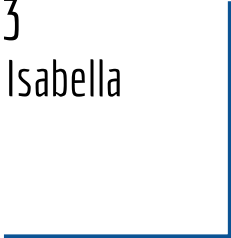




Language of Polarization

SICSS Munich 2023
Philipp, Johanna, Sean, Lea, Isabella
03/08/2023



Introduction and Relevance



Introduction and Relevance

- American politics have become increasingly partisan and polarized since 1960s (Baldassarri & Goldberg 2014)
 - Last few years saw a spiking rise in the (negative) language tone (Jensen et al. 2012), especially in the US politics since 2016 (KhudaBukhsh et al. 2021)
 - Ideological and affective polarization, also online
- Simchon et al. (2022): “language of online polarization”
- Polarization in language is not systematically researched (Jensen et al. 2012)

Research Question

How are historical events used in online discussions regarding the Black Lives Matter movement after the George Floyd murder in May 2020?



Theoretical Background



Political Polarization

Affective polarization

(identity-based, out-group animosity)

VS.

ideological polarization

(divergence of political opinion, attitudes ...)

Online Polarization

- Cross-ideological discussions vs. echo chambers (e.g. Guimaraes et al. 2019; Hargittai et al. 2008; Morales et al. 2021; Nithyanand et al. 2017; Rozenbeek/Palau 2017)
- Highly salient topics (such as BLM) can increase language (online) polarization (Nithyanand et al. 2017; Soliman et al. 2019)

→ might mirror ideological polarization (Simchon et al. 2022)

- Research focuses on 2016 US election as a turning point (An et al. 2019; Hofmann et al. 2022; Solimani et al. 2019)

Hypotheses

1. The discussion in the online public sphere mirrors ideological polarization in the US, with political left and political right differing in their references to historical events.
1. Polarized language increases when BLM and related topics are more salient (e.g. when taking down of statues is discussed).



Data & Method



Data

- Subreddits from the year 2020
 - r/Democrats (left leaning)
 - r/Conservative (right leaning)
- Data collected from ~1.5TB Reddit data dump 2009-2022
- Focus: BLM, pulled statues

Method

1. Scraping both titles and comments of the subreddits r/Democrats (206,614 comments) and r/Conservative (3,682,999 comments)
2. Scraping pulled statues list from Wikipedia
3. Topic Models (STM)
4. Dictionary-based analysis
5. Word co-occurrence analysis
6. Word embeddings
7. Qualitative expert evaluation

Building a History Dictionary

Keywords for...

- US History (e.g., "george washington", "civil war")
- History of the civil rights movement "CRM" ("abolition", "martin luther king", "ferguson")
- "CSA dictionary" (e.g., "confederate states of america", "plantation", "jefferson davis")

Identifying Frames

It wasn't a mistake to pull down the statue of Ulysses S Grant

We need to change our perspective on how to memorialize complicated individuals from history



