Measuring Group Alignment in Public Opinion

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Abstract

Issue polling typically reports group opinion one item at a time. However, democratic governance demands that groups act on agendas and form coalitions across multiple issues simultaneously. This paper introduces a nonparametric measurement framework for *group alignment*: the strength of a particular group's cumulative support across a basket of policy proposals. The framework yields several complementary metrics centered around cumulative alignment, each capturing a distinct facet of within-group opinion cohesion. Applying the framework to the Cooperative Election Study (2008-2024), I find that cross-issue alignment is remarkably low even in an era of sharp partisan sorting: while individual policy items command majority coalitions of 60–90% support among co-partisans, the share of cumulative majorities across every item in the core battery is nearly zero. Democrats exhibit modestly higher alignment than Republican, and Republicans experienced a decline in alignment during the first Trump presidency. Across racial, generational, and educational groups we similarly identify more- and less-aligned groups which are robust to alternative issue baskets and nonresponse assumptions. The framework offers researchers a transparent and interpretable method for summarizing intra-group opinion structure, tracking cohesion over time, and identifying the fault lines along which political coalitions may fracture.

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1 Introduction

Whether political factions are aligned – that is, whether their members agree with the group majority across an array of policy issues – is a central question of democratic politics. Unified factions can credibly claim mandates, sustain legislative coalitions, and signal coherent platforms to voters. As lawmaking in the United States increasingly shifts away from the "Schoolhouse Rock" model of stand-alone bill pasage and towards omnibus bills, minibuses, reconciliation packages, democratic representation depends on cumulative issue alignment, not just issue alignment on average (Hanson 2015; Kroeger et al. 2024; Gluck 2014).

Yet issue polling typically analyzes and reports group views one issue at a time and individual majorities are not policy coalitions. A 2022 Economist/YouGov poll found that 66% of Americans supported Medicare drug-price negotiation, while 53% supported cutting greenhouse-gas emissions. Although both policy proposals enjoy slim majorities, it is not reported how many report both simultaneously, which is relevant since both of these provisions were bundled into the single Inflation Reduction Act (YouGov 2022). Similarly, polls ahead of the 2022 midterm elections showed 80% of Americans favored enhanced background checks for gun buyers under 21 *and* 79% believed mental deserved greater legislative attention, both core elements of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (The Economist/YouGov 2022; American Psychiatric Association and Morning Consult 2022). Yet, a Pew study found that approval of the full BSCA package was lower, at 64% (Pew Research Center 2022). Thus, even when two provisions are popular on their own, the coalition supporting both together may be smaller—and sometimes may not be a majority at all.

This paper addresses the shortcoming of this item-by-item measurement approach in public opinion research, by introducing a set of simple concepts and measurement tools around group alignment. The share of group members who simultaneously hold all majority positions – who are perfectly *aligned* with the group – is typically far smaller than issue-level margins would suggest. The underlying logic is straightforward: the probability of holding two majority positions jointly is necessarily no greater than the probability of holding either one alone, and this gap compounds with each additional issue. Built around this simple feature of probability (also called the conjunction fallacy), I introduce a non-parametric measurement framework based around *alignment* that quantifies how well members of a group jointly agree across a given set of policy issues (*issue basket*). The framework produces several complementary measures that each capture a different facet of within-group alignment, allowing researchers to produce richer statements about the cohesion of public opinion groups.

Applying this framework to the Cooperative Election Study (CES, 2006–2024) reveals that aggregate cross-issue alignment is substantially lower than issue-level consensus would imply. In the 2024 CES, for example, while individual policy items in the core battery each command substantial majority support among partisan groups, the share of partisans who agree with their party's majority position on every item is far smaller. These patterns hold not only for partisan groups but also for racial, generational, and gender categories, and they are robust to alternative issue baskets and missing-data assumptions.

More broadly, this framework offers an alternative method for aggregating public opinion to scaling models which require more structural assumptions (Poole and Rosenthal 1997, 2007). Our key assumption is that the choice of issue basket implicitly defines the relevant policy space. Though this is a type of dimensionality assumption, it is transparent, directly interpretable, and easily subject to sensitivity analyses. This simplicity comes with a corresponding advantage in interpretability: alignment is directly stated in terms of policy agreement – what share of a group's members actually hold the positions that define that group – rather than positions on an opaque latent scale. At the same time, the framework allows for richer statements about the structure of public opinion than are available from issue-level margins alone. It can characterize not just how popular individual positions are, but how cohesive a group's full platform is, how that cohesion varies across issue domains, and how it evolves over time.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literatures on belief constraint, partisan sorting, and opinion aggregation. Section 3 introduces the alignment measurement framework and defines the key quantities of interest. Section 4 presents the empirical results from the CES. Section 5 discusses implications for representation, coalition stability, and the study of public opinion. Full replication data as well as an accompanying R software package is available at `soubhikbarari.com/survalign`.

2 Background

The question of whether citizens hold coherent political beliefs – and how that coherence is best measured – has been central to the study of public opinion.

Converse (1964) demonstrated that mass belief systems exhibit far less internal consistency – what he termed "constraint" – than elite belief systems. Building on Campbell et al. (1960)'s finding that partisan identification serves as the primary

organizing heuristic for political attitudes, Converse showed that most citizens hold issue positions that are only loosely connected to one another and unstable over time, setting the terms of debate for decades of research on opinion structure. Social choice theory describes the consequences of this instability at the elite level: the McKelvey-Schofield chaos theorem (McKelvey 1976) shows that when preferences are defined over a multidimensional policy space, majority rule generically fails to produce a stable social choice.

In the past several decades, a large body of work has documented the increasing polarization and sorting of the American electorate, whereby partisanship, ideology, social identities, and issue positions have become more tightly aligned (Levendusky 2009; Mason 2018; Huddy et al. 2015). The result is the appearance of two ideologically unified camps – an impression reinforced by strong affective partisanship and the stacking of social identities along partisan lines – that the present paper subjects to empirical scrutiny.

However, the picture is more complicated than the sorting narrative implies. Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) show that while between-party polarization has increased, within-party constraint remains surprisingly low. Using pairwise correlations between issue positions, they find only modest evidence of issue alignment among co-partisans. To illustrate the thinness of overlap, they note that in 2004, while 40% of ANES respondents identified as Republicans, only 12% were simultaneously Republican, conservative, and opposed to abortion – precisely the pattern that cross-issue group alignment is designed to quantify. Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) make the case that polarization is real and not a myth, but their evidence is strongest at the level of elite sorting and ideological self-identification; within-party agreement on specific issue positions is less directly addressed. Hare and Poole (2014) similarly document elite-level polarization using NOMINATE scores but acknowledge that mass-level constraint remains more limited, noting a gap between the ideological coherence of congressional parties and the policy consistency of their voters.

The degree of within-group cohesion may also be asymmetric across parties. Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) argue that Republicans are more unified by ideological principle while Democrats are organized around the interests of diverse social groups, which implies different alignment profiles: Republicans may exhibit higher alignment on ideological issues while Democrats may show cohesion only within subdomains. Beyond partisanship, claims of internal cohesion are also common for demographic groups – racial groups via the concept of "linked fate" (Dawson 1994), generational cohorts via theories of generational consciousness (Twenge 2023; Gelman and Shor

2017), and gender groups via the gender gap in political attitudes and voting (Inglehart and Norris 2000; Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2004; Conover 1988). The 2024 U.S. election, in which significant numbers of Black and Latino voters departed from the Democratic coalition (Catalist 2025; Pew Research Center 2025), is a vivid reminder that within-group cohesion is less stable than commonly assumed.

2.1 Opinion Aggregation

A related literature has drawn attention to the perils of aggregating multidimensional preferences into summary measures, particularly for moderate ideologues. Broockman (2016) argues that characterizing voters as "moderates" based on their average ideological placement is misleading: a voter who holds a mix of liberal and conservative positions will appear centrist on a unidimensional scale even though they may agree with neither party's platform on most issues. The problem is not the voters but the summary statistic: averaging obscures the joint distribution of preferences. Fowler et al. (2023) interrogate political moderates, showing that the label encompasses voters with substantively distinct preference profiles – some genuinely centrist, others holding cross-cutting views – and that the political implications of these profiles differ considerably. Together, these accounts suggest that multidimensional issue spaces resist compression into unidimensional summaries, a point that motivates the present paper's focus on the full joint distribution of opinions within groups.

A simple theoretical analog to this issue – that cross-issue alignment falls short of what issue-level margins imply – is the conjunction fallacy (Tversky and Kahneman 1983). The conjunction fallacy is the well-established finding that people judge the probability of a conjunction of events, $P(A \cap B)$, to be greater than the probability of its less probable constituent, $P(B)$, when the conjunction is more "representative" of available evidence. In the present context, the two events are a group member holding the majority position on issue A and on issue B. Even if $P(A) = 0.80$ and $P(B) = 0.75$, the joint probability $P(A \cap B)$ is at most $\min(P(A), P(B)) = 0.75$ and, under independence, would be $0.80 \times 0.75 = 0.60$.

