



Political Considerations in Nonpolitical Decisions: A Conjoint Analysis of Roommate Choice

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Abstract

Research shows the increasing tendency of partisan considerations to influence decisions outside the context of politics, including residential choice. Scholars attribute this tendency to affective distaste for members of the other party. However, little work has investigated the *relative* influence of political and nonpolitical factors in these situations—and it has not sufficiently ruled out alternative explanations for these phenomena. Do people mainly choose to socially avoid members of the other party for political reasons, or is partisanship simply perceived to be correlated with relevant nonpolitical considerations? In some settings, political affiliation may serve primarily as a cue for other factors. As a result, studies that manipulate partisanship but fail to include other individuating information may exaggerate partisanship's importance in these decisions. To address this shortcoming, I assess the impact of political and nonpolitical considerations on roommate selection via conjoint analysis. I find that partisanship strongly influences this social decision even in the presence of nonpolitical-but-politically-correlated individuating information. Partisan preferences are also moderated by roommates' perceived levels of political interest. Finally, other social traits *do* matter, but how they matter depends on partisanship. Specifically, partisans report increased willingness to live with *counter-stereotypic* out-partisans. This suggests that partisan social divides may be more easily bridged by individuals with cross-cutting identities.

Keywords Partisanship · Affective polarization · Homophily · Conjoint

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Introduction

Partisan considerations sometimes influence decisions and interactions outside the context of politics. Scholars commonly attribute the spillover of political preferences into nonpolitical domains to affective distaste for members of the other party; as dislike for the out-party has grown, so too have preferences for partisan social distance and examples of partisan prejudice and discrimination in settings as varied as the workplace (e.g., Gift and Gift 2015), dating and romance (e.g., Huber and Malhotra 2017), and academia (e.g., Inbar and Lammers 2012). Thus far, however, little work has investigated the *relative* influence of political and nonpolitical factors in these situations, and extant research has not sufficiently ruled out alternative explanations for these findings. One possibility, implicit or asserted in most scholarship and popular commentary on the subject, is that people are choosing to socially avoid members of the other party for purely political reasons. However, an alternative explanation is that partisanship is sometimes simply (perceived to be) correlated with relevant nonpolitical considerations that may factor into certain social decisions.

In some settings, partisan affiliation may serve primarily as a cue for these other considerations. Consequently, studies that manipulate partisanship but fail to include other individuating information may exaggerate the importance of political factors in these decisions. As detailed in the following section, most previous work in this area can be characterized in this way; these studies typically ask individuals to make social choices or assessments regarding others about whom they are informed of their partisanship but are told little else. When partisanship is correlated with other factors relevant to these choices or assessments, however, the meaning of subjects' responses for affective polarization becomes less clear. To address this shortcoming, I assess the impact of political and nonpolitical considerations on roommate selection via conjoint analysis, a technique which allows researchers to vary many more profile features than a standard survey experiment. I find that partisanship strongly influences this social decision even in the presence of nonpolitical-but-politically-correlated individuating information. Partisan preferences are also moderated by roommates' perceived levels of political interest, with subjects displaying more aversion to out-partisans who are very interested in politics (and a heightened preference for co-partisans with higher levels of political interest). At the same time, I show that other social traits *do* matter: subjects report greater willingness to live with counter-stereotypic out-partisans than typical out-partisans and even counter-stereotypic co-partisans. This suggests that partisan social divides may be more easily bridged by individuals with cross-cutting identities—or, given that stereotypes of the out-party are often grossly exaggerated relative to reality (Ahler and Sood 2018), by partisans who are more realistically depicted as complex, multifaceted individuals.

Partisan Discrimination in Social Decisions

A growing body of research catalogues instances in which politics and/or partisan conflict appears in nonpolitical settings (e.g., Deichert 2016; Fowler and Kam 2007; Gift and Gift 2015; Gimpel and Hui 2015; Gordon 2009; Huber and Malhotra 2017; Hui 2013; Inbar and Lammers 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Lelkes and Westwood 2017; McConnell et al. 2018; Munro et al. 2010; Nicholson et al. 2016; Pew Research Center 2014; Rom and Musgrave 2014). For example, studies have demonstrated that partisans may discriminate against their political opponents in circumstances ranging from academic hiring (Inbar and Lammers 2012) to everyday economic transactions (McConnell et al. 2018), among others. A subset of this literature focuses on residential choice and partisan geographic sorting (Bishop 2008; Cho et al. 2013; Gimpel and Hui 2015, 2017; Hui 2013; Motyl 2014; Motyl et al. 2014); this work suggests that voters prefer to live among politically like-minded neighbors, and may even make migration decisions based at least partly on this preference (although see Abrams and Fiorina 2012; Mummolo and Nall 2017).

Research typically frames this sort of “spillover” of political considerations as a consequence of affective partisan polarization (i.e., the dislike people feel toward members of the other party). However, several alternative explanations for this kind of behavior have yet to be ruled out. In particular, it is possible that interpersonal social decisions that appear to be made on the basis of partisan affiliation may instead be the result of other relevant factors that are merely *correlated* with partisanship. For example, if someone reports that they do not want to live with a member of the other party, this need not be the result of partisan animus or differences in political opinions—this person might simply assume that they would not have much in common with an out-partisan in terms of relevant social, cultural, and lifestyle preferences (which may be associated with partisanship but on their own are nonpolitical).¹ Other scholars acknowledge the possibility that “partisan sorting” is occurring in social spheres on the basis of nonpolitical homophily; for example, Gimpel and Hui (2017) note that partisan geographic sorting may be “inadvertent” (i.e., people may “express a preference for residential environments with features that just happen to be correlated with partisanship”) just as it may be “intentional.” Indeed, much research on partisan geographic sorting admits that political selection criteria may be direct or indirect (Cho et al. 2013). Furthermore, the extent of such “social polarization” may be overstated, as Klar et al. (2018) point out, for reasons having to do with survey research confounds. Vignette features in survey experiments—such as partisanship—can prompt subjects to infer other traits or characteristics that can confound causal inferences, especially when vignettes provide little additional information (Dafoe et al. 2016). Here, this could prove problematic if describing

¹ Economists describe this distinction as “taste-based” versus “statistical” discrimination (see, e.g., Guryan and Charles 2013). The former refers to discrimination grounded in animus toward an outgroup. The latter refers to the use of group membership to make inferences about some other trait or characteristic: for example, given limited information, an employer might attempt to assess a prospective employee’s projected productivity based on what he believes about the average productivity of other members of their race, gender, or ethnicity.

