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America's Most Divided Sport: Polarization and Inequality in Attitudes about Youth Football

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ABSTRACT

Football may be America's most popular sport, but with growing evidence of the risk of sport-associated concussions, some adults are reconsidering which sports to encourage children to play. Using data from a nationally representative sample of 958 respondents, we examine how political party, belief in patriotic displays in sport, attention to concussion news, social class, and race are associated with support for children playing each of the five major U.S. sports: baseball, basketball, hockey, soccer, and football. Our findings suggest that unlike other sports, attitudes about youth participation in football are divided by views on patriotism in sport, age, race, education, and attention to concussion news. For many Americans, football is connected to participation in a civil religion, which celebrates national pride and respect for the military. We argue that child safety advocates who aim to steer children away from football must grapple with the deeper cultural and identity-based framework associated with the sport.

KEYWORDS:

sport, attitudinal research, patriotism, political sociology, inequality.

In August 2017, John Orsini took his ex-wife, Janice, to family court over what he saw as a crucial parenting decision: whether or not to let their youngest son play football. Youth football had been an important part of the upbringing of the Orsini's older sons, and, by all accounts, the youngest son loved the sport. Ms. Orsini wanted to let him play, but the boy had already suffered three concussions, and Mr. Orsini was concerned about a growing body of research demonstrating the long-term cognitive effects of the contact associated with playing tackle football (Belson 2018). Nearly a year later, a family court judge ruled to allow the teenager to play football with mandated testing at any sign of concussion (CBS Pittsburgh 2018).

While very few parents will end up litigating their children's recreational activity, both medical researchers and investigative reporters have exposed the serious and irreparable long-term health effects linked to concussions¹ in football, making for difficult

conversations in many households (Alosco et al. 2018; Kalman-Lamb 2018; Kirk 2013; Mez et al. 2017). Helmets, though designed to allow players to absorb hard hits to the head, do not offer adequate protection against concussions (Grush 2016), and there is increasing evidence that cumulative “subconcussive” hits in youth tackle football have long-term neurodegenerative effects (Alosco and Stern 2019). Repeated traumatic brain injuries have been linked with a range of negative long-term mental and physical outcomes (Alosco et al. 2018; Mez et al. 2017). The story of one early chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) researcher became the popular Will Smith movie, *Concussion*, in 2015. As this information about the effects of concussions was disseminated to the public, youth football participation has declined. Participation in Pop Warner Youth Football, the nation’s largest youth tackle football program, declined nearly ten percent between 2010 and 2012.(Fainaru and Fainaru-Wada, 2013). By 2018, high school tackle football participation nationwide had fallen to its lowest level since 2000 (Roy 2019). In the NFL, scandals over concussions, displays of militaristic nationalism before games, and incidents of domestic violence may have turned a more educated, cosmopolitan audience against the game (Cook 2019; Semuels 2019). At the same time, the ever-widening array of televised sports programming makes it easy to find alternatives. In one recent poll, nearly half of parents said they would discourage their child from playing football (Murray 2018).

Yet football remains the most popular sport in the United States and is central to the America’s “hegemonic sports culture” (Kaufman and Patterson 2005; Rovell 2014). Despite the seeming exodus from Pop Warner, not all youth have dropped out of football. In places such as western Pennsylvania, where the Orsinis live, football occupies a central position in culture and in the socialization of boys. Football is deeply connected to the American patriotic “civil religion” (Bellah 1967; Butterworth 2008; Montez de Oca 2013; Rugg 2016), and it acts as a “symbolic boundary,” distinguishing those who are group members from those who are not (Bourdieu 1984; Edgell et al. 2019; Lamont and Molnar 2002). People who would encourage children to play football see it not as a child safety debate; instead, they experience tackle football as intertwined with their vision of America. In short, kids playing football is about more than just football in a way that is not necessarily true of other sports.

In this study, we examine how American adults’ attitudes about youth sport participation are associated with their political beliefs, including sports-related patriotic

1 Some doctors and sports researchers oppose the use of the term “concussion,” arguing that it lacks a clear definition. Sharp and Jenkins (2015), for example, recommend “traumatic brain injury.” We have neither the expertise nor the intent to weigh in on this medical debate. However, “concussion” is the word most frequently used in media coverage (Ahmed and Hall 2017) and is frequently used by laypeople (McGlynn, Boneau, and Richardson 2020). Throughout this paper, in instances where we cite existing literature, we employ their terminology, including “head trauma,” “head injury,” and “traumatic brain injury.” Elsewhere, we adopt the terminology of “concussions” used by the public to refer to that broad category of brain injuries resulting from a hit as well as subconcussive impacts, which often lack overt symptoms, but can have long-term consequences (Sharp and Jenkins 2015).

sentiment, as well as their race, educational attainment, income, and attention to concussion related news. In an era of political polarization, Americans are divided along partisan lines in all manner of preferences and patterns of social behavior (Bishop and Cushing 2008; Friedland et al. 2007; Mason 2018; Shi et al. 2017; Sussell 2013), leading many to describe it as a “culture war” (Alwin and Tufis, 2015; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005). Though our cultural preferences are important ways of signaling group membership and fundamental socio-political values, they can also have potentially significant consequences. In the case of youth sports, the cultural preferences held by parents and other influential adults can hold great sway over children’s participation in various sports (Messner 1990). By analyzing the results of a nationally representative survey of Americans collected in late 2017 regarding the sports they would encourage children to play, we offer an initial glimpse into one battlefield in the culture wars and how differing beliefs about politics and patriotism may unequally expose some kids to very serious health risks associated with certain sports.

POLITICS, SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES, AND SPORT

Americans are deeply divided. At the turn of the 21st century, it was possible to argue that it was merely our elected officials – solidly “red” and “blue” partisan politicians in Washington, DC – who were polarized, but that the American electorate was a moderate, middle class, devoutly purple mass, united by a love for baseball and apple pie (Fiorina et al. 2005). But a substantial body of research has shown that it is not just our politicians who are polarized; it is all of us (Baldasarri and Gelman 2008; Sides and Hopkins 2015). To start, the public’s policy preferences are far more neatly sorted by political party than in the past (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). At the same time, partisan identities have become more salient and tend to be “stacked” with other identities related to race, gender, urban/rural living, and religiosity, for example (Mason 2018). Perhaps, most notably, “negative partisanship,” or hostile affect toward the opposing party, has grown substantially in recent years (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Mason 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018).

Geographically-segregated, liberals are more likely to live in racially and ethnically diverse urban areas, while conservatives are more likely to be concentrated in more racially, religiously, and culturally homogeneous suburbs and rural areas (Bishop and Cushing 2008; Pew Research 2014; Sussell 2013). Democrats and Republicans are divided by their chances of getting a college degree, their religious beliefs, and their cultural tastes (Baldasarri and Goldberg 2014; Friedland et al. 2007; Shi et al. 2017). Whether people in a given county prefer Duck Dynasty or Modern Family is a very strong predictor of whether it went for Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election (Katz 2016).

