

The Agenda-Setting Function of Social Media

How does the online social media environment influence user perception of the news via agenda-setting and framing effects?



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Introduction

Social media is an increasing part of people’s information ecosystems.

The news that social media chooses to cover or not cover can influence the political agenda, since social media becomes the only way people have contact with politics.

Agenda-setting: what issues are covered / not covered.

Framing: what aspects of a certain issue are emphasized / not emphasized.

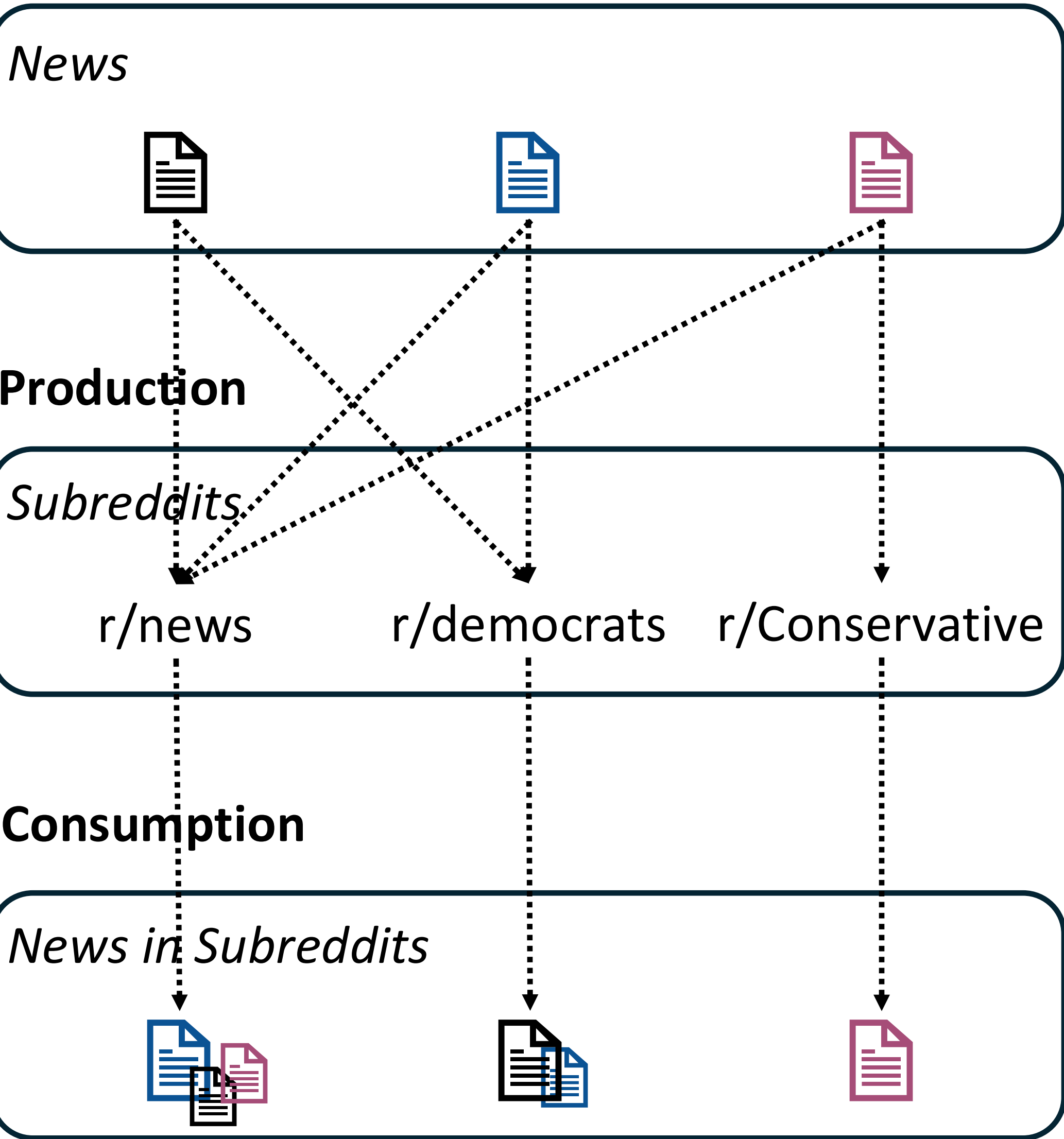
Are issues and frames more polarized on social media than traditional media?

Do the selective exposure effects of social media polarize issues and frames?

How have issue polarization and frame polarization evolved over time?

