

Political Sorting in U.S. Entertainment Media Selection

Sarah Bachleda Fiorini^a, Amanda Lotz^b, Stuart Soroka^a and Dan Hiaeshutter-Rice^a

^a University of Michigan ^b Queensland University of Technology

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Abstract. Analysis of public opinion, news consumption, and social media has examined increasing political polarization and/or partisan sorting; however, few have explored the potential connection between entertainment programming and political sorting. This paper examines viewership of U.S. television entertainment from 2001 to 2016 and finds increasing differentiation in the shows watched in primarily Democratic versus primarily Republican markets. Notably, these years coincide with partisan sorting in news consumption and enhanced fracturing of the U.S. television landscape. Thus, the article confirms growing differences in the most-watched shows in heavily Democratic versus Republican regions, a finding that provides uncommon evidence of suspected fragmentation by political view and of the need to adapt theories of the perceived ‘society-making’ (Turow, 1997) of entertainment television.

Keywords: entertainment media, political polarization, television, public opinion, partisan sorting

Discussion of ‘polarized politics’ is an increasingly regular feature of both academic research and popular commentary. There is widespread concern that both political elites and citizens are becoming increasingly attached to, or defined by, their partisan identities. Moreover, there are worries that these attachments produce a more divisive and unproductive political climate and diminish a common reality about the world.

Media are frequently perceived as being central to the problem. This is evident in the recent resurgence of concerns about liberal media bias. Citizens’ choices in news outlets also increasingly reflect political preferences. Indeed, a combination of partisan biases in news selection and corresponding partisan incentives in news production may be critical in accounting for why partisans appear to have increasingly disparate interpretations of basic facts and perceptions of world events.

Anxieties about individuals self-selecting into niche information environments are not new, however. In the early days of the internet boom, Sunstein (2001) and others raised concerns about echo-chambers of information and the potential harmful effects it could have on public life. Over the past two decades, scholars of selective exposure (e.g., Stroud, 2007; 2008; 2010) have further demonstrated the tendency for people to consume news information that aligns with currently-held beliefs, which in turn reinforces attachment to the partisan identities that led consumers to that content in the first place.

The primary focus of concern has been traditional ‘news’ programming or, to a lesser extent, ‘news’-like non-fiction content. News is an absolutely critical component of any functioning representative democracy; but it makes up only a small part of typical media consumption. Entertainment-focused programming also fills many hours, but little research has explored selective exposure, partisan

polarization or equivalent concepts in such programming. Is political polarization in media use simply a news-related phenomenon, or is it reflected in entertainment-focused media content as well?

This question is of some significance. That entertainment programming is relevant to political attitudes is relatively clear. There are long-standing bodies of work, across multiple traditions in media studies and political communication, on depictions of politics in entertainment (e.g., Parry-Giles, 2010; Tryon, 2016); on late-night television programs and politics (e.g., Feldman and Young, 2008; Niven et al., 2003); on political humor on television (e.g., Jones, 2005); the political use of satire in television comedy (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009; Day, 2011); and on the role that celebrities play in politics (e.g., Street, 2012; Hollander, 2005). Most importantly for the analysis that follows is the recognition that media content primarily focused on entertainment – even entertainment that is in no way overtly political – can have serious political implications, either directly in the short term (e.g. Holbert, 2005; Holbrook & Hill, 2005), cumulatively over the long term (e.g., Gerbner & Gross, 1976), or in terms of ‘common sense’ beliefs about how the world is or should be (see Kellner & Durham, 2001). There are, we believe, good reasons to hypothesize that political polarization is reflected, and even enhanced, by partisan selectivity in entertainment-viewing preferences. Although this possibility is often assumed in acknowledgements of the ‘fragmentation’ of entertainment audience, it has not been systematically or empirically studied.

This article explores prime-time entertainment in the United States for evidence of polarized viewing related to political partisanship. A recent *New York Times* article claimed such polarization based on data derived from ‘liking’ entertainment programs on Facebook (Katz, 2016). While its maps suggest a cultural division in America between *Modern Family* and *Duck Dynasty* states, its use of unreliable self-report data left us curious about what more empirically rigorous data would suggest. The analysis here derives from data of actual viewing over an extended period.

One objective of the analysis that follows is to combine the insights afforded by critical-cultural research more commonly used to investigate the cultural significance of entertainment programming with quantitative research about political behavior and media effects. We then turn to an analysis of Nielsen ratings for all prime-time television shows (excluding major events, sports, or one-off specials), across six Designated Market Areas (DMAs) that have voted systematically Democratic or Republican over the past 18 years. We compare the most highly rated series in these six market areas with an eye towards identifying whether there have been increasing differences between Democratic and Republican viewership. Our findings suggest increasing polarization in entertainment viewing over time. While the data cannot easily determine the cause of polarization in entertainment viewing, they highlight shifts in partisan selection of entertainment programs over the past two decades. Such evidence has important implications, considered in the closing sections, that underscores the importance of critical media studies research on the content of programming with increasingly partisan audiences.

There has been extensive speculation about the role of media in polarization across a growing number of countries and regions, but few studies investigate it empirically. To do so requires grounding this question in a specific context – in this case, the United States. Of course, the situation of the United States has peculiarities, including a two-party system, limited public service television, and the mass adoption of multichannel service, that make its findings difficult to generalize. Nevertheless, this study provides evidence confirming suspicions about the alignment of partisanship and entertainment preferences. It also models a new way scholars can incorporate viewership data recorded in real time into their study of media effects. What is more difficult to discern is whether Americans are becoming more polarized based on partisanship or a fragmenting

entertainment space is enabling more distinct choices. Regardless of the cause, such findings indicate the need to rethink previous theories about the nation- and society-making functions of entertainment programming.

Political Polarization, Partisanship, and Selective Exposure

Political polarization refers to an increasing divide in the policy preferences of partisans – a shift that has been increasingly evident in the U.S. at the elite level over the past few decades (Lee, 2009; Poole, 2007). This kind of polarization has been less apparent amongst U.S. citizens in general (e.g. Bafumi & Herron, 2010; Levendusky, Pope & Jackman, 2008). That said, while public preferences may not be moving away from each other, party identification and policy stances have become increasingly correlated (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). Even as *political polarization* may not be occurring amongst the public, then, *partisan sorting* is.

