The Politics of Aspiration: Ideology as a Luxury Good in Occupational Choice*

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Career aspirations are formed long before people enter the labor market, but whether and how political ideology is part of that formative process remains unknown. Using national surveys on 9.5 million college freshmen entering U.S. institutions between 1976 and 2010, I show that political ideology structures occupational aspirations well before labor market entry, with a magnitude comparable to racial and socioeconomic sorting. This effect is not reducible to background characteristics, though it is largely organized within similar college selection pathways. I show that the effect of political ideology is much stronger among people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. I theorize that this pattern reflects a "luxury goods" mechanism, arguing that ideology is an occupational amenity whose salience increases with material security. This, I propose, makes ideology an expressive resource unequally distributed across the stratification system.

1 Introduction

Workplace stratification by political ideology is a consequential feature of the contemporary American labor market (Chinoy and Koenen 2024), with some firms disproportionately liberal and others disproportionately conservative (see Frake, Hurst, and Kagan 2023; Kagan, Frake, and Hurst 2025). Such political sorting is not confined to firms: it characterizes entire occupational groups, with partisan ratios as large as 4 to 1 (meaning four Democrats for every Republican and vice versa), within certain occupational categories.[1] Put differently, there is a fundamental *alignment* between the kind of work people do and the kind of political worldviews they favor (Weeden and Grusky 2005).

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[1] According to 2024 data from Politics at Work, which documents occupation-level estimates of two-party registration in the United States, almost 80% of individuals working as a political scientist, social worker, or librarian are Democrats, while more than 65% of those working as clergy, oil operator, or commercial pilot are registered as Republicans.

Two central mechanisms, operating at different points in the life-course, may explain such political sorting. On the one hand, people may form politically congruent occupational preferences through early-life socialization and self-select into ideologically consistent occupations (e.g., Meriläinen and Mitrunen 2025; also see Bermiss and McDonald 2018). This would establish cultural socialization as a foundational process that shapes major career decisions. On the other hand, political sorting may emerge after occupational entry, as people develop political views via workplace socialization (e.g., Kitschelt and Rehm 2014; Selenko et al. 2025; Weeden and Grusky 2005). This would establish political ideology as a consequence of occupations, instead of a driver of prior choice.[2]

One significant challenge in distinguishing these two mechanisms is that existing research observes workers only after they have sorted into occupations. While this approach is valuable for precisely documenting the extent and magnitude of political sorting (Chinoy and Koenen 2024), the realized positions reflect the outcome of multiple processes: workplace-level sorting and preference-based self-selection, certainly, but also structural forces such as credentialing, residential segregation, and institutional gatekeeping (e.g., Becker [1964] 1994; Brown and Enos 2021; Weeden 2002). Since the political composition of occupations is the equilibrium outcome, we cannot disentangle pre-entry selection from post-entry workplace effects using variation in aggregate sorting alone.

This identification issue is not only a methodological problem. It is also fundamentally theoretical, because the selection versus influence question elides a basic sociological idea: that different people might end up in different occupations for different reasons. Some individuals may have the latitude to act on their political worldview (to signal worth or accrue expressive benefits), while others may face material constraints that make ideological congruence a secondary consideration at best. If this is correct, the self-selection process is itself class-stratified, and differential selection is a mechanism of occupational inequality: we cannot determine how politics affects occupational sorting without first identifying who treats their political worldview as a guide for major life decisions.

In this article, I take advantage of a unique empirical window to address both the methodological and theoretical problems at once. Instead of examining workers already sorted into occupations, I investigate *occupational preferences*—the vocational aspirations people form in early adulthood—to ask whether ideology shapes which occupations people aspire to pursue. As these preferences are

[2]Kitschelt and Rehm (2014) calls these two pathways *weak* and *strong* theories of preference formation, respectively.

formed before people enter the labor market, the effect of political ideology on occupational choice cannot reflect post-entry workplace processes. Therefore, I can examine whether political ideology shapes occupational aspirations, and whether such an effect is stratified along socioeconomic lines, investigating differential self-selection as a viable cultural mechanism of occupational sorting.

Using data on 9.5 million college freshmen entering U.S. institutions between 1976 and 2010, I study the occupational aspirations people articulate upon entering higher education. I find that ideology, operationalized as whether students identify as liberal, moderate, and conservative, systematically structures occupational aspirations. Using common benchmarks, I show that political stratification in 2010 is 22% as large as gender stratification, 71% as large as racial stratification, and about equal to socioeconomic stratification. I further demonstrate that political sorting is organized within the college selection pipeline: ideology structures which institutions students attend and which fields of study they pursue, which in turn account for the large majority of ideological differentiation in occupational aspirations. Yet, even within college and intended major, a meaningful proportion of sorting remains, and politics informs aspirations within otherwise similar educational tracks.

Ideological sorting in occupational preferences, however, is much stronger among individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. This implies that ideology functions differently depending on one's position in the stratification system: an expressive opportunity for some, a secondary concern for others. One interpretation of this income gradient is consistent with a *luxury goods* mechanism, where the salience of ideological congruence increases with material security (Enke, Polborn, and Wu 2025; Inglehart 1997). I show that, while liberals and conservatives differ along socioeconomic lines on the kinds of occupational attributes they value, where high income liberals want expressive benefits while high income conservatives prefer high earnings and prestige, such differences do not account for the full income gradient. This suggests that ideology might be an expressive resource in the imagination of one's future, and that this expressive capacity is unequally distributed.

This article contributes to our understanding of political stratification in the labor market (Chinoy and Koenen 2024; Colonnelli, Neto, and Teso 2025), proposing that political culture structures how young people come to envision the kind of work they want to do (Arold 2024; Doepke and Zilibotti 2008; Meriläinen and Mitrunen 2025). As such, I provide the first systematic evidence that ideology shapes occupational aspirations in early life. Nevertheless, the capacity to act on such commitments

is itself unequally distributed, and ideological congruence is an expressive good available primarily to those whose material circumstances afford it (Inglehart 1997). Together, these findings suggest that political ideologies are not merely a correlate of where individuals end up in the labor market, but a consequential cultural force that strongly shapes where they ultimately aspire to go.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 develops a theoretical account of how political ideology shapes occupational preferences. Section 3 describes the data sources, as well as the measurement strategy. I then document the association between political ideology and occupational aspirations (Section 4) and investigate how it varies across socioeconomic background (Section 5). In Section 6, I discuss broader implications of understanding the role of politics in major life choices.

2 Ideology as an Occupational Amenity

Occupations are central to the stratification of labor markets, simultaneously structuring earnings inequality (Weeden 2002), career trajectories (Spilerman 1977), and patterns of segregation across gender, race, ethnicity, credentials, and language (Alonso-Villar, Del Rio, and Gradin 2012; Hellerstein and Neumark 2008; Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999). The allocation of individuals to specific occupational categories is thus a consequential stage in the production of labor market segregation, prior to workplace-level sorting within occupations. Accordingly, the mechanisms shaping this allocation are well-documented, emphasizing human capital (Becker [1964] 1994), status attainment (Blau and Duncan 1967; Haller and Portes 1973; Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969) or social resources (Lin, Ensel, and Vaughn 1981), each structuring which occupations are feasible to pursue, as well as heterogeneity in occupational preferences based on personality fit (Holland 1959), non-pecuniary attributes (Rosen 1986), and attitudes towards work and leisure (Doepke and Zilibotti 2008), each shaping which occupations are desirable to pursue, even for those facing similar constraints.

Understanding these allocation processes, however, requires us to examine the formation of particular occupational preferences—when people identify which careers to pursue in the first place—as these preferences shape subsequent sorting into distinct career tracks. Existing accounts typically emphasize how individuals evaluate occupations as bundles of attributes, giving more or less importance to compensation, intrinsic and experiential work qualities, and working conditions (Kalle-

berg 1977; Rosen 1986; York, Song, and Xie 2025), or focus on the match between personality traits and vocational domains (Holland 1959). Less explicit in these accounts, however, are the *symbolic amenities* of certain occupations: perceived cultural character of the work itself, as well as the social affiliations and group identities occupations often signal. This is, in part, what Weeden and Grusky (2005) describe as the "cultural reputations" of occupations: lifestyle profiles or sociodemographic compositions that attract certain kinds of individuals to certain kinds of career preferences.

Such cultural reputations are, in many ways, organized around political ideology, since the lifestyle profiles or group identities occupations signal often become legible through their political valence—much like those "latte liberals" and "bird-hunting conservatives" (DellaPosta, Shi, and Macy 2015). Occupational choice may thus partly reflect a preference for ideological affinity, with actors gaining expressive payoffs (Akerlof and Kranton 2000), or avoiding dissonance penalties when their choice is incongruent with what it ideologically signals (Goldberg and Stein 2018). Consider, for instance, the well-worn tropes of the liberal professor and the conservative cop: occupations whose political reputations reflect both the leanings of those who occupy them and the cultural meanings attached to the work itself. Such tropes persist, in part, because they are self-fulfilling: ideology shapes who is drawn to these occupations in the first place (Gross 2013). The question, then, is how pervasive this selection really is, and how political reputations shape the calculus of such decisions.

2.1 Ideological Congruence in Occupational Preference Formation

What makes one occupation politically preferable to another? We can examine this question with a simple model in which actors choose among occupations by trading off material attributes against political congruence. In this framework, occupations are bundles of pecuniary and non-pecuniary attributes (Rosen 1986), and people use a latent utility index to choose among discrete alternatives (e.g., Bruch and Mare 2012; McFadden 1974). An actor's utility from preferring an occupation thus depends on two components: the occupational attributes common across people in a choice setting (e.g., expected earnings, occupational prestige, and working conditions), as well as the ideological congruence[3] between the actor's own political position and the perceived ideological profile of the

[3]Such an argument for "congruence" assumes a symmetric loss in utility when people assess whether the occupation is to their "left" or to their "right." While asymmetric preferences might exist—e.g., conservatives avoiding left-coded occupations more so than liberals avoid right-coded ones—the core prediction holds under either specification.

occupation, where greater ideological distance reduces the occupation's attractiveness. In this view, political congruence is conceptualized as one occupational amenity among many, and its influence depends on how much weight people place on congruence relative to material considerations.

The relative weight assigned to political congruence compared to material considerations, however, need not be constant across individuals. As people become materially less constrained, expressive or identity-relevant considerations may gain relative prominence in preference formation. We can thus treat ideological congruence as an *expressive good* (Inglehart 1997; Schuessler 2000), the value of which increases in one's material security. This implies that the relative significance of political congruence must be lower when anticipatory material needs are more pressing, making ideological congruence, in effect, a "luxury good" in occupational choice. If this is correct, we should observe that politics structures occupational choice more strongly among higher-income individuals.[4]

Of course, the practical significance of political congruence also depends on whether occupations are perceived as *ideologically differentiated* in the first place. Such perceptions draw from the shared political reputations of occupations (Gross 2013; Weeden and Grusky 2005), formed through direct observation of occupational demographics, representations in the media, or training. This implies two mechanisms through which political sorting in occupational preferences can become evident. Holding perceptions fixed, ideological alignment can become more important if expressive benefits emerge as a more central axis in preference formation. Alternatively, occupations may be perceived as more ideologically differentiated, leading to larger utility penalties from political mismatch. In each scenario, political ideology structures occupational aspirations as a selection pathway.

2.2 Implications for Occupational Choice

Let α_{it} denote an actor i's intended occupation at time t, where ω represents the set of occupational categories available in the relevant choice set. I use occupational *intentions* in early adulthood as a measure of occupational *preferences*. Under this interpretation, when an actor reports occupation j as their intended career from a list of occupational categories presented in ω, this reveals a relative

[4]The proposed income-gradient pattern can be interpreted either as genuine taste heterogeneity in ideological congruence, or as a reduced-form consequence of diminishing marginal utility of material returns. This means that I could achieve the luxury goods effect simply by using the concavity of utility. That said, this concavity may not lead to the luxury goods finding, because the material stakes of occupational decisions may increase with income, too.

evaluation over occupations, as defined via their latent utility.[5] This decision process at the micro-level produces observable implications at the macro level. We can derive the first expectation as:

> **Expectation 1**: Ideological positions systematically structure occupational preferences.

Of course, because ideological congruence is only one component of utility, its practical significance depends on what else is at stake in the general choice setting. As I proposed before, ideology may be more or less important depending on one's socioeconomic position. According to this luxury goods mechanism, which moves individual attention from survival-oriented concerns toward expressive, identity-relevant, or non-material concerns (Enke et al. 2025; Inglehart 1997), political ideology is a class-stratified cultural resource. If this is indeed correct, lower-SES actors should systematically select into occupations on non-ideological grounds, making differential self-selection a mechanism of occupational inequality. These considerations lead to the following empirical expectation:

> **Expectation 2**: The systematic relation between ideology and occupational preferences is stronger among individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

3 Data and Measurement

As my empirical case, I investigate the occupational preferences of college freshmen, as they enter higher education. This is a valuable population for two theoretical reasons. First, college students are systematically encouraged to formulate their occupational intentions: they must declare majors, seek internships, or make human capital investments—all requiring them to establish and commit to certain occupational goals. This selection pipeline makes occupational aspirations a particularly meaningful indicator at a consequential decision point in the life-course. Second, these aspirations are formed *before* the labor market, which provides a rare window into preference formation prior to workplace socialization or employer-level sorting. This allows me to isolate the formative stage of occupational choice, when occupational aspirations are articulated rather than realized.[6]

[5] While occupational intentions will incorporate anticipatory constraints—e.g., individuals avoid stating intentions for careers they perceive as entirely infeasible—they still reveal relative preferences within one's perceived opportunity set. Therefore, even when subsequent structural mechanisms affect which intentions get realized, the *stated* intentions remain informative about how ideology affects the formation of aspirations *at the point they are articulated*.

[6] This empirical focus on higher education is, in the end, one potential instantiation of the broader theoretical framework. While the mechanisms that tie ideology to occupational preferences should operate among non-college youth as well,

3.1 Data Sources

I use survey data from *The Freshman Survey* (TFS), administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles. TFS is designed to collect information about the population of first-time, first-year students at U.S. institutions, with almost 2,000 colleges and universities participating at various points across the study period. Importantly, these surveys are conducted before students begin their classes in their first year, so they capture students' views and preferences before they are fully exposed to the college environment. The final sample includes observations from 1976 to 2010, with almost 10 million participants aged 16 to 20.[7] TFS provides sampling weights that correct for institutional attrition and coverage, as participation is voluntary at the college-level and response rates vary over years and across institutions. I present unweighted estimates to retain all the available observations, while also reproducing all findings with weighted estimates.[8] Table A1 in the Supplementary Materials presents basic descriptive statistics.

TFS has recently been used in several papers examining political ideology among college students. Acton, Cook, and Ugalde Araya (2025) study how political ideology shapes college choices, finding an increasing political polarization in college student bodies. Goldstein and Kolerman (2025) focus on the effects of academic fields on political attitudes, finding differential changes in political views during college across different majors. Most closely related to the present article, Reny et al. (2025) show that individuals intending a career as police officers report more right-wing political attitudes than their peers. In this article, I draw from this line of work and provide a systematic theoretical investigation of why, and for whom, political ideology shapes occupational preferences.

3.2 Measurement

Occupational Preferences. To capture aspirations, I use a survey question asking participants about their "intended careers." This item captures 48 unique occupational categories over time, provided

the fact that college students offer distinct analytical advantages makes them ideal targets for analysis. That said, the extent to which the findings below generalize to non-college youth remains an open question for future research.