Data and Methods

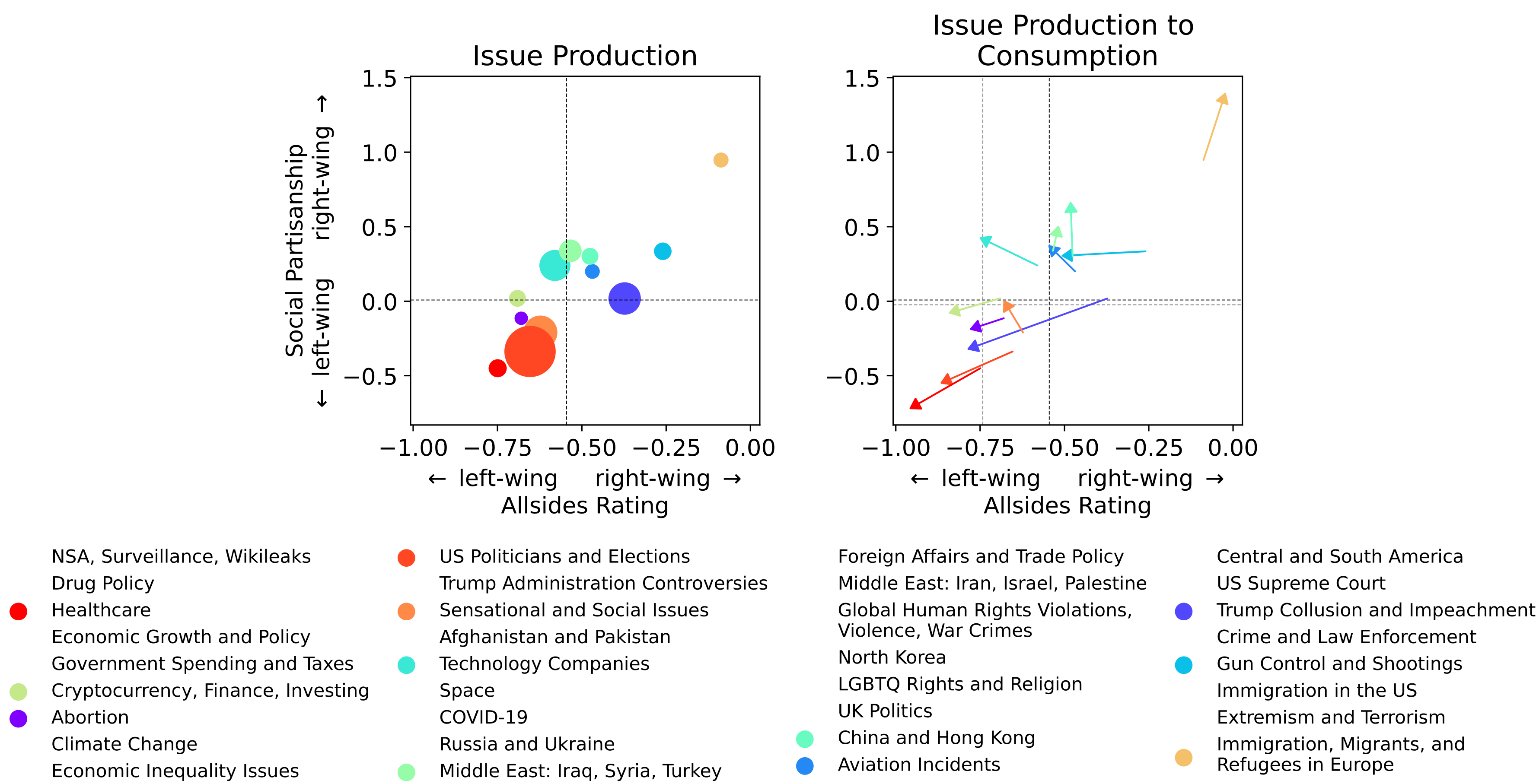
Data: We study all 3.8M hard news articles shared on Reddit until June 2021.