Whether it is television programs, guns, or avocado toast, Americans’ cultural tastes divide along partisan lines (Friedland et al. 2007; Shi et al. 2017; Whitehead, Schnabel, and Perry 2018). Cultural sociologists have long noted that cultural

preferences act as markers with which group members draw symbolic boundaries (Bourdieu 1984; Edgell et al. 2019; Lamont and Molnar 2002). These symbolic boundaries, or “package[s] ... [of] shared cultural affiliations and identities” (Edgell et al. 2019:311), allow for both in-group identity formation and symbolic exclusion of out-group members (Bryson 1996; Lizardo 2006; Lizardo and Skiles 2016). Thus, the iconic red “Make America Great Again” hat means more than just support for the Republican candidate; it bundles together white identity politics, opposition to cultural and demographic change, and a defiant attitude towards conventional politics (NPR 2019). But, even less apparently political cultural preferences, like driving a Prius, dining at Cracker Barrel, or drinking a craft beer, are all markers that draw symbolic boundaries around partisan identities (Shi et al. 2017).

So, too, are sports divided. Marketing and polling firm surveys have shown that football fans tend to lean conservative. Though the NFL as the country’s most popular sport generally spans the partisan divide, college football has the most conservative fan base, even more so than NASCAR. By contrast, the NBA and MLB have slightly liberal-leaning fan bases (Paine, Enten, and Jones-Rooy 2017). In its popular iconography, football is often associated with patriotism, Southern roots, and militarism – all characteristics that are connected with the conservative side of the culture wars. The data used in this study reveal that Republicans watch significantly more professional and college football per week than either Independents or Democrats do (Lindner and Hawkins 2021).

In previous work, we have shown that conservatives are more likely to view soccer as “unAmerican” and are less likely to encourage kids to play it (Lindner and Hawkins 2012). Compared to soccer, which is closely identified with both Europe and Latin America, football may be seen as a homegrown sport. The NFL, with its pastoral field and country music soundtrack, makes explicit appeals to rural audiences, while the NBA more openly embraces African-American culture, features hip hop and R&B artists, and draws a far more racially diverse and urban fan base (Kertscher 2017; Nielsen 2016; Silver 2014). Baseball, steeped in tradition and Americana, but also a history of social progress (e.g., Jackie Robinson’s story of the virtues of opportunity and integration), seems to span partisan boundaries and has played a much smaller role in the culture wars (Lindner and Hawkins 2021; Nathan 2014). Ice hockey, which has had its issues with being unwelcoming or even openly hostile to non-white players, still seems less visibly entangled in partisan rancor. Perhaps because it is fairly racially homogeneous, more regional, and less popular than other sports (Doyle 2020). For Republicans, championing youth football may be a cultural marker, drawing a symbolic boundary around partisan group identity.

Of course, it is one thing to follow a sport and a different thing to believe that children should be encouraged to play it. In this research, we measure separately how much time respondents spend watching the five most popular sports and whether they agree that they would encourage children to play that sport. Specifically, we

hypothesize that unlike the sports of basketball, baseball, soccer, and hockey, Republicans are more likely to encourage children to play football than Democrats and independents, when controlling for the amount of time they spend watching football.

Moving beyond political party, football is also connected to a broader set of political meanings related to patriotism and the practice of a civil religion. Bellah (1967:1) argued that United States has “an elaborate and well-instituted civil religion” with a set of rituals, documents, beliefs, and heroic figures that function to legitimate political authority with a religious stamp and to provide Americans with a sense of unity. If patriotism is sacred in this civil religion, it is must be reinforced through ritual. One prominent place where rituals of civil religion are frequently performed is in the context of sporting events. As Butterworth (2008:318) argues, “Spectacular productions of the national anthem, military flyovers, and frequent calls to ‘support the troops’ are nearly as much a part of mediated sports as the games themselves.” Though some ritual of civil religion occurs at most American sporting events, nowhere is it more apparent than in the NFL, and, especially, the Super Bowl, “a convergence of sports, politics and myth” (Price 1984:190). The ritual performance of patriotism may be so central to football, in part, because the sport has long since replaced baseball as America’s national pastime in both popularity and symbolism (Nathan 2014).

While much past research has identified the multi-dimensional nature of nationalist sentiment, including patriotism, ethnocultural nationalism, and civic nationalism (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016), the particular emphasis of the current study is on attitudes regarding patriotic ritual as performed at sporting events. It is possible that those who particularly value the performance of civil religion at sporting events are especially devoted to football because it is a sport where patriotic ritual is practiced in high baroque form. For such individuals, encouraging children to play football might be considered a patriotic endeavor, enlisting the next generation to participate in American civil religion. Accordingly, we hypothesize that as opposed to sports like basketball, baseball, soccer, and hockey, those who more highly value patriotic displays at sporting events will be more likely to encourage children to play football than those who value patriotic displays less highly.

Most cultural preferences are relatively inconsequential; as a rule, people do not get hurt listening to heavy metal, choosing Target over Walmart, or flying the stars and stripes in their front yard. But it is worth remembering that the cultural preferences at the center of this study – which sports individuals would encourage children to play – are not without consequences. While there is some risk of bodily injury in all sports, in recent years, the risk of concussions and CTE in football has garnered particular attention in the media for good reasons. With child socialization practices already diverging by class and race, the way that adults formulate cultural preferences about youth sports has real stakes for the children in their lives.

EDUCATION, INCOME, RACE, AND CONCERTED CULTIVATION

Increasingly, Americans' tastes in, patterns of, and constraints on child socialization are sorted by race, education, and income (Calarco 2018; Cooper and Pugh 2020; Lizardo and Skiles 2016; Umaña-Taylor and Hill 2020). In a now-classic study, Lareau (2011) described how more affluent and educated parents engage in "concerted cultivation" with their offspring, aiming to arrange activities for them that will yield the best possible outcomes and confer future class status. By contrast, lower income and non-college educated parents pursue a "natural growth" paradigm of parenting, letting "kids be kids" and allowing more unstructured play. Subsequent research has confirmed this phenomenon on a wide scale and further demonstrated that white parents are particularly likely to pursue the concerted cultivation style of parenting, irrespective of social class (Cheadle and Amato 2011).