There is consequently a growing body of work finding that Democratic and Republican identifiers are becoming increasingly ideologically and socially distinct (e.g., Fiorina, 2013; Hetherington, 2009; Lelkes, 2016; Levendusky, 2009). There are likely several sources of this trend. Partisans' preferences may be changing due to growing gaps in income (Garand, 2010), for instance, or misinterpretations of the extremism of political challengers (Ahler, 2014). Given evidence of polarization at the elite level, partisan leaders may also be setting the tone for their constituents (e.g., Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Zingher & Flynn, 2018). It could be that by having increasingly distinct policy stances vis-à-vis the opposing party, elites are making it easier for citizens to 'sort' themselves into one party or the other (Davis & Dunaway, 2016). Most critical for our work: regardless of whether the dynamic is best characterized by polarization or sorting, and regardless of whether the source is elite leadership or alternative factors, Americans are more frequently identifying with the party that aligns with their values and beliefs. Party identification is consequently an increasingly powerful predictor of political behavior (Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009), and partisanship is more strongly correlated with other identities as well, such as religion, race and gender (Mason, 2018). This increasing correlation between partisan and non-partisan identities is central to our expectations about entertainment programming work that follows.

Selective exposure in news consumption is both a consequence and source of polarization and sorting. Research on selective exposure focuses on the tendency for people to select news content congruent with their pre-existing beliefs and predispositions (Stroud, 2008; Garrett, 2009). Research on cognitive dissonance, i.e., a feeling of discomfort in the face of information that challenges one's attitudes initially motivated the notion of selective exposure (Festinger, 1957; Schulz & Roessler, 2012). Recent work suggests that an attraction to attitude-affirming content drives selective behavior, particularly for those who are partisan and have a strong social identification with that group (Stroud, 2008; Slater, 2015). Either way, the critical feature of selective exposure is the same: media consumers are likely to select information that fits with their beliefs. The political consequences of selective exposure are relatively clear. Predominantly attitude-confirming news exposure can create information bubbles in which people are increasingly closed off from diverse (and potentially attitude-changing) perspectives. This can result in growing attachment to one's own party and hostility towards opposing parties (e.g., Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

It is less clear what selective exposure to entertainment programming might look like. Viewers have long selected some shows over others based on preferences for certain kinds of stories, characters, or genres (Oliver, 2003) or mood management (e.g., Zillmann, 2000), of course; but until recently, there wasn't a great variety of choice on mainstream television. The competitive dynamics of advertiser-supported television pushed programming to the 'middle of the road' in an effort to

gather the largest audience. This dynamic began to change in the late 1990's as competition expanded and subscriber-funding became a greater part of the entertainment economy (Author removed, 2014). Channels – especially on cable – sought shows with ‘edge’ to stand out and attract younger and wealthier viewers, attributes sometimes also consistent with more socially-liberal ideals (Becker, 1998). Amidst the greater program choice, programming became gently more political, mainly through representational politics such as casting with greater ethnic diversity, and programs with female leads and gay characters. Such inclusion of previously absent or underrepresented people could signal socially liberal politics that might trigger selective exposure even if the storytelling of these series varied only minimally from convention.

The expanded content options offered by digital cable and the arrival of internet-distributed services such as Netflix – i.e. growing accessibility, affordability, quantity of media content to choose from – have expanded viewers' possibilities for tailoring their entertainment diets to match their interests and values. Although most scholarship has attended to news, these are important questions to ask of entertainment as well.

The Relevance of Entertainment Programming to Political Attitudes

Media studies has tended to focus on how media shape ‘political culture’ rather than its impact on the domain of formal politics (Corner & Richardson 2008; Bodroghkozy, 2012). For example, its scholars have investigated reality television as a crucial mode for political articulation worldwide (Kraidy, 2009; Jacobs 2007; Punathambekar 2010), television's role in making political life ‘eventful’ (Rajagopal, 2001), or television documentaries that explicitly take on the ‘political’ (Curtin, 1995; Bondebjerg, 2006), among other cases in which the political is embedded in everyday culture. A considerable body of work in critical media studies also emphasizes television entertainment as important to how viewers understand the world, perceive things outside their own experience, and as a reinforcer of dominant social norms and beliefs (e.g., Morley, 1992; Gray, 2008; van Zoonen, 2005). As with work on cultivation, this research does not require that only television depicting politics, issues, or political processes matters. A family sitcom or police series can be every bit as ‘political’ as *The West Wing* in affirming perspectives about the world and structures of power, and constructing and reinforcing dominant ideology as understood by British cultural studies (Hall, 2009). This is of some significance given that relatively little U.S. television entertainment is considered openly political. The advertiser-supported business of television has long prioritized programming that offends few and turns away no one, with very few niche outlets producing entertainment programming demarcated along a partisan line (Author removed, 2014).

That said, ostensibly non-political programming can have important political consequences. For instance, Holbrook and Hill (2005) find evidence that exposure to crime dramas increased viewer's concerns about crime and those concerns significantly affected participants' opinion of the president. Ramasubramanian (2010) concludes that stereotypical portrayals of African Americans and Latino-Americans on television affect white viewers' (a) attitudes towards members of these groups, and (b) opinions on race-targeted political policy. Mutz and Nir (2010) focus on positive and negative television narratives about the fairness or flaws in the criminal justice system and find that they affect participants' attitudes towards justice-related policy. Shrum et al. (2010) find cultivation effects for policy-relevant values such as materialism and life satisfaction, and Holbert, Shah and Kwak (2002) demonstrate the predictive power of various types of prime-time sitcom and drama television on people's opinions concerning women's rights.