Defend U.S. Statues and Monuments: Here's What the Mobs Really Want to Destroy



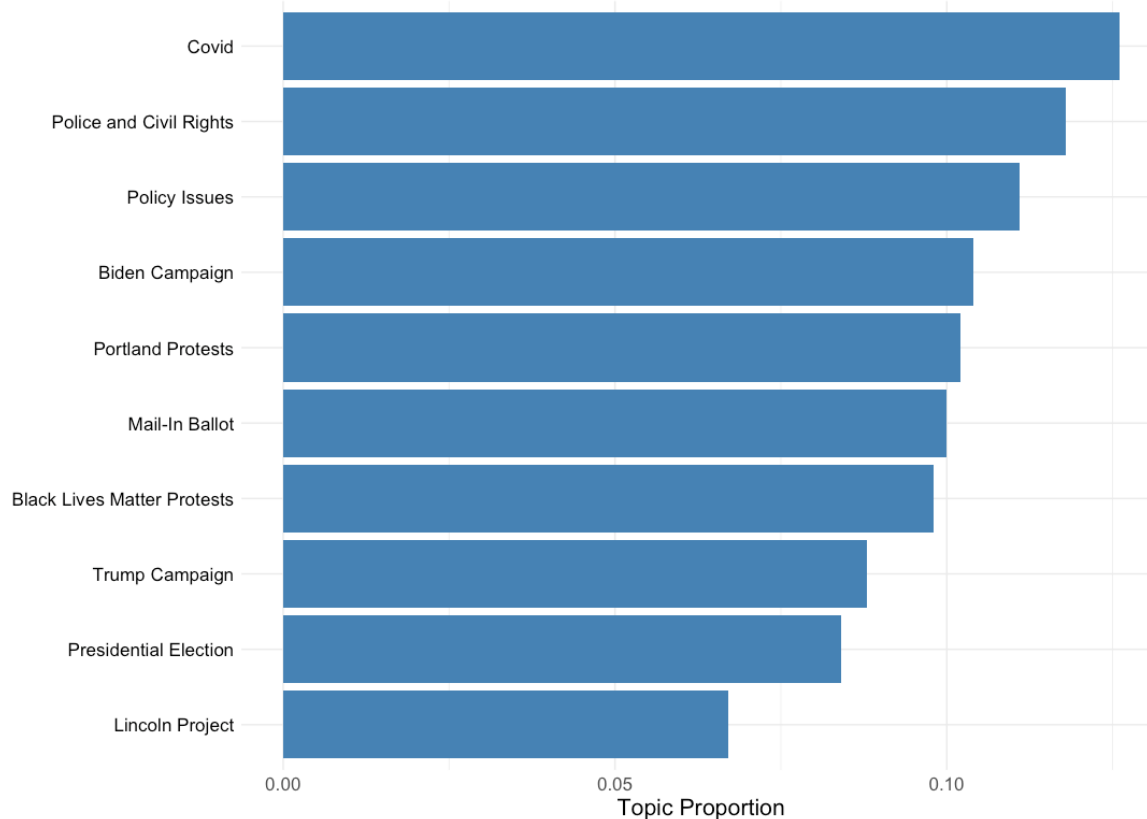
Left-wing Frame	Concept	Right-wing Frame
Statue	Statue	Statue, Monument
Pull down, remove	Bringing down statues	Destroy, tear down
Activists, demonstrators; sad, tired	BLM protestors	Mob, criminals; aggressive, lawless
Change perspectives	Action message	Defend
Complicated individuals	People depicted	Heroes, Symbols