someone in terms of their partisanship leads subjects to infer that (a) their partisan affiliation is a particularly important identity for them, or (b) that they possess other traits or characteristics which are nonpolitical but related to the outcome of interest.²

Despite all of this, seemingly little work has attempted to systematically untangle the political from the nonpolitical and the politically correlated in the context of social decisions. Previous studies in this area have tended to provide little or no additional information (besides partisanship) in their experimental manipulations, rendering them vulnerable to the potential confound described above. For instance, Fowler and Kam (2007) task participants with completing a behavioral game with another supposed player about whom they are told either “[y]ou know nothing about this anonymous individual,” or “[t]he only thing you know about this individual is that he or she is a registered Republican (Democrat).” McConnell et al. (2018) vary only signals of political affiliation from would-be employers while providing only cursory background information (in their case, gender and geographic location). Some prior work has incorporated additional individuating information about partisans in experimental treatments, but this information has often been limited to a small range of features; for example, Lelkes and Westwood (2017) include only education, gender, age, and marital status alongside political affiliation as profile features in their partisan choice task. Similarly, Munro et al. (2010) ask subjects to choose between two “18-year-old White males from small cities within the state” whose college applications were “constructed to be fairly similar in all areas” except in terms of their educational achievement history and their partisanship. Even when treatment vignettes *have* included additional information beyond partisanship, this information has usually not been experimentally varied—nor has it typically included nonpolitical information that is both (a) germane to the situation at hand and (b) itself correlated with partisanship.

This study begins to address the gap in our understanding regarding the relative influence of political and nonpolitical considerations on nonpolitical social/interpersonal decisions by means of a conjoint task. Specifically, it asks subjects to rate and choose between fictitious profiles in the context of a choice between hypothetical roommates. Roommate choice—particularly among college students—can be politically and socially consequential in a variety of ways (Sacerdote 2001). While people typically prefer roommates who are similar to themselves (Hill and Stull 1981; Joiner 1994), having an outgroup roommate is associated with more intergroup friendship, reduced prejudice, increased empathy, and lower intergroup anxiety (Schofield et al. 2010; Van Laar et al. 2005). Furthermore, members of attitudinally-diverse roommate dyads exhibit less resistance to attitude change (Leviton and Visser 2009), a finding which suggests a normative upside to cross-party living arrangements and connects to the extensive literature on the democratic value of exposure

² For example, imagine a respondent who particularly hates country music, but is largely indifferent about politics. This person might report that they are unwilling to live with a potential roommate who is described as a Republican not because of their political views, but because Republicans (stereotypically) tend to enjoy country music. A researcher might regard this reported “social distance” as symptomatic of affective polarization—since it is observationally equivalent—even though it is actually unrelated to politics.

to diverse viewpoints (e.g., Barber 1984; Huckfeldt et al. 2004; Mutz and Mondak 2006). In addition to the above, roommate choice is a common social decision not just for students but for Americans in general: even among post-college-aged adults, living with a (non-romantic, non-family) roommate is an arrangement shared by nearly a third of Americans (Ferro 2014).

The study design utilizes conjoint analysis, a technique commonly applied in marketing to assess which aspects of a product or service most heavily influence consumer preferences (Hainmueller et al. 2014). Conjoint analysis is similar to vignette experiments familiar to many political scientists, but they allow researchers to vary many more treatment elements (perhaps upwards of 30—see Bansak et al. 2017). Research also suggests that conjoint experiments better predict real-world behavior than more traditional survey experiments (Hainmueller et al. 2015). While conjoint experiments can take several formats, one such format is a forced-choice conjoint, in which subjects are presented two side-by-side profiles (of candidates, products, etc.) and asked to rate each profile and to choose between the two. I adopt this format in the present study. Prior to turning to the design details, however, I first derive expectations.

Expectations

As noted, the objective of this study is to assess the relative impact of political and nonpolitical considerations on social decisions—here, roommate choice. Just how important is a potential roommate’s partisan affiliation, especially when compared to other factors which may have substantially more practical relevance (such as, for example, cleanliness, social habits, or even level of interest in politics)? We have both theoretical reasons and prior empirical evidence to suggest that partisanship ought to be an important consideration in selecting a roommate. In general, people tend to prefer connections with similar others (McPherson et al. 2001)—a principle known as homophily and acknowledged as “a pervasive social fact” (Smith et al. 2014)—and previous work in political science has already revealed such preferences for co-partisans in nonpolitical settings and social decisions. In light of this, I expect that

H₁: Partisan affiliation will significantly influence roommate preferences: individuals will be more likely to select roommates whose partisan identities match their own (and reject those who do not match), all else constant.

While such a prediction seems clearly reasonable, less clear is the *relative* impact of partisanship on roommate choice. *How large* of an influence should we expect it to exert? How might the effect of partisanship compare to the effect of relevant lifestyle considerations, including nonpolitical and nonpolitical-but-politically-correlated factors? Given the dearth of previous research on this point, I pose the following research question:

R₁: How will the influence of partisan affiliation on roommate preferences compare to the impact of other factors?

Other recent research suggests that some measures of affective polarization may conflate a dislike of partisans from the other side of the aisle with a dislike of partisanship, political discussion, and politics more generally (Klar et al. 2018). Indeed, many Americans are so turned off by partisan conflict that they may even disguise their own partisan identities, posing instead as independents (Klar and Krupnikov 2016). The degree to which hypothetical roommates are described as interested in politics, then, may prove a significant (negative) consideration. After all, one would expect to converse more frequently with a roommate than with many other kinds of social relations; living with a roommate who is “very interested in politics” might be expected to produce a substantial amount of political discussion. This general aversion to politics leads me to expect, then, that:

H_{2A}: As roommates’ stated levels of political interest increase, individuals will be less likely to prefer them, all else constant.

While political interest may be important in and of itself, there also seems to be a potential for interactive effects. The extent to which a potential roommate is described as “very interested in politics” may have greater import when that roommate’s loyalties lie with the other party than when they are described as a co-partisan. In general, individuals do not want to talk about politics with people with whom they disagree. I further predict, then, that:

H_{2B}: Roommates’ partisan affiliation will significantly interact with their level of political interest to jointly impact individuals’ roommate preferences, all else constant. Individuals will rate out-partisan roommates more negatively as they are described as more politically interested, but this will not be the case for co-partisans.