There have been significant changes in television technology, access, and adoption over the past 20 years that also play a role in understanding increased partisan sorting. In 2000, at the start of the

‘post-network era’ (Author removed, 2014), aggregate cable channel viewing had recently overtaken aggregate broadcast viewing, ending broadcast television’s ability to gather a ‘mass’ audience for all but major events, such as the Super Bowl. Viewer choice and control over television viewing expanded considerably over the next two decades. Cable programming grew in prestige and attention, and then internet-distributed video services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video added yet more options with original series as well as allowing viewers to set their own schedules (Author removed, 2018). DVR use was negligible in 2001 – the first year of the study’s data – and video on-demand technology not yet available. But by 2016, half of U.S. homes owned DVRs, nearly half had Netflix subscriptions, and cable subscribers could access nearly all prime-time programs on-demand. In addition to these devices, internet-based distribution technologies increasingly allow viewers more control over their viewing schedule, in effect adding much more choice beyond ‘what’s on.’ These and other changes to the entertainment landscape have led to the availability of much more programming. In just one format – scripted series – the number of shows produced in the U.S. more than doubled from 181 in 2002 to 455 in 2016 (Author removed, 2018).

The time-period under study here captures the gradual take-up of new technologies that have profoundly reshaped the experience of television for many Americans. In 2001, the first year of data presented here, U.S. prime-time television maintained the norms and characteristics of the network era (mid-1950’s to 1980’s) when the three broadcast networks dominated the business and viewers watched at times appointed by schedulers. By 2016 viewing behavior had changed among all age groups, as the mainstream use of DVRs, video on demand, original cable series, and streaming video services allowed viewers to craft a more deliberate viewing experience. Given work that demonstrates an increasing alignment between partisanship and other identities and values (cited above), entertainment preferences were likely to reflect partisanship in this high-choice environment as well.

Methods

In order to identify whether an increase in political sorting in entertainment media occurred over the past 20 years, we analyzed Nielsen ratings for the top-50 programs in six Designated Market Areas (DMAs) in five different years between 2001 and 2018. Note, it is quite difficult to accurately capture individual-level viewing behavior. Most of the work that tries to connect either news or prime time viewing preferences to political attitudes and behaviors relies on survey self-reports – and these are notoriously unreliable (Prior, 2007). The only systematic accounting of actual viewer behavior in the U.S. is collected by Nielsen Media Research. Since the early 2000’s, it has predominantly used a set-top box to directly capture (i.e., without any error produced by human self-reports) what the television sets of individuals are tuned to, alongside data on the demographic features of the household, and self-reports of who is watching. We use these Nielsen data to examine trends in viewing habits at the aggregate rather than the individual level, a decision which is discussed further below.

Nielsen data are collected at the level of programs watched in a DMA. In lieu of being able to observe the viewing habits of individuals, we focus on six specific DMAs. Our process of selecting DMAs was careful and strategic. We examine only DMAs in which viewership data is gathered using either a Local People Meter or Set Meter.¹ Using GIS (geographic information system) data, we then

¹ The former captures the channel the set is tuned to, and when, with viewers electronically “checking in” to confirm who is watching the program; the latter captures the same but relies on a diary to capture who is viewing. We exclude (typically more sparsely populated) DMAs in which data are gathered using diaries only. Doing so avoids less reliable data.

overlaid maps of DMAs on Congressional Districts in order to assign measures of partisanship to each DMA. We calculated (a) the mean Democratic vote share for presidential candidates, across all (equally weighted) congressional districts in a DMA, for all elections from 1992 to 2012, and also (b) the mean proportion of counties which voted majority Democratic within a DMA, again averaged across all presidential races from 1992 to 2012.² Figure 1 shows a scatterplot of all DMAs, plotted by both (a) and (b).

Figure 1. Nielsen DMAs, by Democratic Vote Share, 1992-2012

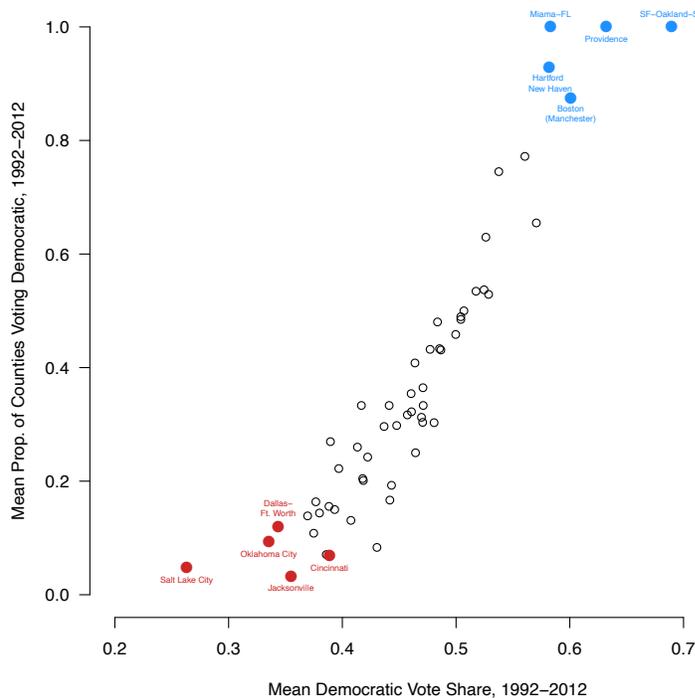


Figure 1 makes clear that our two measures are highly correlated. We focused on the DMAs which have been the most consistently Democratic or Republican over the 20-year period and selected three DMAs from each of these two groups. This selection was based on a number of considerations, including a desire to get regional variation, maintain consistent Nielsen boundaries over the time period, and represent both urban and rural regions. Of the Democratic DMAs, we selected Miami, Providence, and San Francisco-Oakland; of the Republican DMAs, we selected Oklahoma City, Jacksonville, and Cincinnati.³