Supposing there is a basket of K major political issues, the expected share of *perfectly aligned* group members – that is, those who hold the majority position on every issue – under independence declines as $\prod_{k=1}^{K} p_k$, which shrinks rapidly even when each p_k is large. The gap between issue-level margins and cross-issue alignment arises because observers implicitly treat high $P(A)$ and high $P(B)$ as evidence for high $P(A \cap B)$ – precisely the error the conjunction fallacy describes.

The contribution of the present study is to move beyond individual issue agreement

and pairwise correlations to examine the *joint distribution* of opinions at the individual level – that is, whether members of a group simultaneously agree across all issues in a salient basket. This approach is distinct from Baldassarri and Gelman (2008)'s pairwise correlation method, which captures the bivariate relationship between pairs of issues but does not directly quantify how many group members agree on the full set of positions. It is also distinct from latent-dimension approaches such as NOMINATE (Poole and Rosenthal 1997), which summarize preferences on estimated ideological dimensions but make parametric assumptions about the structure of opinion and do not anchor results to a group's actual majority positions. The alignment framework introduced here is non-parametric, directly interpretable in terms of policy agreement, and requires no assumptions about dimensionality beyond the choice of issue basket. Moreover, it can be applied not only to partisan groups but to any groups (e.g., racial, gender, generational), and can be applied to both survey cross-sections and time series.

3 Methodology

This section introduces the alignment measurement framework. The goal is to define a set of quantities that capture how well a group's members agree across a basket of policy issues, without relying on latent scaling models or assumptions about the dimensionality of opinion. I begin by defining the basic concepts – groups, issue baskets, and majority positions – then introduce the key metrics and discuss sensitivity to analytic choices.

3.1 Basics

Let g denote a group of N_g survey respondents, defined by a partition of the sample (e.g., by party identification, race, or generation). Let K denote the number of binary policy items in the issue basket, indexed by $k = 1, \ldots, K$. Each respondent $i \in g$ provides a response $r_{ik} \in \{0, 1, \text{NA}\}$ on each item. Items with non-binary responses are binarized prior to analysis (e.g., by coding the modal response category as 1 and all others as 0).

For each group g and item k, the **majority position** m_{gk} is the response category held by the largest (weighted) share of respondents in g. The **issue majority** p_{gk} is the share of respondents in g who hold this majority position for issue k:

$$p_{gk} = \frac{\sum_{i \in g} w_i \cdot \mathbf{1}[r_{ik} = m_{gk}]}{\sum_{i \in g} w_i \cdot \mathbf{1}[r_{ik} \neq \text{NA}]}$$

where w_i is the survey weight for respondent i. Ties in the modal response are broken alphabetically to ensure determinism.[1]

We can order the K issues within group g by their **individual issue majority** in decreasing order:

$$p_{g(1)} \geq p_{g(2)} \geq \cdots \geq p_{g(K)}$$

where $p_{g(k)}$ is the individual issue majority for the issue ranked k-th. The **cumulative issue majority** up to rank k is the proportion of group members who simultaneously hold the group's majority position on all issues ranked 1 through k:

$$\mathcal{P}_{g(k)} = \frac{\sum_{i \in g} w_i \cdot \prod_{j=1}^{k} \mathbf{1}[r_{i,(j)} = m_{g(j)}]}{\sum_{i \in g} w_i \cdot \prod_{j=1}^{k} \mathbf{1}[r_{i,(j)} \neq \text{NA}]}$$

By construction, $\mathcal{P}_{g(k)} \leq p_{g(k)}$ for all k, and $\mathcal{P}_{g(k)} \leq \mathcal{P}_{g(k-1)}$ meaning that adding more issues to the conjunction can only reduce or maintain the share of jointly aligned members. The full sequence $\mathcal{P}_{g(1)}, \ldots, \mathcal{P}_{g(K)}$ traces how quickly aggregate majorities erode as we stack additional issues. The distinction between $p_{g(k)}$ and $\mathcal{P}_{g(k)}$ is the empirical counterpart to the conjunction fallacy: the former captures how much support any single issue commands, while the latter captures how much of that support survives when all prior issues are simultaneously required.

For each respondent $i \in g$, their **individual alignment** a_i is the proportion of items on which they agree with their group's majority position:

$$a_i = \frac{\sum_{k=1}^{K} \mathbf{1}[r_{ik} = m_{gk}]}{\sum_{k=1}^{K} \mathbf{1}[r_{ik} \neq \text{NA}]}$$

A score of $a_i = 1$ indicates perfect agreement with all group majority positions while $a_i = 0.5$ indicates agreement on exactly half.

The distribution of individual alignment scores within a group is summarized by four scalar metrics and one functional (curve) metric. Each captures a different facet of group cohesion.

[1] For simplicity, we assume that issues have clear majorities and can be reduced to binary positions (pro or con). In practice, the framework can be extended to handle pluralities with ordinal issues (levels of support) or nominal issues (specific policy preferences).

3.2 Group Alignment Measures

The **alignment mean** is the (weighted) average individual alignment across all respondents in a group:

$$\bar{a}_g = \frac{1}{N_g} \sum_{i \in g} w_i \cdot a_i$$

where the weights w_i are normalized to sum to N_g within the group. An alignment mean of 0.80 indicates that the average group member agrees with the majority position on 80% of items. This metric is easy to interpret but, like any mean, can obscure distributional features: a group with most members near 0.70 and a group split between 0.50 and 1.00 could have the same alignment mean.

Uncertainty for $\bar{a}_g$ is quantified via a design-weighted standard error that accounts for the variability in survey weights:

$$\widehat{\mathrm{SE}}(\bar{a}_g) = \frac{\hat{\sigma}_w}{\sqrt{n_{\text{eff}}}} = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i \in g} w_i (a_i - \bar{a}_g)^2}{n_{\text{eff}} \sum_{i \in g} w_i}}$$

where $\hat{\sigma}_w$ is the weighted standard deviation of individual alignment scores, and $n_{\text{eff}} = \dfrac{(\sum_{i \in g} w_i)^2}{\sum_{i \in g} w_i^2}$ is the Kish effective sample size (Kish 1965). The Kish correction scales the sample size downward to account for the design effect introduced by unequal weighting: when weights are highly variable, a few respondents dominate the estimate, and $n_{\text{eff}} \ll N_g$; when weights are uniform, $n_{\text{eff}} = N_g$ and the formula reduces to the standard unweighted SE. Approximate 95% confidence intervals are constructed as $\bar{a}_g \pm 2\,\widehat{\mathrm{SE}}(\bar{a}_g)$.

Cumulative weak alignment is the share of group members whose individual alignment is at least 0.50:

$$\alpha_g = \frac{1}{N_g} \sum_{i \in g} w_i \cdot \mathbf{1}[a_i \geq 0.5]$$

This measure is interpreted as a more permissive headcount of aligned members within a group. A group where only 40% of members agree with the majority on at least half of issues is fractured, even if the alignment mean appears moderate.

Cumulative perfect alignment is the share of group members who agree with the group's majority on every item in the basket:

$$A_g = \frac{1}{N_g} \sum_{i \in g} w_i \cdot \mathbf{1}[a_i = 1]$$

This is the strictest measure of alignment. Even in highly sorted groups, A_g tends to be small, because the joint probability of holding all majority positions declines multiplicatively with the number of items. Under independence of issue positions within the group, the expected perfect alignment is $A_g^{\text{expected}} = \prod_{k=1}^{K} p_{gk}$. This mechanical dependence on basket size means that A_g is most useful for comparisons across groups measured on the *same* basket, or for tracking the same group over time.

Cumulative issue alignment is the number (or share) of items on which the majority position is held by more than 50% of the group. Unlike the previous metrics, which summarize the distribution of respondents, this metric summarizes the issue basket itself, stating how many issues constitute a genuine group majority. A group for which all K items have clear majorities has a coherent agenda while a group for which many items are contested at near-50% margins does not, even if the group's alignment mean is moderate.

Finally, the **alignment curve** provides the most complete picture of group cohesion. For each threshold $t \in [0, 1]$, it plots the share of group members whose alignment score is at or above t:

$$C_g(t) = \frac{1}{N_g} \sum_{i \in g} w_i \cdot \mathbf{1}[a_i \geq t]$$

The curve is a complementary cumulative distribution function (CCDF) of individual alignments. A cohesive group's curve stays high across thresholds before declining; a fragmented group's curve drops steeply near the left. The scalar metrics above are readable as special points on this curve: $\alpha_g = C_g(0.5)$ meaning that the y-intercept at $t = 0.5$ yields the cumulative weak alignment; $A_g = C_g(1)$ meaning that the y-value at $t = 1$ gives cumualtive perfect alignment; and $\bar{a}_g = \int_0^1 C_g(t)\, dt$ meaning alignment mean corresponds to the area under the alignment curve. Table 1 summarizes all metrics introduced in this section.

3.3 Analytic Choices

The alignment framework involves two analytic choices that can substantively affect results: the treatment of nonresponse and the selection of the issue basket. Both should be specified transparently and subjected to sensitivity analysis.

