluster 9 Tastes	1,524	3.97	1.27	1	7	-0.24	-0.01	0.24	-0.04	-0.06	-0.31	-0.31	0.31	0.09	0.08
(22) Cluster 10 Tastes	1,505	4.62	1.23	1	7	-0.07	-0.13	0.09	-0.05	0.11	-0.23	-0.17	0.17	0.09	-0.06
(23) Lean-Liberal Tastes	1,525	4.38	0.97	1.08	6.9	-0.25	0.09	0.32	0.02	0.03	-0.26	-0.25	0.23	0.10	0.04
(24) Lean-Conservative Tastes	1,525	4.49	1.03	1	7	0.18	0.00	0.11	0.02	0.03	0.10	0.13	-0.03	-0.09	-0.03

	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)	(24)
(11) Race Other	1.00													
(12) Urban-Rural	0.02	1.00												
(13) Cluster 1 Tastes	0.01	-0.14	1.00											
(14) Cluster 2 Tastes	-0.03	-0.06	0.31	1.00										
(15) Cluster 3 Tastes	-0.02	-0.06	0.33	0.36	1.00									
(16) Cluster 4 Tastes	-0.05	-0.08	0.41	0.34	0.52	1.00								
(17) Cluster 5 Tastes	-0.06	-0.10	0.35	0.44	0.66	0.67	1.00							
(18) Cluster 6 Tastes	-0.01	-0.08	0.46	0.49	0.33	0.52	0.36	1.00						
(19) Cluster 7 Tastes	-0.01	0.13	0.30	0.30	0.44	0.49	0.40	0.33	1.00					
(20) Cluster 8 Tastes	0.03	0.03	0.37	0.32	0.52	0.52	0.45	0.41	0.53	1.00				
(21) Cluster 9 Tastes	-0.03	-0.23	0.46	0.32	0.34	0.66	0.53	0.50	0.34	0.39	1.00			
(22) Cluster 10 Tastes	0.03	-0.10	0.39	0.18	0.62	0.62	0.51	0.47	0.32	0.49	0.55	1.00		
(23) Lean-Liberal Tastes	-0.04	-0.19	0.57	0.55	0.64	0.78	0.79	0.60	0.43	0.57	0.85	0.69	1.00	
(24) Lean-Conservative Tastes	0.01	0.09	0.58	0.35	0.52	0.55	0.41	0.51	0.86	0.68	0.40	0.46	0.53	1.00

TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Popular Culture Items by Bivariate Correlations with Ideological Identity

	Lean Liberal		Non-Polarized		Lean Conservative
Oprah Winfrey Show	-.29	No Country for Old Men	-.06	Final Destiny	Kid Rock .15
Jimmy Kimmel Show	-.29	Go to a Spa	-.06	E-Sports	Rodeo .14
The View	-.27	Bladerunner	-.06	The Sopranos	Florida-Georgia Line .14
Ellen Degeneres Show	-.25	Soccer	-.06	Go Wine Tasting	Rascal Flatts .13
Get Out	-.23	Red Hot Chili Peppers	-.06	Coldplay	Carrie Underwood .13
Beyoncé	-.23	The Godfather	-.05	The Real Housewives	Johnny Cash .12
Davide Letterman Show	-.22	Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)	-.03	Pink Floyd	Nascar .12
Tupac Shakur	-.21			The X-Files	Sugarland .10
Pharell Williams	-.21			Limp Bizkit	Antiques Roadshow .10
Twelve Years a Slave	-.21			Hell's Kitchen	Pawn Stars .08
Orange is the New Black	-.19			The Blair Witch Project	Patsy Cline .08
Kendrick Lamar	-.19			Olympus Has Fallen	Golf .08
Puff Daddy	-.18			2001	Lynyrd Skynrd .07
Lauryn Hill	-.18			The Last Airbender	Pearl Harbor .07
Ja Rule	-.17			Twilight	Mötley Crüe .06
Grand Budapest Hotel	-.17			Two Broke Girls	Willy Nelson .06
Eco-Tourism	-.16			One Direction	Ride ATVs .06
				I Know What You Did Last	
Stranger Things	-.16			Summer	True Grit .06
Adele	-.16			Grimm	
Katie Perry	-.15			Bob Dylan	
Attend an Opera	-.14			Top Chef	
Curb Your Enthusiasm	-.13			Boxing	
Mad Men	-.13			Two and a Half Men	
The Shining	-.13			Insane Clown Posse	
Flo Rida	-.13			Go to Casinos	
The Office	-.13			Go Sightseeing	
Crouching Tiger/ Hidden Dragon	-.12			The Transformers	
Go to Bars	-.12			King of Queens	
Go to Museums	-.12			Gone in 60 Seconds	
Annie Hall	-.10			Tour de France	
The Foo Fighters	-.10			The Human Centipede	
Taste Authentic Cuisine	-.09			The Amazing Race	
Suicide Squad	-.09			Go to Amusement Parks	
Justin Bieber	-.09			E.T.	
Gossip Girl	-.09			The Ghost Whisperer	
I am Sam	-.09			Watch TV	
Being John Malkovitch	-.09			Bones	
Architecture Tour	-.08			The Bachelor	
The Martian	-.08			The Rolling Stones	
Supergirl	-.08			Dr. Phil	
Scary Movie	-.08			Go to the Pool	
The Hangover	-.08			Joe Dirt	
Downton Abbey	-.08			Saving Private Ryan	
Tyler Perry	-.08			Rowing	
Britney Spears	-.08			Skiing	
Greys Anatomy	-.08			Go to the Fair	
Jerry Springer	-.08			AC/DC	
Supernatural	-.07			Football	
U2	-.07			The Notebook	
Game of Thrones	-.07			Paul Blart	
Basketball	-.07			Air Force One	
Tennis	-.07			KISS	
How I Met Your Mother	-.07			Baseball	
The Sixth Sense	-.07			Motorcross	
One Tree Hill	-.07			Nickleback	