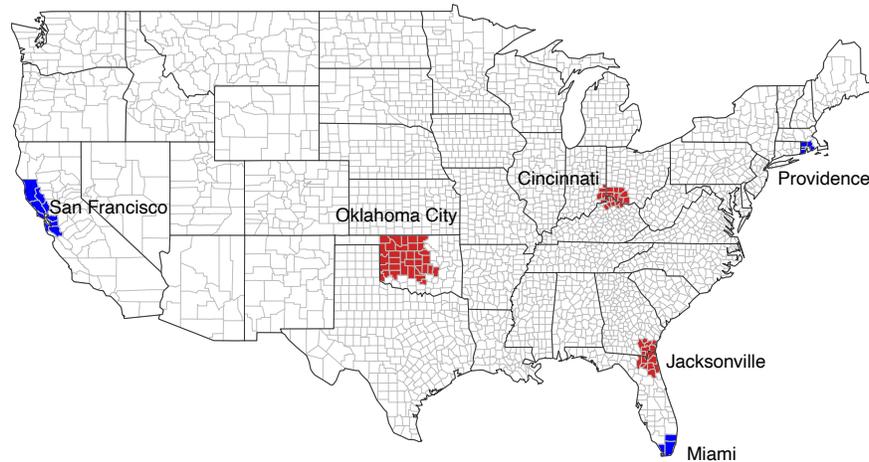
The regional distribution of our six DMAs is not perfect — the Republican districts tend to be in the middle of the country, while Democratic DMAs tend to be on the coasts, as readily evident in Figure 2, which plots our six DMAs on a map of the U.S. However, this is also the nature of political partisanship in the U.S. The focus on six DMAs (rather than more) is a function purely of financial constraints — Nielsen data are expensive and priced per year, per market. Costs also meant that we do not have annual data, but rather four-year intervals in 2001, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016; we

²Data on voting is drawn from CQ Press's library, found here <http://library.cqpress.com/elections/download-data.php>. Access to these data was provided by the (Removed for review).

³We might have chosen Salt Lake City, the most consistently Republican DMA, but we concerned that the television viewing habits of this predominantly Mormon region would not be representative of Republican DMAs more broadly.

include 2001 rather than 2000 because Nielsen databases changed in 2001, and data prior to that period is not directly comparable with data from 2001 onwards.

Figure 2. DMAs Used for Analysis



Our analysis relies on ecological inference, i.e., inferring individual-level behavior from aggregate-level data, and the difficulties of, and some solutions for, ecological inference have been described in detail elsewhere (King et al. 2004). Here, we take an admittedly simple approach: we select only regions in which the *vast majority* of individuals — over 80% in each case — voted either Democratic or Republican in all of the election years selected. Differences in viewership across our Democratic and Republican DMAs must consequently be driven primarily by Democrats and Republicans, respectively; they cannot, at least not more than a small amount, be driven by the viewing behavior of the Democrats who live in predominantly Republican DMAs, and vice versa. Of course, we must be cautious in our interpretation, as we have aggregate, not individual-level, data. But we proceed under the belief that our aggregate-level data will for the most part reflect the individual-level differences that we are interested in.

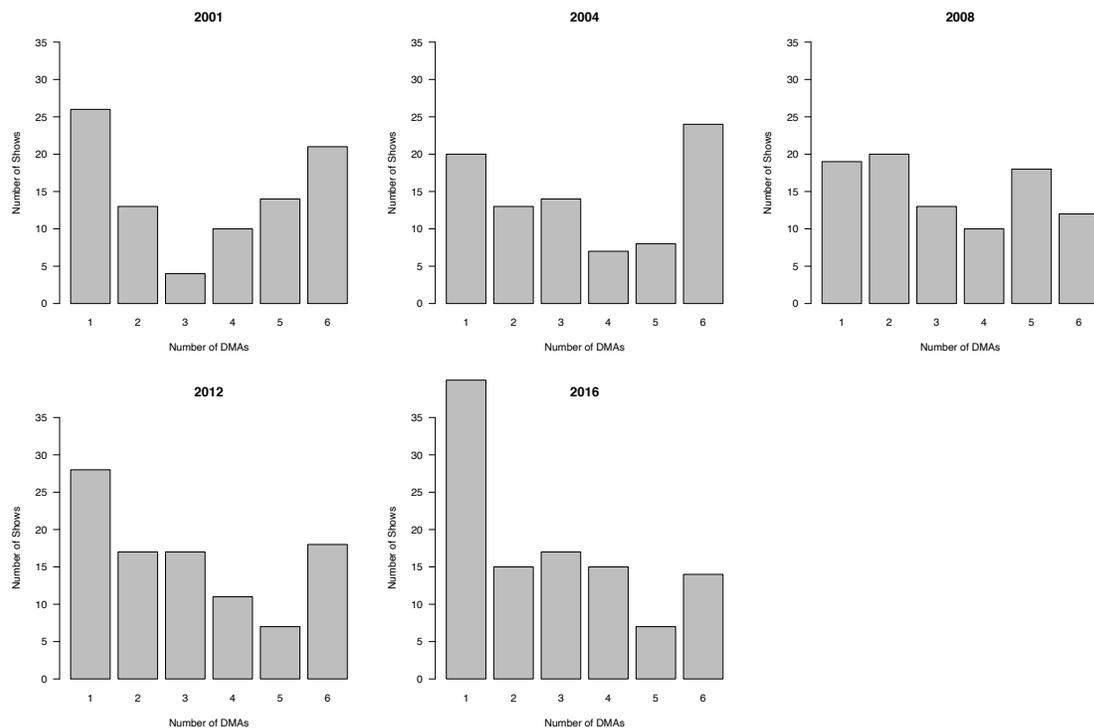
To measure prime time viewing preferences we rely on the ‘rating’ produced by Nielsen, a measure indicating the percent of households in a DMA watching a given program. Our data include all prime-time programs, where prime time is 7-10 p.m. CST from Mondays to Saturdays and 6-10 p.m. CST on Sundays. The analysis is based on an estimated average for each airing of a show over the course of the entire year. In most cases, there is a single line of data for each program; in cases of special episodes of ongoing shows— think of the season finale for *Survivor* — we use the average rating received across multiple entries.