Treatment of Nonresponse. Respondents frequently skip individual survey items, and the treatment of these non-responses affects alignment scores. The framework supports two approaches. Under the default treatment (exclude), missing items are dropped from the denominator, so a respondent who answers 4 of 6 items is scored on those 4. This is appropriate when non-response is plausibly missing at random (e.g., due to survey fatigue). Under the conservative treatment (unaligned), every missing response is counted as disagreement with the group majority. This is appropriate when non-response may signal dissent or disengagement. The conservative treatment uniformly lowers all alignment metrics. Main results should be reported under both assumptions to assess sensitivity.

Choice of Issue Basket. A basket of items with large individual issue majorities will mechanically produce higher alignment than one that includes more individually contested issues. When comparing alignment across time, the researcher must also decide whether to hold the basket fixed (to isolate genuine opinion change) or to allow it to vary with each survey wave (to capture alignment on the most salient issues of the day). There is no single correct basket; the appropriate choice depends on the research question. In the analyses that follow, the primary basket consists of all consistently available policy items within each survey, with domain-specific baskets (e.g., immigration, spending) examined as robustness checks. The basket is pre-specified before examining results.

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Table 1: **Summary of Group Alignment Metrics.** All metrics are defined for a group g of N_g respondents across K policy items, with survey weights w_i. Issues are indexed $k = 1, \ldots, K$ and ordered $k = (1), \ldots, (K)$ by decreasing issue majority $p_{g(k)}$ where relevant.

Name	**Interpretation**	**Usage Notes**
Individual Alignment (a_i)	Share of answered items on which respondent i agrees with the group majority.	• *Exclude* nonresponse treatment: omits NAs from denominator • *Unaligned* nonresponse treatment: counts each NA as disagreement
Individual Issue Majority ($p_{g(k)}$)	Share of group g holding majority position on k-th issue ranked by support.	• Inherits nonresponse treatment from a_i
Cumulative Issue Majority ($\mathcal{P}_{g(k)}$)	Share of group g holding majority positions on top k issues simultaneously.	• Mechanically decreases with K ⇝ comparisons between different-sized issue baskets not possible • Inherits nonresponse treatment from a_i
Alignment Mean ($\bar{a}_g$)	Average share of majority positions held by a group member.	• Mean of a_i • Normalized by number of issues ⇝ comparisons between different-sized issue baskets possible • Inherits nonresponse treatment from a_i but less sensitive to assumption
Cumulative Weak Alignment (α_g)	Share of members aligned with group majority on a majority of issues.	• Equals $C_g(0.5)$ on the alignment curve • Inherits nonresponse treatment from a_i
Cumulative Perfect Alignment (A_g)	Share of members aligned with group majority on all issues.	• Mechanically decreases with K ⇝ comparisons between different-sized issue baskets not possible • Inherits nonresponse treatment from a_i
Cumulative Issue Alignment (κ_g)	Count (or share) of items with group majorities ($p_{g(k)}$ >50%).	• Comparisons between different-sized issue baskets not possible unless normalized (κ_g/K) • Less sensitive to nonresponse assumption than respondent-level metrics
Alignment Curve ($C_g(t)$)	CCDF of individual alignments	• All group-level metrics are special points on this curve • Inherits nonresponse treatment from a_i

Notes: All metrics treat "majority" as simple majority (more than half of respondents or issues). The terms "aligns with" and "agrees with" are used interchangeably. All metrics incorporate survey weights w_i and uniform weights are assumed when none are provided. Survey items are assumed to be binary or binarizable to a majority (pro/con) position. Ties in the modal response category are broken alphabetically for determinism. The choice of issue basket (K items) implicitly defines the relevant issue space. Comparisons across groups analyzed on different baskets should be made with caution.

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4 Empirical Findings

This section applies the alignment framework to the Cooperative Election Study (CES), which provides large cross-sectional samples (typically 50,000–60,000 respondents) fielded annually around U.S. elections since 2006, with a rich battery of policy preference items covering immigration, abortion, gun control, environmental policy, military spending, and trade. I examine alignment within partisan, racial, generational, and gender groups, across multiple issue baskets, and over time. The primary grouping variable is party identification (Democrat, Republican, Independent/Other) and selected demographic groups are examined as extensions.

4.1 Issue Baskets in the CES

The core CES issue basket consists of all policy preference items covering immigration, abortion, environmental regulation, gun control, military spending, and trade (Dagonel 2021). In the 2024 wave, these items span a wide range of issue-level support within each partisan group: most individual items command majority support of 60–90% among co-partisans, reinforcing the appearance of broad within-party agreement and distance between the two parties.

4.2 Partisan Alignment in 2024

Aggregate alignment of partisans tells a different story. Table 1 reports the alignment mean, cumulative weak alignment, and cumulative perfect alignment for each partisan group on the full core battery.

Table 2: **Partisan Alignment in 2024 on Core Policy Issues**. Percents rounded to 2 digits. Alignment measured across 17 policy position questions.

	Democrat	Republican	Independent/Other
# Respondents	22,982	18,663	15,913
Alignment Mean	79%	67%	74%
Cumulative Weak Alignment	97%	88%	93%
Cumulative Perfect Alignment	5%	0%	3%
Cumulative Issue Alignment (N)	8	4	5
Cumulative Issue Alignment (%)	47%	24%	29%

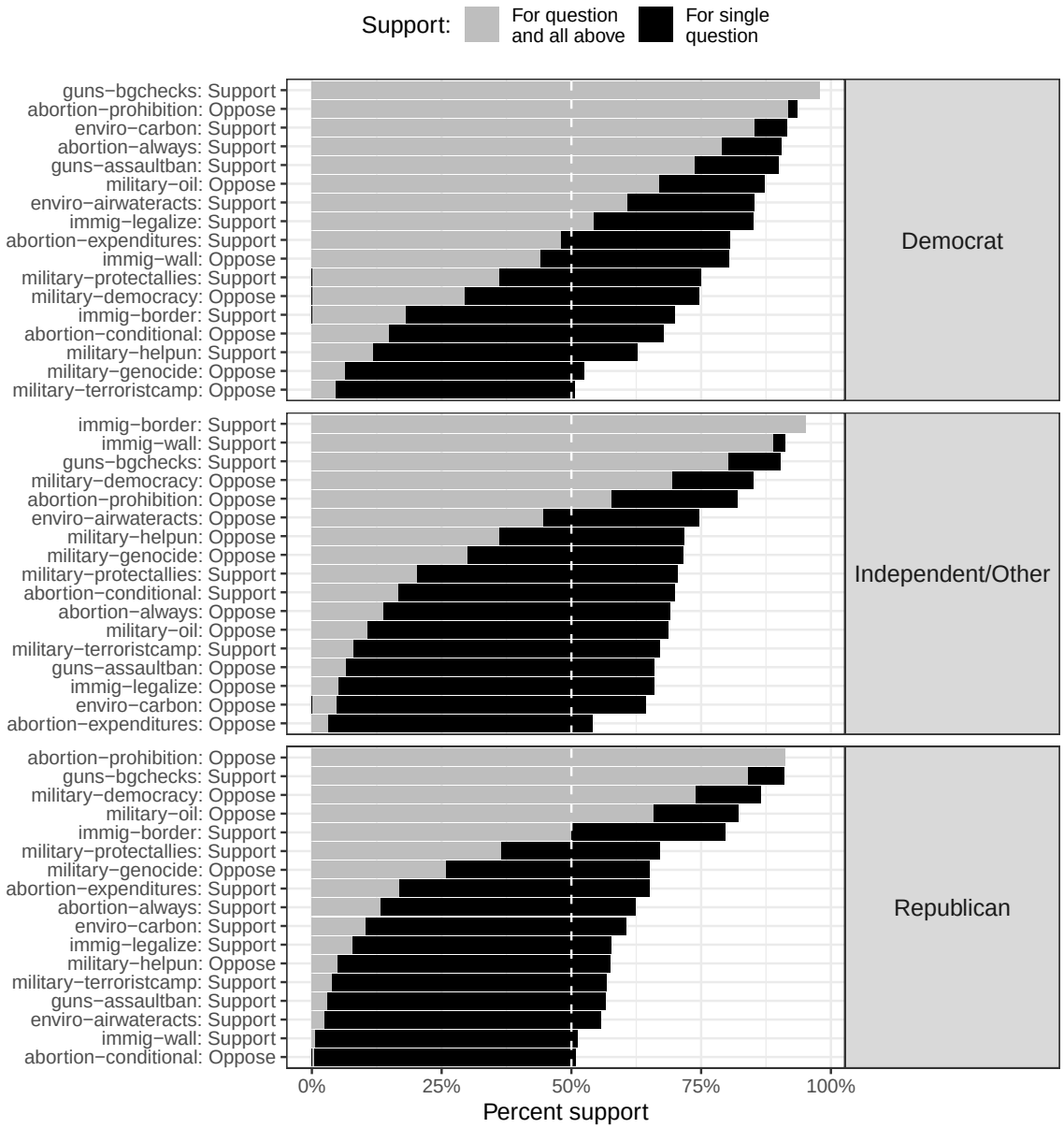

Figure 1: **Cumulative Issue Majority vs. Individual Issue Majority for Core Policy Items.** For each partisan group (panel), items are ordered top-to-bottom by decreasing individual issue majority. The dark bar shows the individual issue majority $p_{g(k)}$ for that item; the light bar shows the cumulative issue majority $\mathcal{P}_{g(k)}$ – the proportion of group members who support the majority position on that item and all higher-ranked items simultaneously. The vertical dashed line marks the 50% threshold.