Note: Correlations with ideological identity scale (1="Very Liberal" to 7="Very Conservative") shown where significant ($r < .05$).

Table 2. Ten Taste Clusters

1	2	3	4	5
Sports	Restricted Leisure	Blockbusters	Genre TV	Prestige TV & Film
Baseball	Architecture (L)	2001	Amazing Race	12 Years a slave (L)
Basketball (L)	Cuisine (L)	Air Force 1	Bones	Annie Hall (L)
Boxing	Ecotourism (L)	Bladerunner (L)	Broke Girls	Being John Malcovitch (L)
E-sports	Museums (L)	Crouching Tiger (L)	Ghost Whisperer	Curb Your Enthusiasm (L)
Football	Opera (L)	E.T.	Gossip Girl (L)	Downton Abbey (L)
Golf (C)	Sightsee	The Godfather (L)	Greys Anatomy (L)	Game of Thrones (L)
MMA (L)		The Martian (L)	Hell's Kitchen	Grand Budapest Hotel (L)
		No Country for Old Men (L)	How I Met Your Mother (L)	Grimm
Motocross		Olympus Has Fallen	Insane Clown Posse	I am Sam (L)
Nascar (C)		Pearl Harbor	King of Queens	Letterman (L)
Rodeo (C)		Saving Private Ryan	One Tree Hill (L)	Mad Men (L)
Rowing			Orange is the New Black (L)	The Office (L)
		The Shining (L)	Supergirl (L)	The Sopranos
Skiing		The Sixth Sense (L)	Supernatural (L)	Stranger Things (L)
Soccer (L)		True Grit	Top Chef	
Tennis (L)		The X-Files	Two and a Half Men	
Tour de France				

6	7	8	9	10
Unrestricted Leisure	White-Rural	Rock	Nonwhite-Urban	Genre Movies
Amusement Parks	Antiques Roadshow (C)	AC/DC	Adele (L)	The Blair Witch Project
ATV (C)	Carrie Underwood (C)	Red Hot Chili Peppers (L)	Britney Spears (L)	Final Destiny
Bars (L)	Florida-Georgia Line (C)	Coldplay	The Bachelor	Get Out (L)
Casino	Johnny Cash (C)	Bob Dylan	Beyoncé (L)	Gone in 60 Seconds
Fair	The Notebook	Pink Floyd	Justin Bieber (L)	The Hangover (L)
Pawn Stars (C)	Patsy Cline (C)	Foo Fighters (L)	Puff Daddy (L)	The Human Centipede
				I Know What You Did Last Summer
Pool	Rascal Flatts (C)	Kid Rock (C)	Dr. Phil (L)	Joe Dirt
Spa (L)	Sugarland (C)	Kiss	Ellen Degeneres (L)	The Last Airbender
TV	Willie Nelson (C)	Limp Bizkit	Flo Rida (L)	Paul Blart
Wine Tasting		Mötley Crüe (C)	Ja rule (L)	Scary Movie (L)
		Nickleback	Kendrick Lamar (L)	Suicide Squad (L)
		Lynyrd Skynyrd (C)	Katie Perry (L)	Transformers
		The Rolling Stones	Jimmy Kimmel (L)	Twilight
		U2 (L)	Lauryl Hill (L)	
			One Direction	
			Oprah (L)	
			Pharrell Williams (L)	
			The Real Housewives (L)	
			Jerry Springer (L)	
			The View (L)	
			Tupac (L)	
			Tyler Perry (L)	