The programs receiving the highest ratings are often one-time programs such as the Super Bowl and other major sporting events, especially by 2016. Because we want to focus on the typical, i.e., on-an-average-day, viewing habits across DMAs, we exclude these one-time special programs from our analysis and emphasize on-going series. We do so by manually coding these programs, excluding (a) major sporting events, (b) election-night programming, and (c) one-time special episodes of entertainment programs such as *Miss Universe*, or *It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*.

The resulting list of programs varies from year to year with a tendency to increase in variety over time – a product of the shift towards a greater number of cable networks and original show

production. The data we purchased from Nielsen includes the top 500 lines of shows from each DMA, and once we excluded special programs and removed multiple episodes of a single show, between 60 and 90 shows per DMA remained for each year. Of these, we analyzed the top 50 shows in each year. The list of shows for each DMA was then merged into a single, annual dataset, the length of which was determined by the number of unique shows that compose the top-50 shows in any one of the six DMAs. (If there is a show that does not make the top 50 lines of data for one DMA, but it appears in another DMA, it is included in the dataset). The number of unique shows varies by year and trends upwards over time, as expected. There are 96 unique shows in 2001, 93 in 2004, 100 in 2008, 111 in 2012, and 118 in 2016.

Figure 3. The Distribution of Shows Across DMAs



Just how much overlap is there in top shows across DMAs over time? Figure 3 illustrates the overlap in top shows across DMAs over time. The top-left panel shows the number of shows that make the top-50 list in just one, or two, three, four, five or all six DMAs in 2001. In this case, there are 21 shows that make the top-50 list in all six DMAs, and 26 shows that make the top-50 list in just one of our DMAs. There is a good amount of overlap in the viewing habits of our six DMAs. This is less true in 2016, however. In 2016, just 14 shows make the top-50 across all DMAs, and there are 39 shows that make the top 50 in only one of the six DMAs. This change is a preliminary indication that preferences have become more distinct across DMAs over time. We take Figure 3 as initial evidence of shifting preferences within a changing media ecosystem.

Results

Our principle objective, however, is to determine whether Nielsen ratings are increasingly related to the partisanship of DMAs. We do this using an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) in which Nielsen ratings are estimated as a function of two variables, *Show* and *Partisanship* (Table 1). *Show* is simply the name of the show, included here as categorical variable. It indicates the proportion of variance in

ratings that is the product of the popularity of programs. Most of the total variation in top viewed shows is a function of exactly this. There are periods during which *Friends* or *Survivor* are highly popular everywhere, for instance.

The variable *Partisanship* takes on one of only two values: Democrat or Republican. This variable indicates the proportion of variance in ratings that is correlated with the partisanship of DMAs. That said, we have no particular expectations about the direct effect of *Partisanship* – we do not expect all show ratings to be higher in Democratic or Republican DMAs, for example. What we are most interested in is the interaction between *Partisanship* and *Show*. That interaction captures the extent to which *Show*-level ratings vary systematically across the *Partisanship* of DMAs. The proportion of variance in ratings that is accounted for by this interaction tests the possibility that there is a link between partisanship and entertainment preferences.

Table 1. ANOVAs

	Df	Sum Sq	F
2001			
Show	87	12584.9	8.44
Party	1	162.1	9.46
<i>interaction</i>	87	1522.8	1.02
2004			
Show	84	16121.7	11.77
Party	1	191.4	11.73
<i>interaction</i>	84	1252.5	0.91
2008			
Show	90	5530.6	4.29
Party	1	227.8	15.91
<i>interaction</i>	90	1168.6	0.91
2012			
Show	97	4610.1	7.16
Party	1	186.1	28.03
<i>interaction</i>	97	1187.8	1.84
2016			
Show	107	2655.4	5.07
Party	1	126.4	25.85
<i>interaction</i>	107	626.4	1.20

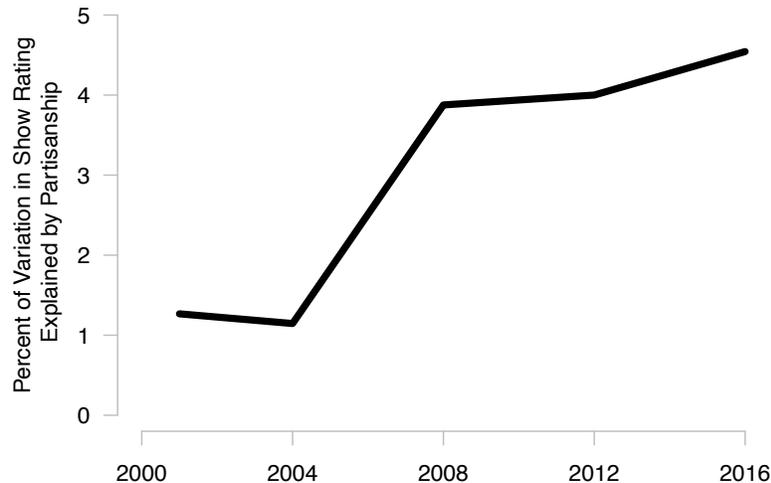
Cells contain results from ANOVAs estimating Nielsen rating as a function of *Show*, *Party*, and an interaction between these two categorical variables. Df = degrees of freedom; Sum Sq = Sum of Squares; F = F-test of the significance across all categories.

Because we want to examine change over time, we estimated ANOVAs separately for each year. Full results are included in Table 1.⁴ The most critical findings, however, are illustrated in Figure 4, which shows the proportion of variance explained by the interaction between *Show* and *Partisanship*. Before 2008, the proportion of variance explained hovers around 10%. From 2008 onwards, the variance is roughly 20%. There are hints of a slight upward trend from 2008 onwards, but it is too small to credit. The major shift here is a change in the equilibrium, before 2008, and then from the 2008

⁴ Note that by estimating models annually we avoid one potential source of non-independence in our cases, i.e., the possibility that cases are correlated within years.

onwards. Our interpretation of these results is as follows: controlling for the popularity of individual shows, the proportion of variance in show ratings that is related to the partisanship of DMAs doubles over the time period examined here.