With youth sports being the most popular extracurricular activity for children in the United States (Pew Research 2015), it is no surprise that researchers have turned their attention to concerted cultivation in the sports realm (Vincent and Maxwell 2016). Parents enroll children in sports programs because they see participating in them as an opportunity to get exercise, make friends, and learn lessons such as discipline, teamwork, and resilience (Farrey 2015). Kids, too, are often eager to play sports to spend time with their friends, to bond with older siblings and relatives, and, simply to have fun (Farrey 2015; Messner 1990). Sociologists have long noted that children of different social classes and races tend to be drawn into different types of sports (Bourdieu 1978; Hartmann 2016; Martin 2015). For middle and upper class parents, football may seem more threatening to children's future opportunities than lower risk sports such as basketball, baseball, or soccer (Semuels 2019; Whalen 2019). Moreover, white, middle class youth and their parents increasingly appear to be less interested in team sports, especially those, like football, that have often been associated with violence, bullying, and homophobia (Anderson and White 2017).

By contrast, adhering to a "natural growth" parenting paradigm, working and lower middle class parents may prefer to let kids play the sports they like or that peers and family members are involved in. Of course, parental "choices" about what sports their children will play are limited by local opportunities related to race and class segregation (Thomas 2016; Tompsett 2017). For example, if football is one of the only organized sports offered by a community, it is reasonable to expect parents of lesser means to gravitate toward that sport; in contrast, parents in affluent and mostly white communities may see other contact sports, such as lacrosse, as a viable substitute for football (Cook 2018). As Martin (2015) has shown, through a combination of media representations, racial socialization, discriminatory gatekeeping, and unequal access, Black children are often drawn into football, basketball, and baseball at higher rates than their white peers.

It is important to note here that our survey measure asks about children in general – not necessarily parents' own children – and that we asked the question of both parents and non-parents. Nonetheless, we expect general similarities across

parents and non-parents in class-based values and views on children's socialization. Accordingly, we hypothesize that white, more highly educated, and more affluent respondents will be less encouraging of children's playing football than respondents who identify as racial-ethnic minorities, are less educated, or have lower family incomes. We do not expect to observe similar patterns for other sports.

CONCUSSIONS IN SPORTS

Parents, other influential adults, and youth themselves select sports for a wide range of reasons. One of them is the perceived risk. All sports – like life itself – bear some degree of risk, but different sports have varying risks and benefits. Tennis, for example, has a very low risk of head injury, but does not offer the comradery and team play of basketball, football, or soccer. Differential preferences about sports participation by race, education, and income take on new significance as researchers have learned more about the long-term consequences of concussions associated with some sports, especially football. While all manner of risks exist in sports, concussions have garnered special attention in recent years.

Epidemiologists have shown that athletes who suffer head trauma due to participation in collision sports, such as football, are at higher risk for CTE, a progressive neurodegenerative disease (Alosco et al. 2018; Alosco and Stern 2019; Binney and Bachynski 2018; Mackay et al. 2019; Mez et al. 2017). This pattern has been especially well documented in professional athletes in both American football (Binney and Bachynski 2018; Mez et al. 2017) and European soccer (Mackay et al. 2019). In one study of the brains of 111 deceased American football players, researchers diagnosed 99 percent with CTE, although it should be noted that this was a voluntary rather than random sample of players (Binney and Bachynski 2018). Other research has raised similar concerns about the link between concussions and CTE for youth, high school, and college athletes (Alosco et al. 2018; Bachynski 2019; Rivara et al. 2020). As these findings have emerged, there has been substantial news coverage of the risks of concussions in sports, with the bulk of attention focused on football (Bachynski 2019; Whalen 2019). Football fans sometimes feel unduly picked on in the public discussion of concussions (Bachynski 2019; Belson et al. 2019). Such defenders of football are quick to note that all contact sports have some risk of head injury, and they point out that the rate of head injuries in, say, girls' soccer is higher than that of football.² While both of those statements are true, as Binney (2019) points out, it is also deeply misleading. First, for reasons that are not currently well understood, girls' sports

² Most epidemiological studies examine the differential rates of sports-related concussions by sex (i.e., comparing males and females) even though the sports themselves are more typically referred to by socially-constructed gender categories (e.g., boys' and girls' basketball, men's and women's soccer). However, some of reasons for the observed differential rates by sex have to do with the way that gender is constructed (e.g., males may under-report concussions because boys are socialized to be tough) (Coxe et al. 2020). Much less is known about transgender athletes, in part, because neither the NCAA nor state high school associations maintain an authoritative, nationwide count of trans athletes.

have 50–100 percent higher rates of head injuries than comparable boys' sports (Kerr et al. 2019). In high school soccer, for example, the rate of concussions per 10,000 athletic-exposures (AE) (i.e., practices and games) is 3.14 for men and 6.91 for women. Taking an average for both genders for soccer, for example, and comparing it to football obscures larger between sport differences by exploiting the fact that football almost entirely excludes girls and women.

When comparing football to other boys' sports, the reason for the focus on football is obvious. The rate of concussions for boys' high school football is 9.7 per 10,000 AEs, more than triple the rate for soccer (3.14), and well over six times the rate for basketball (1.46), and baseball (1.35) (Binney 2019; Kerr et al. 2019). Concussion rates for collegiate ice hockey (data are unavailable for hockey for high school or below) are as high as or higher than collegiate football, but far fewer people play ice hockey. Indeed, at the high school level, there are almost twice as many concussions in football as in all the other boys' sports combined (Binney 2019; Kerr et al. 2019). Though data are less systematically available below the high school level, a consensus statement from a panel of pediatricians reached similar conclusions about the risk of concussions in "collision sports," recommending limiting contact and collisions in football during practices (Rivara et al. 2020). If anything, the extent of concussions in youth sports may be worse than data suggest due to under-reporting problems, especially in football (Coxe 2020). To be clear, athletes in all sports ought to be aware of the risks associated with the sport – not just concussions, but the full range of physical and mental health risks – although these risks are challenging to assess even for highly trained physicians, coaches, and athletic trainers (Fuller 2007; 2018). But the bottom line is that football is a popular sport in the United States and appears to pose a greater risk of concussions than other sports. Despite these potential dangers, coaches, staffs of football organizations, and former players have often been less focused on addressing the apparent child safety issue and more intent on "saving the game" (Bachynski 2019).

In keeping with the actual rates of occurrence, football has attracted far more media coverage than other sports for concussions. From the Will Smith movie to an influential PBS Frontline feature on concussions in football to regular mentions on ESPN and morning talk shows, there has been substantial news coverage of the concussions in recent years (Bachynski 2019; Cook 2019). Some initial qualitative and journalistic evidence indicates that these news stories may dissuade parents and other adults from encouraging or even allowing children to play football (Semuels 2019; Whalen 2019). Certainly, the NFL's reaction to this publicity indicates that its leadership understands the threat to their revenue streams and the viability of a future labor force if interest in American football declines. For example, the NFL's "Play 60" campaign goes beyond the efforts of other professional leagues – rather than focusing on simply increasing youth participation in its respective sport, the goal of this NFL program is to build brand loyalty and create lifelong fans (Rugg 2019). The NFL has created a physical education curriculum that takes advantage of a captive audience of school students (Montez de Oca, Scholes, and Meyer 2016) and serves its own "commercial

and political interests” by emphasizing the language, strategy, and appeal of American football (Rugg 2019). Because the NFL provides resources to schools who adopt its curriculum, students who attend underfunded schools, and are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic status and racial and ethnic minority families, may be particularly exposed and susceptible to the messages of these programs (Rugg 2019). In addition to programs aimed at youth, the NFL’s outreach to women is likely not only an attempt to increase its current fan base, but also an effort to create a future generation of mothers who support their children’s participation in tackle football (Montez de Oca and Cotner 2018). There is some recent evidence that these campaigns have been particularly successful in convincing parents that the social benefits of youth tackle football may outweigh the potential costs associated with concussion risks (McGlynn et al. 2020).