Note: Items that lean liberal are marked with (L) and items that lean conservative are marked with (C).

Table 3. OLS Models Predicting Average Tastes in Popular Culture Clusters

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Sports	Restricted Leisure	Blockbusters	Genre TV	Prestige TV & Film	Unrestricted Leisure	White- Rural	Rock	Nonwhite- Urban	Genre Movies
Ideological Identity	0.01 (0.02)	-0.09*** (0.02)	-0.03 (0.01)	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.11*** (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.09*** (0.02)	0 (0.02)	-0.15*** (0.02)	-0.04** (0.02)
Items in Cluster Known	-0.09*** (0.02)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.03** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)
Constant	5.04*** (0.36)	5.49*** (0.25)	5.66*** (0.11)	5.01*** (0.11)	5.46*** (0.11)	5.17*** (0.27)	4.69*** (0.14)	4.27*** (0.15)	3.58*** (0.16)	4.47*** (0.12)
Number of Observations	1,524	1,518	1,521	1,516	1,509	1,523	1,521	1,521	1,524	1,505

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Table 4. OLS Models Predicting Average Tastes in Popular Culture and Proportion of Sociodemographic Effects Mediated by Ideological Identity

	Lean-Liberal Items			Prop. Mediated	Lean-Conservative Items			Prop. Mediated
	1	2	3		1	2	3	
Ideological Identity	-0.13*** (0.01)		-0.08*** (0.01)		0.09*** (0.01)		0.09*** (0.01)	
Education		0.05** (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	0.15		-0.04 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	
Childhood Arts		0.14*** (0.01)	0.13*** (0.01)	0.06		0.09*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	-0.11
Income		0 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)			0.01 (0.01)	0 (0.01)	
Sex=Male		-0.02 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)			0.11 (0.06)	0.1 (0.06)	
Age Years Old		-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	0.09		0.01*** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	0.28
Race (White Omitted)								
Black		0.64*** (0.08)	0.59*** (0.08)	0.08		-0.07 (0.09)	-0.01 (0.09)	
Hispanic		0.21* (0.08)	0.20** (0.08)	0		-0.27** (0.09)	-0.27** (0.09)	0
Asian		0.14 (0.11)	0.15 (0.10)			-0.1 (0.12)	-0.12 (0.12)	
Other		-0.16 (0.18)	-0.12 (0.18)			-0.03 (0.21)	-0.07 (0.20)	
Urban-Rural		-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.09** (0.03)	0.22		0.10* (0.04)	0.07 (0.04)	0.40
Items Known	0.01*** (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)		0.03*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	
Constant	4.50*** (0.13)	4.47*** (0.18)	4.73*** (0.19)		3.61*** (0.15)	3.20*** (0.22)	2.94*** (0.22)	
Number of observations	1,431	1,431	1,431		1,431	1,431	1,431	

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Table 5. OLS Models Including Sociodemographics Predicting Average Tastes in Popular Culture Clusters