Figure 4. Variance Explained by *Show*Partisanship*



Our results are robust to the changing number of shows included in the analysis over time and controlling for urban versus rural DMAs (which we find has no impact on the results). Contrary to what some might expect based on U.S. politics and the election of Donald Trump, it is not the case that 2016 is the year at which polarization in entertainment viewing spikes. It is, rather, the period between 2004 and 2008, leading up to the election of Barack Obama. This makes sense given what we know about both technological growth and trends in political polarization as described in our review of literature above.

Republicans watch CSI, Democrats watch Madam Secretary...

The 2000's marked a 'perfect storm' of digital media technology advancement. First, digital cable multiplied available channels and DVRs enabled greater control. By 2010, internet streaming services brought even more choice and control. But what may be most relevant to understanding our results were the subsequent shifts and growth in original television entertainment content. That is to say, the variety of entertainment programming available went through a significant change as many cable channels, and then streaming services, created new series. Audiences were presented with (a) a wider range of content to choose from and that content was increasingly aimed to appeal to different taste segments (e.g., the emergence of ambiguously heroic protagonists such as Tony Soprano), and (b) more flexibility and accessibility in consuming those programs over mainstream network offerings.

Research in political science and public opinion also highlights the early- to mid-2000's as a key period in the shift towards more partisan sorting. Pew Research Center (2014) finds a significant jump towards more ideologically consistent attitudes among Democrats and Republicans from 2004 to 2014; Fiorina (2016) suggests that the shift in polarizing attitudes might be led at the elite level, particularly for partisan activist and donors, starting in the early 2000's; Hill and Tausanovitch (2015) find increasing partisan sorting in the mid-2000's. Relatedly, Abramowitz and Stone (2006) highlight the "Bush Effect" in the early 2000's as a significant moment of increasing polarization of the American public.

We consequently believe that the shift in Figure 4 reflects a combination of partisan sorting and technological advances and content diversification that allowed people to select content more in line with their interests and attitudes. Just as importantly, recall that it needn't be the case that shows are increasingly (explicitly) partisan, but rather that *as a broad range of political and cultural values are increasingly aligned within partisanship, differences in content preferences between parties became more apparent.*

Of course, we cannot directly attribute polarization to entertainment viewing, nor can we directly attribute more distinct viewing patterns in Democratic and Republican DMAs to polarization. Our suspicion is that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two. And while aggregate-level data cannot easily demonstrate a causal link in either direction, our findings are as we would expect were such a relationship to exist. That this is the case with highly reliable viewership data is of some significance. We thus take our results as an essential starting point for work that explores the relationship between entertainment viewing and political polarization and/or partisan sorting, in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Taking a more critical look at the top 20 shows among Democrat and Republican DMAs also serves as a useful reminder that much of the entertainment programming that Americans are watching is similar, not different. In 2001, for instance, *Survivor* is the top program in all six DMAs; *Friends* and *Law & Order* make the list for every DMA as well. There are a good number of common top programs, and not just in 2001. Indeed, *Survivor* and *Friends* are the top two programs in every DMA in 2004; *American Idol* makes the list across all DMAs in 2004 and 2008; and *The Voice* and *Dancing with the Stars* are top shows everywhere in 2012; *Bull* and *NCIS* are especially prominent in 2016. And this is by no means an exhaustive list of the shows that have sizeable viewership in all the DMAs examined here.⁵

Difference across DMAs is more evident lower in the lists. Indeed, much of the variation driving the Figure 4 results occurs beyond the top 20 shows. Still, we see hints of the differences we might expect given the results in Figure 4 and in the Appendix tables. Focusing on the latter years for which we have data: *Modern Family* makes the top-20 only in Democratic DMAs; *Glee* appears only in San Francisco; the *Colbert Report* reaches the top 20 only in Miami. In contrast, *NCIS* and *CSI* are watched more in Republican DMAs. *Criminal Minds* makes the top 20 for all three Republican DMAs and none of the Democratic DMAs; *Madam Secretary* makes the top 20 for all Democratic DMAs and none of the Republican DMAs (though airs on CBS, the same network as *Criminal Minds*, *NCIS*, and *CSI*). There clearly *are* differences, and although they are relatively small as Figure 4 makes clear, these differences across all programs have seen a two-fold increase over the time period examined.

Discussion

Our analyses suggest an increase in the (modest) association between partisanship and viewing habits. At best, the partisanship of our six DMAs accounts for 20% of the variation in Nielsen ratings. It appears to still be the case that the reliance of much entertainment programming on advertiser funding leads it to try to appeal to as broad an audience as possible rather than partisan niches. And it is likely that entertainment viewing habits are not as much about partisanship as much as they are about other preferences.⁶ Moreover, our analysis does not adequately investigate the

⁵ A full list of top 20 shows across the six DMAs from 2001 – 2016 is available in Appendix Tables A1-5.

⁶ A significant limitation of our data is an inability to examine the degree to which show choice is more strongly predicted by other individual viewer characteristics – especially race, gender, sexuality, etc. We cannot tell with aggregate data whether partisanship has an impact above and beyond these factors, nor the scale of the impact compared to these

nuances of storytelling or the ideas expressed in series. Again, we view our findings as an important *starting point* for the use of other, likely more critical, methods to investigate the substantive differences in the entertainment accessed by audiences with different partisan identification.

That said, we do not want to minimize the shift in viewing habits illustrated above. Although it is difficult with observational data to directly tie partisanship and/or attitude change to specific stimuli, consider the lay theory offered by then vice-president Joe Biden, who opined on *Meet the Press* (May 6, 2012) that, “I think *Will & Grace* probably did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody’s ever done so far” on the topic of gay identity. Notably, this claim could be made of *Will & Grace*—a series unusual at its launch in 1998 for its depiction of two gay characters as primary protagonists – because it appeared at a time when gay characters were uncommon and audiences less polarized (note that *Will & Grace* appears in all six markets in table A1 and four of six in A2). Straight Americans who might not have known gay friends or co-workers came to know Will and Jack through stories that downplayed the perceived difference of gay identity. In 2019, it is likewise easy to imagine storylines about trans characters doing similar work for audiences who are unfamiliar with trans individuals. U.S. cultural attention to transgender identity has grown considerably in awareness in the last decade, both in terms of policy debates – so-called ‘bathroom bills’ – and prevalence of trans characters in television entertainment (Cavalcante, 2018). But given the polarization of entertainment audiences, the question is, who sees these characters? Who is likely to see the sophisticated depictions of trans identity displayed in recurring characters on *Shameless* (Showtime) or *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix), or primary characters in *Pose* (FX), *Sense8* (Netflix), or *Transparent* (Amazon)? Certainly not the breadth of viewers likely to have seen *Will & Grace*. Such cases illustrate how profoundly entertainment television has changed in its ability to construct a ‘cultural forum’ (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983) and of the need for theories about its cultural role that account for the continued pervasiveness of television viewing, but the fragmentation of that viewing, across much wider and diverse selections.