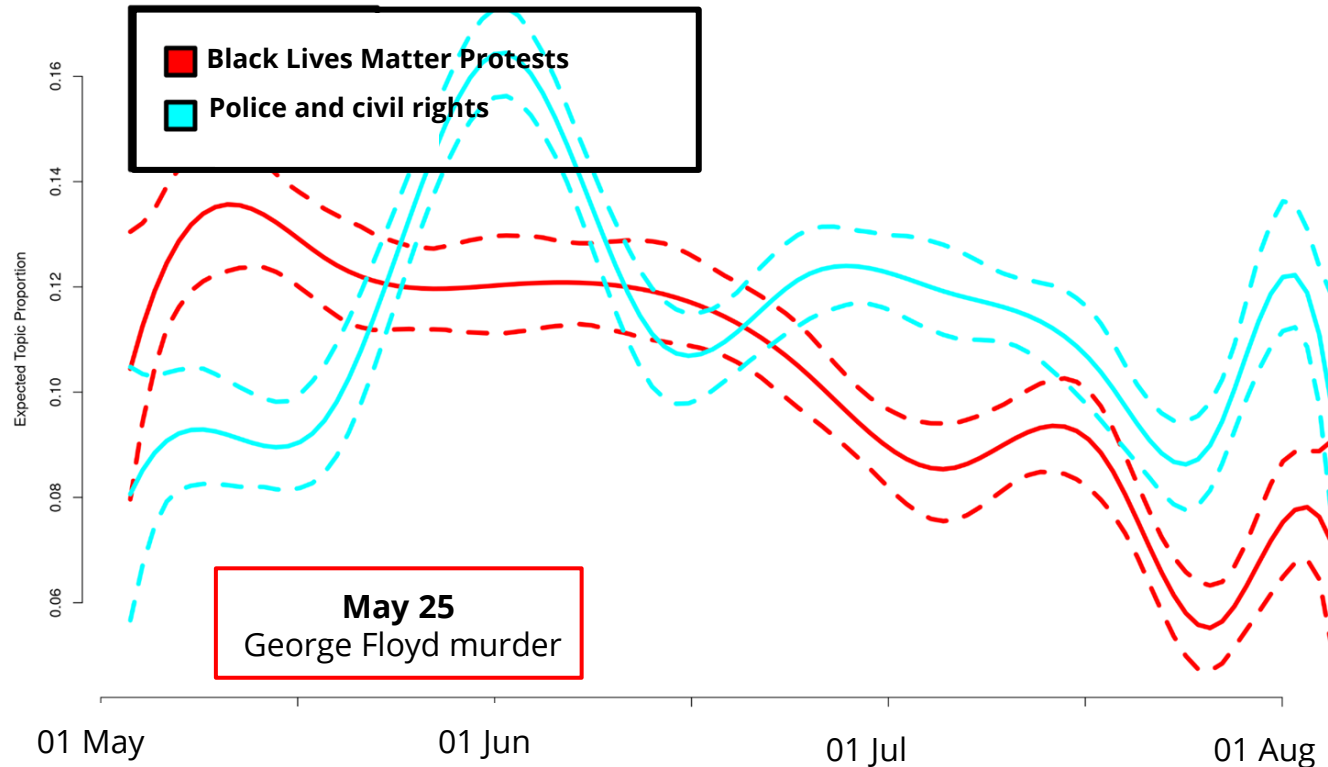
Results



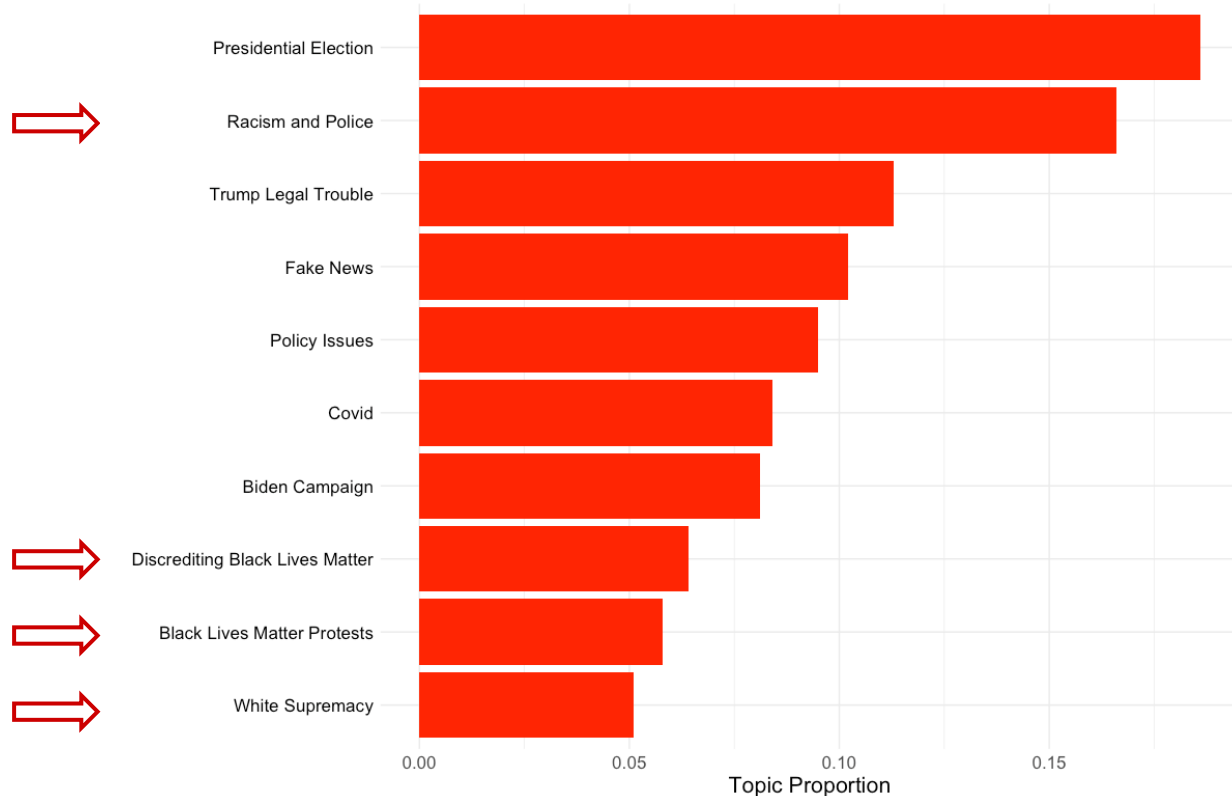
Topic Modelling: r/Democrats



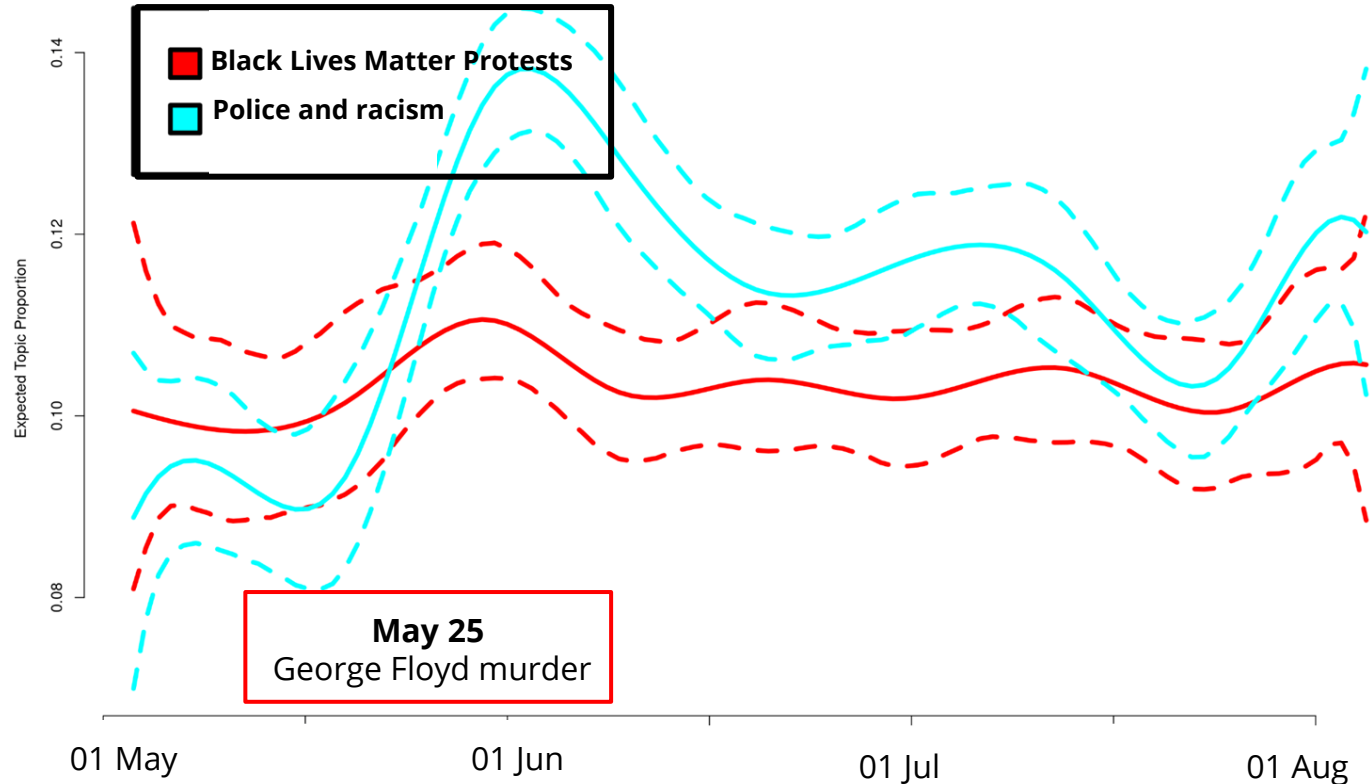