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Sports	Restricted Leisure	Blockbusters	Genre TV	Prestige TV & Film	Unrestricted Leisure	White-Rural	Rock	Nonwhite-Urban	Genre Movies
Ideological Identity	0.06*** (0.02)	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.08*** (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)	0.07*** (0.02)	0 (0.02)	-0.09*** (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)
Education	0 (0.02)	0.12*** (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.07** (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	0 (0.02)	-0.09*** (0.02)
Childhood Arts	0.18*** (0.02)	0.25*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.16*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.11*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.04 (0.02)
Income	0.02* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0 (0.01)	0 (0.01)	0 (0.01)	0 (0.01)
Sex=Male	0.55*** (0.07)	-0.25*** (0.06)	0.31*** (0.06)	-0.14* (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.25*** (0.06)	0.16* (0.07)	-0.30*** (0.06)	0.24*** (0.07)
Age Years Old	-0.01* (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	0 (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0 (0.00)	-0.02*** (0.00)	-0.02*** (0.00)
Race (White Omitted)										
Black	0.65*** (0.10)	0.06 (0.09)	0.21* (0.09)	0.47*** (0.10)	0.31** (0.10)	0.27** (0.09)	-0.18 (0.10)	-0.17 (0.11)	1.09*** (0.10)	0.58*** (0.10)
Hispanic	0.33** (0.11)	0.20* (0.10)	-0.02 (0.09)	0.17 (0.10)	0.14 (0.11)	0.06 (0.09)	-0.37*** (0.11)	-0.26* (0.11)	0.30** (0.10)	0.05 (0.11)
Asian	0.27 (0.14)	-0.02 (0.13)	-0.14 (0.12)	0.08 (0.14)	0.06 (0.14)	-0.21 (0.12)	-0.13 (0.14)	-0.15 (0.14)	0.51*** (0.13)	-0.19 (0.14)
Other	0.16 (0.24)	-0.11 (0.22)	-0.11 (0.21)	-0.33 (0.23)	-0.39 (0.24)	-0.09 (0.20)	-0.2 (0.24)	0.18 (0.25)	-0.09 (0.23)	0.3 (0.24)
Urban-Rural	-0.08 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.09* (0.05)	-0.04 (0.04)	0.09 (0.04)	0.06 (0.05)	-0.16*** (0.04)	-0.03 (0.05)
Items in Cluster Known	-0.12*** (0.02)	-0.10* (0.04)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)	-0.07*** (0.01)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.02* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Constant	3.94*** (0.39)	4.48*** (0.28)	4.60*** (0.19)	5.65*** (0.22)	4.79*** (0.22)	5.37*** (0.30)	4.10*** (0.24)	3.89*** (0.26)	5.05*** (0.26)	5.51*** (0.24)
Number of observations	1,430	1,424	1,427	1,422	1,415	1,429	1,427	1,427	1,430	1,412