Our central objective has been to make the case for a broader consideration of under what conditions selective media consumption occurs, and its potential political implications. Republicans watching *CSI* and Democrats watching *Madam Secretary* may be simply a reflection of today’s political climate or could continue to reinforce the growing disparity in citizen’s outlook on the world. Either way, it is critical that research continues to explore these possibilities in order to understand the evolving role of mass media in an era of fragmentation.

important factors. However, given trends evidenced in partisan sorting, it is possible that partisanship can serve as a sort of ‘proxy’ for demographics. We believe this is an important and interesting topic for future work.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Top 20 Programs, 2001

Cincinnati	Jacksonville	Oklahoma City	Miami	Providence	San Francisco
Survivor	Survivor	Survivor	Survivor	Survivor	Survivor
Everybody Loves Raymond	Jag	Friends	Friends	Friends	Friends
Yes, Dear	Weakest Link	Practice	60 Minutes	Law&Order	Law&Order
Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	48 Hours	Who Wants To Be A Millionaire	Will And Grace	Frasier	Mole
Friends	Will And Grace	E.R.	Law&Order	Will And Grace	West Wing
Becker	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	Law&Order	Who Wants To Be A Millionaire	Everybody Loves Raymond	Will And Grace
48 Hours	Frasier	48 Hours	Temptation Island	Weakest Link	60 Minutes
Law&Order	Fear Factor	Will And Grace	Practice	Yes, Dear	Frasier
Who Wants To Be A Millionaire	Yes, Dear	Fear Factor	Everybody Loves Raymond	E.R.	The Lone Gunmen
Mole	Everybody Loves Raymond	Weakest Link	America's Most Wanted	West Wing	Weakest Link
E.R.	60 Minutes	Frasier	Becker	Scrubs	Who Wants To Be A Millionaire
Welcome To New York	Friends	Scrubs	Yes, Dear	Providence	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation
West Wing	Temptation Island	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	Yo Soy Betty, La Fea	Crossing Jordan	E.R.
Bette	Ellen	The Weakest Link	Scrubs	Becker	Scrubs
Will And Grace	Big Brother	60 Minutes	Frasier	The Weakest Link	The Weakest Link
60 Minutes	King Of Queens	Crossing Jordan	E.R.	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	Everybody Loves Raymond
Ellen	The Weakest Link	Diagnosis: Murder	Jag	The Weber Show	Fear Factor
King Of Queens	Amazing Race	Funniest Home Videos	Ellen	Ellen	Temptation Island
America's Funniest Home Videos	Law&Order	Dateline	Weakest Link	Just Shoot	48 Hours
Frasier	Big Apple	Just Shoot Me!	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	King Of Queens	Just Shoot Me!

Table A2. Top 20 Programs, 2004

Cincinnati	Jacksonville	Oklahoma City	Miami	Providence	San Francisco
Survivor	Survivor	Friends	Friends	Survivor	Friends
Friends	Friends	Survivor	Survivor	Friends	Survivor
Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	Frasier	Frasier	American Idol	Frasier	Frasier
Without A Trace	Jag	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	Frasier	Law&Order	American Idol
Frasier	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	Desperate Housewives	The Apprentice	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	Desperate Housewives
American Idol	American Idol	Dateline	60 Minutes	The Apprentice	60 Minutes
Everybody Loves Raymond	Law&Order	Without A Trace	Desperate Housewives	Everybody Loves Raymond	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation
Two & A Half Men	Without A Trace	Law&Order	My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiance	American Idol	The Apprentice
Desperate Housewives	The Apprentice	The Apprentice	The Swan	Will And Grace	Law&Order
Law&Order	Desperate Housewives	American Idol	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	60 Minutes	The Swan
The Apprentice	My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiance	Ncis	Scrubs	Seinfeld	Without A Trace
Becker	Cold Case	E.R.	Everybody Loves Raymond	Two & A Half Men	Lost
Ncis	Dateline	Lost	That '70s Show	Dateline	West Wing
Cold Case	The Swan	Average Joe	Will And Grace	E.R.	Amazing Race
Lost	60 Minutes	Cold Case	Dateline	Scrubs	Cracking Up
According To Jim	E.R.	Joey	Forever	West Wing	That '70s Show
Judging Amy	Last Comic Standing	Big Brother	Without A Trace	Without A Trace	Cold Case
60 Minutes	Will And Grace	Boston Legal	Two & A Half Men	Joey	Forever
E.R.	Ncis	Everybody Loves Raymond	Law&Order	Happy Family	My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiance
Listen Up	Crossing Jordan	Extreme Makeover: Home Edition	Seinfeld	Listen Up	Will And Grace