Although concussions and other risks of injury are not the only reasons people might not encourage children to play football, they are clearly important ones. For these reasons, holding all else constant, we expect that those respondents who report greater attention to news about concussions in sports are less likely to encourage children to play football than those who are less attentive to such reports. We do not expect that attention to concussion news is associated with less encouragement of youth to play baseball, basketball, soccer, or ice hockey, or at least not to nearly the same degree as football.

SPORTS BACKGROUND AND OTHER SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Because our goal in this study is to isolate the role that political views, education, income, and race, in particular, play in shaping attitudes about youth participation in sport, we also account for a number of background factors that may be related to these central predictors and the likelihood that respondents would encourage children to play certain sports (Newkirk 2017). Respondents’ own sports background will likely influence which sports they prefer children to play and how strongly they might encourage each sport (Strandbu, Bakken, and Stefansen 2019). Therefore, we consider how much time respondents generally spend watching each sport, as well as the depth of their own prior competitive athletic experience. Older Americans may hold different attitudes about sports, especially those which have grown or waned in popularity over time (e.g., soccer and baseball respectively). Women may be more attuned to or concerned about the health risks associated with sports (Boufous, Finch, and Bauman 2007), and since football remains an almost entirely male sport, women may be less eager to encourage children to play football than men. Married respondents are more likely to be parents themselves (U.S. Census 2016), and their spouses may play a role in influencing their attitudes toward youth sports, which may result in different levels of types of youth sports encouragement compared to non-married respondents. Christianity and sport are both powerful institutions at the center of American life with a long, shared history, which is still explicitly connected by athletes, coaches, and pundits (MacAloon 2006).

Nowhere is that connection more visible than in the United States than with football. For this reason, Christians may be more likely to encourage children to play football and other sports than non-Christians. In terms of geography and locale, part of the partisan divide between fans of, say, the NBA and the NFL, is reflective of deeper urban vs. rural divides. More importantly, in rural communities, youth and high school football occupy a central role in building collective identity and shared meaning. Simply put, football is a way of life not just in the South, but through many rural parts of the country (Hall 2013), even as opportunities to play football in low population areas are diminishing (Cook 2019). By contrast, for example, though many of the strongest youth basketball programs tend to be found in urban areas, basketball remains popular throughout the country.

Each of the sports we examine has associated gendered connotations. Intercollegiate men's and women's programs exist for basketball, soccer, and ice hockey. At the college level, baseball is generally reserved for men, while softball is the equivalent women's sport. Football, by contrast, does not have dual programs. The few women who play football compete alongside men. Given these differences, many people may regard football as a men's sport, while soccer, for example, may more readily conjure images of both women and men for most members of the public. When respondents are asked whether they would encourage children to play football, they may well imagine boys they know more than girls. These gender connotations may affect how strongly respondents agree that they would encourage children to play the sport, but they may also have particular implications for parents, depending on the genders of their own children. A father of girls, for example, might think about his own daughters when asked about encouraging children to play basketball, but not when asked about football. For this reason, we do not ask respondents about their own children. Additionally, parental decisions might be affected by how nearby an ice rink is or how expensive the league is. Instead, we ask all adults about children in the abstract. Obviously, parental attitudes are influenced by the particulars of each parent and child's circumstances. But parents are certainly not the only adults in society who are concerned about or invested in children's socialization and wellbeing, which might also include educators, coaches, government officials, and other community leaders. Parents or not, people's beliefs and values regarding child socialization are important in the way they think about which sports youth ought to play (Whalen 2019).

THE CURRENT STUDY

This study examines how general support for participation in various youth sports is associated with partisanship, sports-specific patriotism, race, social class (as measured by education and income), and attention to concussion news. For more than a decade, there has been a growing child safety debate about concussions and football. It stands to reason that this debate, like so many others in American life, has been pulled into the vortex of the partisanship divide. It is possible that such a divide is not about partisanship per se, but that people see encouraging youth football as a way of

expressing patriotism and extending the American civil religion. Likewise, competing ideals about child socialization and attention to concussion news may contribute to some individuals seeing youth football as too risky. Given the potential consequences of concussions, adults' attitudes about youth sports could end up affecting the physical and mental well-being of children later in life. For this reason, understanding the divides in these attitudes could help child safety advocates target the underlying identity-based and cultural foundations behind youth participation in collision sports such as football.

METHOD

Data

Sample. The data were gathered by SurveyMonkey Audience, an online polling firm used widely by news outlets, businesses, and in academic research, using a nationally-representative sampling frame with original survey questions created by the authors³ from October 10–12, 2017. SurveyMonkey Audience has an online panel of 80 million people in more than a hundred countries who have already submitted responses regarding basic demographics (e.g., gender, age, race, income, geographic location). All panelists must have Internet access, but may complete surveys on a smartphone, tablet, or computer. For this survey, SurveyMonkey contacted non-institutionalized U.S. residents 18 and older with demographics balanced to U.S. Census proportions. For each survey panel respondents complete, they earn credits, which can be exchanged for a contribution to one of several charitable organizations. Of the 1,089 respondents who were contacted and agreed to participate, 1,017 (93.4 percent) completed the survey, with median completion time of just under six minutes. We limited the sample for this study to those respondents who had valid responses on all five of our dependent variables (see below) for a final analytic sample size of 958. Compared to U.S. Census demographics, women and white respondents were overrepresented in the sample. To adjust for this overrepresentation, individual sample weights were created by calculating ratios of representation in the U.S. Census to representation in the sample by race and gender, then combined, and assigned to each respondent.

Missing data. Missing data on the independent variables were minimal (less than 4 percent) with the exception of income (14 percent; see Table 1). For the regression analyses that follow, we used multiple imputation in Stata 15.1 (`mi impute` command) based on 10 data sets to maximize statistical power ($N = 958$). In all regression models, we included a dummy variable for cases with missing data (1 = missing data on any measure, 0 = no missing data), but it was non-significant in all models. As a check on our missing data strategy, we also conducted regression analyses with listwise deletion ($N = 784$), which produced substantively nearly identical results (available from the authors upon request).