The alignment mean – the average share of majority positions held by a group member – is substantially higher than cumulative perfect alignment in all groups, reflecting the fact that most group members agree with the majority on *most* issues but depart on at least one. Republicans exhibit higher alignment than Democrats on the core battery, consistent with Grossmann and Hopkins (2016)'s characterization of Republicans as more ideologically unified. Independents, as expected, exhibit the lowest alignment, reflecting the heterogeneity of a residual category that combines moderates, cross-pressured voters, and the disengaged.

Figure 1 presents the alignment curves for each partisan group. The curves decline steeply as the agreement threshold increases: a large share of each group agrees with the majority on at least half of the issues, but the share who agree on *all* issues is far smaller. The gap between the left side of the curve (where most members qualify) and the right side (where few do) is the visual signature of the phenomenon this paper documents.

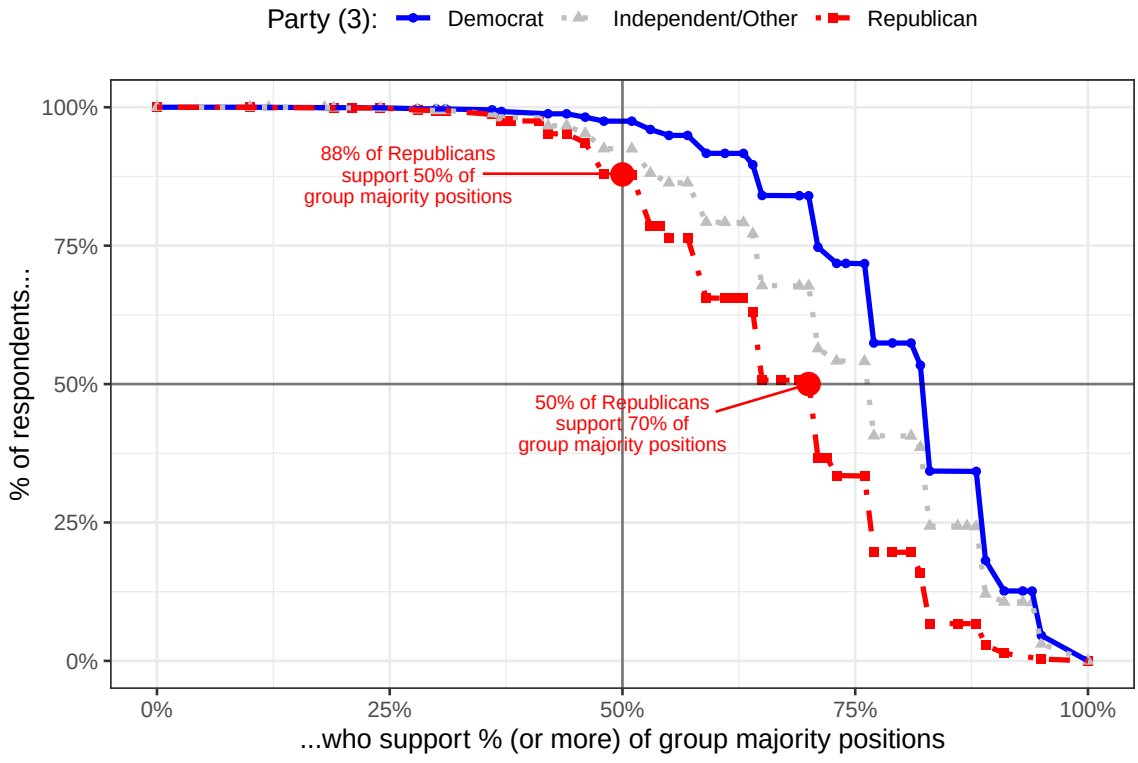

Figure 2: **Alignment Curves for Partisans on Core Policy Issues.** Each curve plots the share of group members (y-axis) whose individual alignment score meets or exceeds a given threshold (x-axis). The vertical dashed line marks the majority threshold (50%); the horizontal dashed line marks the 50% respondent share.

4.3 Temporal Trends in Partisan Alignment (2006–2024)

To examine whether within-party alignment has increased alongside the well-documented rise in partisan sorting, I apply the alignment framework to each CES wave from 2006 to 2024, using the set of core policy items available in each wave.

Figure 2 plots the alignment mean over time for each partisan group, with shaded bands showing $\pm 2\,\widehat{\mathrm{SE}}(\bar{a}_g)$ as defined in the previous section. The bands are narrow throughout, confirming that estimates are precise given the large CES sample sizes. Despite the substantial increase in issue-level sorting documented in the literature – with larger majorities of Democrats and Republicans holding the "party line" position on individual issues – the alignment mean has shown a more modest trajectory. This suggests that while partisans have become more likely to hold the party-line position on any *given* issue, the share who hold the party-line position on *all* issues has not kept pace.

Figure 3 shows cumulative weak alignment over time. This metric, which captures the share of group members agreeing with the majority on at least half of the issues, reveals a pattern broadly consistent with sorting: weak alignment has increased modestly for both Democrats and Republicans. But even in the most recent waves, a non-trivial share of partisans fails to meet even this lenient threshold.

5 Discussion

The central finding of this paper is that group support on individual policy issues does not translate into aggregate alignment across a basket of issues. This gap between issue-level and aggregate support is large, persistent across groups and over time, and robust to a range of analytic choices. The result adds nuance to a growing awareness tha that politically sorted groups are not internally unified in their policy preferences.

The partisan comparison deserves closer inspection. That Democratic alignment on the core CES battery meets or exceeds Republican alignment may seem surprising in light of Grossmann and Hopkins (2016)'s influential account of asymmetric politics, which characterizes Republicans as organized around ideological principles and Democrats around the diverse interests of coalition groups — a structure that would predict stronger policy cohesion among Republicans. The pattern documented here suggests, however, that on the specific policy domains captured by the CES battery — abortion, immigration, environmental regulation, gun control, military spending, and trade — Democratic majorities are not merely large but strikingly consistent across the coalition. Republicans, meanwhile, show a notable decline in alignment

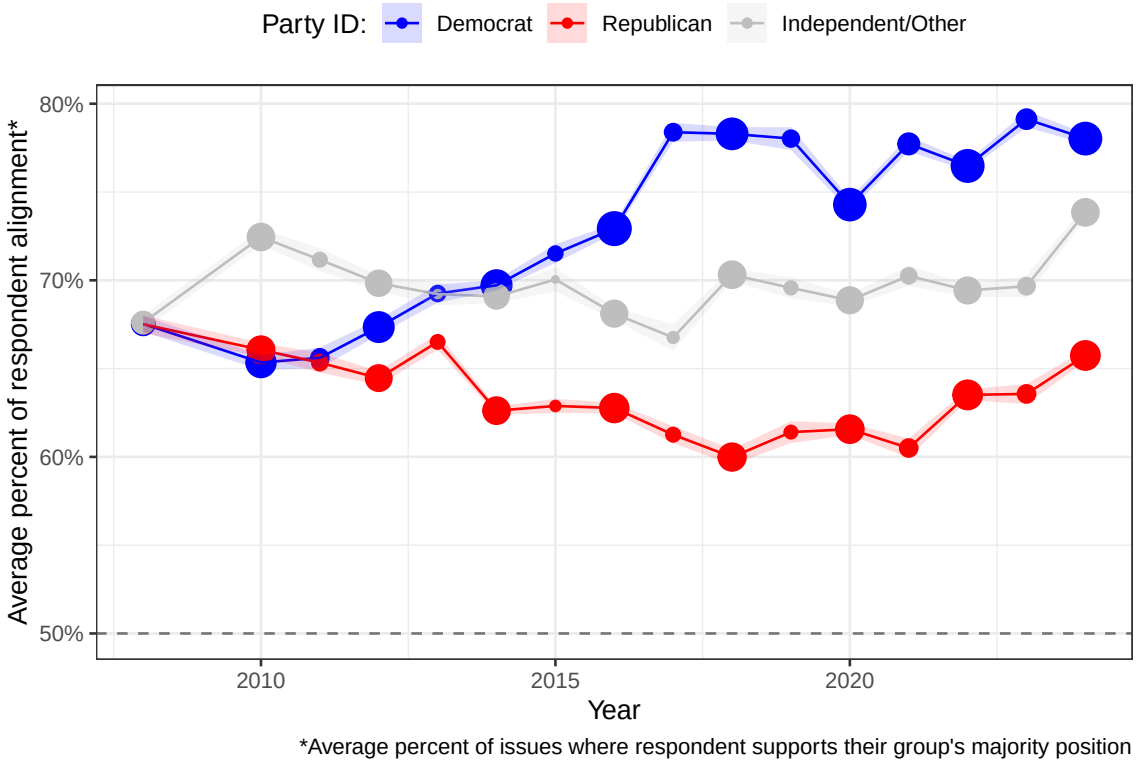

Figure 3: **Partisan Alignment Mean Over Time, CES 2006–2024.** Each point plots the weighted alignment mean $\bar{a}_g$ for a partisan group in a given CES wave; point size reflects group sample size. Shaded bands show $\pm 2\,\widehat{\mathrm{SE}}(\bar{a}_g)$, where $\widehat{\mathrm{SE}}$ uses the Kish effective sample size to correct for unequal survey weights (see Section 2). The dashed horizontal line marks 50%. The core policy battery includes abortion, immigration, environment, guns, military spending, and trade items available in each wave.