Table A3. Top 20 Programs, 2008

Cincinnati	Jacksonville	Oklahoma City	Miami	Providence	San Francisco
American Idol	House	Comanche Moon	House	American Idol	American Idol
Dancing With The Stars	American Idol	Mentalist	American Idol	House	House
House	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	Dancing With The Stars	Survivor	Dancing With The Stars
Gary Unmarried	Mentalist	Dancing With The Stars	20/20	Deal Or No Deal	60 Minutes
Mentalist	Jag	Ncis	60 Minutes	Amazing Race	Dance War: Bruno Vs. Carrie Ann
Survivor	Comanche Moon	House	Til Death	America's Got Talent	Survivor
Extreme Makeover: Home Edition	24 Hours	American Idol	The Moment Of Thruth	Mentalist	Mentalist
Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	60 Minutes	Eleventh Hour	Supernanny	Law&Order	Back To You
Two & A Half Men	Dancing With The Stars	Extreme Makeover: Home Edition	Cashmere Mafia	The Biggest Loser	20/20
Comanche Moon	Deal Or No Deal	48 Hours	Extreme Makeover: Home Edition	Without A Trace	Amazing Race
American Gladiator	Law&Order	20/20	New Amsterdam	1 Vs 100	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation
Rules Of Engagement	Ncis	Without A Trace	Smarter	Ncis	Bachelorette
Ncis	America's Got Talent	Eli Stone	Back To You	Back To You	Dancing With The Stars
Shark	Criminal Minds	Dance War: Bruno Vs. Carrie Ann	Dancing With The Stars	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	Cashmere Mafia
Criminal Minds	Amazing Race	Million Dollar Password	24 Hours	Extreme Makeover: Home Edition	Lost
60 Minutes	Simpsons	Rules Of Engagement	Lost	The Apprentice	Samantha
20/20	Eleventh Hour	Cashmere Mafia	Miss Guided	Two & A Half Men	Eleventh Hour
Eleventh Hour	Back To You	Shark	Dance War: Bruno Vs. Carrie Ann	Dancing With The Stars	So You Think You Can Dance
Mom	Shark	Survivor	Mentalist	Million Dollar Password	Ncis
Desperate Housewives	Survivor	Criminal Minds	Eli Stone	Shark	Comanche Moon

Table A4. Top 20 Programs, 2012

Cincinnati	Jacksonville	Oklahoma City	Miami	Providence	San Francisco
60 Minutes	The Voice	The Voice	The Voice	The Voice	American Idol
The Voice	60 Minutes	Go On	American Idol	60 Minutes	60 Minutes
Dancing With The Stars	Hatfields & Mccoys	60 Minutes	Dancing With The Stars	American Idol	Dancing With The Stars
2 Broke Girls	American Idol	Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	60 Minutes	Off Their Rockers	20/20
Hatfields & Mccoys	Ncis	Vegas	Sal Y Pimienta	Ncis	Bachelor
Survivor	Simpsons	Ncis:La	AQUÍ Y AHORA	Big Bang Theory	Modern Family
Big Bang Theory	Dancing With The Stars	Mentalist	X Factor	Mentalist	X Factor
Mentalist	Mentalist	Undercover Boss	20/20	Rob	Glee
Unforgettable	Ncis:La	Big Bang Theory	Colbert Report	Dancing With The Stars	Elementary
American Idol	Survivor	Elementary	Big Bang Theory	America's Got Talent	The Voice
Ncis	Criminal Minds	Take It All	Modern Family	Ncis:La	Mentalist
Vegas	America's Got Talent	Criminal Minds	Amor Bravio	2 Broke Girls	Off Their Rockers
Person Of Interest	Person Of Interest	Dancing With The Stars	2 Broke Girls	House	Person Of Interest
Ncis:La	Unforgettable	Good Wife	Wizards Of Waverly Place	The New Normal	Castle
Amazing Race	Walking Dead	Off Their Rockers	Ncis	Two & A Half Men	Ncis
Criminal Minds	Vegas	Ncis	The Neighbors	Unforgettable	Survivor
Two & A Half Men	Big Bang Theory	Amazing Race	Two & A Half Men	Go On	America's Got Talent
Csi: Crime Scene Investigation	Big Brother	American Idol	Rob	Person Of Interest	Bachelorette
Rob	Blue Bloods	Person Of Interest	Person Of Interest	Wizards Of Waverly Place	Alcatraz
Elementary	Amazing Race	Survivor	Criminal Minds	X Factor	Amazing Race

Table A5. Top 20 Programs, 2016

Cincinnati	Jacksonville	Oklahoma City	Miami	Providence	San Francisco
Bull	Ncis	Little Big Shots	The Voice	Commander In Chief	60 Minutes
Big Bang Theory	Bull	X-Files	Celia	Ncis	Bull
Ncis	Big Bang Theory	60 Minutes	Empire	Bull	Dancing With The Stars
60 Minutes	Commander In Chief	Bull	60 Minutes	The Voice	Downton Abbey
Hawaii Five-0	60 Minutes	To Tell The Truth	Little Big Shots	60 Minutes	Ncis
Mike & Molly	The Voice	Elementary	X-Files	X-Files	X-Files
Ncis:No	Ncis:No	Hawaii Five-0	Commander In Chief	America's Got Talent	Madam Secretary
Little Big Shots	Little Big Shots	America's Got Talent	Dancing With The Stars	Little Big Shots	Good Wife
Dancing With The Stars	X-Files	Ncis	El Gordo Y La Flaca	Undercover Boss	Bachelor
Great Indoors	America's Got Talent	The Voice	Senor Cielos	Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory
Kevin Can Wait	Empire	Csi: Cyber	Sal Y Pimienta	Dancing With The Stars	Jimmy Kimmel Live
Odd Couple	Hawaii Five-0	Ncis:No	AQUÍ Y AHORA	Macgyver	American Idol
America's Got Talent	Macgyver	Big Bang Theory	America's Got Talent	Kevin Can Wait	Bachelorette
Mom	Undercover Boss	Blue Bloods	Undercover Boss	This Is Us	Little Big Shots
The Voice	American Idol	Ncis:La	Bull	Great Indoors	The Voice
Commander In Chief	Simpsons	Better Late Than Never	Jimmy Kimmel Live	Blue Bloods	Undercover Boss
Game Of Silence	Ncis:La	Criminal Minds	Good Wife	Madam Secretary	Late Late Show With James Corden
Macgyver	Odd Couple	Dancing With The Stars	American Idol	Walking Dead	Ncis:No
Ncis:La	Blue Bloods	Bachelor	Madam Secretary	Odd Couple	To Tell The Truth
American Idol	Mike & Molly	Nashville	Ncis	American Idol	America's Got Talent