Partisan categorization comes with a wide array of stereotypes (Rothschild et al. 2019). But what happens when those stereotypes are challenged? In other words, will a Democrat evaluate a counter-stereotypic Republican more favorably as a potential roommate than they would a typical Republican (and vice versa)? Research in social psychology shows that exposure to counter-stereotypic information can attenuate emotional responses to outgroups, diminish dehumanization tendencies (Prati, Crisp, and Rubini 2015), increase intergroup tolerance (Vasiljevic and Crisp 2013), and reduce prejudice (Hutter and Crisp 2005; Prati et al. 2018). While deciding to live with someone is something of a step beyond merely not dehumanizing them, I nevertheless also expect that:

H₃: Counter-stereotypic out-partisans will be evaluated more favorably than stereotypical out-partisans, all else constant.

Procedure

The ideal subjects for this study are people who may be in the market for roommates; there are few groups that fit better, then, than college students. I thus relied on a research participant pool of students at a large Midwestern university, with data

Table 1 Conjoint attribute classes

Attribute class	Attributes
Political	Partisan affiliation; political interest
Nonpolitical	Cleanliness; preferred bedtime; social preferences
Nonpolitical but politically correlated	Favorite hobby; most important value; music preferences; race/ethnicity; religion; sexual orientation

collection taking place between March and May 2018.³ While this particular sample cannot be considered representative of all students nationally *per se*, there is nothing inherently distinctive about it. Moreover, I do not make predictions based on sample features that lack variance, and thus generalizing from this sample is reasonable (see Druckman and Kam 2011 for discussion). At any rate, given that young people tend to have less-crystalized views on political matters (Jennings and Niemi 1981; Sears 1985), reliance on a student sample makes for a harder test of the impact of partisanship on social decisions.

Participants first answered a series of standard political and demographic questions (partisan affiliation, political interest, age, race, year in school, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and gender). The "Appendix" provides a summary of sample demographics (Table 6) and the full survey instrument. Subjects next were asked to imagine that they were taking part in a roommate selection process. They were prompted to answer a series of questions about their habits and lifestyle preferences (e.g., musical taste, preferred bedtime, etc.) and to imagine that their responses would be used to match them with a roommate.

Subjects then completed a total of 10 forced-choice conjoint tasks (a number small enough that it is unlikely to produce satisficing; see Bansak et al. 2018). The goal of this study is to untangle the influence of (1) political, (2) nonpolitical, and (3) nonpolitical-but-politically-correlated factors on nonpolitical social decisions (here, roommate choice); thus, subjects were presented with multiple attributes from each of these "classes," as shown in Table 1. The inclusion of several attributes in the final category—nonpolitical but politically correlated—is contingent on the levels assigned to these attributes. For example, some levels of the "hobbies" attribute are politically correlated (e.g., hunting and fishing are seen as predominantly Republican pastimes, whereas yoga is generally considered more characteristic of Democrats), while others are not (e.g., shopping and swimming are not typically associated more with one party or the other).

Where possible, the attribute levels (detailed in Table 2, below) were drawn from existing research on partisan stereotypes and related areas (e.g., Ahler and Sood 2018; Deichert 2016; Howat n.d.; Kelly 2018; Rothschild et al. 2019). Race, sexual orientation, and religion are all demographic categories which are correlated with

³ Subjects were undergraduates enrolled in political science courses who were required to participate in research pool studies for course credit.

partisanship (i.e., Democrats are more likely to be nonwhite, nonreligious, and LGBT-identifying than Republicans), and research confirms that ordinary people perceive these differences (Ahler and Sood 2018; Rothschild et al. 2019). People also see clear differences between Democrats and Republicans in terms of their personal values (Howat n.d.; Jacoby 2014); they tend to view Republicans as more strongly holding values such as following rules, behaving properly, and respecting traditions, and Democrats as more strongly holding values such as helping others and treating others fairly. Likewise, and as noted above, people make similar distinctions in terms of their specific cultural associations with the parties: people view hip-hop, yoga, theatre/performing arts, and foreign films as Democratic pastimes, while considering country music, golf, and hunting and fishing as more characteristic of Republicans (Deichert 2016; Kelly 2018). As an additional check on these perceptions, subjects were asked (after completing the initial measures and the conjoint tasks) to rate each hobby and music genre as “more commonly associated with Democrats,” “more commonly associated with Republicans,” or “not more commonly associated with one party over the other.”

In each task, subjects were presented with side-by-side tables describing two potential roommates in terms of 11 attributes. These attributes, shown in Table 2, were displayed in random order across subjects (though for each individual respondent, the order of the attributes remained constant across all 10 tasks). Each attribute was fully randomized independently of every other attribute (meaning that all permutations were possible); this randomization was also independent across profiles even within the same task (i.e., the level of “Attribute A” for “Roommate 1” was independent of the level of “Attribute A” for “Roommate 2,” etc.). With the exception of sexual orientation, all attribute levels were weighted equally in the randomization.⁴ For each of the ten pairs, subjects were asked to choose between the two potential roommates and to rate their willingness to live with each potential roommate on a 1–7 scale. Figure 1 presents an example of what respondents were shown for a given decision.

After the conjoint tasks, subjects completed several final measures. They ranked the list of roommate attributes (the first column in Table 2) in order of importance to them. Finally, they rated the degree to which the attribute levels for “hobbies” and “music preferences” (see Table 2) are more typical of Democrats, Republicans, or neither.

Results

The procedure described above yielded a total of 4100 observations. While scholars advocate several different approaches to analyzing conjoint tasks (ranging from ordinary least squares to Bayesian hierarchical modeling), the most commonly

⁴ To enhance experimental realism, the levels for sexual orientation were weighted 80% straight, 20% LGBT.