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

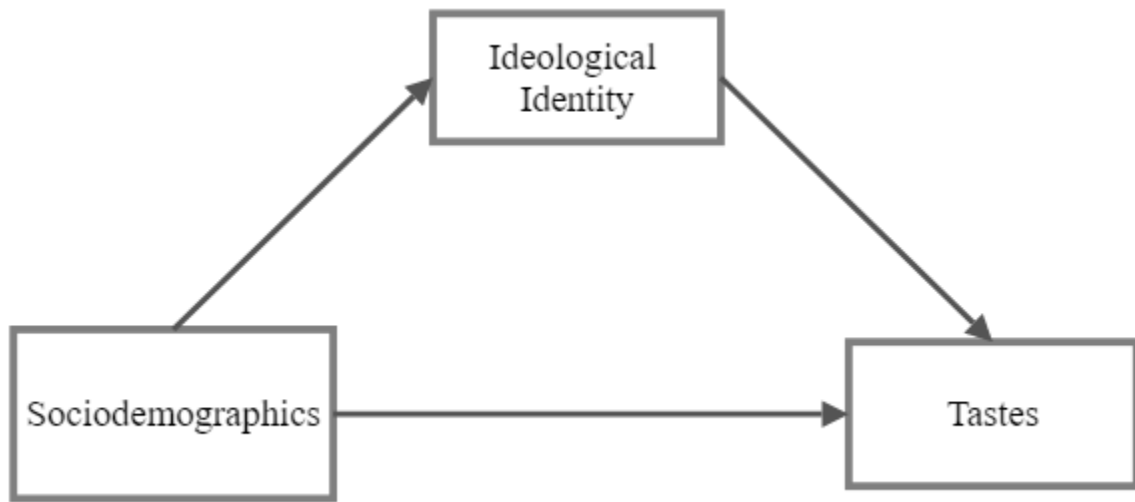


Figure 1. Pathways Leading to the Potential Polarization of Popular Culture

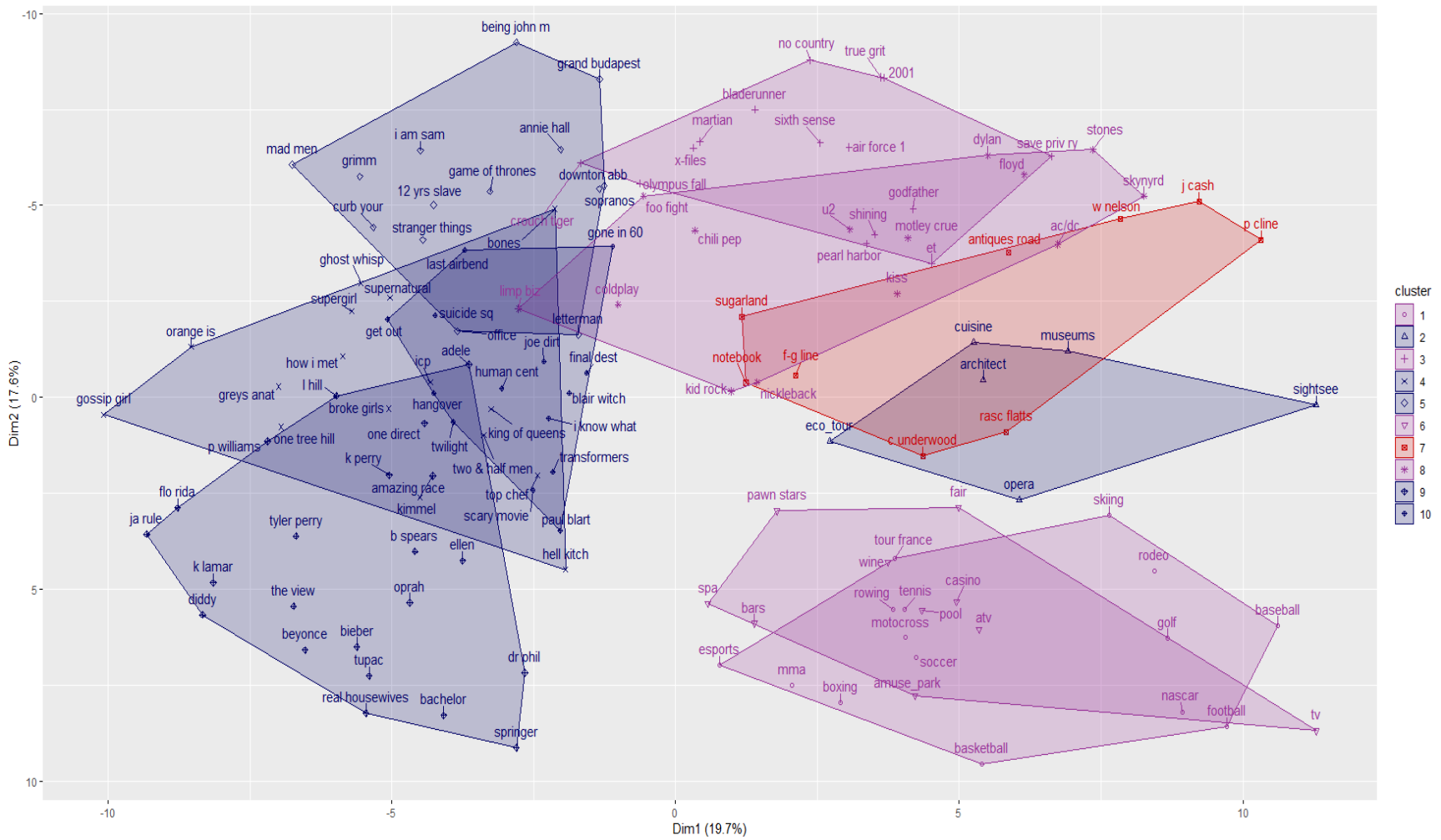


Figure 2. Results of K-Means Clustering Procedure

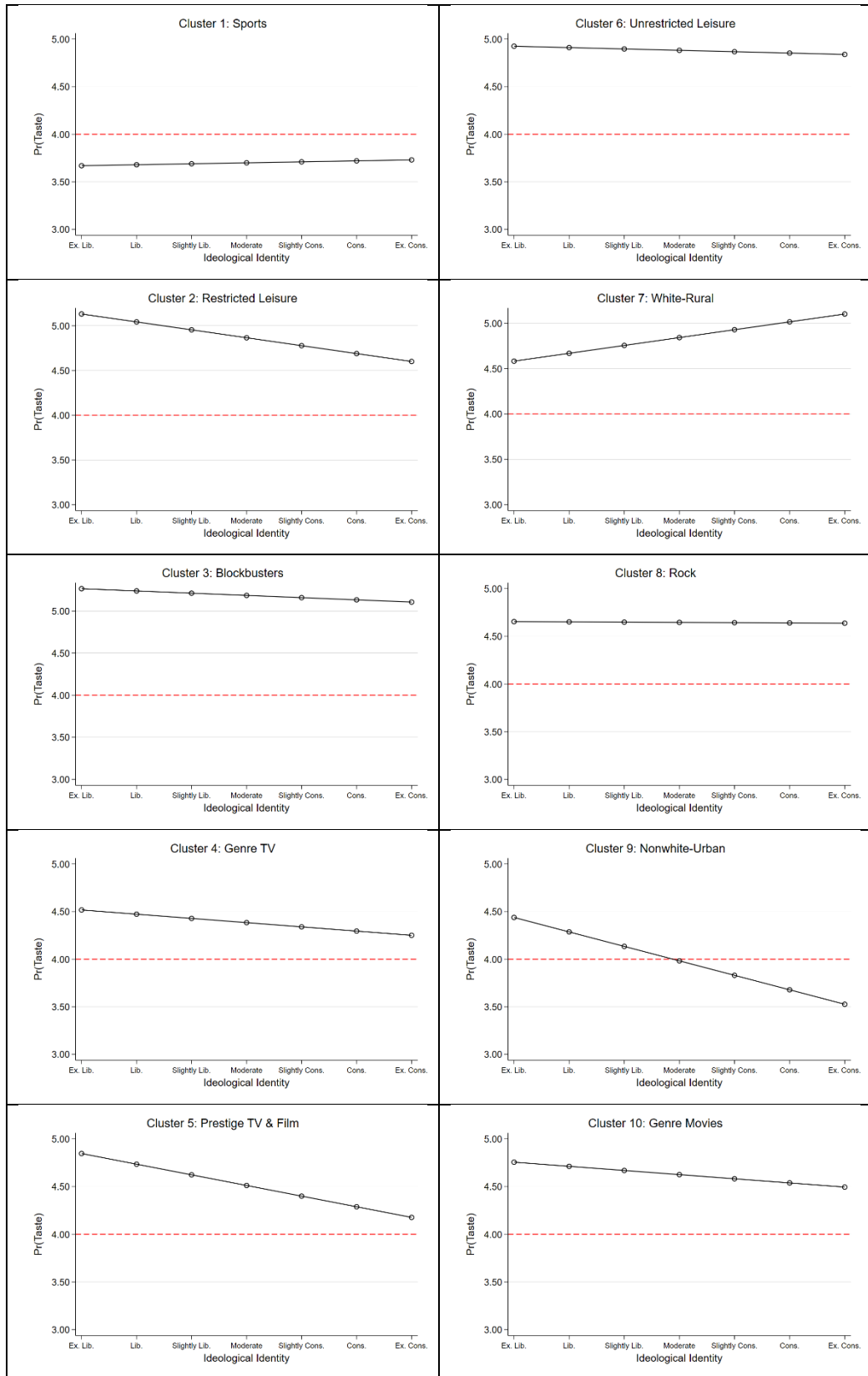


Figure 3. Predicted Average Tastes in Culture Clusters by Ideological Identity

ENDNOTES

¹ Although popularized by Hunter, the term “culture war” was first introduced by Todd Gitlin and Ruth Rosen in a 1987 *New York Times* opinion editorial (DiMaggio 2003)

² Due both to homophily and sociodemographically segmented tastes we believe people more generally overestimate how widely known and engaged with the media they enjoy are. For example, tenured and tenure track academics—who are definitionally high education, and oftentimes in the top quartile of income earners—may dramatically overestimate the popularity of the HBO show *Succession*, thinking it is widely known or watched, as opposed to a show that on average during its third season in 2021 was watched by less than ½ of 1% of Americans (Schneider 2021).

³ Models available upon request.