Topic Trends over Time from r/Democrats



Topic Modelling: r/Conservative



Topic Trends over Time from r/Conservative



Comparing Topics: Frex Terms

r/Democrats

Topic: Police and civil rights

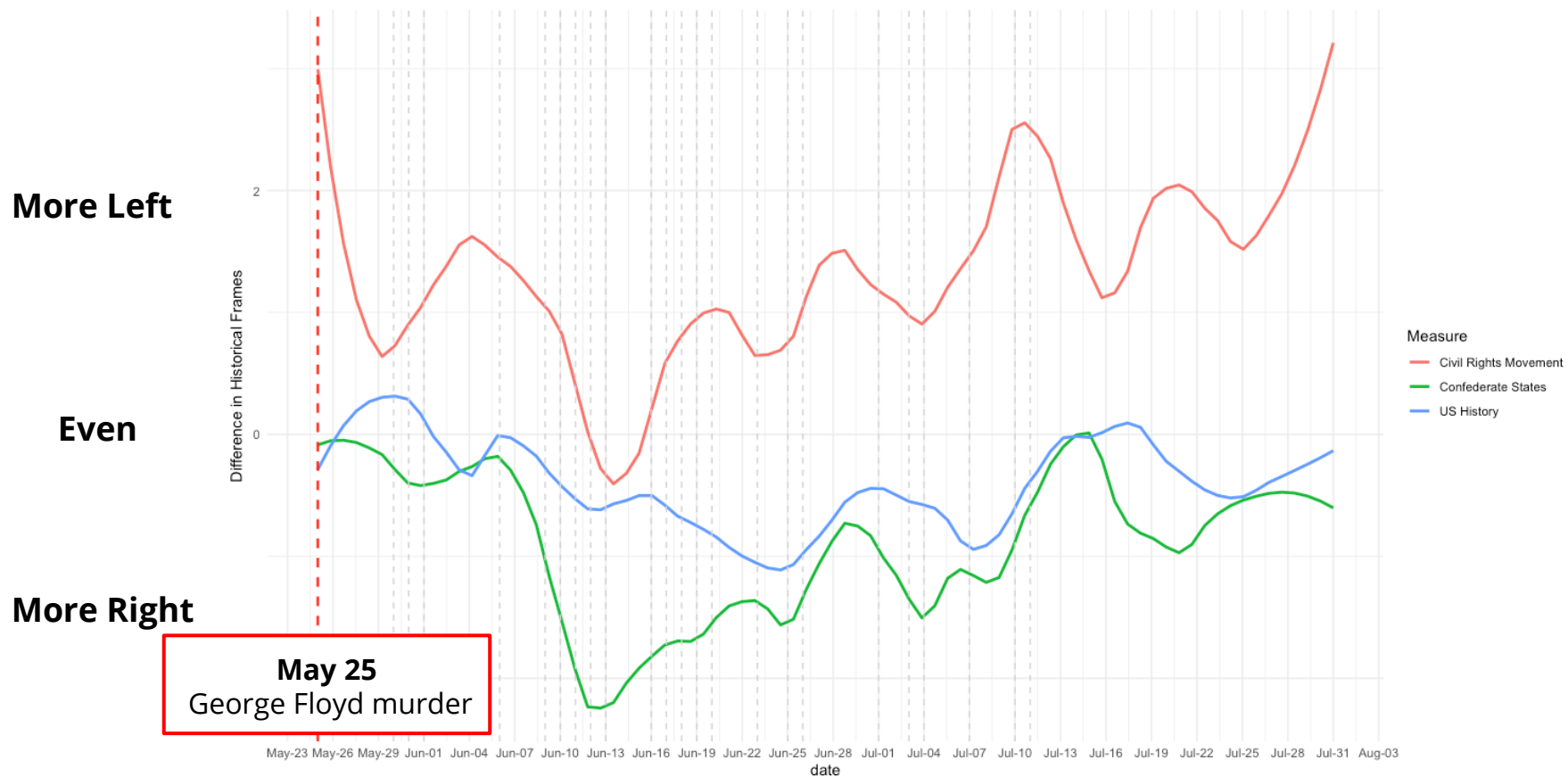
great, rights, racist, civil, police, lewis, happen,
john, dead, wont, little, defeat, like, booker,
video, years, die, let, person, cory