Table 2 Conjoint attributes

Attribute	Number of levels	Levels
Political attributes		
Partisan affiliation	3	Democrat/independent/Republican
Political interest	3	Very interested in politics/somewhat interested in politics/not at all interested in politics
Nonpolitical but politically correlated attributes		
Favorite hobby	10	Theatre and performing arts/doing yoga/watching foreign films/carts and auto mechanics/visiting farmers markets/shopping/swimming/hunting and fishing/playing golf/watching sports
Most important value	5	Helping others/treating others fairly/following rules and behaving properly/respecting traditions/trying new things
Music preferences	5	Hip-hop/country music/Jazz/classic rock/electronic
Race/ethnicity	4	White/Black/Hispanic/Asian American
Religion	4	Catholic/evangelical Christian/Jewish/nonreligious
Sexual orientation	2	Gay/straight
Nonpolitical attributes		
Cleanliness	3	Very clean and tidy/somewhat clean and tidy/not at all clean and tidy
Preferred bedtime	3	9 pm/11 pm/1 am
Social preferences	2	Likes to go to parties on weekends/likes to stay in on weekends

Scenario 1 out of 10

	Roommate 1	Roommate 2
Preferred bedtime	1 am	11 pm
Favorite Hobby	Cars & auto mechanics	Visiting farmers markets
Music preferences	Electronic	Classic rock
Partisan Affiliation	Democrat	Independent
Race/Ethnicity	Asian American	Black
Religion	Catholic	Evangelical Christian
Social preferences	Likes to go to parties on weekends	Likes to stay in on weekends
Cleanliness	Very clean and tidy	Not at all clean and tidy
Interest in politics	Very interested in politics	Very interested in politics
Most important value	Helping others around them	Helping others around them
Sexual orientation	Straight	Straight

Fig. 1 Conjoint task example

accepted method is to estimate the *average marginal component effect* (Hainmueller et al. 2014) via linear regression.

This study included two different outcome measures: 1–7 ratings of each profile, and a binary choice between each profile pair. For ease of interpretation and because it allows for more variation in responses than the binary choice variable, I focus on analyses of the 1–7 rating variable in the text that follows. I used the approach described by Hainmueller et al. (2014) to calculate the average marginal component effect (AMCE) for each attribute, where applicable. To assess the robustness of the resulting findings, I also analyzed the results of the choice task using both OLS and logistic regression. I regress both outcomes on (a) on the profile attributes as they are, and (b) on variables indicating a correspondence between the profile attributes and respondent demographic characteristics and preferences (where possible). I also include an interaction term for partisan affiliation * political interest (see hypothesis H_{2B}), given theoretical reasons to suspect that this interaction may be important. The results that follow remain substantively consistent regardless of the specific

Table 3 Partisan associations with attribute levels

	... More commonly associated with		
	Democrats%	Neither%	Republicans%
Hip-hop	76.1	23.4	0.5
Theatre/performing arts	74.6	23.9	1.5
Yoga	69.7	29.4	1.0
Foreign films	66.7	32.3	1.0
Going to farmers markets	58.2	36.3	5.5
Electronic	40.3	59.2	0.5
Jazz	37.3	59.2	3.5
Shopping	11.9	84.1	4.0
Swimming	7.0	91.5	1.5
Classic rock	6.0	66.7	27.3
Golf	2.5	31.5	66.0
Watching sports	1.5	68.7	29.9
Cars and auto mechanics	1.0	50.0	49.0
Hunting and fishing	0.0	8.5	91.5
Country music	0.0	11.4	88.6

modeling choices. Details on analyses not presented in this section are available in the "[Appendix](#)" or in the replication materials.

First, as a partial check on respondent perceptions of the conjoint attributes (i.e., are certain attribute levels indeed correlated with partisanship?), I examine evaluations of the levels of the “hobbies” and “music preferences” attributes. As mentioned, subjects were asked (after the conjoint task) to rate each level of these attributes as “more commonly associated with Democrats,” “more commonly associated with Republicans,” or “not more commonly associated with one party over the other.” The results of these ratings, displayed in [Table 3](#) below, clearly show that certain levels of these attributes are strongly associated with one party or the other. Respondents perceived a close link between Democrats and performing arts, yoga, farmers markets, foreign films, and hip-hop; and even stronger associations between Republicans and hunting and fishing, golf, and country music. We are on safe ground, then, to consider these particular attributes nonpolitical-but-politically-correlated.

Next, we turn to explore the impact of the full set of attributes on roommate preferences. [Figure 2](#) presents the results of the simplest model, in which all variables represent the attribute levels featured in the task profiles (which with the exception of partisan affiliation, are not recoded relative to respondents’ own traits). In this model, partisanship was coded to indicate in-party or out-party status relative

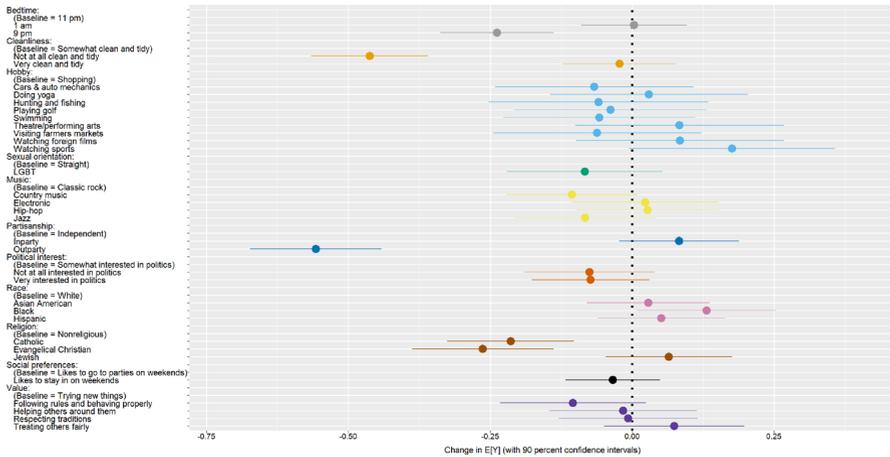


Fig. 2 Effects of roommate traits on preference evaluations. This figure plots the average marginal component effect (see Hainmueller et al. 2014) of each attribute level on roommate ratings. The broad pattern of results shown here—and the main substantive findings—are robust to alternative specifications, including ordered logistic regression and OLS with and without clustered robust standard errors

to respondents.⁵ For now, this model includes no interaction term between partisan affiliation and political interest. The figure depicts estimates of the average marginal component effect for each attribute level plus 90 percent confidence intervals.

What this figure immediately makes apparent is the significant influence of partisanship, even in the presence of other individuating information. This is the case even though much of that other information is directly relevant to roommate preferences, and, in some cases, is correlated with partisanship. It seems that in the context of roommate choice, partisanship is more than just an indicator for other lifestyle preferences (e.g., religion, personal values, music preferences, hobbies, etc.) that tend to be correlated with it; rather, subjects have strong roommate preferences regarding party affiliation itself. Indeed, the coefficient on “PID: out-party” is the largest in the model; subjects preferred to avoid living with a member of the other party to roughly the same extent that they preferred not to live with someone who was described as “not at all clean and tidy.” This is more than double the size of the negative coefficient on “prefers to go to bed at 9 pm”—quite a feat in a sample of young adults. Preferences regarding co-partisans were not nearly so strong: subjects reported a partiality *for* members of their in-party that was positive and statistically significant (at $p < 0.10$, one-tailed test), but just one-seventh the size of the negative coefficient on “out-party.” Together, these results offer initial support for H_1 (partisanship does significantly influence roommate preferences) and a first-pass answer to R_1 (the effect of roommate out-party membership is the largest in the regression).