For each news article, we get:

- **Traditional Media Partisanship** (Allsides Rating)
- **Social Media Partisanship** (Waller and Anderson, 2021)
- **Primary Issue** (BERTopic-like workflow)
- **Primary Frame** (fine-tuned roberta-large classifier)

Results



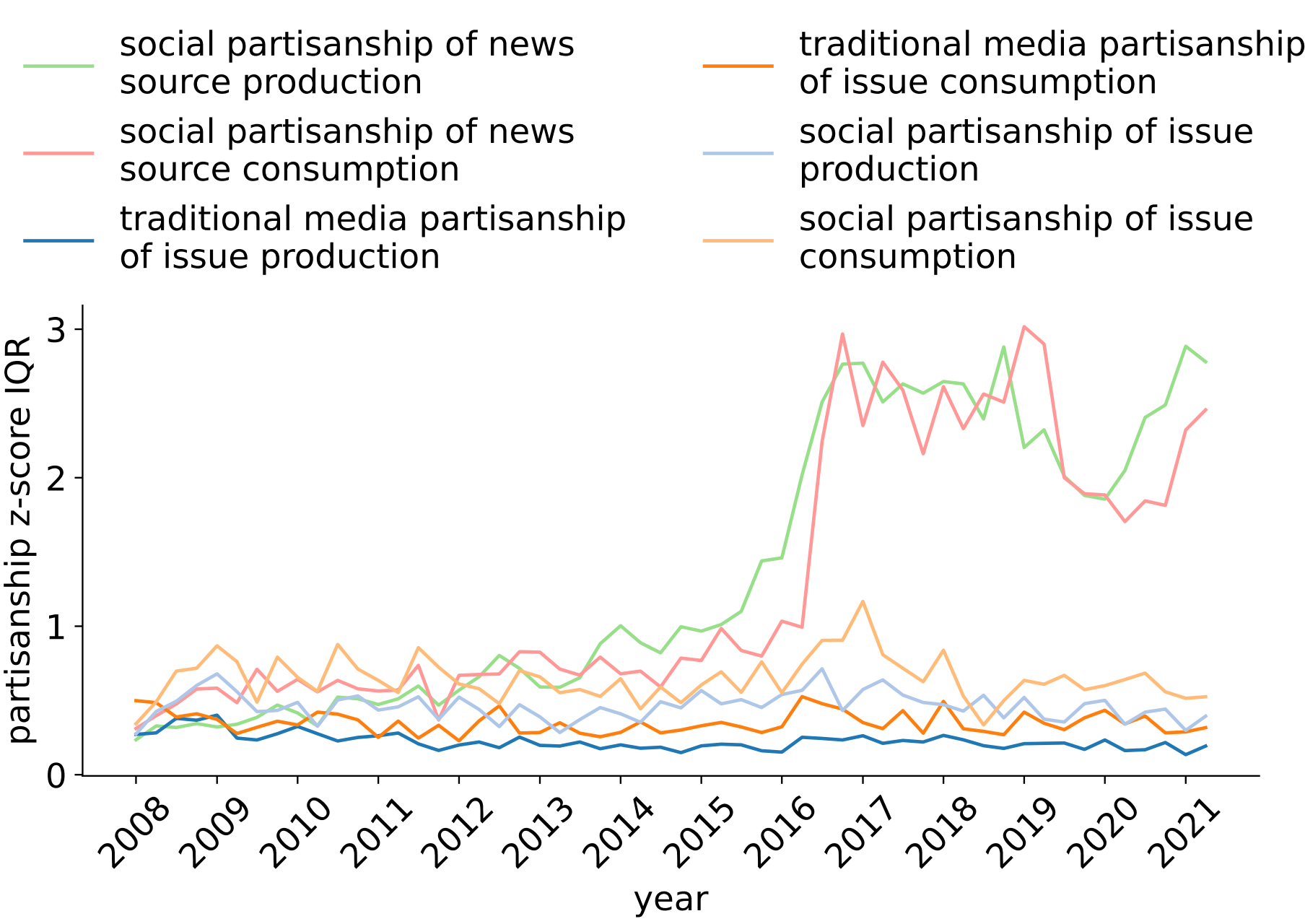
How are issues distributed along traditional media and social media lines?

To quantify polarization, we use the interquartile range (IQR) of the issues’ Allsides rating (traditional media) and social partisanship scores (social media). To enable comparison, we convert the Allsides ratings into z-scores.

We find that **issues are more polarized in social media than in traditional media.**

How did issues shift from production to consumption?

We find that **issues are more polarized in consumption than production.**



How does issue polarization change over time?

In contrast to the significant polarization of news outlets on Reddit in 2016, **issues do not polarize over time.**

The same trend applies for frames.

Takeaways

The act of **sharing news on social media** contributes to **issue polarization**.

The **selective exposure effects of Reddit** further contribute to **issue polarization**.

While left- and right-wing communities have become increasingly segregated in the news articles sources that are produced and consumed, the **news articles are not becoming at segregated in the issues that they discuss.**

We add a media effects dimension to the growing body of work on selective exposure, political polarization, and echo chambers, illustrating the importance of studying the *textual* content of news on social media.