[7] I made two important decisions while processing the data. First, I removed survey years before 1976, since the survey item used to elicit participants' occupational preferences had substantial revisions in earlier years. Second, I dropped people aged 21 and older (4.8% of the initial sample), so that I can focus on early adults as my target population.

[8] Note that about 30% of observations have missing weights, which means that weighting the data reduces the effective sample size quite significantly. Therefore, I present unweighted and weighted estimates throughout the analyses.

as pre-aggregated units in the TFS data. Since response options and category labels in the original questionnaires change across survey waves—for instance, "Accountant or Actuary" in earlier waves becomes simply "Accountant" in later ones—I prepared an LLM-assisted protocol to document the original questionnaire wording and a response crosswalk, which I provide in the reproduction files. In the end, I focus on the 41 occupations that appear consistently over time, which account for more than 98% of category responses, and reassign the remaining ones into broader categories.[9]

There are two sources of measurement uncertainty about this strategy. First, since original response options change across survey waves, it is likely that large breaks in the time series reflect instrument redesign rather than genuine preference change. Looking at the marginals of occupations over time, the most consequential such period spans 1995 to 2000 (see Table A2 for marginals across decades). I therefore flag this time period as potential instrument drift in analyses below. Second, the "Other" and "Undecided" categories are aggregate buckets, with their composition shifting in response to the available response options over time. I thus drop undecided responses from most analyses and verify that the findings are not sensitive to the inclusion of the "Other" response category.

Political Ideology. To capture ideology, I use an item asking students to characterize their political ideology on a five-point scale: *far left*, *liberal*, *middle-of-the-road*, *conservative*, or *far right*. Because the extremes of this scale feature relatively few respondents (3.9% of the complete sample), I collapse it into three main categories: liberal (combining far left and liberal), moderate (middle-of-the-road), and conservative (combining conservative and far right). Table A3 presents the marginals of these categories over time. Of course, it is likely that the *meaning* of these categories changed across years: someone identifying as "liberal" in 1980 may not be equivalent to someone doing so in 2005. I thus complement the main analyses with 12 issue-specific questions—ranging from capital punishment to the legality of same sex relations—to measure issue-specific pathways. Since these items appear in different survey years, I cannot construct a composite scale, so I replicate the main analyses using each item separately. In Supplementary Materials B, I provide the complete list of these issue items, and the specific question wording and response options used for measuring these positions. Table B1 presents the distribution of responses, as well as the number of complete observations.

[9] I recoded *interpreter* into *other*, *statistician* into *research scientist*, *physician assistant* into *medical/dental assistant*, *college administrator* into *other*, *federal/state/local government official* into *other*, *semi-skilled worker* into *skilled trade*, and *laborer* into *other*. Dropping observations with these responses from the analyses does not change the substantive conclusions.

Socioeconomic Background. I measure socioeconomic position using parental household income, as reported by students upon entering college.[10] Since parental income is the primary determinant of material circumstances for young adults, I use it as the main item for socioeconomic background. To ensure comparability across years, I transform income categories into within-year decile ranks, assigning each student to one of ten equal groups based on their position in the income distribution in the year they were surveyed. This transformation allows me to take care of inflation and response category redesigns over time, ensuring that a student, say, in the 8th decile in 1980 and another one in the 8th decile in 2005 are comparably positioned relative to their peers in the same year.[11] While this measure is consistently used in the main analyses, I provide supplemental analyses using real parental income (reported income adjusted with the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' CPI estimates), as well as analyses that adjust for educational background, in the Supplemental Materials.

4 Documenting Ideological Sorting

I now present empirical evidence of ideological sorting in occupational aspirations. Findings below show that (1) the distribution of political ideology varies across occupational preferences, with the magnitude of this variation being comparable to common benchmarks (e.g., race or socioeconomic status), (2) prior sociodemographic differences among students have little explanatory power for political selection into occupational aspirations, while (3) the college selection pipeline—including the choice of the college and intended major—explains a substantial amount of variation.

4.1 Ideological Sorting in Occupational Preferences

Let me start with Figure 1, which shows the occupation-level distribution of political differentiation in TFS, pooled across the 2005–2010 survey years. Each point captures the net political composition of an occupation, calculated as the conservative share minus the liberal share among respondents,

[10] Students respond to the item: "What is your best estimate of your parents'/guardians' total income last year? Consider income from all sources before taxes."

[11] Since income is measured in grouped bins rather than continuous values, respondents within the same bin received the same decile assignment. One comparability problem is that the top income categories are coarser in early survey years, meaning that the 10th decile is more heterogeneous in early years than in later ones. This likely makes tests of Expectation 2 much more conservative in the early part of the study period, compared to tests in later years.

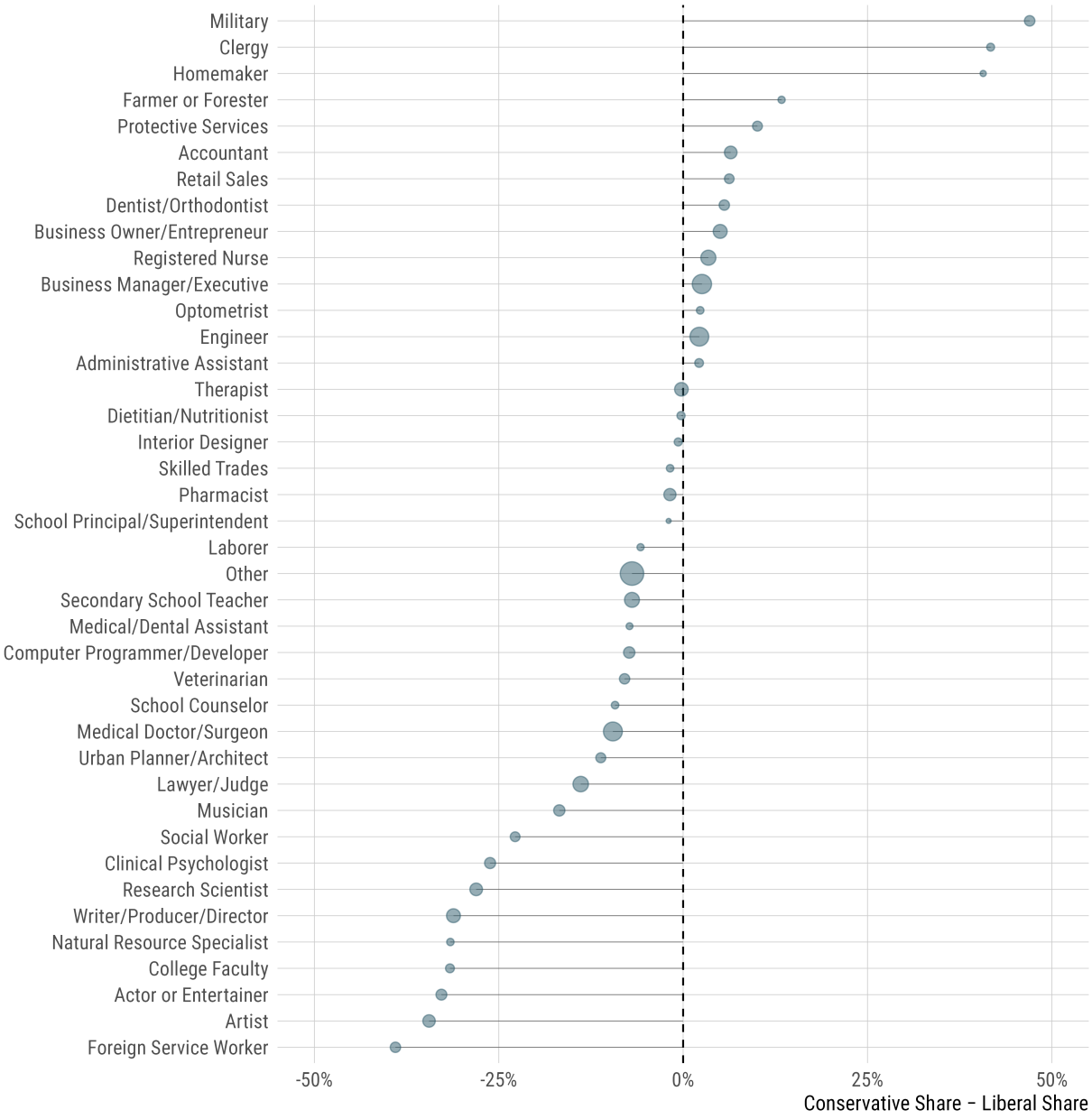

Figure 1: Ideological Sorting in Occupational Preferences

Notes: The figure presents the composition of ideological sorting in occupational preferences, computed from the pooled 2005–2010 data using share conservative minus share liberal as the main statistic. Values above zero indicate occupations with higher conservative than liberal share, values below zero indicate the reverse pattern, and the dashed vertical line represents equal shares of liberals and conservatives. Point size is proportional to occupation size.

with group shares computed over everyone, including moderates. The final score thus ranges from −100% (all liberal) to 100% (all conservative): categories to the right of the reference line are those where conservatives outnumber liberals, while categories to the left reflect the opposite ordering.

Figure 1 suggests that there is meaningful ideological variation in occupational preferences. On the right, we see military, clergy, homemaker, farmer or forester, and members of protective services as the most distinctive occupations. On the left, we see foreign service workers, artists, college faculty, as well as writers and social workers. In contrast, several occupational categories cluster fairly close to zero, which indicates that the share identifying liberal and the share identifying conservative are roughly similar for these cases. Notably, several high-prevalence occupational categories—such as engineers or business executives and managers—indicate almost zero differentiation.[12] The overall finding, then, is one of substantial though uneven differentiation in occupational aspirations.

While Figure 1 reveals *where* political differentiation is concentrated, it does not speak to the overall magnitude of ideological sorting. To address this question, I define *the level of political differentiation in occupational preferences* as my empirical estimand. I quantify this value using mutual information, M, which I calculate from the contingency table of occupational categories J and ideology groups P. If political ideology is indeed informative of occupational choice, the distribution of occupational preferences should systematically vary over ideological positions. M captures this variation.

Let n_{jpt} denote the number of individuals in year t with occupational preference $J = j$ and political ideology $P = p$, and let N_t denote the total number of respondents in year t. We can calculate group shares as $q_{jpt} = n_{jpt}/N_t$ (the joint share), $q_{jt} = \sum_p q_{jpt}$ (the marginal share for occupation j), and $q_{pt} = \sum_j q_{jpt}$ (the marginal share for ideology p). The mutual information is then defined as

$$M_t(J;P) = \sum_j \sum_p q_{jpt} \log\left(\frac{q_{jpt}}{q_{jt}q_{pt}}\right) \tag{1}$$

This measure captures the reduction in uncertainty about occupational preferences when ideology is known, or equivalently, the degree to which (J, P) deviates from independence. While this is not a normalized measure, it features desirable properties for measuring segregation, the prime among them being the decomposability of the measure into the structural relationship between the two variables, as well as the shares attributable to marginal distributions (Mora and Ruiz-Castillo 2011; Reardon and Firebaugh 2002). Yet, as it ultimately depends on the marginal distributions of both occupations and ideology, I complement it with normalized calculations of M, as well as analyses

[12] While Figure 1 provides unweighted estimates, the weighted ones are identical, with Spearman's $\rho > 0.98$. Similarly, excluding moderates from the denominator leads to similar findings (with Spearman's $\rho > 0.99$).

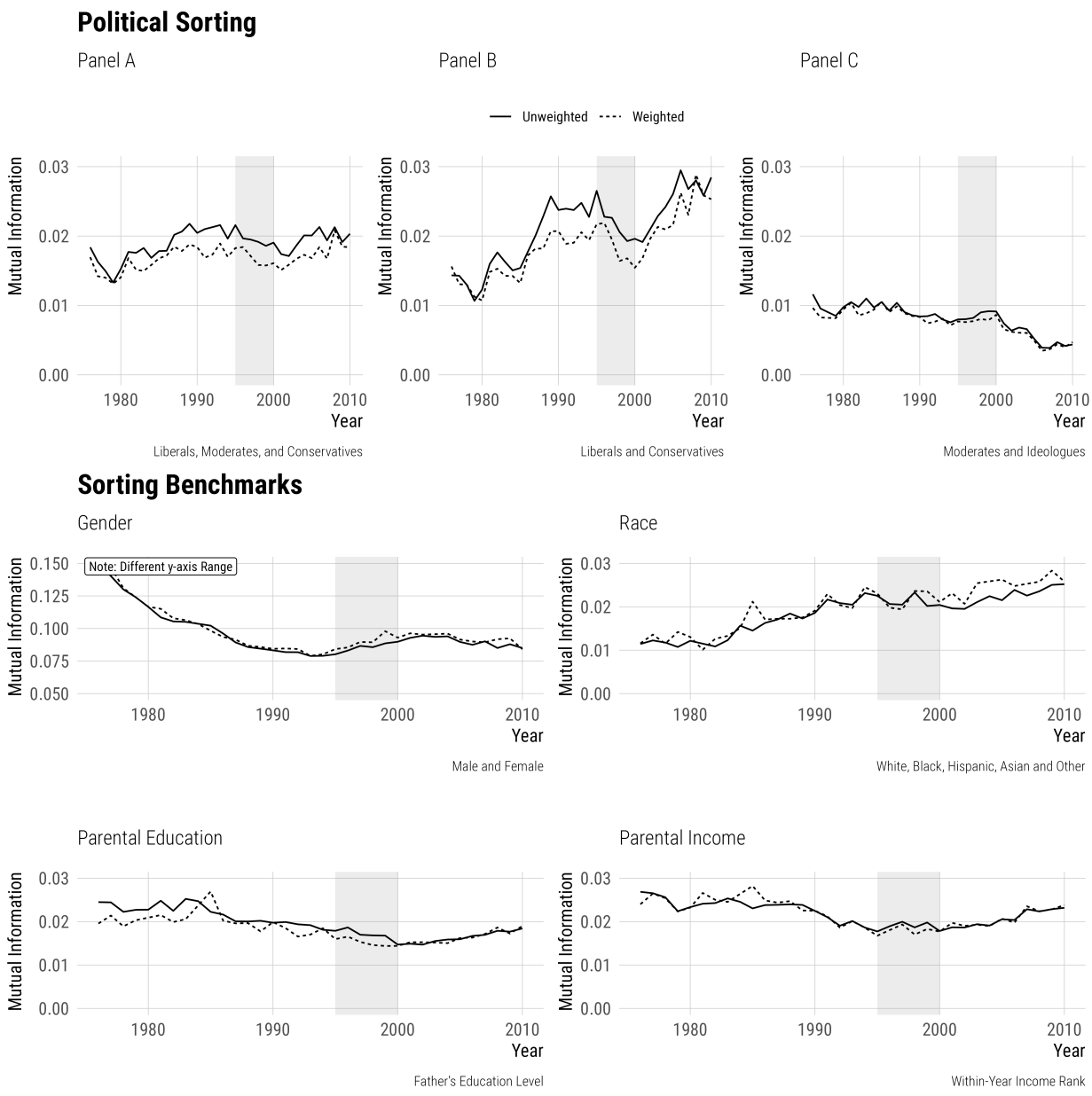

Figure 2: Temporal Trajectories in Ideological Sorting

Notes: The figure presents changes in political sorting over time, and benchmarks that magnitude against sorting by gender, race, parental education, and parental income. Each panel plots yearly M values between occupational preferences and the relevant grouping variable (described on the bottom-right corner of each panel), as weighted and unweighted series. Participants who are "undecided" in their career aspirations are excluded. The shaded band marks 1995–2000 to highlight temporary changes in the occupational preference instrument in the surveys. "Ideologues" in Panel C refer to an alternative coding where liberals and conservatives are combined into one group for comparisons with moderates.

that decompose changes in M into shifts in marginals versus changes in the occupation-ideology relationship itself. These additional analyses are presented in the Supplementary Materials.