⁵ Pure independents were excluded from this analysis due to the lack of a single outgroup category here; independent leaners were grouped with the party they preferred.

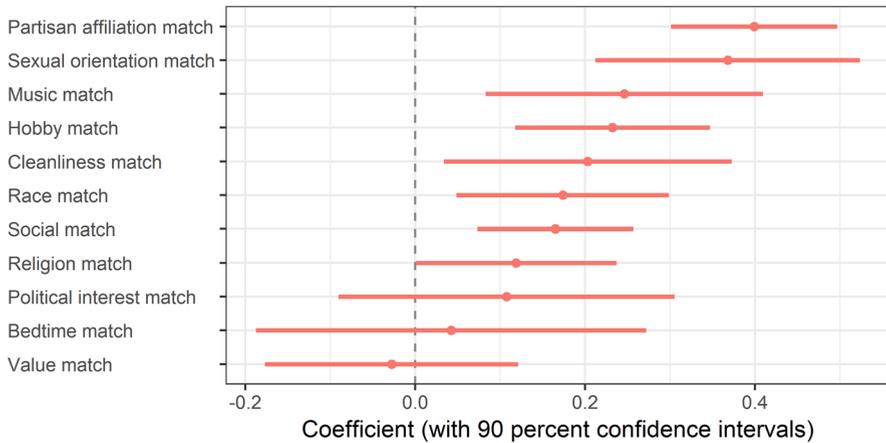


Fig. 3 Roommate-respondent attribute correspondence and preferences. This model presents OLS regression coefficients with standard errors clustered by respondent. The results depicted in Fig. 3 are robust to alternative specifications

It is possible that examining the influence of individual attribute levels could obscure important distinctions due to heterogeneous preferences. That is, certain segments of the sample may prefer roommates *with* a certain characteristic, while other segments may prefer roommates *without* that characteristic—washing out its influence in the aggregate. Another approach to assessing the impact of roommate characteristics on respondent preferences, then, is to look at the effects of a *match* in roommate and respondent characteristics, rather than at the effects of any given attribute level. To explore this, I recoded all attribute variables to indicate a match (or no match) between roommate characteristics and respondent preferences (or respondent characteristics, where relevant) for that level. For example, the PID attribute was coded as a match when roommates and respondents shared the same party affiliation, and a non-match otherwise. Similarly, the race attribute was coded as a match when respondents and roommates were of the same race; etc. The results of this analysis are shown in Fig. 3, below. Examined in this way, several additional attributes rise to the level of statistical significance; subjects do appear to value roommates who share tastes in music, hobbies, etc., and who are demographically similar (in keeping with general expectations of social homophily). Even when attribute levels are combined in this way, however, the largest coefficient in this model is on the partisanship variable.

While the effect of partisanship is large and statistically significant in the full regression, it may be the case that it still partly serves as a cue for roommate characteristics which are nonpolitical but politically correlated (as described above). Does controlling for roommate partisan affiliation increase predictive power even though it is correlated with these other variables? To partly address this question, we can use an *F* test to compare a model which includes partisanship with a reduced model which does not. If partisanship is an important roommate consideration beyond various nonpolitical but politically correlated factors, the former model should be more

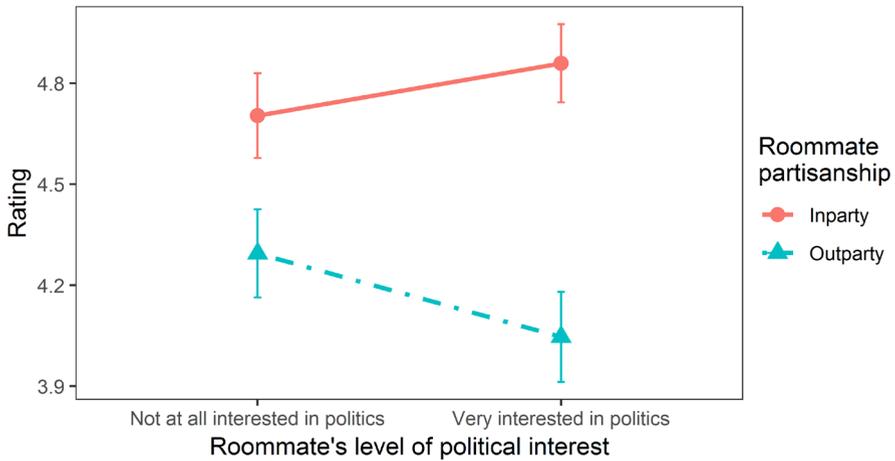


Fig. 4 Political interest moderates partisanship's effect on preferences

predictive. The results of such a comparison show that including partisan affiliation significantly improves model fit ($p < 0.001$). Partisanship is not merely a stand-in for other lifestyle features but rather an important social consideration in and of itself, even in a nonpolitical context.

With ample evidence in favor of H_1 , I turn next to the impact of political interest. I find that, on its own, political interest does not seem to impact preferences (see Figs. 2 and 3), allowing us to reject H_{2A} . That said, recall that H_{2B} anticipated that the influence of a hypothetical roommate's partisanship on subjects' preferences may be moderated by the roommate's level of political interest. It seems reasonable to expect that partisans may evaluate an out-partisan who is very interested in politics more negatively than an out-partisan who is not at all interested in politics. To assess this possibility, I compare roommate evaluations by partisanship and level of political interest in Fig. 4. There does appear to be some evidence of an interactive effect.⁶ Subjects report less willingness to live with a member of the out-party who is described as “very interested in politics” than one who is “not at all interested in politics.” The opposite is the case for co-partisans (i.e., subjects evaluate co-partisans who are very interested in politics more positively than those who are not interested in politics), although this difference is not statistically significant.⁷

⁶ Evidence for an interactive effect is partly contingent on the precise operationalization. There is less to suggest an interactive effect in the binary outcome models; this may be due to the smaller amount of variation in the dependent variable. Regressing these variables on the rating outcome suggests an interaction between out-partisan affiliation and interest, with out-partisans being evaluated more negatively when they are described as more interested in politics.

