Issue and Event Specific Dynamics of Ideological Polarization[*]

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Abstract

Models of social and political behavior require precise estimates of the ideological positions of elite political actors and ordinary citizens. Social media presents unparalleled opportunities to measure individual traits of millions of people. Here we extend existing models that estimate positions on latent spaces based on network structure to estimate the ideological preferences of 3.8 million Twitter users in the United States. We then examine the role of political ideology in information diffusion through a dataset of 150 million tweets related to 12 different political and non-political issues. Results reveal that communication structures are dynamic, flexible, and situation-specific, and that previous work may overestimate the degree of online political polarization. We demonstrate that newsworthy events unrelated to politics and emergency situations are able to dramatically reduce the degree of ideological segregation in online communication networks, suggesting that it is a mistake to consider ideological polarization as a fixed aspect of online communication. These findings underscore the promise of harvesting social media data bearing on self-selected networks to estimate individual-level characteristics, as well as the potential for developing dynamic indicators of ideological preferences that will enable researchers to address a wide range of existing questions about social and political behavior.