Figure 2 presents the level of political sorting in occupational preferences over time. The top panels vary how moderates are incorporated into the analyses: Panel A uses all three ideology categories, Panel B restricts the TFS sample to liberals and conservatives only, and Panel C contrasts moderates against ideologues (liberals and conservatives combined). The bottom panels provide benchmarks against sorting along gender, race, parental education, and parental household income. I shade the 1995–2000 period to emphasize the substantial changes in the instrument in this time window.

Figure 2 suggests that the overall magnitude of political sorting is strong and consequential. To anchor this claim, consider the 2010 estimates of mutual information alongside common benchmarks. When all three ideology groups are included, the magnitude of ideological sorting is roughly 22% of the magnitude of gender sorting—by far the largest axis of occupational segregation in general. Against other benchmarks, the findings are even more striking: political sorting is 71% as large as racial sorting, while it is 97% and 77% as large as sorting through parental education and household income. Restricting the focus to liberal and conservative students amplifies these figures considerably, with ideological sorting rising to 30% as large as gender sorting, 98% as large as racial sorting, 1.3 times that of education sorting, and 1.06 times that of income sorting. These findings highlight that political ideology is a powerful axis of sorting comparable in magnitude to race and class.

How do these patterns change over the years? I find that the temporal trajectories depend critically on how moderates are treated. When all three ideology groups are included (Panel A), M remains virtually flat from the mid-1970s through 2010. Excluding moderates (Panel B), however, reveals a starkly different picture: political sorting among liberals and conservatives nearly doubles over the same window, suggesting that ideological polarization in occupational preferences is concentrated in the liberal–conservative contrast. Consistent with this interpretation, Panel C shows that sorting between moderates and ideologues decreases, albeit slightly, over time. This suggests that political sorting among students relies primarily on liberals and conservatives diverging across years.

In Supplementary Materials C, I investigate these results further. First, I rule out alternative explanations, including finite-sample noise and variations in marginal distributions. Second, I examine policy issues as an alternative to ideological identity, showing which occupations hold more or less extreme stances on specific policy questions relative to their baseline, as well as exploring increased sorting into ideological labels. Finally, I assess the relevance of these estimates by comparing stated

aspirations with realized partisan distributions in the labor market, finding a cross-occupation correlation of 90%. Across all these analyses, the substantive findings support Expectation 1.

4.2 Sociodemographic Background and College Selection Pipeline

I now turn to the question of what accounts for political differentiation in occupational preferences. I consider two explanations. It may be that ideological sorting is largely a reflection of pre-existing sociodemographic differences, and much of political sorting is attributable to these compositional differences. Alternatively, the association may be organized through the educational pipeline itself: people sort into colleges and fields of study, which then organize their career aspirations.

I address both questions jointly within a shared statistical framework. Specifically, I decompose M such that I separate the share of M coming from an actor's ideology in a way that can be attributable to observable predictors from the share of M that persists net of these factors, following a general strategy proposed in Åslund and Nordström Skans (2009). In doing so, I estimate the propensity to identify as a liberal, moderate, or conservative given a set of factors, $\Pr(P = p \mid X)$, using a logistic regression.[13] This strategy helps me construct a counterfactual occupation-by-ideology table that holds the occupational distributions fixed but replaces the observed ideology with the predicted ideology. Therefore, the counterfactual M_C computed from such a table captures the ideology and occupation dependence implied purely by antecedent empirical attributes X. The end quantity of this protocol is what I call residual mutual information, or M_R, which is represented as

$$M_R = M - M_C \tag{2}$$

This approach is best understood as a descriptive *decomposition* rather than a causal identification strategy. M_R captures the ideological sorting that persists after removing the pathways associated with X, allowing me to examine how much of the aggregate association covaries with X.

Figure 3 presents the main results in the context of sociodemographic characteristics. In each row,

[13] More precisely, I use pairwise logits for predicting liberal, moderate, and conservative identification (then combining these estimates via softmax, which allows me to avoid computationally intensive multinomial logit), while using a simple logistic regression predicting the propensity to identify as liberal for the two-category analyses.

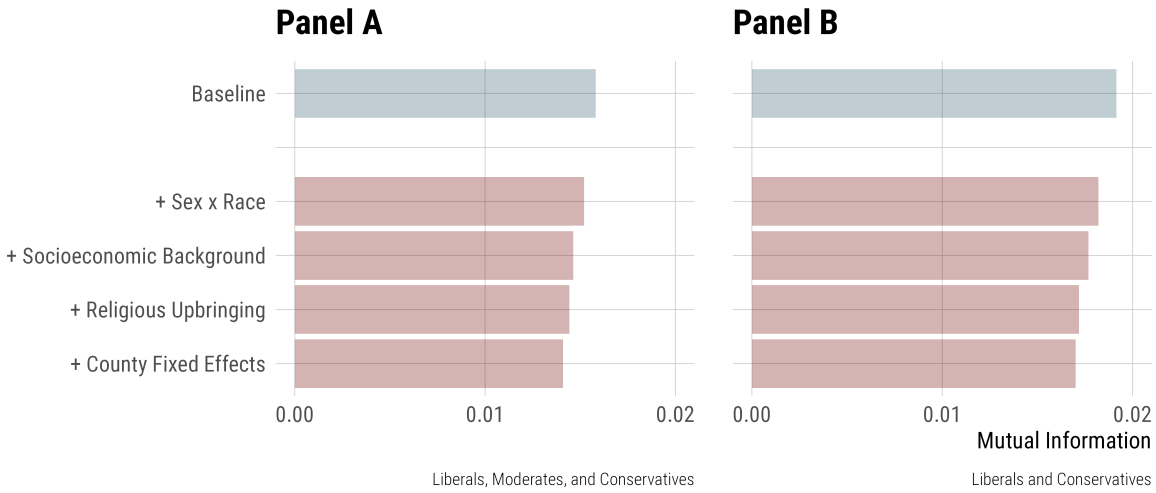

Figure 3: Decomposition of Ideological Sorting by Sociodemographic Characteristics

Notes: The figure presents a decomposition of ideological sorting in occupational preferences by sociodemographic background characteristics. Baseline refers to observed M, while other rows present residual M after sequentially expanding the set of predictors used to construct counterfactual ideology distributions. Panel A uses all three ideology categories, while Panel B restricts the sample to liberals and conservatives. Missing values are included in the estimations.

I sequentially expand the predictor set X: (1) sex interacted with race, (2) parental socioeconomic status (measured through fixed effects for household income rank, educational attainment of the mother and the father, as well as their reported occupations), (3) religious upbringing (measured through parental religious affiliation), and (4) county of residence.[14] The figure suggests that these characteristics explain little: the residual mutual information remains close to the baseline in both panels, implying that political sorting is not an artifact of prior sociodemographic differences.

In Figure 4, I turn to the question of college selection pipeline. Once again, I expand the predictor set sequentially, including first the high-school GPA (alongside sex, race, household income rank, father's and mother's educational attainment, and father's and mother's occupations), then adding college fixed effects, and finally adding intended major. The results reveal a striking pattern. While high-school GPA reduces the association only slightly, implying that prior differences in ability and academic preparation explain little, college fixed effects explain a much stronger portion, consistent with recent research that shows that political sorting into institutions is consequential (Acton et al. 2025). Intended major, however, accounts for even a larger share, which suggests that a substantial

[14] I assigned all missing observations to an explicit "missing" category for estimation.

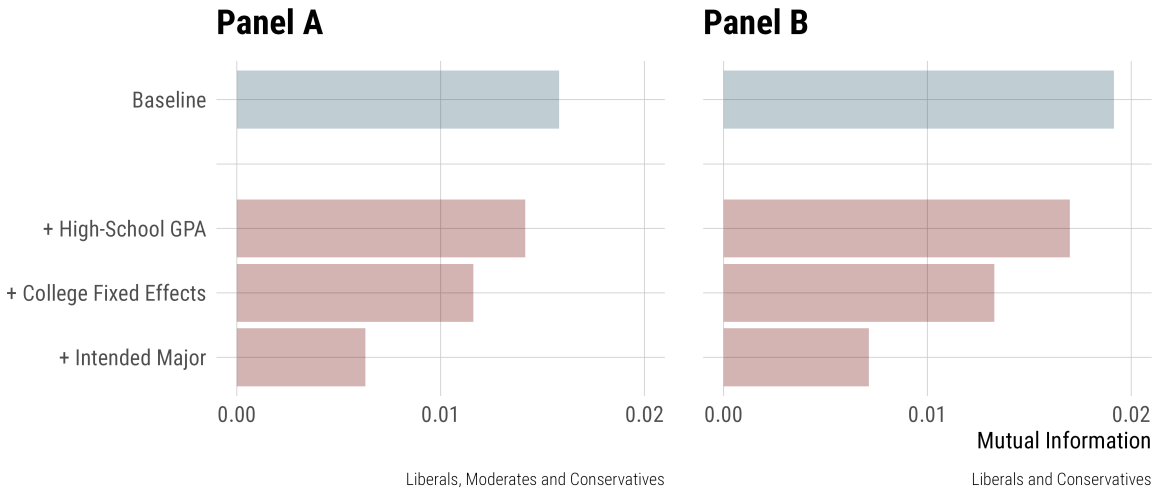

Figure 4: Decomposition of Ideological Sorting by the College Selection Pipeline

Notes: The figure presents a decomposition of ideological sorting in occupational preferences by educational selection and college pathways. Baseline refers to observed M, while other rows present residual M after sequentially expanding the set of predictors used to construct counterfactual ideology distributions. Panel A uses all three ideology categories, while Panel B restricts the sample to liberals and conservatives. Missing values are included in the estimations.

portion of ideological differentiation is organized through academic field-sorting. Yet, even within universities and intended majors, ideology remains informative of occupational preferences.[15]

Together, these findings indicate that the association between political ideology and occupational preferences is substantially organized within the institutional selection pipeline. Students sort into ideologically distinct institutions and academic fields, and these choices account for a meaningful share of ideological differentiation in occupational aspirations. Yet, it is notable that ideology still has a strong independent predictive power over occupational preferences even among a restrictive composition of students attending the same institution *and* pursuing the same field of study.

5 Ideology as a Luxury Good

I now turn to the question of whether ideological sorting in occupational preferences varies across socioeconomic background, testing the existence of an income gradient in ideological sorting.

[15]Since intended majors and intended careers are elicited on the same survey, intended major can partly be a proxy for the outcome. Hence, this result is best interpreted as evidence that sorting is *organized* within academic fields.

5.1 The Income Gradient in Ideological Sorting

In Expectation 2, I predict that political ideology and occupational aspirations covary more strongly among individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. To explore this prediction, I compute mutual information M between ideology and aspirations within each parental income decile, using within-year parental income rank as the measure of socioeconomic position. If the relative salience of political congruence increases with socioeconomic background, mutual information M between ideology and aspirations should rise monotonically as a function of parental income.[16]

Figure 5 presents the findings, using weighted and unweighted samples across columns, and varying ideology groups across rows. These results provide strong support for Expectation 2: students from the highest-income families present roughly two to three times the level of ideological sorting in occupational aspirations compared to students from the lowest-income families. Once we focus on the difference between Panels A and B, we can also observe important differences, as excluding moderates both raises the overall magnitude of M and steepens the income gradient.

In Supplementary Materials D, I explore this finding further. First, I test mechanical explanations, including differential trends across time and differences in occupational and ideological entropies across income deciles. Second, I test the robustness of the gradient using a CPI-adjusted parental income measure rather than within-year decile ranks. Third, I ask whether the income gradient is sensitive to differences in parental educational attainment and parental occupations. Across these diverse specifications, the income gradient holds, providing strong support for Expectation 2.

5.2 Expressive versus Material Preferences

While Figure 5 presents strong evidence that ideological sorting rises with household income, that pattern, in itself, cannot establish that ideological congruence becomes more important as material security increases. A simpler explanation is that high-income liberals and conservatives differ more strongly than low-income ones in the kinds of occupational attributes they value. If this is indeed the case, the income gradient could partly reflect differences in such valuations, which show up as

[16] Note that parental income may also affect the distribution of ideological preferences, which could mechanically affect M across income deciles. In Supplementary Materials D, I demonstrate that normalizing M by within-decile ideology entropy preserves the income gradient, ruling out this compositional alternative.

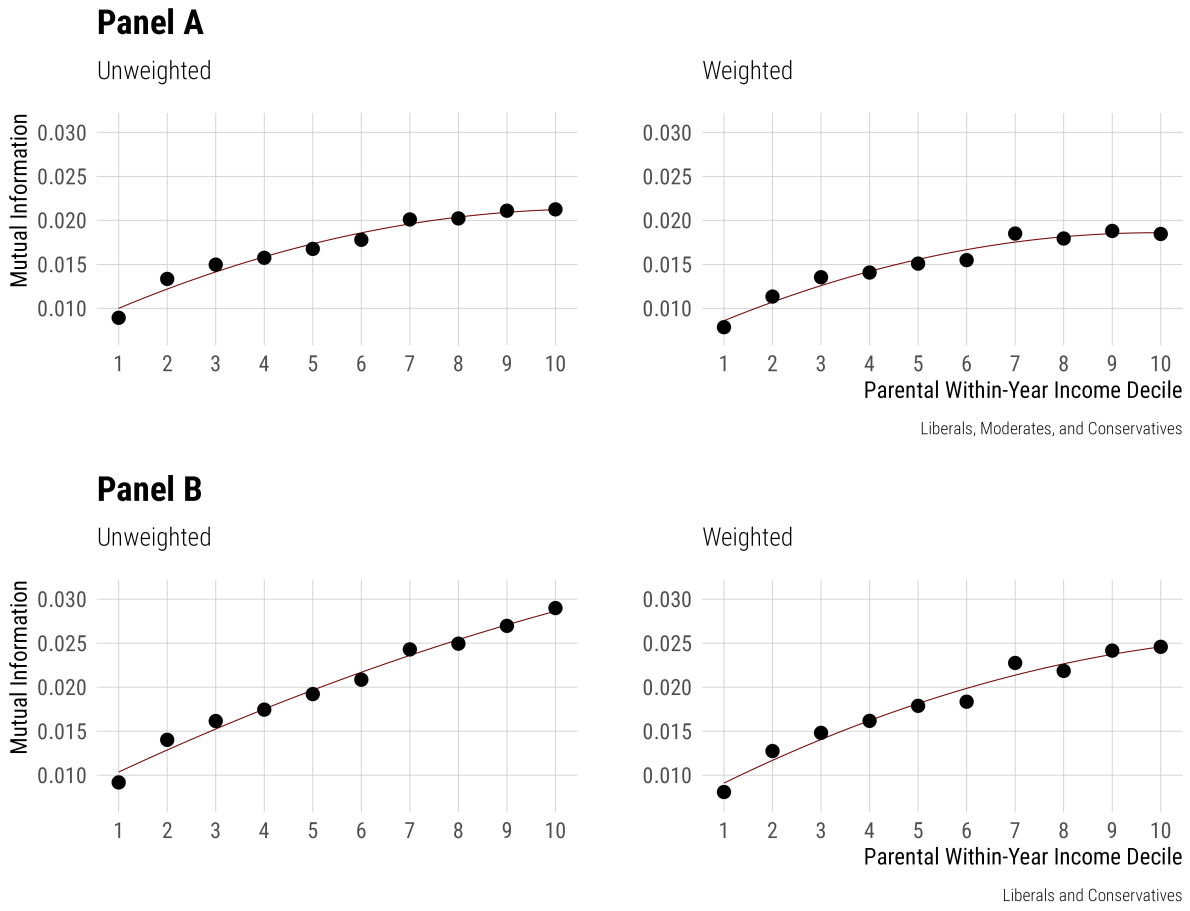

Figure 5: Ideological Sorting Across Socioeconomic Background

Notes: The figure presents mutual information M between political ideology and occupational preferences across household income, which I calculate as within-year income rank across 1976-2010. The estimates include bootstrap confidence intervals from 500 draws, as well as a quadratic fit to describe the overall income gradient. Panel A: findings using all three categories (Liberal, Moderate, Conservative). Panel B: Liberal and Conservative only.

ideological differences. To properly address this issue, we need to ask whether the income gradient persists after accounting for differences in how students evaluate occupational attributes.