⁷ There is additionally some evidence of an interaction between *respondent* political interest and roommate partisan affiliation, with out-partisan roommates being evaluated increasingly negatively as respondent political interest increases. However, this interaction is not robust across different model specifications.

Table 4 Predicted roommate ratings

	Predicted Democratic evaluations	Predicted Republican evaluations
Stereotypical Republican	3.94	5.94
Counter-stereotypic Democrat	4.65	5.28
Counter-stereotypic Republican	4.81	4.91
Stereotypical Democrat	5.53	4.24

Having established that both partisanship and political interest matter for roommate preferences, how willing are subjects to make exceptions for atypical partisans—those who do not “fit the bill” in terms of what we normally expect members of the other party to be like? Research in social psychology gives reason to expect that counter-stereotypic outgroup members should be evaluated more favorably than more typical outgroup members; accordingly, the impact of out-party membership may dissipate for out-partisans who are not “typical.” To test for this, I estimated the predicted rating for stereotypical and counter-stereotypic Democratic and Republican roommates⁸ among Democratic and Republican respondents. The results of these estimates are shown in Table 4. (Recall that subjects rated each potential roommate on 1–7 scales, with 1 being the worst evaluation and 7 being the best.)

As expected, both Democrats and Republicans evaluated counter-stereotypic out-partisans more favorably than typical out-partisans. Note that the differences between Democrats’ and Republicans’ ratings were smallest for the counter-stereotypic partisans—and, interestingly, that members of both parties were actually predicted to rate counter-stereotypic out-partisans *more positively* than counter-stereotypic co-partisans.⁹ In other words, even though partisan affiliation is the single most predictive factor regarding how much subjects will like a potential roommate, other factors do seem to make a difference as well. This clearly supports hypothesis H₃.

Having shown that partisanship is of substantial import for roommate preferences, we might now ask—to what extent do people admit this consideration? Does self-reported willingness to consider an out-partisan roommate match actual behavior? At the conclusion of the survey, subjects ranked the list of roommate attributes

⁸ Here, stereotypical Republicans had attribute levels of white, straight, evangelical Christian, likes country music, likes hunting and fishing, and values respecting traditions. Counter-stereotypic Republicans had attribute levels of black, LGBT, nonreligious, likes hip-hop, likes theatre/performing arts, and values treating others fairly. Counter-stereotypic and stereotypical Democrats had the same sets of attribute levels, respectively. The remaining attributes were held constant at “somewhat interested in politics,” “somewhat clean and tidy,” “likes to go to parties on weekends,” and “goes to bed at 11 pm.”

⁹ In part, we might expect these evaluations to relate to what social psychologists call the “black sheep effect”—i.e., the tendency toward attitude extremity when judging fellow ingroup members. The black sheep effect holds that people will judge likeable ingroup members more positively than comparable outgroup members—and unlikeable ingroup members more negatively than comparable outgroup members (Marques and Paez 1994). Interestingly, this is not entirely what we observe here: while “likable” (i.e., stereotypical) co-partisans are indeed evaluated more positively than counter-stereotypic out-partisans (who are identical in every respect save partisan affiliation), stereotypical out-partisans are still evaluated *most* negatively, again illustrating the strength of partisan affiliation in interpersonal evaluations.

Table 5 Trait importance self-reports versus actual

Trait	Mean importance (self-report)	Rank (self-report)	Coefficient	Rank (coefficient)
Cleanliness	2.96	1	0.20	5
Bedtime	3.69	2	0.04	10
Values	3.84	3	−0.03	11
Social preferences	4.33	4	0.17	7
Hobbies	5.24	5	0.23	4
Partisan affiliation	6.14	6	0.40	1
Music	6.86	7	0.25	3
Religion	7.71	8	0.12	8
Political interest	7.71	9	0.11	9
Sexual orientation	8.52	10	0.37	2
Race	9.00	11	0.17	6

(the first column in Table 2) in order of importance to them from one to eleven (e.g., “Which of the following characteristics are most important to you in a potential roommate? [Their sexual orientation, their hobbies, their taste in music, etc.]”).

Table 5 shows evidence strongly suggestive of social desirability—when it comes to reporting (or assessing) the influence of various traits on their roommate decisions, subjects strongly under-report (or underestimate) the extent to which race, sexual orientation, and partisan affiliation actually weigh in their deliberations. Subjects ranked potential roommates’ partisanship only sixth in importance out of eleven traits—yet this trait exerted the greatest influence on their actual ratings and choices.

Discussion

Even in the presence of other individuating information—including nonpolitical matters which are directly relevant to one’s living arrangements and/or correlated with partisanship—partisanship matters for roommate choice. In this context, partisanship is more than just an indicator for other demographic characteristics or lifestyle preferences (such as race, religion, or musical taste) that tend to be correlated with it. Instead, subjects have strong dispositions against would-be roommates who are members of the other party (and somewhat weaker preferences for co-partisan roommates). All told, partisanship exerts an effect on roommate ratings larger than any other attribute. This is the case across multiple possible operationalizations and is robust to alternative specifications. Individuating information does not attenuate the impact of partisanship. Significantly, people’s preferences against members of

the out-party far outweighed their preferences for co-partisans—lending support to notions of “negative partisanship.” Just as contemporary American politics may (increasingly) be characterized more by alignment *against* one party rather than attachment to the other (Abramowitz and Webster 2016, 2018), people may prefer to avoid roommates who are members of the other party to a greater extent than they prefer to seek out co-partisan roommates.

Considered on its own, roommates’ political interest was not a significant factor shaping subjects’ preferences. But participants reported less willingness to live with a member of the out-party who is described as “very interested in politics” than one who is “not at all interested in politics”—and the opposite for co-partisans. In other words, when considering life with a potentially-disagreeable roommate, subjects are sensitive to just how much disagreement they ought to expect—a finding consistent with past work on selective exposure to dissonant political information (e.g., Arce-neaux and Johnson 2013; Gerber et al. 2012; Stroud 2008; etc.). On the other hand, given shared political views, someone who is enthusiastic about those views may be a more appealing roommate than someone with no interest in the subject. Additionally, members of both parties evaluated counter-stereotypic out-partisans more favorably than typical out-partisans. Interestingly, Democrats and Republicans came closer to consensus when rating counter-stereotypic partisans than stereotypical partisans. Not only that, members of both parties were actually predicted to rate counter-stereotypic out-partisans more positively than counter-stereotypic co-partisans. This finding relates to (and extends) recent work which identifies circumstances that may ameliorate partisan polarization (e.g., Druckman et al. forthcoming; Levendusky 2018; Shafranek forthcoming).¹⁰ We appear to be more willing to give out-partisans a chance—and seem to require less social distance from them—when they deviate from the usual partisan mold.