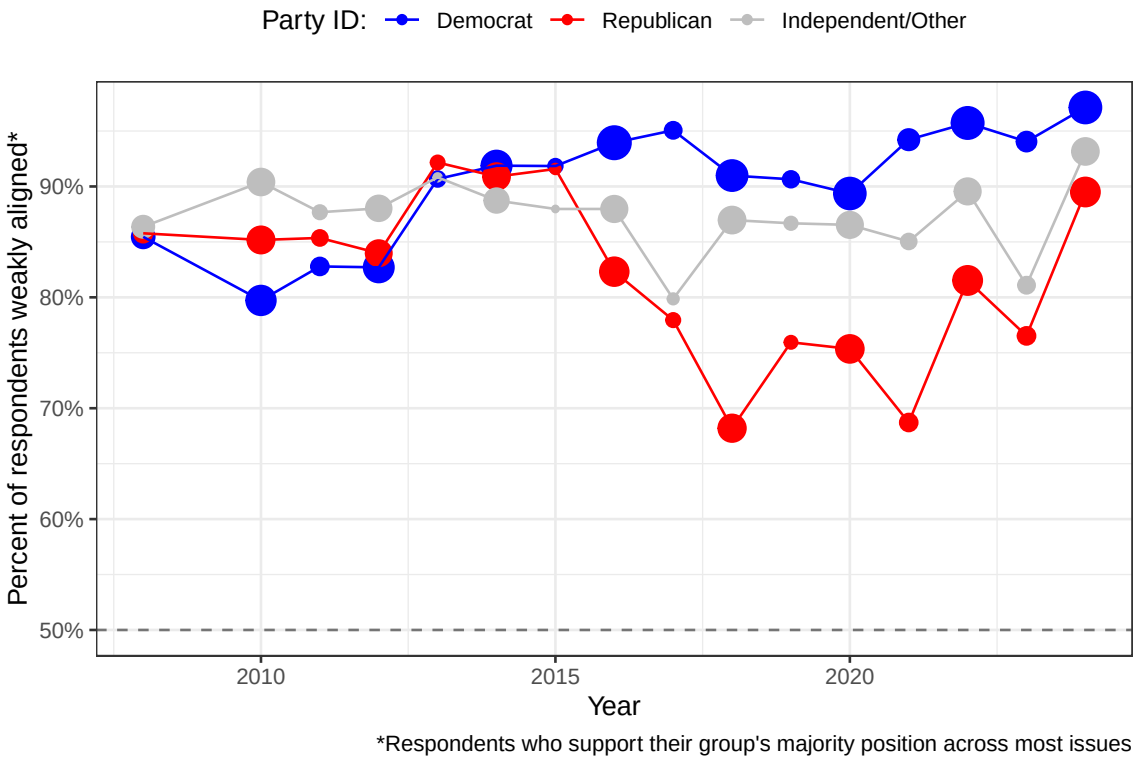

Figure 4: **Partisan Cumulative Weak Alignment Over Time, CES 2006–2024.** Each point plots the share of group members whose individual alignment score meets or exceeds 0.5 (i.e., who agree with the group majority on at least half of the core policy items). Point size reflects group sample size. The dashed horizontal line marks 50%. Even at this permissive threshold, a non-trivial share of partisans fall short in all waves.

during the Trump administration. This is consistent with accounts of a populist realignment that reshuffled the party's issue positions: Trump's protectionist trade stances, in particular, departed sharply from the free-trade orthodoxy that had long unified Republican voters, and his broader appeal rested on identity and cultural grievance rather than programmatic conservatism (Sides et al. 2018; Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). The temporal variation in Republican alignment illustrates a key feature of the framework: it surfaces the decoupling between electoral and identity cohesion — which remained high among Republicans throughout the period — and policy cohesion, which did not.

This finding also has direct implications for a large body of scholarship examining issue agreement between legislators and their constituents. Studies using individual-level CCES data show that constituents hold representatives accountable for specific roll-call votes, and that a one-standard-deviation increase in perceived issue agreement can improve a representative's net approval by roughly 35 percentage points (Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki 2022). Other work shows that legislators frequently "leapfrog" over their own constituents ideologically, casting votes more extreme than the median district voter would prefer — a pattern driven in part by primary incentives and the difficulty of satisfying a heterogeneous electorate (Bafumi and Herron 2010). Taken together, this literature treats issue-by-issue agreement as the fundamental currency of representation.

Ahler and Broockman (2018) reveal a complication in this logic. Even when most constituents prefer the liberal position on each individual issue — and thus exhibit high issue agreement with a liberal legislator — their mean ideological position may still appear distant from the legislator's position on a unidimensional scale. This occurs because issue agreement is a joint quantity that is not well-captured by ideological averages. The delegate paradox implies that representatives who select more polarized positions can actually maximize issue-by-issue agreement with their constituents. But this logic assumes that issue agreement within the constituency is itself high. The present results call that assumption into question: if within-group alignment is low, there is a natural ceiling on how much issue-by-issue representation any single legislator can provide, even one who perfectly matches the group's majority position on every issue. The delegate paradox, in other words, has a prior — before asking whether representatives agree with their constituents, we should ask whether constituents agree with each other.

The results also bear on the relationship between social identity and policy agreement. The partisan identity literature documents strong and growing intra-party cohesion

around social identity (Huddy et al. 2015; Mason 2018) – partisans feel close to their co-partisans, dislike the other side, and are emotionally invested in their party's success. But affective cohesion does not entail policy cohesion. The present results suggest that even among strong partisans, there is substantial heterogeneity in the specific combinations of issue positions that individuals hold. This gap between identity unity and policy unity may help explain why partisans can be simultaneously highly loyal in their voting behavior and highly diverse in the specific policies they endorse.

Finally, the low level of aggregate alignment documented here may help explain the fragility of political coalitions. If a substantial share of group members departs from the group majority on at least one issue, then shifts in issue salience or framing can dislodge voters who were "aligned" on most issues but not all. This logic is consistent with the observed volatility of recent U.S. elections, including the defection of significant numbers of Black and Latino voters from the Democratic coalition in 2024. Even strong partisans may be willing to shift sides when the particular issue on which they depart from their group becomes salient – a dynamic that is invisible in issue-by-issue polling but visible in the alignment framework.

Several limitations warrant mention. The alignment framework, as currently implemented, measures alignment against a group's *own* majority positions, meaning it does not compare alignment across groups (e.g., asking whether a Democrat is more aligned with the Democratic or Republican platform). Extending the framework to cross-group comparisons is a natural next step. Additionally, the mechanical decline of perfect alignment with basket size means that comparisons across baskets of different sizes require normalization, which is not yet standard practice. Finally, the framework treats each issue as equally weighted; a version that incorporates issue salience or importance weights could yield different conclusions. Despite these limitations, the basic finding that aggregate alignment is substantially lower than issue-level support is robust and consequential.

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A. Issue Baskets in the CES

A1. Items in Each Basket

The analyses in this paper draw on two issue baskets constructed from the Cooperative Election Study. The **core policy basket** targets the six major policy domains consistently covered across CES waves: abortion, immigration, environmental regulation, gun control, military spending, and trade. The **spending basket** targets federal spending preference items, which ask respondents whether funding for various government programs should increase, decrease, or remain the same.

The specific items selected in the 2024 CES wave are listed in the following table.

Table A1: **CES Issue Basket Items.** Item descriptions are taken from column labels where available. Only items present in the 2024 wave are shown; coverage across waves is visualized in Figures A1 and A2 below.