To do so, I draw on data from two survey years (1989 and 1990). In these two years, students rated thirteen career attributes—including material concerns such as high anticipated earnings or career advancement, as well as intrinsic dimensions such as the ability to work with ideas and making an important contribution to society—from *not important* to *essential*, providing importance judgments about each. I regress each standardized attribute rating on ideology, household income rank that I 0–1 normalized, and their interaction, adjusting for year, sex, race, and age fixed effects. This gives,

Table 1: Ideological Gap in Occupational Attributes Across Low and High Income

Attribute	Gap at Low Income	Gap at High Income
Job Openings Generally Available	0.11	0.18
Rapid Career Advancement Possible	0.08	0.33
High Anticipated Earnings	0.07	0.45
Well-Respected Prestigious Occupation	0.08	0.40
Great Deal of Independence	−0.23	−0.16
Chance for Steady Progress	−0.04	0.11
Can Make Important Contribution to Society	−0.10	−0.23
Can Avoid Pressure	−0.02	−0.09
Can Work with Ideas	−0.21	−0.32
Can Be Helpful to Others	−0.05	−0.18
Able to Work with People	−0.03	−0.04
Intrinsic Interest in Field	−0.08	−0.16
The Work Would Be Challenging	−0.07	−0.09

Notes: The table presents the conservative–liberal gap in evaluations at the bottom (income rank = 0) and top (income rank = 1) of the household income distribution, calculated from a regression where attribute evaluations are regressed on ideology, household income rank, and their interaction, adjusting for year, sex x race, and age. In each estimation, the outcome variables are standardized to have a mean of 0 and a SD of 1. Positive values imply conservatives rate the attribute higher than liberals, and negative values indicate the reverse. Data from 1989–1990. N = 242,706.

for each attribute, the ideology gap at the bottom versus the top of the income distribution. Table 1 presents these findings, showing several important patterns. We see that the conservative-liberal gap in material attributes is modest at low income but expands substantially at the top. Similarly, liberals consistently place greater weight on intrinsic and altruistic attributes, and this gap widens with parental income. These patterns raise the possibility that part of the observed income gradient in sorting reflects these differences, rather than the relative salience of political ideology.

Figure 6 tests whether the income gradient is primarily an artifact of such differential gaps between liberals and conservatives. Using the 1989–1990 sample, I replicate the residual mutual information exercise I introduced in Section 4 within each parental income decile[17], now accounting for the full set of thirteen career-attribute ratings. If the income gradient primarily reflects these compositional differences, then accounting for them should substantially flatten the income profile over M. Figure 6 shows that this is not the case. Conditioning on the attributes reduces the overall level of sorting, but the income gradient is almost entirely preserved. In other words, while occupational-attribute

[17]Of course, the attribute ratings are themselves potentially endogenous to ideology. This suggests the residual M might understate the "true" ideology effect, because I am removing some of the variation through which ideology operates.

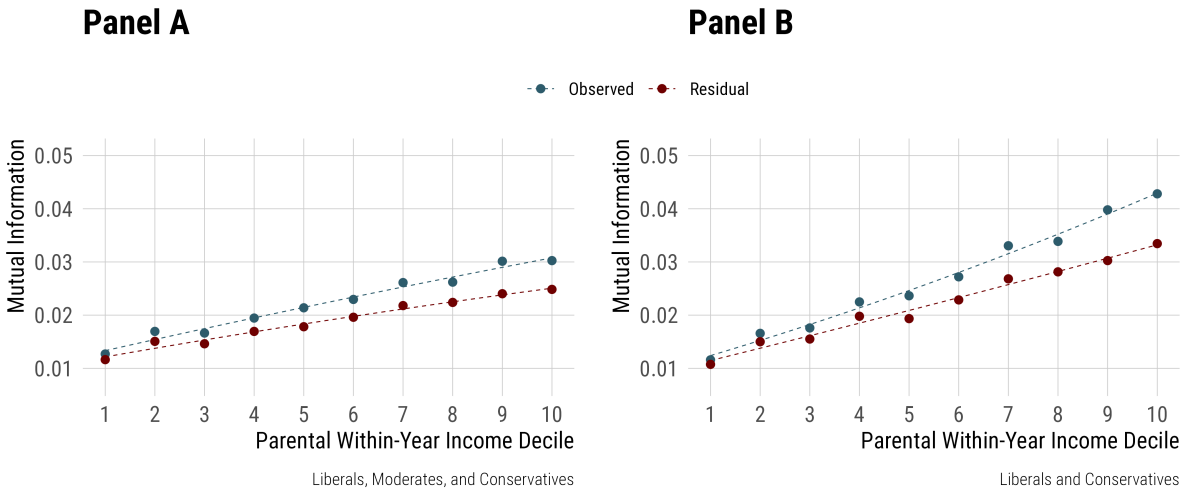

Figure 6: The Income Gradient in Ideological Sorting

Notes: The figure presents observed and residual mutual information between ideology and aspirations across parental income deciles in the 1989–1990 sample. Residual M is computed using the same decomposition strategy described in Section 4, now applied within each income decile using the set of thirteen standardized career-attribute ratings. Panel A uses all three ideology categories, while Panel B restricts the sample to liberals and conservatives.

valuations may explain a portion of the observed ideological sorting, they do not fully explain the gradient, providing further evidence for the differential salience of ideological congruence.

6 Discussion and Conclusions

Taken together, the results presented in this article support the idea that ideology is a consequential force in the formation of occupational aspirations, though its effect is unequally distributed across the stratification system. Using survey data on college freshmen entering U.S. institutions between 1976 and 2010, I showed that political ideology systematically structures occupational aspirations before labor market entry, with its magnitude comparable to well-established axes of sorting such as race and socioeconomic status. I further showed that this association is not reducible to prior sociodemographic differences while it is substantially organized within the college selection pipeline. Most consequentially, I showed that congruence effects are significantly stronger among students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, arguing that the latitude to act on one's political ideology is itself stratified, making personal ideology a luxury good for occupational aspirations.

These findings suggest that political worldviews shape which careers individuals aspire to pursue well before workplace socialization or employer-level sorting, and that selection is a consequential mechanism of political stratification in economic life, complementing existing work that documents ideological sorting in the labor market setting (e.g., Chinoy and Koenen 2024; Colonnelli et al. 2025; Frake et al. 2023; Kagan et al. 2025). These patterns are consistent with the notion that occupations carry "cultural reputations" (Weeden and Grusky 2005) and structure preference formation, with ideological congruence as a meaningful consideration in occupational choice (Akerlof and Kranton 2000; Rosen 1986). However, the results also suggest that this self-selection process is not uniform. The fact that ideology matters more for higher-SES students implies that political sorting operates through different channels depending on an actor's position in the stratification system.

6.1 Theoretical and Empirical Limitations

One substantive limitation of this article is the causal status of political ideology in the formation of occupational preferences. Since ideology and preferences are measured simultaneously at college entry, I cannot rule out the possibility that students form preferences first and then adopt politically congruent positions. Such *anticipatory socialization*, the notion that committing to a career leads one to align their political commitments with their perceptions of what the proper political position is for that career, is a plausible alternative, and one path that this article cannot adjudicate. It is thus possible that students, anticipating cultural matching in hiring (Rivera 2012) or deciding that their political self-understandings should capture what occupations signal (Akerlof and Kranton 2000), shift their political views accordingly. That said, this scenario cannot account for the luxury goods finding. If ideology is an effect of aspirations, it is unclear why higher-SES students would be more likely to align their political ideologies with their aspirations than lower-SES students.

Similar design issues preclude a clean interpretation of the luxury goods pattern, for which there are two reasonable alternatives. First, it might be that higher-SES students hold more accurate (or more differentiated) perceptions (Lynn and Ellerbach 2017; Lynn, Shi, and Kiley 2025), generating stronger sorting without a real shift in the weights placed on congruence. While this is a plausible alternative, it is also slightly demanding: it requires not just that higher-SES individuals are better informed, but that perceptual differentiation scales continuously with income. Second, higher-SES

students may face a larger range of variation in their choice sets, purely because they consider many options feasible. Since I only observe revealed preferences in this data, the relevant composition of the choice set—as perceived by the individual decision-maker—is unobserved in this article.

It is also important to note that the population I study, college freshmen entering U.S. institutions, is a selected group, definitely more affluent and higher-achieving than their non-college peers. This selection has important implications for the main findings. Considering that college environments are much more amenable to expressive choice and political change (Brońić and Miles 2021; Goldberg and Stein 2018; Scott 2022), college students are, arguably, the population most likely to treat occupational choice as an expressive act in the first place. This consideration implies that among non-college youth, where material constraints are presumably more binding and the occupational choice set is more limited, we may see much smaller congruence effects. Similarly, the coverage of this article ends in 2010, a period before the sharp intensification of political polarization in American life (DellaPosta 2020). Whether the patterns documented here have strengthened, weakened, or fundamentally changed in the subsequent years is a question that future data can address.

6.2 Implications for Theory and Research

Despite these limitations, these findings have several theoretical implications. I show that a meaningful share of the political composition of occupations is established before individuals enter the workforce. Existing accounts have documented the extent and magnitude of political sorting across firms and occupations (Chinoy and Koenen 2024), though leaving the question of how early in the life-course these processes begin unanswered (but see Meriläinen and Mitrunen 2025). This article argues that firm-level processes operate on a population that is already ideologically sorted along occupational lines. While the evidence presented here does not exclude demand-side mechanisms, it introduces the development of occupational preferences as a clear supply-side mechanism.

More broadly, these findings propose that political ideology is a cultural force in the stratification of occupational life, functioning as an organizing principle through which people come to envision which careers are desirable in the first place (Doepke and Zilibotti 2008). In this sense, I argue that political ideology is a structuring force for what people want (Vaisey 2010). At the same time, the

luxury goods finding complicates any straightforward account of ideology as a universal force in preference formation. If political congruence is indeed an expressive good whose salience increases with material security, it means that the politics of occupational choice relates to broader arguments about how expressive individualism is distributed unequally across the economic structure.

Ultimately, this article suggests that political ideology is not merely a correlate of where individuals end up in the labor market, but a consequential force that shapes economic outcomes. The tension I emphasized throughout this article, however, is that the capacity to act on such commitments is itself stratified. The consequence is a labor market in which the political *character* of occupations is disproportionately defined by those at the top of the income distribution. Whether such a dynamic deepens political polarization or dampens it is an unresolved question, but its implications for how we theorize the relationship between culture and inequality are, I believe, quite substantial.

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Supplemental Materials for

The Politics of Aspiration: Ideology as a Luxury Good in Occupational Choice

Turgut Keskintürk

April, 2026

Table of Contents

1 Supplementary Materials A: Data and Measurement

The Freshman Survey (TFS) is a large-scale survey study, designed to capture first-year students at U.S. institutions of higher education granting baccalaureate-level degrees or above, as described in the *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System* at the Department of Education. Starting with its inception in the 1960s, more than 2,000 organizations have participated in these surveys at different time points, with more than 200,000 students in each year. The breadth, granularity, and timing of this data makes TFS an ideal candidate for an empirical examination of preference formation.

I made several decisions while processing these surveys for analyses. First, I excluded participants who were aged 21 or older at the time of the survey (4.83% of the sample) to focus on young adults. Second, I excluded surveys completed before 1976 because the survey item used to elicit students' occupational preferences had substantial revisions during this window. Third, I only included data with complete responses to the occupation and ideology questions (leading to 12% reduction). Table A1 presents the basic descriptive statistics for weighted observations, unweighted observations, and observations with missing weights, suggesting no meaningful differences across groups.

Table A1: Descriptive Statistics in TFS

	Unweighted	Weighted	Weight Missing
Characteristic	**N = 9,506,408**	**N = 6,696,391**	**N = 2,810,017**
Gender			
Male	45.3%	46.7%	45.0%
Female	54.7%	53.3%	55.0%
Age	18.27 (0.55)	18.23 (0.50)	18.39 (0.66)
Race			
White	79.0%	78.7%	77.3%
Black	6.9%	8.4%	8.1%
Hispanic	3.4%	3.3%	4.1%
Asian	5.3%	4.4%	4.9%
Other	5.4%	5.2%	5.7%
Religion			
Protestant	42.4%	44.8%	43.4%
Catholic	32.0%	31.2%	31.1%
Jewish	3.8%	3.0%	3.3%
Other	6.8%	7.1%	7.8%
None	14.9%	14.0%	14.3%
Parental Income Rank	5.55 (2.85)	5.35 (2.81)	5.20 (2.83)

(*continued*)

Characteristic	Unweighted N = 9,506,408	Weighted N = 6,696,391	Weight Missing N = 2,810,017
Father's Education			
Grammar School or Less	2.9%	3.1%	3.8%
Some High School	5.1%	5.6%	6.7%
High School Graduate	19.7%	21.9%	22.9%
Postsecondary School	4.1%	4.3%	4.4%
Some College	14.1%	15.0%	14.9%
College Degree	25.9%	25.6%	23.9%
Some Graduate School	3.0%	2.7%	2.6%
Graduate Degree	25.2%	21.8%	20.8%
Political Ideology			
Liberal	28.6%	27.1%	27.3%
Moderate	49.0%	50.9%	50.9%
Conservative	22.4%	22.0%	21.7%
Type of Institution			
2-Year College	2.5%	0.0%	8.4%
4-Year College	52.0%	55.4%	51.0%
University	45.5%	44.6%	40.6%
Historically Black College	2.6%	4.1%	3.5%

TFS uses 26 stratification units to group the participating organizations based on institutional type (e.g., four-year colleges or universities), organizational race, selectivity, and financial control. The participation, however, is voluntary at the institution level, so these surveys are not nationally representative. To address this limitation, TFS provides sampling weights that reflect the stratification design and applies the requirement that the institutions survey at least 65% of their students.

The 2016 *Cooperative Institutional Research Program* (CIRP) report presents long-standing trends in TFS, as well as more details about the research methodology, the construction of sampling weights, and comparability across time (see Eagan et al. 2016). The original survey instruments, codebooks, and institution-level participation status across years are accessible from the electronic Instruments and Codebooks page at the HERI website. The original variable names and the corresponding data files, as well as the harmonization scheme I used for occupational crosswalks, can be found in the replication repo, which also features the publicly available HERI datasets from 1966 to 2010.