In sum, preferences for partisan social distance do in fact reflect more than a simple use of partisanship as a social heuristic. Partisans prefer to avoid members of the other party even when provided with additional information about their lifestyle and demographic characteristics. When it comes to at least one kind of social decision, not all considerations weigh equally: partisan affiliation stands head-and-shoulders above other political, nonpolitical, and nonpolitical-but-politically-correlated factors.

Conclusion

This study examined the relative influence of political and nonpolitical considerations on nonpolitical interpersonal decisions—specifically, roommate choice. While previous research documents the rising tendency of partisan political considerations to influence decisions and interactions outside the context of politics, this work has not investigated the relative influence of political and nonpolitical factors. As a

¹⁰ One possibility, of course, is that exposure to counter-stereotypic out-partisans merely results in *subtyping* (Hewstone 1994). Such subtyping allows people to preserve their prior stereotypes of—and affect toward—the outgroup as a whole (Kunda and Oleson 1995).

result, prior research does not sufficiently rule out competing explanations for these phenomena. The present study shows that partisanship is not merely used as a cue for other relevant considerations; rather, people do prefer to socially avoid members of the other party independent of their other attributes. Moreover, when it comes to these kinds of decisions, partisanship may in fact loom *largest* as a consideration—here outweighing even more seemingly-immediate factors for choosing a roommate such as their social preferences, preferred bedtime, or level of cleanliness.

Naturally, additional research is necessary to gauge the extent to which these conclusions are generalizable. Would we observe the same trends among different populations? Given the limitations of student samples, future studies should ponder precisely this possibility. In particular, are treatment effects and preferences regarding out-partisan roommates generally uniform across parties? Or do Democrats and Republicans diverge in terms of their preferred social distance from those with whom they disagree politically? Another limitation of the present study is its hypothetical nature. Whether we would see similar trends in real-world roommate choices is an open question, but it is worth noting that at least some populations almost certainly explicitly select on partisan affiliation when searching for roommates—for example, the staff of political parties, legislatures and legislative committees, NGOs, think tanks, and similar organizations in Washington, D.C. and in state capitals. A 2017 *New York Times* article (Rogers 2017) observes that since the 2016 election, a number of online roommate-wanted ads have included explicit political clauses (e.g., “Trump supporters need not apply”).

Does partisan affiliation exert a similar impact on different kinds of social decisions and interactions? It seems plausible that partisanship might exert even greater effects on choosing a date or a mate, but a substantially reduced influence on picking an employee or a place to eat. Future work should also continue to investigate preferences for and against stereotypical/counter-stereotypic co-partisans and out-partisans—and, furthermore, should attempt to directly assess whether and when people might *infer* partisan affiliation from other related individual characteristics. The present study allows some leverage on the latter question—in American politics, independent identification may be functionally-equivalent (in a social sense) to an absence of information about partisan affiliation (Klar and Krupnikov 2016). But when no information on partisan affiliation at all is provided, what then?

For now, evidence suggests that partisan preferences in social situations reflect more than a use of partisanship as a social heuristic. When asked to consider someone as a potential roommate, that roommate’s partisan affiliation outweighs all other individuating information, including details about both demographic characteristics and relevant habits and preferences. In this setting, at least, partisan preferences for social distance do not appear to be illusory. Perhaps the one promising note on which to end is that when information about out-partisans contradicts expectations, these people are seen as more socially desirable. In many cases, such information does exist—given the inherent multi-dimensionality of human beings—and could offer one path to bridging partisan social divides.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Appendix

Sample Demographics

See Table 6

Table 6 Sample demographic characteristics

	First year
Year in school (mode)	
Race (white)	50.0%
Percent Democrat (excluding learners)	70.7%
Age (mean)	19.8
Gender (female)	49.0%
LGBT	14.9%
Total <i>N</i>	205

Main Results

See Tables 7 and 8.

Table 7 AMCEs corresponding to Fig. 2

Level	Estimate	SE
1:00 AM bedtime	0.003517	0.056628
9:00 PM bedtime	−0.23825***	0.060461
Not at all clean and tidy	−0.46246***	0.062735
Very clean and tidy	−0.02226	0.061055
Cars and auto mechanics	−0.06686	0.106274
Doing yoga	0.029507	0.105895
Hunting and fishing	−0.05925	0.117736
Playing golf	−0.03825	0.103033
Swimming	−0.05791	0.102793
Theatre/performing arts	0.083338	0.111697
Visiting farmers markets	−0.06188	0.111409
Watching foreign films	0.084081	0.111373
Watching sports	0.175953	0.110251
LGBT	−0.08323	0.083216
Country music	−0.10639	0.070031
Electronic	0.023078	0.078593
Hip-hop	0.027157	0.076847
Jazz	−0.08276	0.075456
Inparty	0.082644	0.063957
Outparty	−0.55725***	0.070498
Not at all interested in politics	−0.07528	0.069711
Very interested in politics	−0.07341	0.062896
Asian American	0.028273	0.065839
Black	0.131008	0.074485
Hispanic	0.051361	0.068171
Catholic	−0.2141**	0.067794
Evangelical Christian	−0.26333***	0.075768
Jewish	0.064524	0.067805
Likes to stay in on weekends	−0.03399	0.050504
Following rules and behaving properly	−0.10446	0.078234
Helping others around them	−0.01589	0.079125
Respecting traditions	−0.00724	0.074333
Treating others fairly	0.074009	0.075056

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Table 8 OLS model corresponding to Fig. 3

	Dependent variable Rating
Partisan affiliation match	0.399*** (0.051)
Political interest match	0.108 (0.078)
Social match	0.165*** (0.049)
Sexual orientation match	0.368*** (0.055)
Religion match	0.119*** (0.060)
Bedtime match	0.042 (0.108)
Value match	– 0.028 (0.079)
Race match	0.174*** (0.054)
Cleanliness match	0.203*** (0.075)
Hobbies match	0.232*** (0.053)
Music match	0.246*** (0.077)
Constant	3.855*** (0.063)
Observations	3316
R ²	0.048
Adjusted R ²	0.045
Residual std. error	1.399 (df = 3304)
F statistic	15.202*** (df = 11; 3304)