³ All variables were pre-tested with a convenience sample of undergraduate students in sociology courses. Based on the results and qualitative feedback, we made minor modifications to the measures.

Variables

Dependent variables. The five outcome variables asked respondents to indicate how much they agree with the following statement in reference to five different sports: “I would encourage children to play [specific sport].” The five sports were baseball, basketball, soccer, hockey, and football, and responses ranged from 1 ¼ strongly disagree to 5 ¼ strongly agree.

Independent variables. Political party identification was a set of three dummy variables coded as Republican (reference group), Democrat, and Independent. Sporting event patriotism asked respondents to indicate their agreement (1 ¼ strongly disagree to 5 ¼ strongly agree) with the following statement: “It is important to have representations of patriotism (e.g., the singing of the National Anthem, military color guards, etc.) at sporting events.” Race was coded as 1 ¼ white and 0 ¼ non-white. Education was a set of dummy variables that assessed the highest degree respondents had earned: high school or less (reference), some college, bachelor’s degree, graduate degree. Annual income was a set of dummy variables divided roughly by quintiles (see Table 1): less than \$25,000, \$25,000-49,999, \$50,000-74,999 (reference), \$75,000-124,999, and \$125,000 or more. Concussion attention asked respondents, “How much attention have you paid to news coverage of concussions in sports over the past few years?” with response categories from 1 ¼ none to 4 ¼ a great deal.

Control variables. Watch [sport] was a set of five ordinal variables that assessed how often respondents watched the major professional and/or collegiate leagues associated with the five sports of interest (baseball, basketball, soccer, hockey, and football) on a scale from 1 ¼ never to 5 ¼ rarely miss a game. Athlete experience was an ordinal variable that assessed the highest level of competitive sports respondents ever played in, coded as 1 ¼ never participated, 2 ¼ youth recreational league, 3 ¼ high school freshman or junior varsity, 4 ¼ high school varsity, and 5 ¼ collegiate and/or professional. Age was a set of three dummy variables representing the age categories 18–29, 30–44 (reference group), 45–59, and 60 or older. Gender and marital status were binary variables, coded respectively as 1 ¼ female and 0 ¼ male and 1 ¼ married and 0 ¼ not married. Religious affiliation was measured by three dummy variables defined as Christian (Catholic, Protestant, or “other” Christian; reference group), other religion (Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, etc.), and no religion (agnostic, atheist, none, etc.). Community type was a set of three dummy variables that includes urban (reference group), suburban, and rural. Geographic region was a set of four dummy variables consisting of South (reference group), Northeast, Midwest, and West.

Analytic Strategy

We first calculated and graphed frequency distributions for each outcome to show the variability in respondents’ willingness to encourage children to play each of the five sports (see Figure 1) and tested for statistically significant mean differences among them using a series of paired t-tests. We then estimated five separate multiple

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for All Study Variables (Unweighted)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Encourage Baseball	3.99	.93	958
Encourage Basketball	3.93	.90	958
Encourage Soccer	3.92	.98	958
Encourage Hockey	3.30	1.08	958
Encourage Football	3.07	1.33	958
Republican	.30	—	939
Democrat	.41	—	939
Independent	.29	—	939
Sporting Event Patriotism	3.58	1.44	955
White	.76	—	925
Education (High School or Less)	.13	—	942
Education (Some College)	.32	—	942
Education (Bachelor's Degree)	.30	—	942
Education (Graduate Degree)	.25	—	942
Income (Less than \$25,000)	.23	—	824
Income (\$25,000-49,999)	.20	—	824
Income (\$50,000-74,999)	.18	—	824
Income (\$75,000-124,999)	.22	—	824
Income (\$125,000 or More)	.17	—	824
Concussion Attention	2.76	.97	951
Watch Baseball	2.28	1.18	949
Watch Basketball	1.95	1.00	957
Watch Soccer	1.65	.96	927
Watch Hockey	1.77	1.05	950
Watch Football	2.49	1.14	958
Athlete Experience	2.60	1.40	951
Age	3.58	1.09	943
Female	.53	—	943
Married	.49	—	940
Christian	.63	—	931
Other Religion	.10	—	931
No Religion	.27	—	931
Urban	.34	—	943
Suburban	.45	—	943
Rural	.20	—	943
South	.34	—	931
Northeast	.19	—	931
Midwest	.22	—	931
West	.24	—	931

regression models to examine which predictors accounted for these differences in support for each sport across respondents. For each of these models, the watch [sport] variable changed to match the outcome sport. Because there were very few significant predictors in the models examining the first four outcomes (baseball, basketball, soccer,

and hockey), we present one full regression model for each in Table 2. In contrast, for the football outcome, we broke the regression down into three sub-models. The first model included all the central independent variables, which measure political views, social position, and attention to concussion news, as well as one control variable of particular import—the amount of time spent watching football. Next, we added the remaining control variables in the second model to assess whether any relationships between the predictors and outcome found in the first model were spurious. Finally, in the third model, we removed the sporting event patriotism variable; a comparison of the second and third models showed the effect that sporting event patriotism had on reducing the size and significance of other predictors in the model. We also produced a cross-tabulation of attitudes toward encouraging children to play football by education and by political party to visualize examples of differences across the categories of two central independent variables. The individual sample weights were used to produce a representative U.S. sample for the regression analyses and the figures.

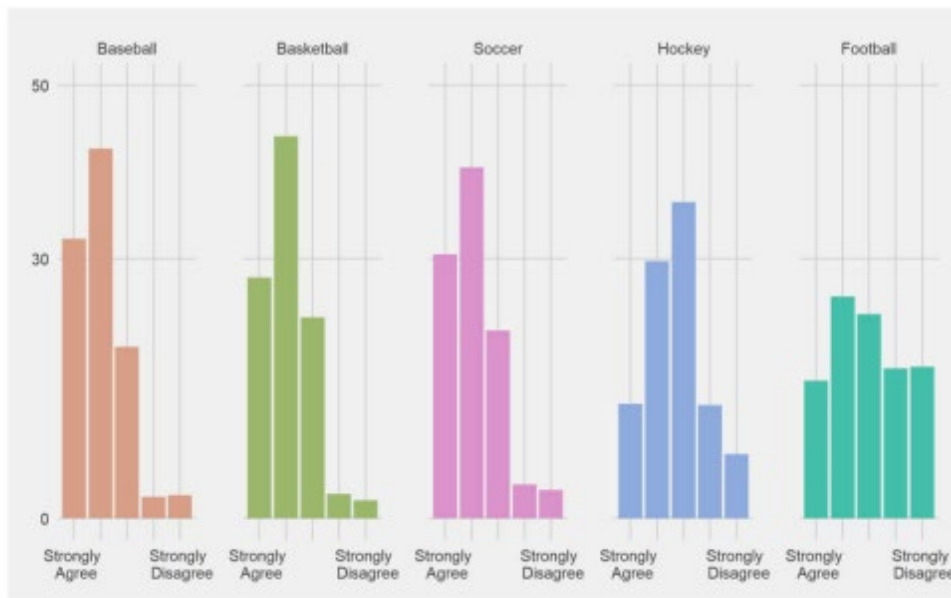


Figure 1. Frequency Distributions for “Encourage Children to Play” Outcomes (Weighted)