I present the distribution of occupational preferences and political ideology across decades in Table A2 and Table A3, respectively, showing significant, though modest, trends over the window.

Table A2: Occupational Preferences Across Decades in TFS

Characteristic	**1970** N = 1,003,428	**1980** N = 2,386,946	**1990** N = 2,691,896	**2000** N = 3,204,489	**2010** N = 219,649
Occupational Preferences					
Accountant	5.4%	5.1%	3.3%	2.2%	2.1%
Actor or Entertainer	1.2%	1.1%	1.4%	1.6%	1.3%
Administrative Assistant	1.3%	0.7%	0.5%	0.6%	0.6%
Artist	1.8%	1.7%	1.7%	2.2%	2.0%
Business Manager/Executive	8.6%	11.6%	8.2%	8.1%	6.5%
Business Owner/Entrepreneur	2.0%	2.9%	2.5%	3.0%	2.6%
Clergy	0.6%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%
Clinical Psychologist	1.3%	1.5%	1.9%	1.5%	1.6%
College Faculty	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.6%	0.6%
Computer Programmer/Developer	2.5%	4.1%	1.4%	2.1%	1.6%
Dentist/Orthodontist	1.3%	0.8%	0.5%	0.9%	1.2%
Dietitian/Nutritionist	0.5%	0.2%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%
Engineer	8.9%	10.4%	4.7%	6.4%	8.2%
Farmer or Forester	0.7%	0.4%	3.4%	0.9%	0.2%
Foreign Service Worker	0.9%	1.4%	0.8%	0.9%	1.1%
Homemaker	0.2%	0.1%	0.4%	0.2%	0.1%
Interior Designer	0.6%	0.5%	0.2%	0.4%	0.2%
Laborer	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%
Lawyer/Judge	6.3%	6.3%	5.3%	4.5%	4.1%
Medical Doctor/Surgeon	5.9%	6.0%	8.1%	7.0%	8.2%
Medical/Dental Assistant	1.4%	0.6%	1.5%	0.2%	0.2%
Military	1.3%	1.2%	0.9%	1.1%	1.5%
Musician	1.5%	1.2%	1.4%	1.5%	1.6%
Natural Resource Specialist	1.2%	0.5%	2.0%	0.7%	0.3%
Optometrist	0.3%	0.2%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%
Other	9.7%	9.3%	12.5%	13.8%	12.6%
Pharmacist	0.9%	0.8%	1.1%	1.7%	2.0%
Protective Services	1.0%	0.7%	1.1%	0.9%	1.1%
Registered Nurse	3.7%	2.5%	2.3%	3.2%	4.4%

(*continued*)

Characteristic	**1970** N = 1,003,428	**1980** N = 2,386,946	**1990** N = 2,691,896	**2000** N = 3,204,489	**2010** N = 219,649
Research Scientist	3.0%	2.2%	1.8%	2.0%	2.8%
Retail Sales	1.0%	1.2%	0.9%	1.0%	0.7%
School Counselor	0.3%	0.3%	0.8%	0.4%	0.3%
School Principal/Superintendent	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.1%	0.0%
Secondary School Teacher	2.8%	2.4%	3.9%	4.0%	3.5%
Skilled Trades	0.7%	0.5%	0.7%	0.3%	0.2%
Social Worker	2.2%	1.1%	1.8%	1.0%	1.0%
Therapist	2.2%	2.1%	3.1%	2.6%	3.4%
Undecided	11.3%	12.3%	12.8%	15.9%	16.1%
Urban Planner/Architect	1.4%	1.3%	1.2%	1.1%	0.7%
Veterinarian	1.3%	1.0%	1.4%	1.1%	1.2%
Writer/Producer/Director	2.6%	2.9%	2.7%	3.0%	2.9%

Table A3: Political Ideology Across Decades in TFS

Characteristic	**1970** N = 1,003,428	**1980** N = 2,386,946	**1990** N = 2,691,896	**2000** N = 3,204,489	**2010** N = 219,649
Political Ideology					
Liberal	28.3%	24.9%	28.4%	31.4%	31.6%
Moderate	53.9%	52.9%	49.0%	45.1%	44.2%
Conservative	17.8%	22.3%	22.6%	23.5%	24.2%

2 Supplementary Materials B: Survey Items for Political Issue Positions

I present the full question wordings for the issue items in Table B1.

Table B1: Response Distributions Across Political Issues

Survey Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	N
A national health care plan is needed to cover everybody's medical costs.	10.8	23.4	42.9	22.9	5,934,496
Abortion should be legal.	25.3	16.0	28.8	29.9	8,788,440
It is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships.	37.4	30.1	18.1	14.4	8,787,850
Marijuana should be legalized.	40.8	25.6	22.6	10.9	9,054,474
Racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America.	38.2	43.5	15.6	2.7	5,795,891
The activities of married women are best confined to the home and family.	53.7	25.1	14.6	6.6	7,585,153
The death penalty should be abolished.	34.7	35.6	17.3	12.4	8,284,648
The federal government is not doing enough to control environmental pollution.	2.4	15.4	48.5	33.7	6,746,425
The federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns.	6.2	13.5	38.2	42.1	5,983,517
The federal government should raise taxes to reduce the deficit.	23.8	47.0	24.8	4.3	4,323,934
There is too much concern in the courts for the rights of criminals.	7.8	28.4	43.4	20.4	8,343,882
Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now.	12.1	25.2	37.1	25.6	7,813,807

3 Supplementary Materials C: Alternative Analyses for Sorting

3.1 Ruling Out Mechanical Artefacts

Check 1. The expected M under independence is effectively zero in every year, which suggests that the observed values are not due to finite-sample noise and comparable with minimal bias.

Check 2. The "effective number" of occupational categories, which I calculated as the exponential of Shannon entropy, remained largely stable across this window, ranging from 21 to 26, while the entropy of occupational distributions (ranging from 3 to 3.2) as well as political ideology (ranging from 1 to 1.1) minimally varied over time. Taken together, these values suggest that the trajectories in political sorting are not just mechanical artifacts of shifts in the marginal distributions. To show an alternative specification, I decompose changes in M into three pathways in Figure C1[1], showing that the divergence between liberals and conservatives is a structural change, rather than an artifact of changing marginals. I also show that analyses with normalized M values—which normalize the observed M scores with the entropy of occupations (Figure C2) and the entropy of ideology groups or relevant benchmark categories (Figure C3)—provide the same substantive conclusions.[2]

3.2 Investigating Policy Issues for Occupational Choice

Check 1. It might be that some of the trends reflect better sorting into ideological labels, rather than stronger politicization of occupational aspirations. Considering that political ideology is now more constrained than before (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Levendusky 2009), the temporal trends we observe in Figure 2 may reflect a more general sorting trajectory. In Figure C4, I present alternative analyses that use substantive issue positions to predict occupational sorting. These findings show that these issue positions are predictive of occupational choice, yet many of these effects are stable across time. Considering that the increasing constraint hypothesis is supported in this data as well (Figure C5), it is likely that a share of these trends results from increased political sorting.

[1] I use an informative visualization strategy introduced in Sobchuk and Beheim (2025) for representing these pathways.

[2] Using normalized M scores for benchmarking provides broadly consistent findings. Results from Figure C2 suggest that ideological sorting is 27% as large as gender sorting, 90% as large as racial sorting, 1.2 times of education sorting, and 94% as large as parental income sorting. Results from Figure C3 suggest that ideological sorting is 18% as large as gender sorting, 96% as large as racial sorting, and almost half as socioeconomic sorting.

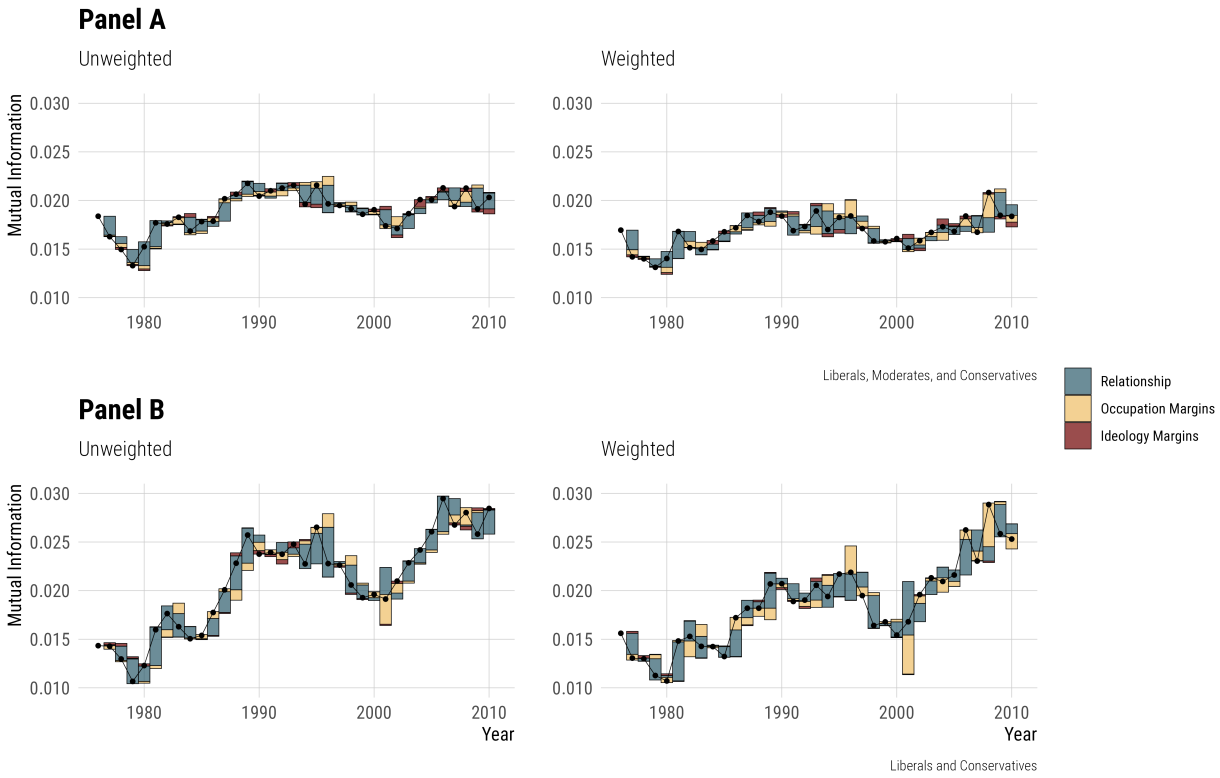

Figure C1: The Decomposition of Temporal Trajectories in Ideological Sorting

Notes: The figure presents the decomposition of consecutive year-to-year changes in political sorting into (1) change due to occupation marginals, (2) change due to ideology marginals, and (3) change due to the occupation-ideology relation. For each adjacent pair of M, the change in M is decomposed with a Shapley procedure. Bars are represented as floating contributions around M, stacking positive and negative contributions separately by survey window, while the black line presents the observed M values. Panel A: Liberal/Moderate/Conservative; Panel B: Liberal/Conservative only.

Check 2. I also analyzed the average political position at the level of occupations and issue positions. Figure C6 provides a heatmap of occupation-level deviations from the grand issue mean on each of the twelve policy issues, where positive values indicate more conservative positions while negative values more liberal ones, showing how political differentiation spans multiple issue domains, with occupations that skew conservative on one policy tending to do so on others as well.

3.3 The Labor Market Relevance of Aspirations

It is plausible to argue that, while there are strong differences in preferences, these differences are not likely to translate into observed labor market realities. To see whether this critique is important, I compared realized partisan distributions in the labor market in 2012 to the observed ideological

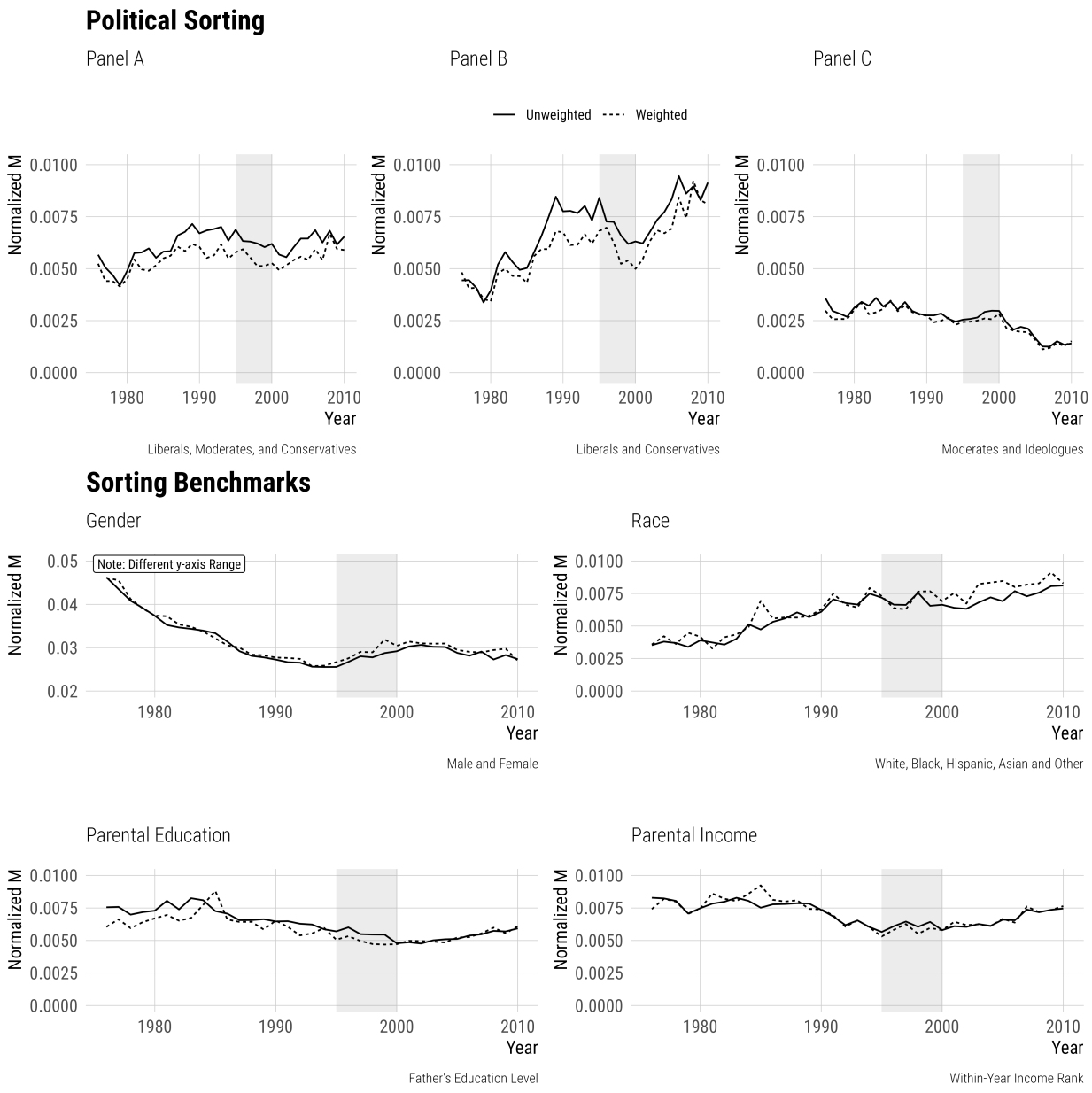

Figure C2: Temporal Trajectories in Ideological Sorting, Normalized by Occupational Entropy