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

Binary Choice Outcome

See Tables 9 and 10

Table 9 AMCEs of roommate traits on preference evaluations, binary outcome

Level	Estimate	SE
1:00 AM bedtime	−0.017	0.023
9:00 PM bedtime	−0.137***	0.025
Not at all clean and tidy	−0.186***	0.021
Very clean and tidy	0.023	0.022
Cars and auto mechanics	−0.096*	0.043
Doing yoga	−0.007	0.043
Hunting and fishing	−0.090*	0.042
Playing golf	−0.021	0.039
Swimming	−0.013	0.041
Theatre/performing arts	−0.093*	0.041
Visiting farmers markets	−0.022	0.037
Watching foreign films	−0.005	0.038
Watching sports	0.028	0.042
LGBT	−0.019	0.026
Country music	−0.086***	0.026
Electronic	−0.071**	0.027
Hip-hop	−0.010	0.025
Jazz	−0.053*	0.026
Inparty	0.007	0.021
Outparty	−0.166***	0.022
Not at all interested in politics	−0.005	0.023
Very interested in politics	0.017	0.023
Asian American	−0.004	0.025
Black	0.062*	0.025
Hispanic	0.038	0.024
Catholic	−0.055*	0.024
Evangelical Christian	−0.078**	0.027
Jewish	−0.051	0.026
Likes to stay in on weekends	−0.046*	0.020
Following rules and behaving properly	−0.088**	0.029
Helping others around them	−0.013	0.027
Respecting traditions	−0.067*	0.027
Treating others fairly	−0.021	0.026

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Table 10 Roommate-responder trait correspondence and preferences, binary outcome

	Dependent variable Choice
Partisan affiliation match	0.436*** (0.069)
Political interest match	0.162 (0.103)
Social match	0.396*** (0.065)
Sexual orientation match	0.270*** (0.073)
Religion match	0.339*** (0.081)
Bedtime match	0.297*** (0.150)
Value match	0.147 (0.106)
Race match	0.014 (0.071)
Cleanliness match	0.145 (0.100)
Hobbies match	0.224*** (0.070)
Music match	0.283*** (0.103)
Constant	-0.772*** (0.085)
Observations	3954
Log likelihood	-2,673.256
Akaike inf. crit.	5,370.512

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

Instrument

1. Counting this quarter, what is your year in school?
 - First year
 - Sophomore
 - Junior
 - Senior, graduating this year
 - Senior, not graduating this year
 - Other

2. Please choose one or more races or ethnicities that you consider yourself to be (mark all that apply)
 - White (1)
 - Black or African-American (2)
 - Hispanic/Latino(a) (3)

- Asian or Asian American (4)
 - Middle Eastern or North African (5)
 - American Indian or Alaskan Native (6)
 - Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (7)
 - Other (8)
3. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican, Independent, or what?
- Democrat (1)
 - Republican (2)
 - Independent (3)
 - Other party (please specify) (4)
4. [strong/weak partisan or closer to which party]
5. Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Where you would place yourself on a scale from (1) you rarely follow what's going on in government to (7) you follow what's going on in government and public affairs almost all of the time?
6. Please select your current age (in years).
7. What is your gender?
- Male
 - Female
 - Other
8. Which of the following terms best describes your religious beliefs?
- Catholic
 - Mainline Protestant
 - Evangelical Protestant
 - Jewish
 - Hindu
 - Muslim
 - Nonreligious
 - Other
9. Do you identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT)?
- Yes
 - No
10. For the next few minutes, imagine that you are filling out a survey that will be used to match you with a potential roommate.
- Which of the following activities do you enjoy? Check all that apply.
- Theatre/performing arts
 - Doing yoga
 - Watching foreign films
 - Cars and auto mechanics

- Visiting farmer's markets
 - Shopping
 - Swimming
 - Hunting and fishing
 - Playing golf
 - Watching sports
 - Reading
 - Playing video games
 - Rock climbing
 - Volunteering
 - Going to coffee shops
11. Out of the following options, what is your favorite genre of music?
- Hip-hop
 - Country music
 - Jazz
 - Classic rock
 - Electronic
 - Heavy metal
 - Pop
 - Other
12. On a scale from (1) not at all clean and tidy to (7) very clean and tidy, how would you rate your level of personal cleanliness?
13. Which of the following statements best describes you?
- I like to go to parties on weekends.
 - I like to stay in on weekends.
14. Below is a list of personal values, i.e., things people might consider important in life. Out of these options, which is most important to you?
- Helping others around you
 - Treating others fairly
 - Following rules and behaving properly
 - Respecting traditions
 - Trying new things
 - Making your own decisions
 - Living in safe, secure surroundings
 - Enjoying life and having fun
 - Being successful and admired
15. Generally speaking, around what time do you prefer to go to bed?
- 8 pm or earlier
 - 9 pm
 - 10 pm
 - 11 pm
 - Midnight

- 1 am
- 2 am or later

16. **[CONJOINT TASK]** For the next few minutes, we are going to ask you to act as if you were trying to pick a roommate to live with.

We will describe to you several pairs of potential roommates. For each pair, please indicate your attitudes towards the two potential roommates and which one you would prefer to live with. Even if you aren't entirely sure, please indicate which of the two you prefer.

[Tasks 1–10 here]

Which of these potential roommates would you rather live with?

- Roommate 1
- Roommate 2

On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 indicates that you would definitely NOT live with this person, and 7 indicates you would definitely live with this person, where would you place...

Definitely would NOT live with							Definitely WOULD live with
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Roommate 1							
Roommate 2							

17. Which of the following characteristics are most important to you in a potential roommate? Please rank these items in order from most important (1) to least important (10). (To reorder the items in this list, click and drag.)

- Their sexual orientation
- Their hobbies
- Their taste in music
- Their cleanliness
- Their social preferences
- Their political views
- Their level of interest in politics
- Their religious views
- Their personal values
- Their race/ethnicity
- Their preferred bedtime

18. Think about each of the following hobbies. Generally speaking, would you say that each hobby is more commonly associated with Democrats, more commonly associated with Republicans, or not more commonly associated with one party over the other?

- Theatre/performing arts
- Doing yoga

- Watching foreign films
 - Cars and auto mechanics
 - Visiting farmers markets
 - Shopping
 - Swimming
 - Hunting and fishing
 - Playing golf
 - Watching sports
19. Think about each of the following genres of music. Generally speaking, would you say that each genre is more commonly associated with Democrats, more commonly associated with Republicans, or not more commonly associated with one party over the other?
- Hip-hop
 - Country music
 - Jazz
 - Classic rock
 - Electronic

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