Basket	Column	Item Description
Core Policy	abortion-20weeks	Ban abortions after the 20th week of pregnancy
	abortion-always	Always allow a woman to obtain an abortion as a matter of choice
	abortion-conditional	Permit abortion only in cases of rape, incest, or danger to woman's life
	abortion-coverage	Allow employers to decline coverage of abortions in insurance plans
	abortion-expenditures	Prohibit the expenditure of federal funds for any abortion
	abortion-prohibition	Make abortions illegal in all circumstances
	enviro-airwateracts	Strengthen EPA enforcement of the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act even if it costs jobs
	enviro-carbon	Give the Environmental Protection Agency power to regulate carbon dioxide emissions
	enviro-mpg-raise	Raise required fuel efficiency standards for automobiles
	enviro-renewable	Require states to use a minimum amount of renewable fuels for electricity generation
	guns-assaultban	Ban assault rifles
	guns-bgchecks	Require criminal background checks for all gun sales
	guns-names	Prohibit state and local governments from publishing names and addresses of gun owners
	guns-permits	Make it easier for people to obtain concealed-carry permits
	immig-border	Increase border security along the U.S.–Mexico border
	immig-deport	Deport undocumented immigrants
	immig-employer	Penalize employers for hiring undocumented immigrants

Table A1: **CES Issue Basket Items.** Item descriptions are taken from column labels where available. Only items present in the 2024 wave are shown; coverage across waves is visualized in Figures A1 and A2 below. *(continued)*

Basket	Column	Item Description
	immig-legalize	Grant legal status to undocumented immigrants meeting work and tax requirements
	immig-police	Allow police to question individuals about immigration status
	immig-reduce	Reduce overall levels of immigration
	immig-report	Require local police to report undocumented immigrants to federal authorities
	immig-services	Provide public services to undocumented immigrants
	immig-wall	Build a wall along the U.S.–Mexico border
	military-democracy	Use military force to promote democracy abroad
	military-genocide	Use military force to stop genocide
	military-helpun	Use military force to help the United Nations enforce international law
	military-oil	Use military force to ensure access to foreign oil supplies
	military-protectallies	Use military force to protect U.S. allies under attack
	military-terroristcamp	Use military force to destroy terrorist training camps
	trade-canmex-except	Exclude Canada and Mexico from U.S. trade agreements
	trade-canmex-include	Include Canada and Mexico in U.S. trade agreements
	trade-china	Support or oppose free trade agreements with China
Spending	spending-education	Increase government spending on education
	spending-healthcare	Increase government spending on health care
	spending-infrastructure	Increase government spending on infrastructure
	spending-police	Increase government spending on police
	spending-welfare	Increase government spending on welfare

A2. Item Coverage Across Waves

Figures A1 and A2 display the coverage (percent missing) of each item in the core policy and spending baskets across all CES waves from 2006 to 2024. Cells with 100% missing are suppressed (the item was not fielded that wave). Analysts holding the basket fixed across waves should use only items with full coverage.

Figure A1: **Item Coverage for the Core Policy Basket, CES 2006–2024.** Each cell shows the percentage of respondents with a missing response for the given item and wave. Items not fielded in a wave are omitted. Lower values (darker tiles) indicate better coverage.

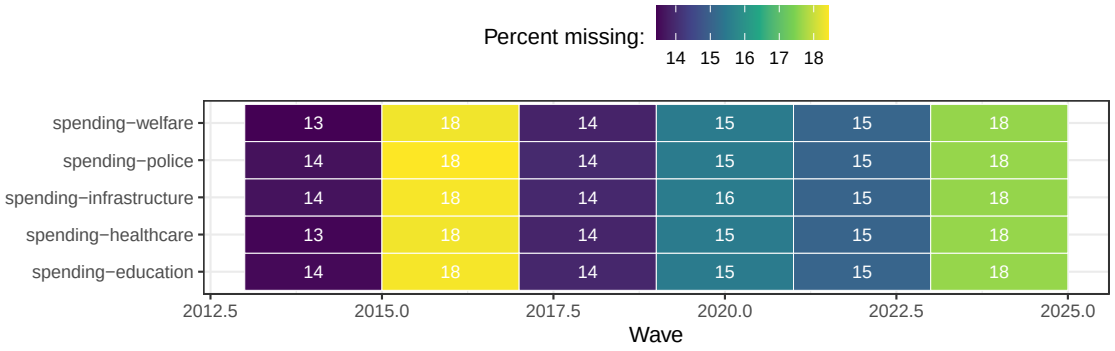

Figure A2: **Item Coverage for the Spending Basket, CES 2006–2024.** Each cell shows the percentage of respondents with a missing response for the given item and wave. Items not fielded in a wave are omitted.

A3. Robustness of Partisan Alignment

The main conclusions are subjected to several sensitivity checks.

Alternative Issue Baskets. I re-estimate alignment using domain-specific baskets (e.g., immigration items only, spending items only, social issue items only). Alignment is generally higher on narrower, domain-specific baskets – mechanically, fewer items produce less opportunity for disagreement – but the qualitative finding holds: aggregate alignment falls short of what issue-level margins imply, regardless of the domain. Notably, results using the federal spending preference basket closely mirror those obtained with the core policy basket used in the main analysis, confirming that the findings are not specific to the choice of issue domain.

Alternative Nonresponse Assumptions. Under the conservative treatment where missing responses are counted as disagreement with the group majority, all alignment metrics decline. The magnitude of the decline varies by group, but the ranking of groups and the qualitative patterns remain stable. This suggests that the main findings are not driven by the treatment of non-response.

Table A2 summarizes the sensitivity of the alignment mean across these analytic choices for selected groups, and Table A3 reports the analogous results for cumulative weak alignment.

Table A2: **Sensitivity of Alignment Mean to Issue Basket and NA Treatment, CES 2024.** Each cell reports the weighted alignment mean for a partisan group under the specified issue basket and nonresponse assumption. 'Exclude' drops missing responses from the denominator; 'Unaligned' counts them as disagreement with the group majority. Estimates are rounded to two decimal places.

Issue Basket	NA Treatment	Democrat	Independent/Other	Republican
Core policy	Exclude	0.79	0.74	0.67
Core policy	Unaligned	0.40	0.38	0.33
Spending only	Exclude	0.71	0.66	0.62
Immigration only	Exclude	0.77	0.84	0.63

Table A3: **Sensitivity of Cumulative Weak Alignment to Issue Basket and NA Treatment, CES 2024.** Each cell reports the share of group members aligned with their group majority on at least half of items. 'Exclude' drops missing responses from the denominator; 'Unaligned' counts them as disagreement with the group majority. Estimates are rounded to two decimal places.

Issue Basket	NA Treatment	Democrat	Independent/Other	Republican
Core policy	Exclude	0.97	0.93	0.88
Core policy	Unaligned	0.07	0.07	0.00
Spending only	Exclude	0.82	0.78	0.72
Immigration only	Exclude	0.89	0.92	0.74

A4. Racial Alignment in the CES

The alignment framework is not limited to partisan groups. To examine whether the gap between issue-level and aggregate support extends to other politically meaningful categories, I measure alignment within racial groups on the CES core policy battery (2024 wave).

Table A4 reports the full suite of alignment metrics for each racial group on the 2024 CES core policy battery.

Table A4: **Racial/Ethnic Alignment in 2024 on Core Policy Issues.** Percents rounded to 2 digits. Alignment measured across 17 policy position questions.

	White (Non-Hispanic)	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other
# Respondents	41,443	5,150	1,949	3,730	7,728
Alignment Mean	66%	68%	70%	64%	70%
Cumulative Weak Alignment	87%	86%	90%	85%	89%
Cumulative Perfect Alignment	0%	1%	1%	0%	1%
Cumulative Issue Alignment (N)	4	4	4	4	4
Cumulative Issue Alignment (%)	24%	24%	24%	24%	24%

Figure A3 shows the distribution of individual alignment scores across racial groups. Racial groups exhibit alignment profiles that are generally lower than those of partisan

groups, reflecting the fact that racial groups are less politically sorted.

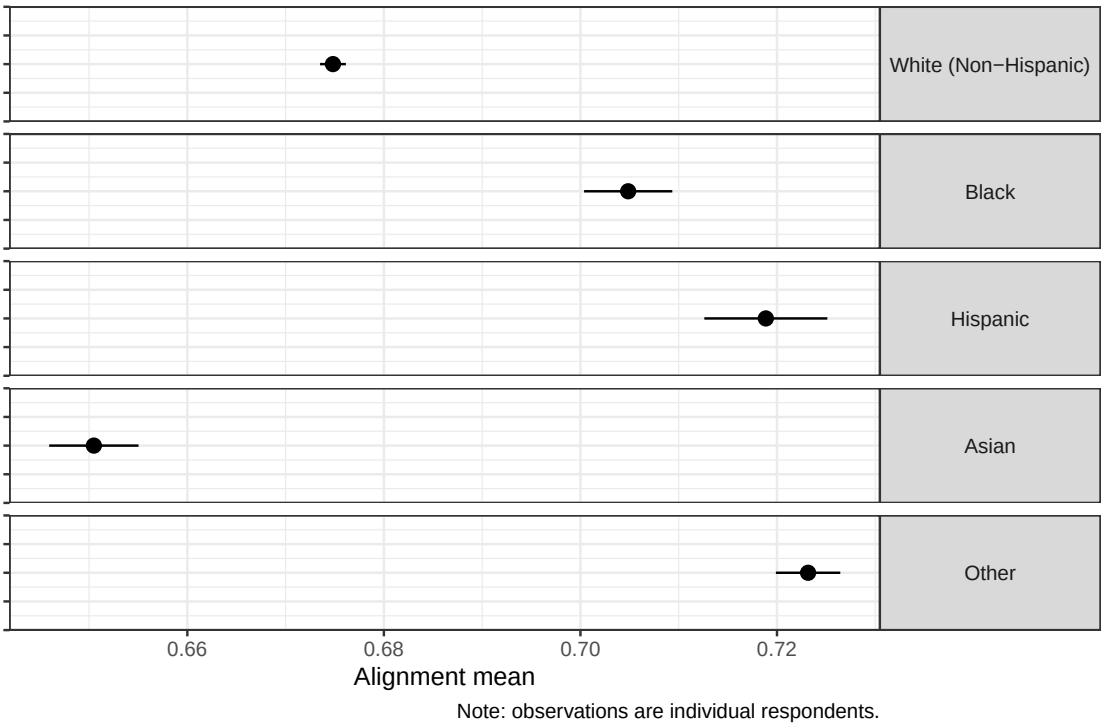

Figure A3: **Individual Alignment Score Distributions by Racial/Ethnic Group, CES 2024.** Each point shows the weighted alignment mean for a group; horizontal lines show 95% confidence intervals. Black respondents exhibit the highest alignment among racial groups, consistent with the linked-fate literature.