Notes: The figure presents changes in political sorting over time, and benchmarks that magnitude against sorting by gender, race, parental education, and parental income. Each panel plots yearly H values between occupational preferences and the relevant grouping variable (described on the bottom-right corner of each panel), as weighted and unweighted series. Participants who are "undecided" in their career aspirations are excluded. The shaded band marks 1995–2000 to highlight temporary changes in the occupational preference instrument in the surveys. In contrast to the figure I present in the main manuscript, this figure normalizes the M values by the entropy of occupations within each year.

distributions in the 2010 TFS data. The finding from this analysis is presented in Figure C7. I found a strong correlation between the two measures, with a cross-occupation correlation of 90%. This

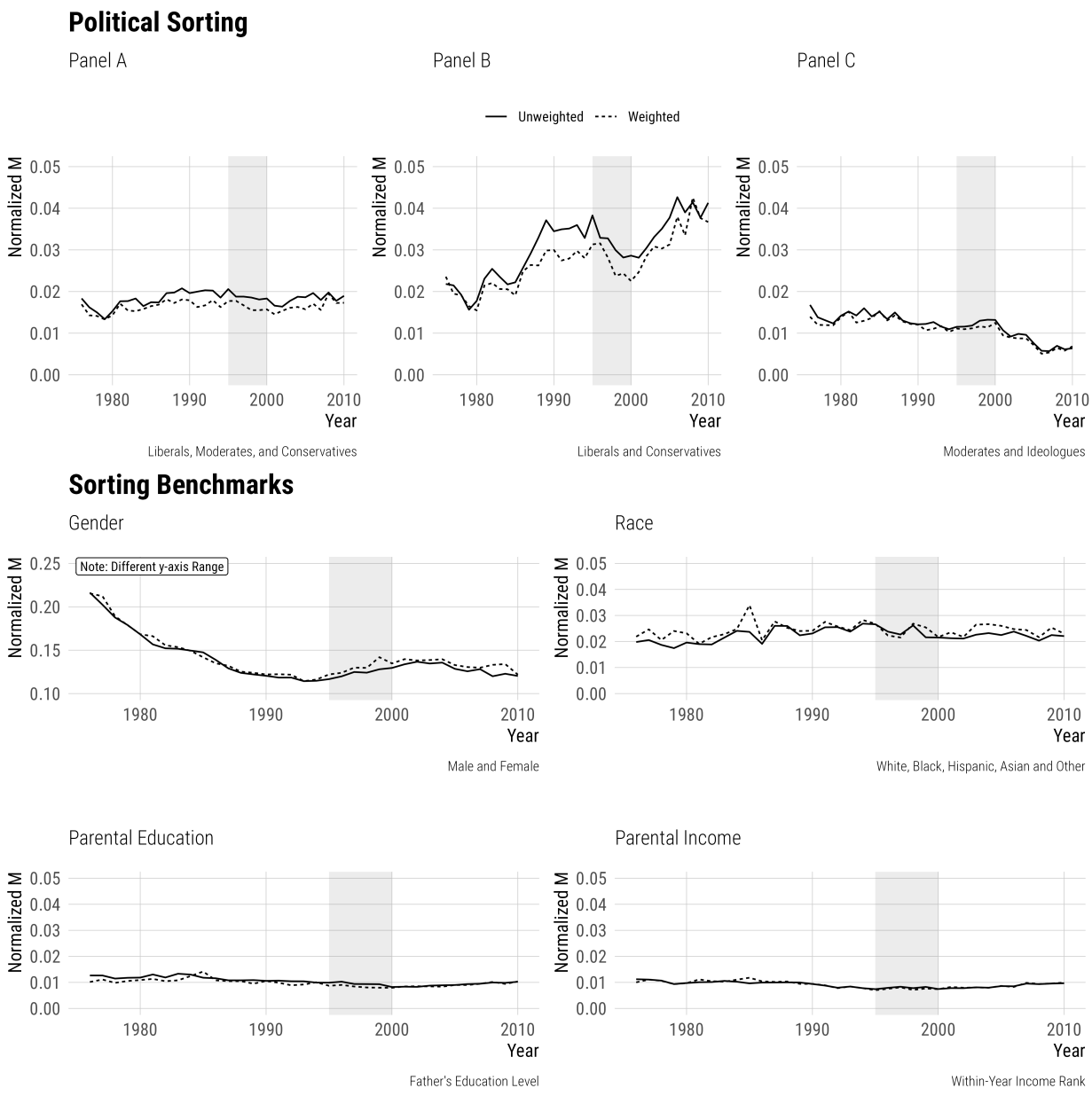

Figure C3: Temporal Trajectories in Ideological Sorting, Normalized by Group Entropy

Notes: The figure presents changes in political sorting over time, and benchmarks that magnitude against sorting by gender, race, parental education, and parental income. Each panel plots yearly H values between occupational preferences and the relevant grouping variable (described on the bottom-right corner of each panel), as weighted and unweighted series. Participants who are "undecided" in their career aspirations are excluded. The shaded band marks 1995–2000 to highlight temporary changes in the occupational preference instrument in the surveys. In contrast to the figure I present in the main manuscript, this figure normalizes the M values by the entropy of each group within each year.

finding suggests that the distribution of occupational preferences among students in the TFS data predicts actual occupational distributions in the labor market quite substantially.

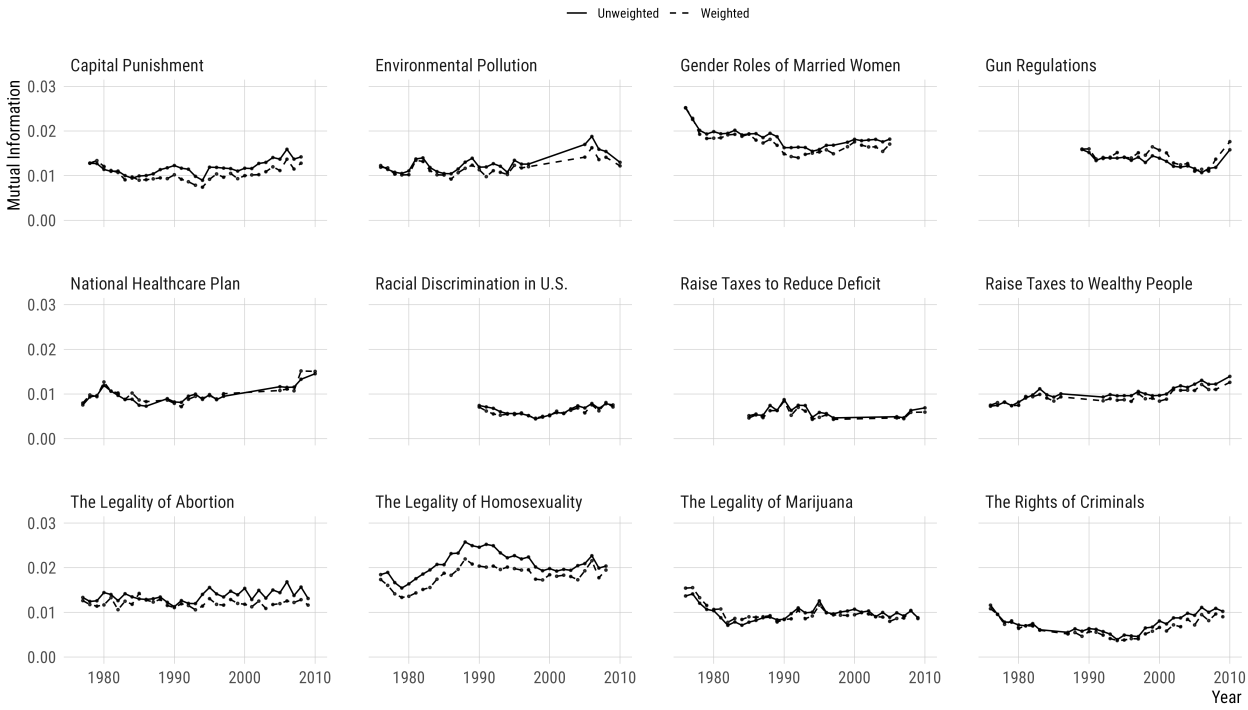

Figure C4: Issue-Specific Ideological Sorting in Occupational Preferences

Notes: The figure presents how informative political issue positions are of occupational preferences over time, separately for each issue. The solid lines represent unweighted mutual information values, while dashed lines represent weighted values. All issue positions are measured with four response categories, including strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree. Complete item wording for each issue domain is presented in Supplementary Materials B.

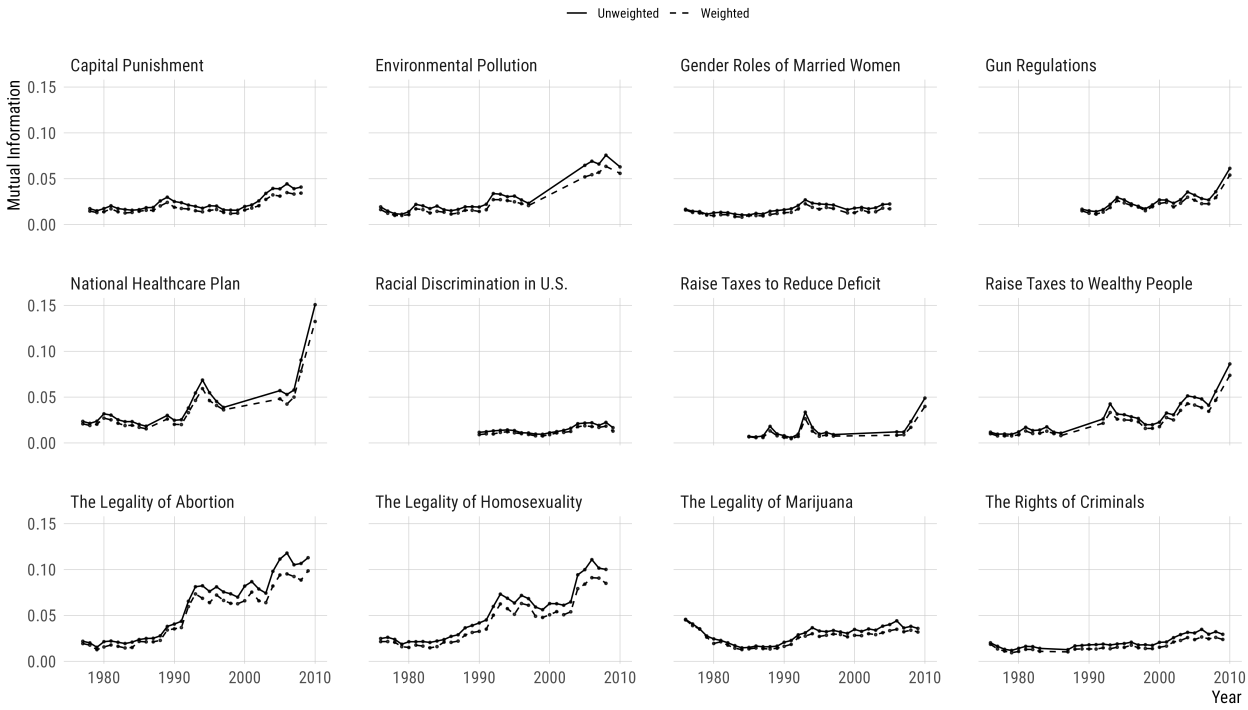

Figure C5: Ideology-Issue Alignment Over Time

Notes: The figure presents how strongly political ideology is associated with policy issue responses over time, separately for each issue domain. For each issue and year, alignment is measured as mutual information between ideology group and issue category, with solid lines representing unweighted mutual information values and dashed lines representing weighted values. All issue positions are measured with four response categories, including strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree. Complete item wording for each issue domain is presented in Supplementary Materials B.

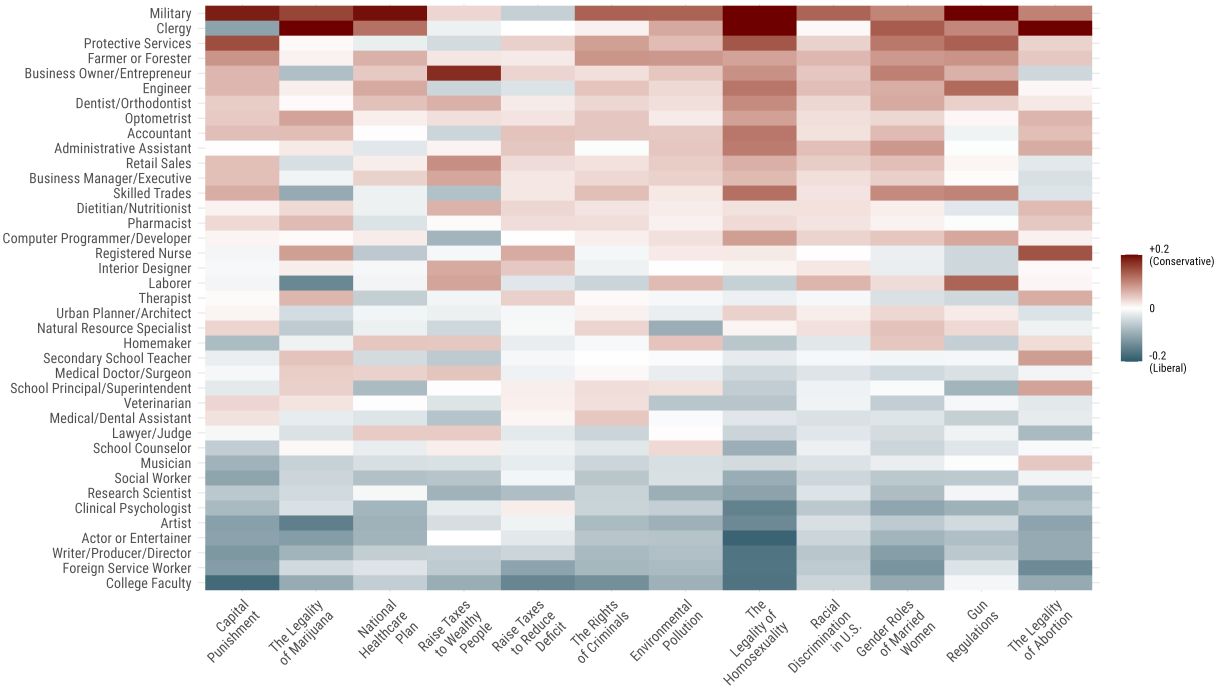

Figure C6: Issue Positions Across Occupations

Notes: The figure presents occupation-level deviations on each of the twelve issue items, computed from unweighted data pooled across all available survey years for each issue. Positive values (darker red) indicate that actors hold more conservative positions than the overall population, while negative values (darker blue) indicate more liberal positions.