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the frequency distributions for each of the outcome variables. Respondents were very likely to strongly agree or agree with encouraging children to play baseball, soccer, and basketball, but less likely to do so for hockey and football. Football, in particular, had a substantial proportion of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with supporting children playing that sport. Table 1, which displays the means and standard deviations for all study variables, confirmed the finding that Americans were less encouraging of children playing the two “collision” sports. The average response for baseball, basketball, and soccer was close to “agree,” whereas the average response for hockey and especially football was much closer to “neither agree nor disagree.” In addition, when examining the standard deviations, there was

clearly the most variation in opinion regarding encouraging children to play football. A series of paired t-tests revealed that mean levels of encouragement were significantly lower for football than the four other sports (t-scores ranged from 6.29 to 21.56; all $p < .001$), although respondents were also less supportive on average of children playing hockey compared to soccer, basketball, or baseball (t-scores between 17.62 and 20.56; all $p < .001$).

Table 2. Regression Models Predicting “Encourage Children to Play [Sport]” (Weighted)

Predictor	1. Baseball		2. Basketball		3. Soccer		4. Hockey	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Republican	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Democrat	.09	.08	.15	.08	.09	.09	-.03	.09
Independent	.12	.08	.11	.08	.16	.09	.24*	.09
Sporting Event Patriotism	.07**	.03	.04	.03	.04	.03	.15***	.03
White	.01	.07	-.06	.08	.01	.08	-.11	.09
Education (High School or Less)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Education (Some College)	-.03	.10	-.05	.10	-.08	.11	-.02	.11
Education (Bachelor’s Degree)	-.10	.10	-.09	.10	-.10	.11	-.08	.12
Education (Graduate Degree)	-.14	.11	-.08	.11	-.05	.12	-.07	.13
Income (Less than \$25,000)	-.22*	.10	-.20	.10	-.19	.12	-.03	.12
Income (\$25,000-49,999)	.13	.10	-.07	.10	-.01	.11	.12	.13
Income (\$50,000-74,999)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Income (\$75,000-124,999)	.08	.09	-.04	.09	.10	.10	.06	.12
Income (\$125,000 or More)	-.08	.11	-.08	.11	-.07	.13	.01	.13
Concussion Attention	.10**	.03	.12***	.03	.08*	.04	.02	.04
Watch [Sport]	.19***	.03	.20***	.03	.21***	.04	.23***	.03
Athlete Experience	.04	.02	.03	.02	.02	.03	.04	.03
Age (18-29)	-.05	.09	.18*	.09	.06	.10	-.19	.10
Age (30-44)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Age (45-59)	.03	.08	.09	.08	-.06	.09	-.16	.10
Age (60+)	-.05	.08	-.00	.08	-.00	.09	-.14	.10
Female	.03	.06	.15**	.06	.17*	.07	.16*	.07
Married	-.01	.06	.07	.07	-.01	.07	-.10	.08
Christian	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Other Religion	-.23*	.10	-.07	.10	-.17	.11	.03	.12
No Religion	-.11	.07	-.15*	.08	-.15	.08	-.06	.09
Urban	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Suburban	.01	.07	.05	.07	.06	.08	-.02	.08
Rural	.15	.08	.18*	.08	.09	.09	.12	.10
South	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Northeast	-.03	.08	.09	.08	.07	.09	.06	.10
Midwest	.02	.08	.15	.08	.09	.09	.13	.09
West	-.01	.08	.04	.08	.06	.09	-.02	.09
Intercept	2.97***	.22	2.88***	.22	3.08***	.24	2.30***	.25
R ²	.17		.14		.09		.16	

N = 958; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; non-significant dummy variable for missing data included in model but not shown

Table 2 shows four OLS regression models, one each for encouragement of baseball, basketball, soccer, and hockey, respectively, regressed on all the independent variables. Looking across the four models, the only predictors that were significantly related to more than one sport were sporting event patriotism, concussion attention, and watch [sport]. In all four models, respondents' time spent watching the sport in question was the strongest predictor of encouraging children to play that sport, with approximately a one-fifth point predicted increase in the outcome variable scores for each one category increase in watching. With each one-category increase in the attention respondents paid to concussion news, their encouragement of baseball, basketball, and soccer (but not hockey) increased by about one tenth of a point. There was also a small positive effect of sporting event patriotism on support of children playing baseball and hockey. Of the control variables, only gender was significantly and consistently related to the outcomes, with women being slightly more encouraging than men of children playing basketball, soccer, and hockey. There were very few other significant predictors across the four sports and none that appeared in more than one model. Overall, the models explained between 9 percent (soccer) and 17 percent (baseball) of the variance in respondents' opinions about which sports children should be encouraged to play.

In contrast to Table 2, a majority of the central independent variables in Table 3 were significantly related to encouraging children to play football. Model 1 revealed two positive predictors of encouraging football: each one-category increase in sporting event patriotism and watching football corresponded to slightly more than a quarter point increase in the predicted outcome score. Four other central predictors were negatively related to support for children playing football. White respondents and those making \$125,000 or more a year (compared to the middle quintile income group) scored about four tenths of a point lower on the outcome. Likewise, respondents with bachelor's or graduate degrees were about half a point less supportive of football than those without a high school diploma. The negative bivariate association between encouraging children to play football and degree is illustrated in Figure 2. Finally, respondents who paid closer attention to concussion news were less likely to encourage football, with about a one-fifth point reduction for each one-category increase in that predictor. The addition of control variables in Model 2 did very little to change the size or significance of the coefficients for the central independent variables. In fact, only two of the control variables were significantly related to the outcome, with people over age 60 and respondents living in the West found to be less encouraging of children playing football. Yet, this full regression model for football explained nearly twice as much or more variance (30 percent) in American adults' encouragement of children playing as any of the models for the other four sports.

Comparing Model 2 to Model 3 revealed a number of significant coefficients that were eliminated or substantially reduced by the presence of sporting event patriotism in the model. In Model 3, when sporting event patriotism was removed from the model, political party and religious affiliation were both significantly related to encouraging

children to play football. Both Republicans and Independents (not shown in table; $t = 3.10$, $p < .01$) were significantly more supportive of football, by about a third of a point for Independents and nearly half a point for Republicans. A visual depiction of the bivariate difference in encouragement of football by political party is shown in Figure 3, but again, these differences appeared to be nearly fully explained by attitudes toward patriotic displays at sporting events.