Figure A4 presents alignment curves for White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Other racial categories. Black respondents exhibit the highest alignment among racial groups on the core CES battery, consistent with the literature on linked fate and the relative political homogeneity of Black public opinion. However, even among Black respondents, cumulative perfect alignment is substantially lower than issue-level margins would suggest.

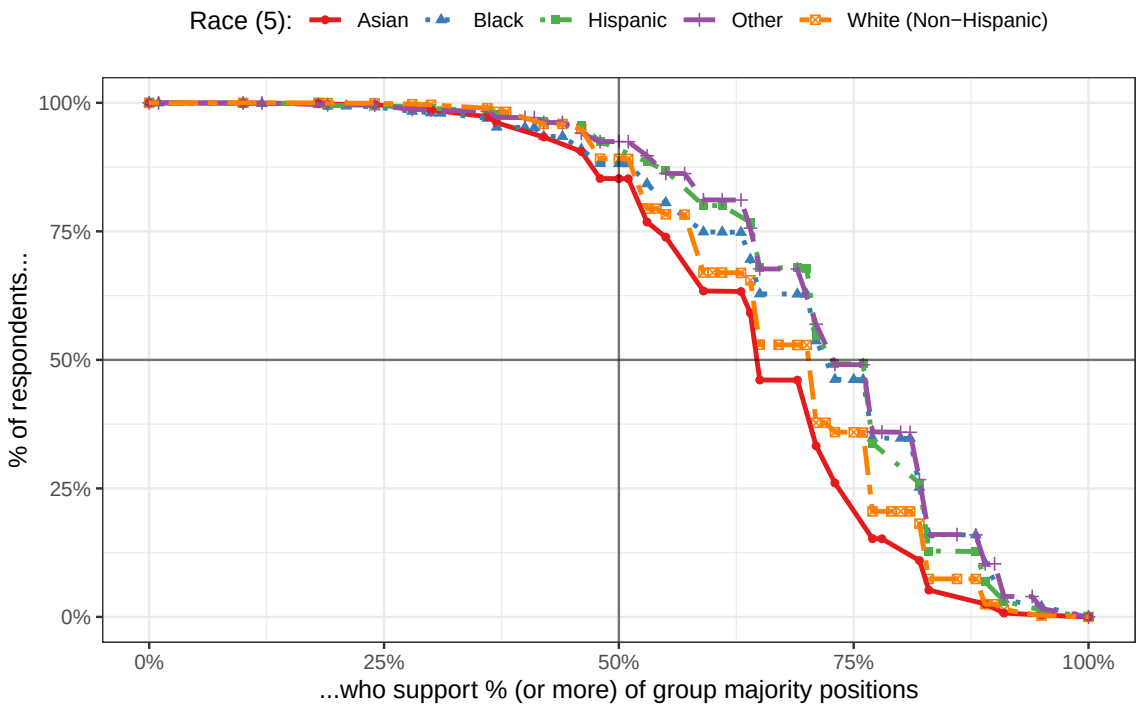

Figure A4: **Alignment Curves by Racial/Ethnic Group, CES 2024 Core Policy Battery.** Each curve plots the share of group members (y-axis) whose individual alignment meets or exceeds a given threshold (x-axis), using each group's own majority positions as the reference. The vertical dashed line marks 50%. Racial groups generally exhibit lower alignment than partisan groups, reflecting lower political sorting. Black respondents show the highest alignment among racial groups, consistent with the linked-fate literature, but even among Black respondents cumulative perfect alignment is substantially below issue-level margins.

A5. Educational Alignment in the CES

Education is a politically consequential demographic dimension, particularly following the realignment of college-educated voters toward the Democratic Party and non-college voters toward the Republican Party over the past decade (Sides et al. 2018; Abramowitz 2018). I measure alignment within educational groups on the CES core policy battery (2024 wave) to examine whether these partisan shifts have produced corresponding within-group opinion cohesion.

Table A5 reports the full suite of alignment metrics for each educational group.

Table A5: **Educational Alignment in 2024 on Core Policy Issues.** Percents rounded to 2 digits. Alignment measured across 17 policy position questions.

	Less than HS	High school	Some college	College	Post-grad
# Respondents	15,983	7,960	20,627	13,297	2,133
Alignment Mean	66%	70%	66%	67%	66%
Cumulative Weak Alignment	89%	79%	91%	80%	85%
Cumulative Perfect Alignment	0%	2%	0%	1%	1%
Cumulative Issue Alignment (N)	4	4	4	4	4
Cumulative Issue Alignment (%)	24%	24%	24%	24%	24%

Figure A5 shows the distribution of individual alignment scores across educational groups. College graduates and post-graduates tend to show higher alignment, potentially reflecting more crystallized political attitudes among the highly educated (Zaller 1992).

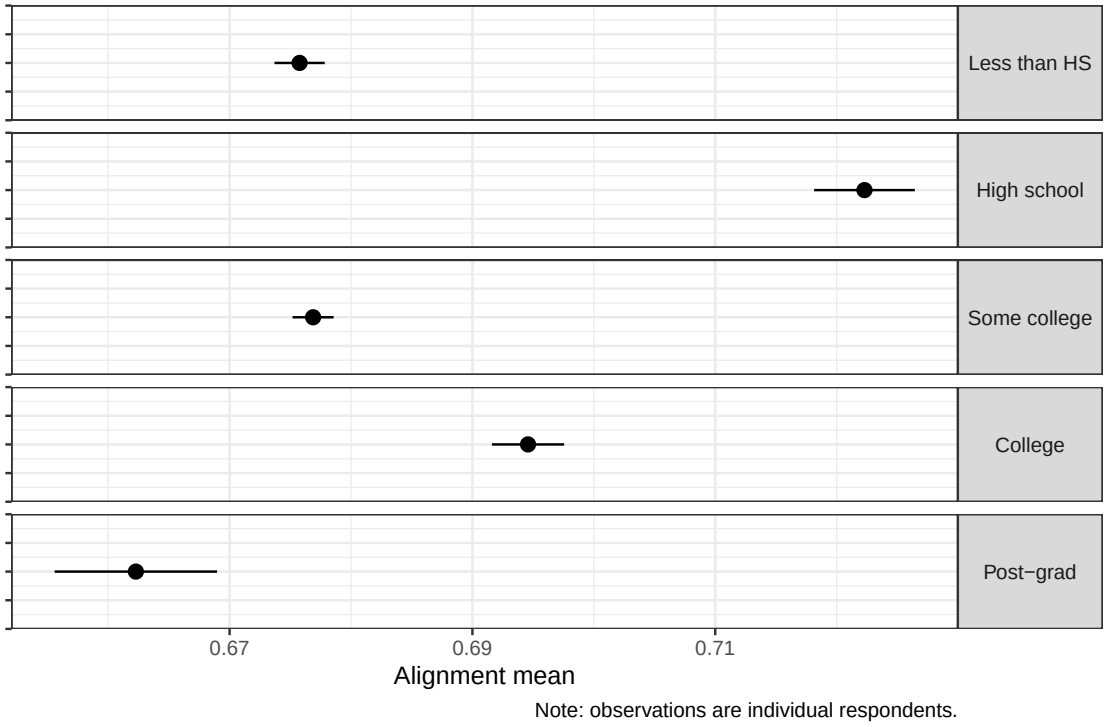

Figure A5: **Individual Alignment Score Distributions by Educational Group, CES 2024.** Each point shows the weighted alignment mean for a group; horizontal lines show 95% confidence intervals.

Figure A6 presents alignment curves for each educational group. As with partisan and racial groups, the curves decline as the agreement threshold rises, confirming that aggregate cross-issue alignment falls well below issue-level margins across all educational strata.