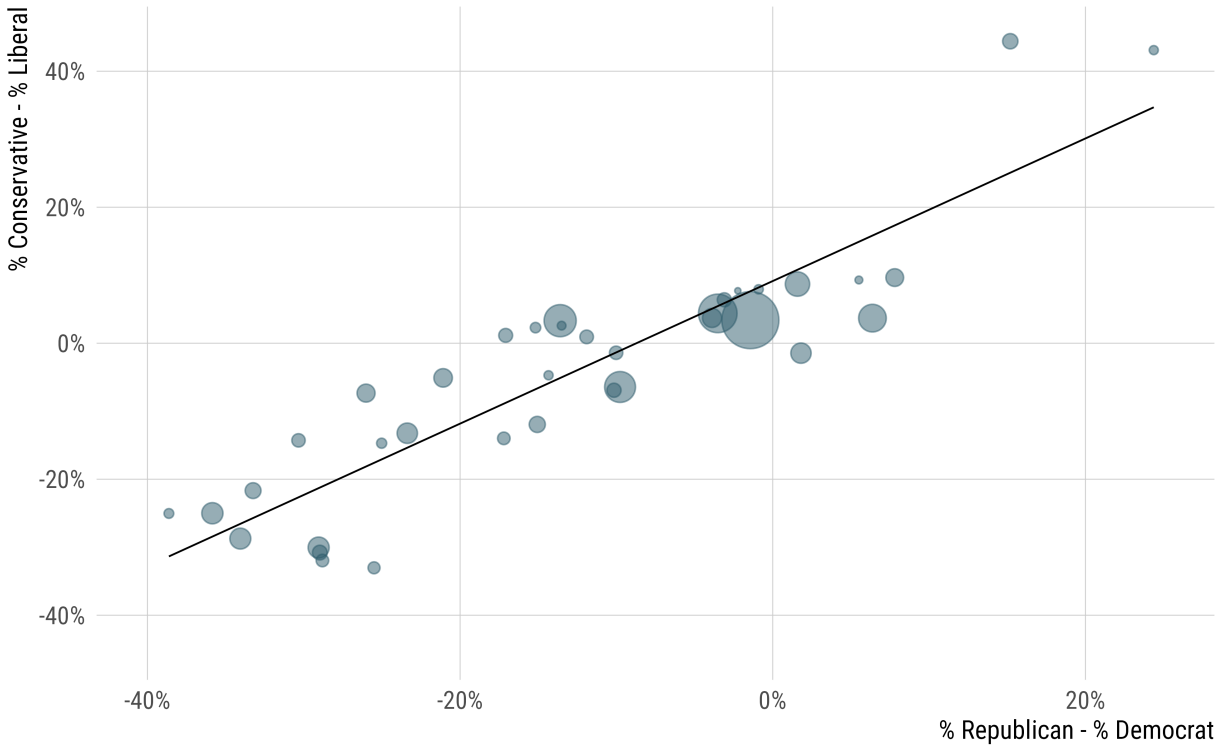

Figure C7: Comparisons with Partisan Sorting in the Workplace

Notes: The figure compares the ideological ordering of occupational preferences among students with the partisan ordering of realized occupations in external labor-market data, using Politics at Work 2012 values. For each occupation, the y-axis uses the conservative share minus liberal share in intended occupation and the x-axis uses employment-weighted partisan margin aggregated from O*NET titles to career categories. The replication repository presents how Politics at Work O*NET categories are mapped into coarser labels observed here. Note that "Undecided," "Other," "Homemaker," and "Foreign Service Worker" are excluded. Point size is proportional to aggregated employment size. The fitted line is an OLS trend. The correlation between the two measures is 0.9, with strong mapping from intentions to realizations.

4 Supplementary Materials D: Alternative Analyses for Luxury Goods

4.1 Ruling Out Mechanical Artefacts

Check 1. It might be that the pooled analyses obscure differential time trends. To address this issue, I implement the basic analysis within each survey year separately from 1976 to 2010, showing that the income gradient is consistent across this window (Figures D1 and D2).

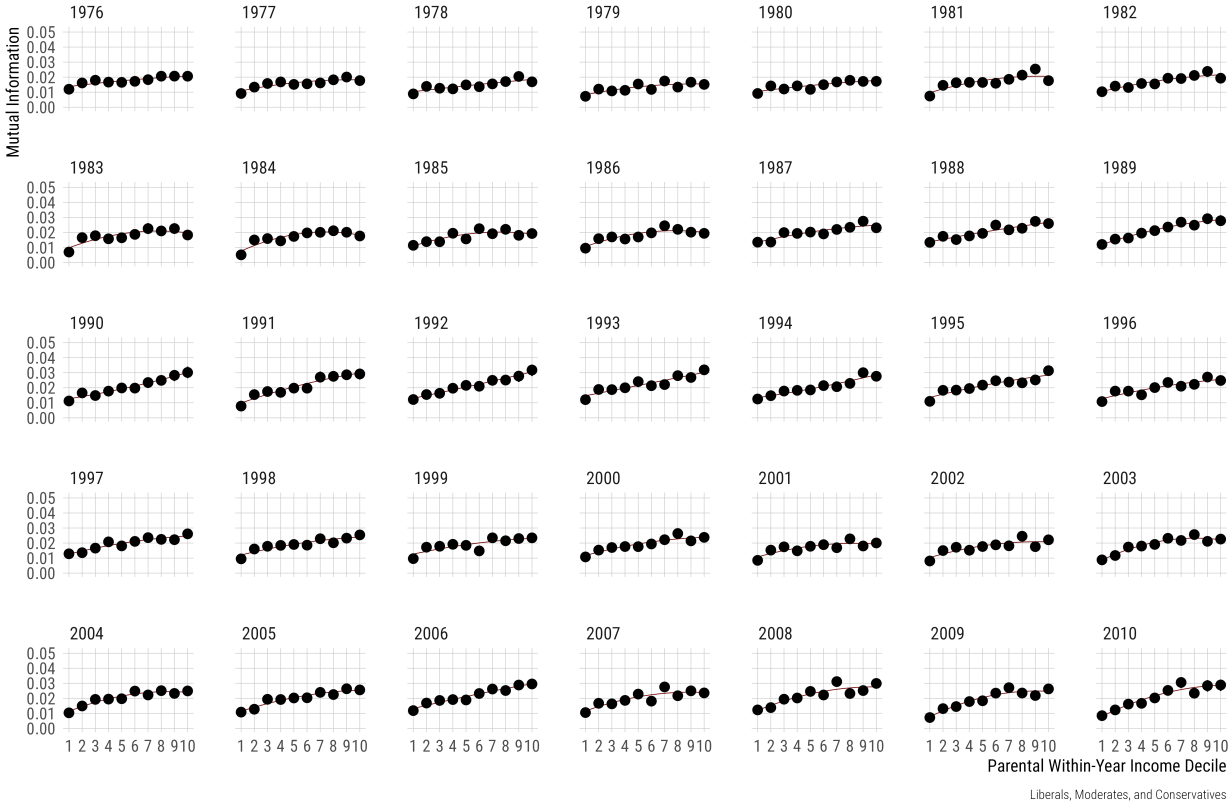

Figure D1: Income Gradient in Ideological Sorting Across Years

Notes: The figure presents mutual information M between political ideology and occupational preferences across household income, which I calculate as within-year income rank across 1976-2010. The estimates include bootstrap confidence intervals from 500 draws, as well as a quadratic fit to describe the overall income gradient.

Check 2. It might be that the gradient reflects differences in the entropy of occupational preferences or ideological distributions across deciles. Substantively, the former would suggest that higher-SES students face broader occupational choice sets[3], which mechanically gives more room for ideolog-

[3]Put differently, higher-SES students may aspire to a wider range of occupations. If the gradient survives normalization by within-decile occupational entropy, that would give strong evidence against a pure compositional story.

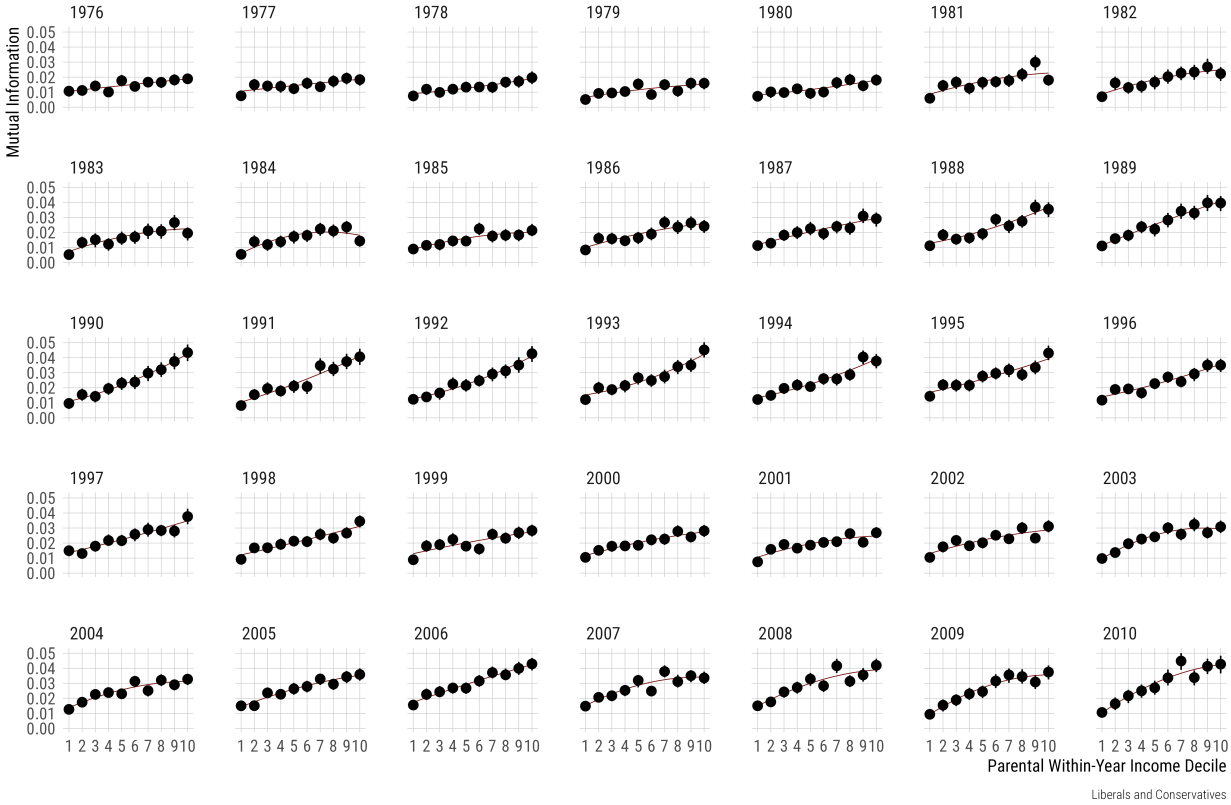

Figure D2: Income Gradient in Ideological Sorting Across Years

Notes: The figure presents mutual information M between political ideology and occupational preferences across household income, which I calculate as within-year income rank across 1976-2010. The estimates include bootstrap confidence intervals from 500 draws, as well as a quadratic fit to describe the overall income gradient.

ical differences to generate sorting, while the latter suggests group differences in ideology. I show that normalizing M by within-decile occupational entropy (Figure D3) and ideology entropy (Figure D4) produces the same basic findings, falsifying these interpretations.

4.2 Alternative Measurement of Household Income

It is possible to propose that the within-year decile transformation of household income introduces biases into the analysis. To address this, I construct an alternative measure using CPI-adjusted real parental income (in 2010 dollars), assigning midpoint values to each income bin and deflating with the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index. I then replicate the income gradient analysis using $10,000 real-income bins. Figure D5 shows that the income gradient is preserved under this

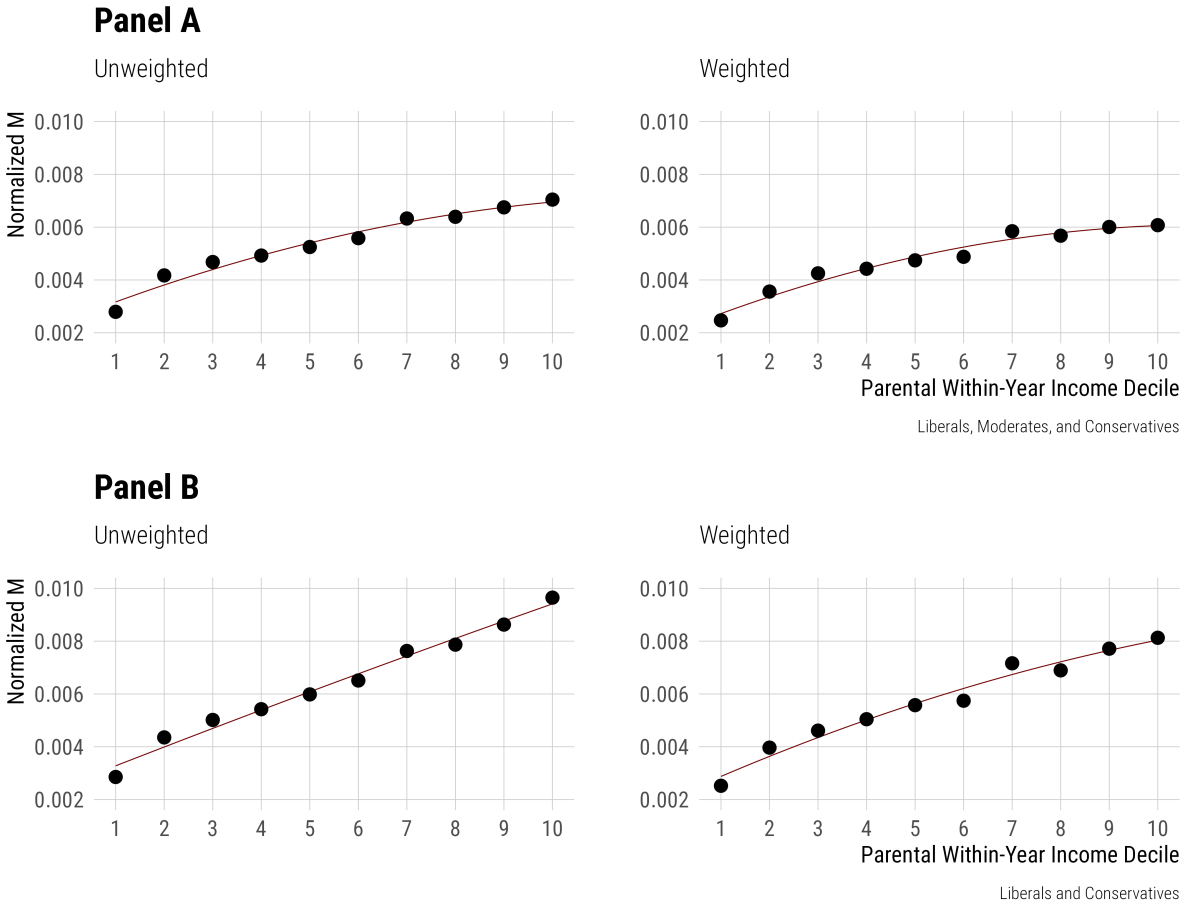

Figure D3: Income Gradient in Ideological Sorting, Normalized by Occupational Entropy

Notes: The figure presents mutual information M between political ideology and occupational preferences across household income, which I calculate as within-year income rank across 1976-2010. The estimates include bootstrap confidence intervals from 500 draws, as well as a quadratic fit to describe the overall income gradient. In contrast to the main figure I present in the main manuscript, this figure normalizes the M values by the entropy of occupations within each income decile. Panel A: Liberal/Moderate/Conservative; Panel B: Liberal/Conservative only.

alternative specification, with mutual information rising monotonically across real income levels in both weighted and unweighted samples, demonstrating a concave effect pattern.