Likewise, compared to Christians, respondents who identified with another religion or no religion scored about one third of a point lower on support for football, but these differences were not significant after accounting for sporting event patriotism. Less substantially, the effects of having a bachelor's or graduate degree (compared to a high school diploma or less) were reduced by about one third by sporting event patriotism alone, and the significant negative effect on encouraging football for respondents living in the Northeast only appeared without sporting event patriotism in the model. Overall, though attitude toward patriotic displays at sporting events was a key predictor in the model, it did not eliminate many other effects of social position, such as race, educational attainment, income, and perceived knowledge about concussions.

DISCUSSION

In one sense, the findings of this study reject the premise of a deeply divided America. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that they would encourage children to play baseball, basketball, soccer, and to a lesser extent, hockey. Most Americans see youth sports participation as a good thing. Moreover, for the most part, Americans of different ages, races, genders, political parties, and social classes agree on those sports. But football is a different story. In the midst of growing concerns about the long-term effects of concussions, encouraging children to play football has become divisive.

Our findings demonstrate that Democrats are significantly less likely than Republicans to report that they would encourage children to play football. However, this association is largely accounted for by Republicans' strong belief in the importance of patriotism connected to sports. These results indicate that encouraging children to play football is not an inherently partisan affair. Rather, they tend to suggest that football holds a special place among sports in its attachment to patriotic ideals and the performance of a "civil religion" (Bellah 1967; Butterworth 2008; Montez de Oca 2013; Rugg 2016). This view is not exclusive to Republicans, but does appear to be more common among them. Similarly, support for patriotic displays in sports is more common among Christians than non-Christian and the positive, significant association between being Christian and encouraging football becomes non-significant when controlling for the patriotism measure.

Table 3. Regression Models Predicting “Encourage Children to Play Football” (Weighted)

<i>Predictor</i>	1.		2.		3.	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Republican	—	—	—	—	—	—
Democrat	-.15	.11	-.10	.11	-.45***	.10
Independent	.04	.10	.06	.10	-.13	.10
Sporting Event Patriotism	.27***	.03	.24***	.03	—	—
White	-.39***	.10	-.36***	.10	-.39***	.10
Education (High School or Less)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Education (Some College)	-.16	.13	-.13	.13	-.20	.13
Education (Bachelor’s Degree)	-.45***	.13	-.42***	.13	-.59***	.14
Education (Graduate Degree)	-.49***	.14	-.43***	.14	-.58***	.15
Income (Less than \$25,000)	-.10	.14	-.15	.14	-.16	.14
Income (\$25,000-49,999)	.01	.14	-.05	.14	-.08	.14
Income (\$50,000-74,999)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Income (\$75,000-124,999)	-.15	.13	-.13	.13	-.15	.13
Income (\$125,000 or More)	-.42**	.13	-.37**	.14	-.41**	.14
Concussion Attention	-.20***	.04	-.17***	.05	-.16***	.05
Watch Football	.27***	.04	.24***	.04	.27***	.04
Athlete Experience	—	—	.04	.03	.04	.03
Age (18-29)	—	—	-.07	.12	-.04	.12
Age (30-44)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Age (45-59)	—	—	-.09	.11	-.06	.11
Age (60+)	—	—	-.34**	.11	-.32**	.11
Female	—	—	.05	.08	.07	.08
Married	—	—	.05	.09	.09	.09
Christian	—	—	—	—	—	—
Other Religion	—	—	-.17	.14	-.32*	.14
No Religion	—	—	-.17	.10	-.37***	.10
Urban	—	—	—	—	—	—
Suburban	—	—	-.13	.09	-.12	.09
Rural	—	—	.03	.11	.08	.11
South	—	—	—	—	—	—
Northeast	—	—	-.17	.10	-.22	.11
Midwest	—	—	.06	.10	.07	.11
West	—	—	-.27**	.10	-.27*	.11
Intercept	2.79***	.26	3.00***	.29	4.11***	.26
R ²	.27		.30		.26	

N = 958; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001; ; non-significant dummy variable for missing data included in model but not shown.

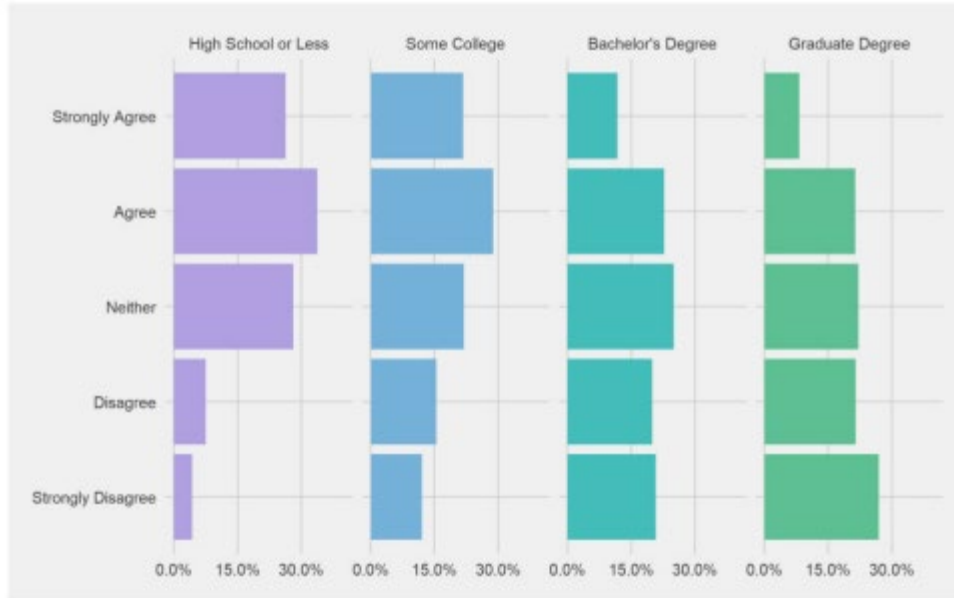


Figure 2. Cross-Tabulation of “Encourage Children to Play Football” by Degree (Weighted)

In that light, encouraging youth football is not just about the sport of football itself. It is connected to a deeper package of cultural beliefs about patriotic expression, respect for the military, and shared national identity. These beliefs are more important to Republicans and Christians. For child safety advocates, then, simply raising awareness about the frequency of concussions in football is unlikely to change minds. Appeals to encourage children to enroll in less risky sports might be more successful if they highlighted the patriotic rituals performed in other sports. At minimum, campaigns against youth football would be more effective if they used language recognizing that not enrolling kids in football may feel like sacrificing more than “just a game.”