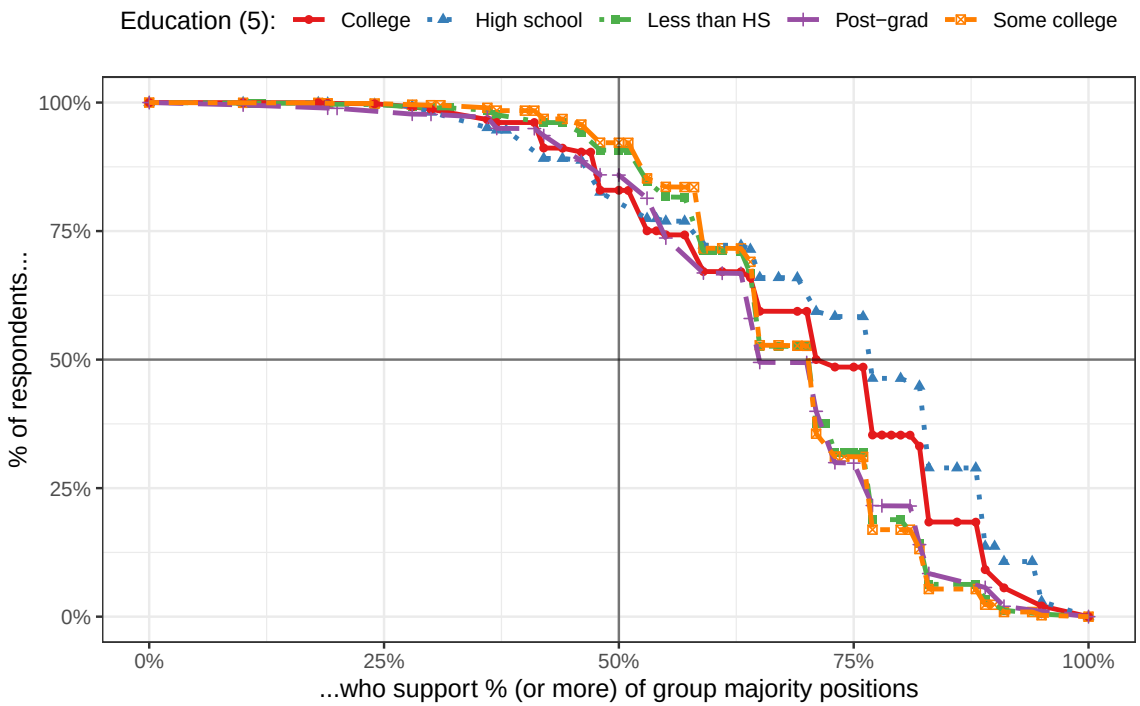

Figure A6: **Alignment Curves by Educational Group, CES 2024 Core Policy Battery.** Each curve plots the share of group members (y-axis) whose individual alignment meets or exceeds a given threshold (x-axis), using each group's own majority positions as the reference. The vertical dashed line marks 50%.

A6. Age Alignment in the CES

Generational differences in political opinion have attracted considerable attention, particularly following the strong Democratic lean of younger voters documented in recent election cycles (Twenge 2023; Gelman and Shor 2017). I measure alignment within age cohorts on the CES core policy battery (2024 wave) to examine whether generational opinion gaps translate into genuine within-cohort cohesion.

Table A6 reports the full suite of alignment metrics for each age group.

Table A6: **Age Group Alignment in 2024 on Core Policy Issues.** Percents rounded to 2 digits. Alignment measured across 17 policy position questions.

	18-29	30-49	50-64	65+
# Respondents	18,368	17,394	15,271	8,967
Alignment Mean	67%	68%	66%	67%
Cumulative Weak Alignment	95%	97%	80%	83%
Cumulative Perfect Alignment	0%	0%	1%	2%
Cumulative Issue Alignment (N)	4	5	4	5
Cumulative Issue Alignment (%)	24%	29%	24%	29%

Figure A7 shows the distribution of individual alignment scores across age groups. Older respondents tend to show higher alignment, consistent with the well-documented finding that political attitudes become more crystallized with age and experience.

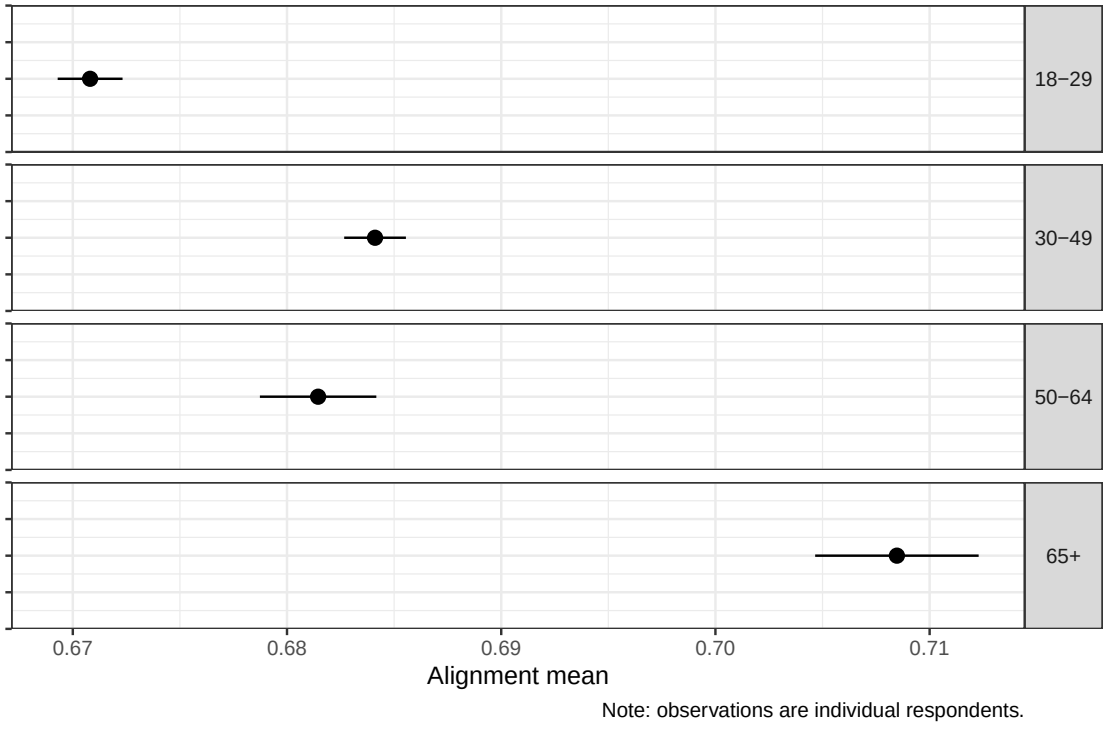

Figure A7: **Individual Alignment Score Distributions by Age Group, CES 2024.** Each point shows the weighted alignment mean for a group; horizontal lines show 95% confidence intervals.

Figure A8 presents alignment curves for each age cohort. Across all age groups,

alignment curves decline steeply as the agreement threshold rises, confirming that the gap between issue-level and aggregate alignment is not unique to partisan or racial groups but pervades the electorate along generational lines as well.

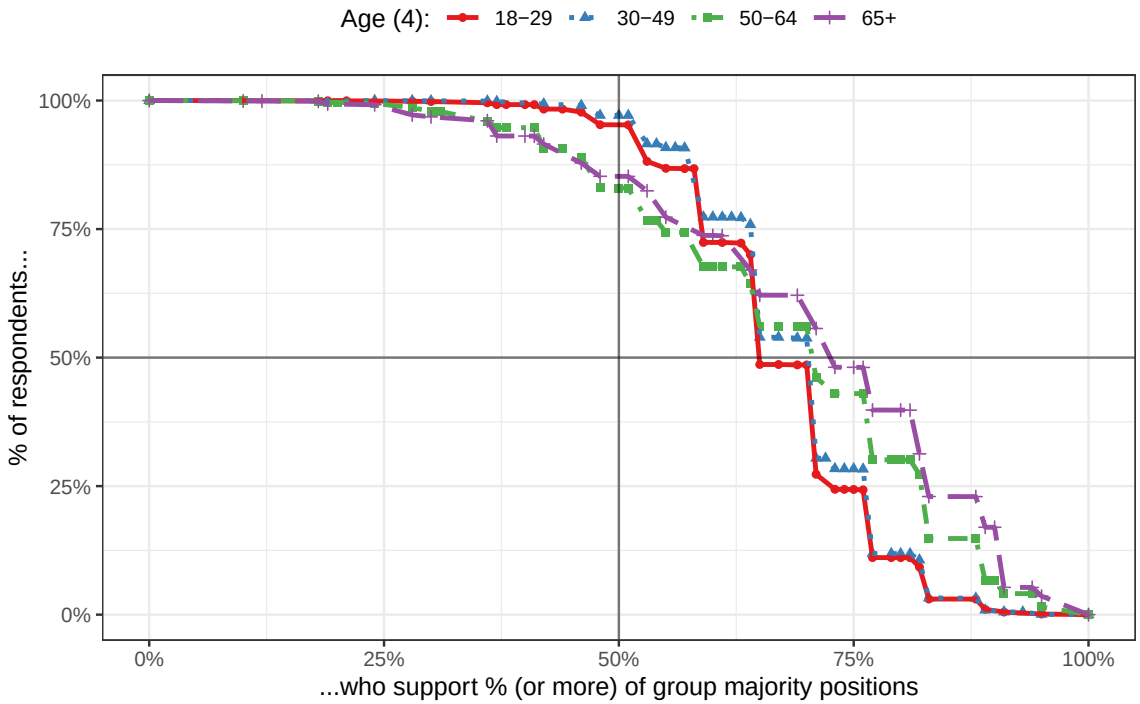

Figure A8: **Alignment Curves by Age Group, CES 2024 Core Policy Battery.** Each curve plots the share of group members (y-axis) whose individual alignment meets or exceeds a given threshold (x-axis), using each group's own majority positions as the reference. The vertical dashed line marks 50%.