4.3 Occupational Reproduction and Educational Composition

Check 1. It may be that the income gradient reflects occupational inheritance rather than political selection: higher-SES students may be more likely to aspire to a parent's occupation, and if parental occupations are themselves ideologically sorted, this could steepen the gradient. To address this, I

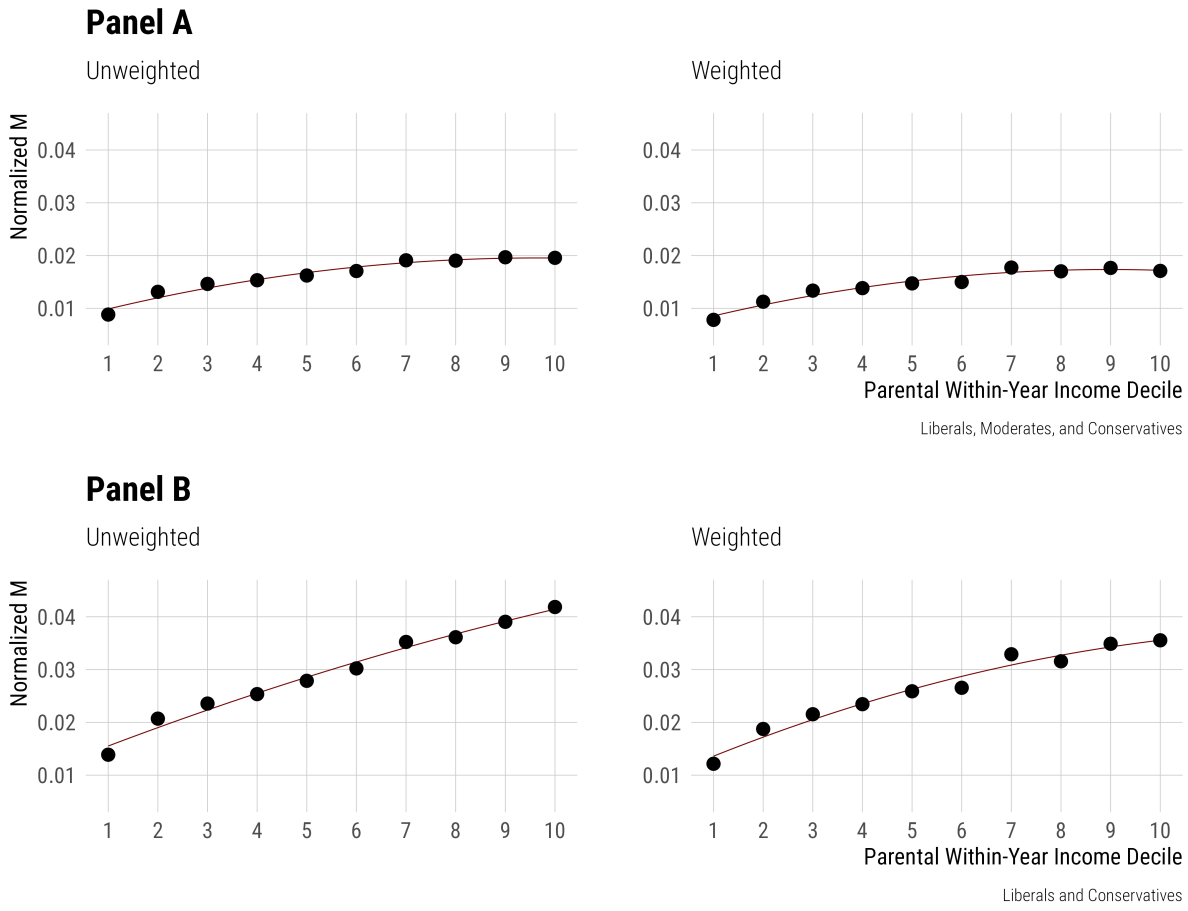

Figure D4: Income Gradient in Ideological Sorting, Normalized by Ideology Entropy

Notes: The figure presents mutual information M between political ideology and occupational preferences across household income, which I calculate as within-year income rank across 1976-2010. The estimates include bootstrap confidence intervals from 500 draws, as well as a quadratic fit to describe the overall income gradient. In contrast to the main figure I present in the main manuscript, this figure normalizes the M values by the entropy of political ideology within each income decile. Panel A: Liberal/Moderate/Conservative; Panel B: Liberal/Conservative only.

identified students whose intended career matches either one of their parent's reported occupation (approximately 13% of the relevant sample) and replicate the analysis after excluding them. Figure D6 shows that the income gradient is virtually unchanged, ruling out this possibility.

Check 2. It is highly plausible that the income gradient reflects differences in parental educational composition across income deciles because higher-income families tend to have more educated parents, and parental education may independently shape both ideology and occupational aspirations. To address this, I standardize the educational composition within each income decile by

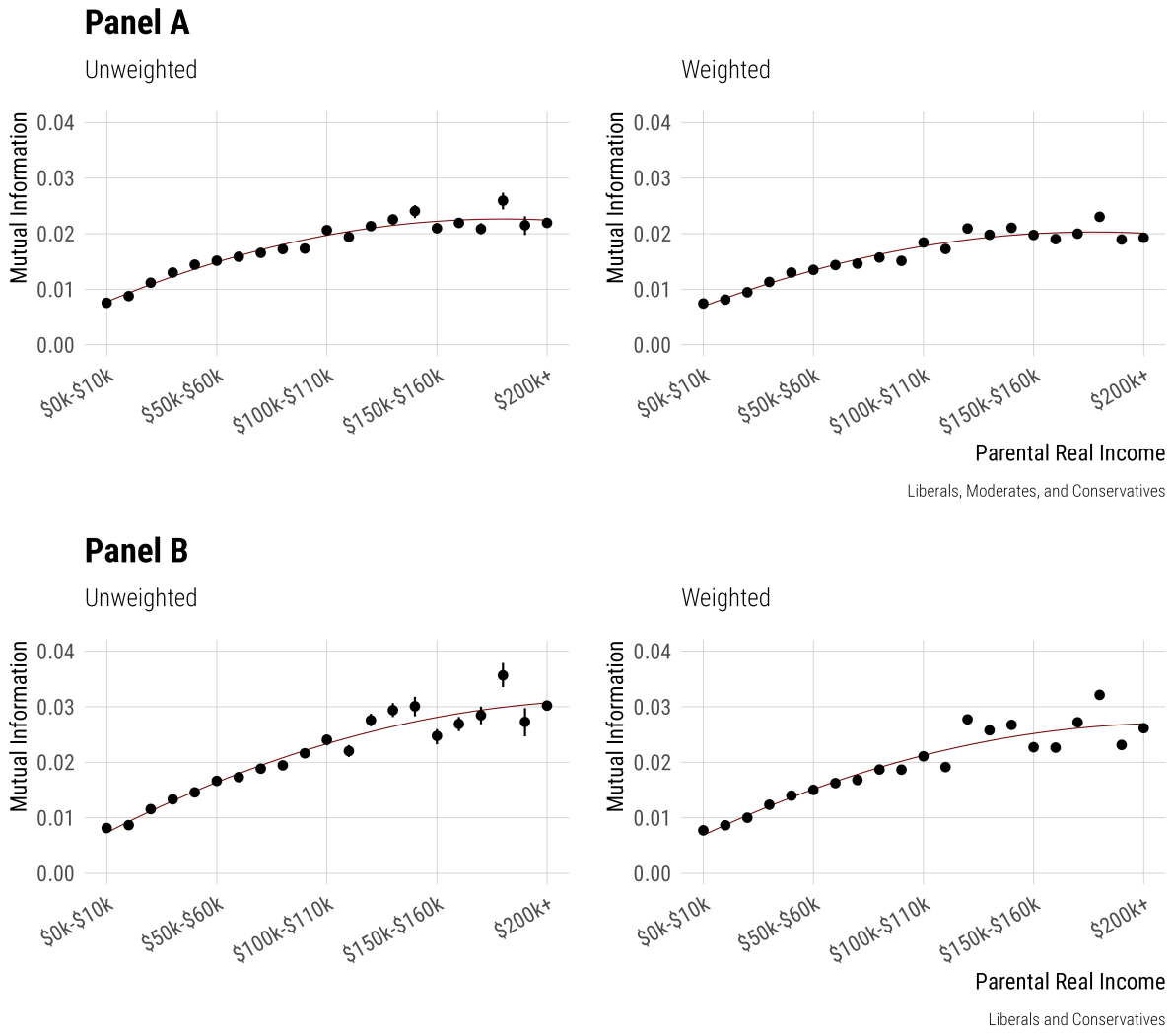

Figure D5: Income Gradient in Ideological Sorting Using CPI-Adjusted Real Income

Notes: The figure presents mutual information M between political ideology and occupational preferences across household income, measured as CPI-adjusted real parental income in 2010 dollars and binned in $10,000 intervals. The estimates include bootstrap confidence intervals from 500 draws, as well as a quadratic fit to describe the overall income gradient. Panel A: Liberal/Moderate/Conservative; Panel B: Liberal/Conservative only.

computing mutual information within income-by-father's-education cells and reweighting by the marginal education distribution. Figure D7 shows that these estimates are slightly lower than the original ones, suggesting that parental education accounts for a modest share of ideological sorting within income deciles, but the income gradient is preserved across each specification.

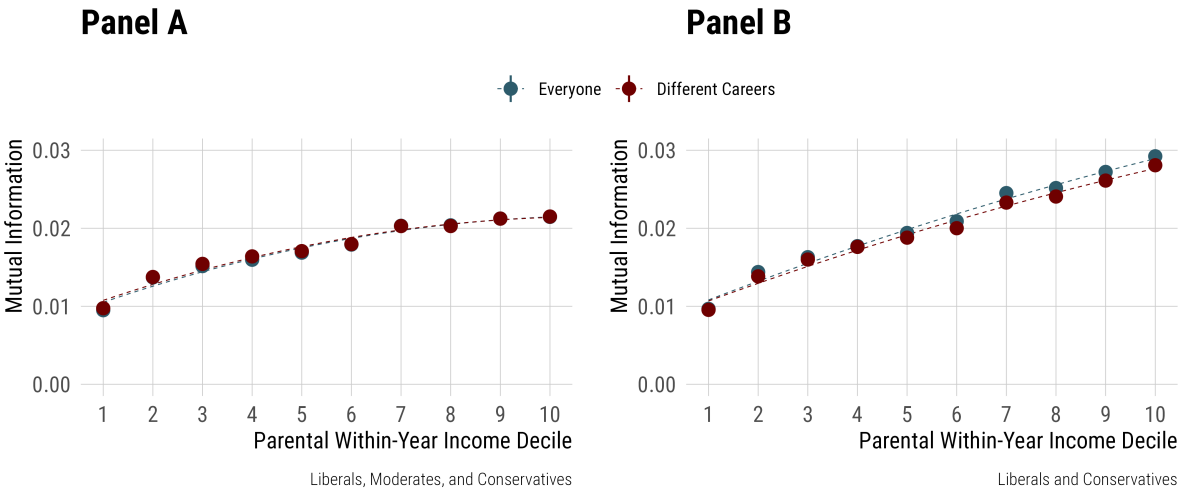

Figure D6: Income Gradient in Ideological Sorting Net of Occupational Reproduction

Notes: The figure presents mutual information M between political ideology and occupational preferences across household income, comparing the sample with the subsample that excludes those whose intended career matches either parent's occupation. The estimates include bootstrap confidence intervals from 500 draws, as well as a quadratic fit to describe the overall income gradient. Panel A: Liberal/Moderate/Conservative; Panel B: Liberal/Conservative only.

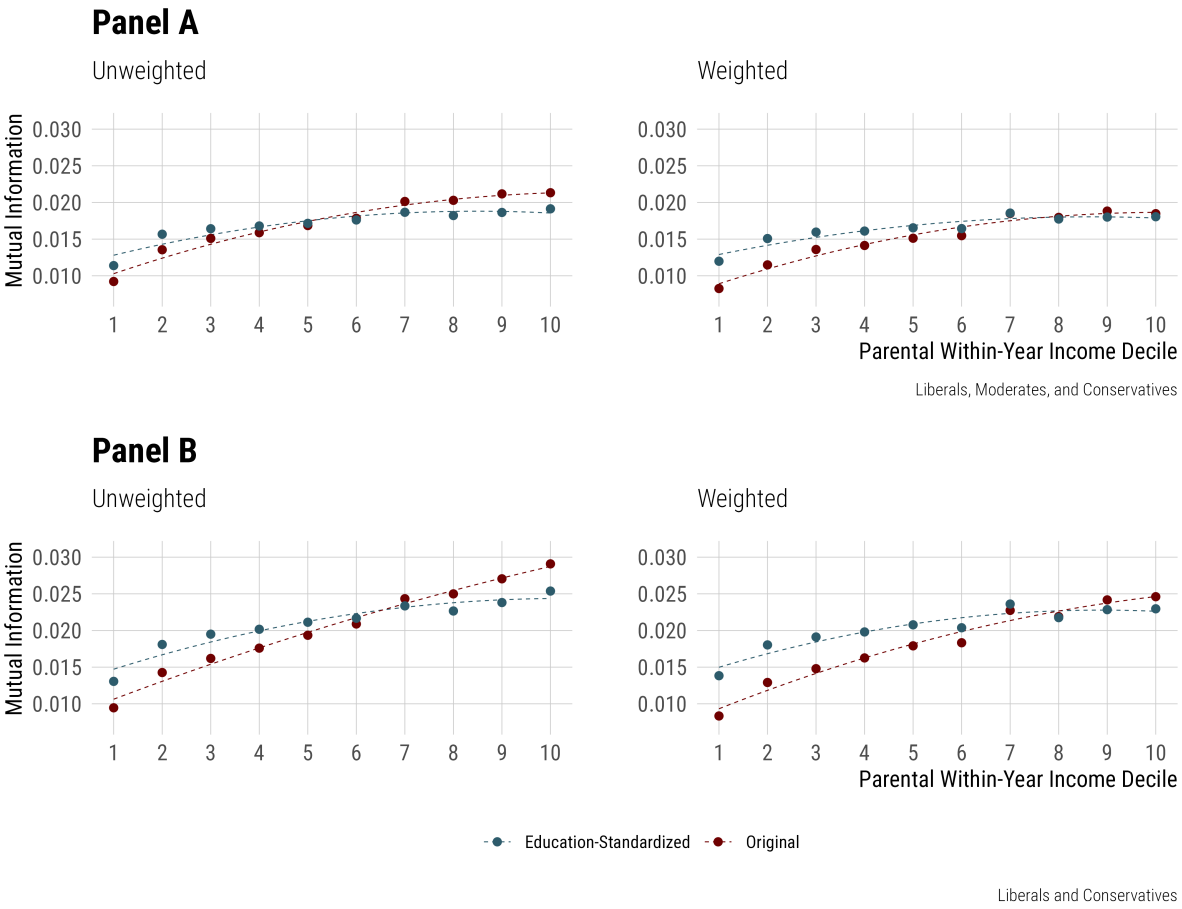

Figure D7: Income Gradient in Ideological Sorting, Standardized by Parental Education

Notes: The figure presents mutual information M between political ideology and occupational preferences across household income, comparing original estimates with education-standardized estimates. Standardization was performed by computing M within each income-by-education cell and reweighting by the marginal distribution of father's education. Panel A: Liberal/Moderate/Conservative; Panel B: Liberal/Conservative only.

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