It is worth noting here that this long-planned survey happened to be fielded during a national controversy about NFL players kneeling in protest of racial injustice. Indeed, two days before the survey went live, Vice President Mike Pence walked out of an Indianapolis Colts game after players knelt during the national anthem. These news events may have contributed to heighten already partisan polarized views about the importance of patriotic displays at sporting events, particularly among football fans. On the one hand, there is a possibility that some of the effect sizes in this study may have since changed marginally, as is always the case with attitudinal research. On the other hand, it is no coincidence that a debate over race, politics, and patriotism broke out over protests in football rather than soccer, basketball, or ice hockey. For this reason, we are confident the findings speak to more enduring patterns in political divides regarding sports.

This study also found that older, white, more educated people in the Northeast and the West are less likely to encourage kids to play football. These results may reflect belief in a “concerted cultivation” model of child socialization, which may also be related to differences in the youth sports opportunity structure across communities. Or it may

simply be a means of signaling symbolic boundaries by those with greater cultural capital. Regardless, these divides in beliefs about youth socialization and sport raise the specter of unequal health risks along race, class, and geographic lines. In an unequal and polarized era, the son of working class Texas Republicans may face a far greater risk of cognitive impairment from football-related concussions than the son of college-educated Democrats in Vermont. While several journalistic accounts (Belson et al. 2019; Cook 2019; Semuels 2019) and qualitative research (Whalen 2019) have pointed out these potential inequalities, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first nationally-representative quantitative study to offer evidence of these demographic divides in attitudes.

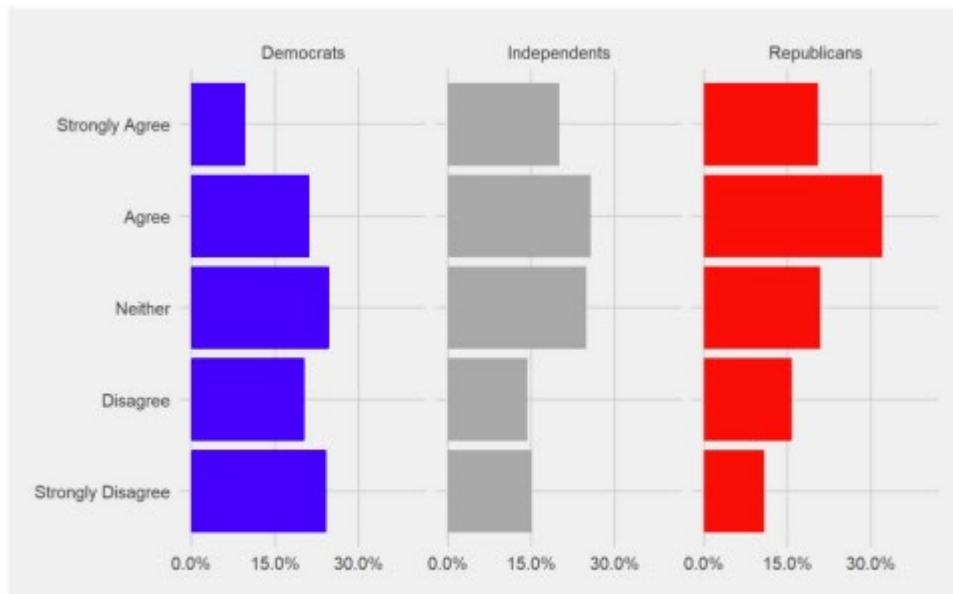


Figure 3. Cross-Tabulation of “Encourage Children to Play Football” by Party (Weighted)

In connection with our findings on the effects of political views, race, and social class, and sociodemographic factors, it might be tempting to imagine that such views about the role of patriotic displays in sports are primarily held by older, white people, but, in fact, there was no bivariate correlation between our patriotism measure and either age or race. Consistent with the notion that the rituals of civil religion performed at sporting events are unifying (Butterworth 2008), we find broad support for patriotic expression in sport. There can be little doubt that facile notions of patriotism are more fraught for members of racial and ethnic minorities who have experienced oppression at their country’s hand. And some of the bombastic, commercialized displays of patriotism at sporting event may strike some older viewers as more distasteful than respectful. But this is speculation. The more compelling account of why white, educated, older individuals are less likely to encourage children to play football is that their devotion to the “concerted cultivation” model of child socialization supersedes their preference for maintaining the rituals of civil religion (Cheadle and Amato 2011; Lareau 2011; Vincent

and Maxwell 2016). As in so many aspects of American life, for better or for worse, individual advancement takes priority over collective practices and symbols.

As child safety advocates consider how to raise awareness about the risks associated with collision sports, our findings offer a bright spot. Holding all else constant, respondents who reported to paying greater attention to news about concussions in sports were significantly less likely encourage children to play football and were significantly more likely to encourage kids to play baseball, basketball, and soccer. While our measure of concussion attention was self-reported, it suggests that news coverage highlighting the risks associated with concussions can be successful.

There are limitations to the current study that should be mentioned in interpreting our results. First, the survey data used here are cross-sectional, and the data analyses are descriptive and correlational; we do not make any claims about the causal processes at work among the various variables. Future research using longitudinal data would be better positioned to make causal claims by examining the relationship between changes in political views or exposure to concussion news, for example, and changes in attitudes toward participation in various youth sports. Second, we deliberately chose to focus on abstract encouragement of children to play youth sports among all adults rather than actual enrollments among parents only. Further, because the dependent measures simply ask about “children,” the nature of the sport in question may prime the respondent to think about boys, girls, or both (e.g., when asked about football, they may tend to picture boys they know rather than girls). Future research ought to examine actual patterns of youth enrollment in various sports, including the financial costs of participation, and account for a child’s gender as well as the sports preferences, beliefs about patriotism, and social class of parents and other influential adults. Finally, as is true of most surveys that cover a broad set of topics and respondent characteristics, our data are self-reported and do not include every measure that would be ideal for examining the specific topic at hand. For example, we used urban/rural living and geographic region as proxies for the cultural and structural importance of sports in communities, and we were not able to include measures that directly assessed respondents’ opinions about the risk inherent in particular sports. Future surveys could be designed with an explicit focus on youth sports participation and could include measures of community support and opportunities for various youth sports, as well as a wide range of the perceived costs and benefits of participation in recreational vs. competitive, collision vs. contact vs. noncontact, and individual vs. team sports.

In conclusion, we find that the American public is divided about football – like so many other aspects of civic life. However, unlike preferences in television shows or beverage of choice, youth participation in football carries real risks. The divisions in attitudes of today potentially produce the unequal childhoods of tomorrow. Our results indicate that beliefs about patriotism in sports, race, education, and attention to concussion-related news are all important predictors of whether or not people

encourage youth to play football. Child safety advocates who seek to convert would-be young football players to other sports will have to grapple not only with Americans' love for game, but also with football's special place within our civil religion.

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