r/Conservative

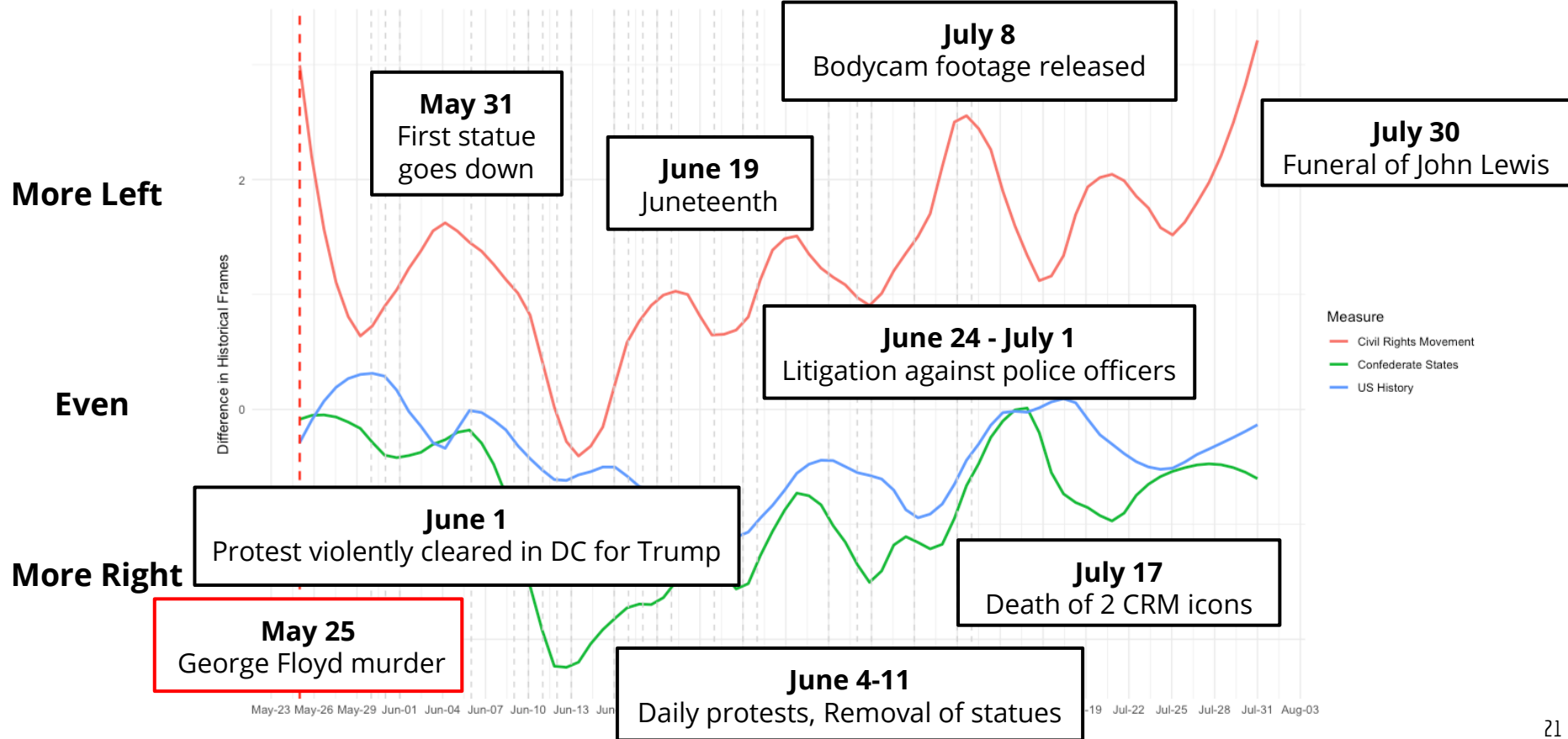
Topic: Police and racism

racism, officers, officer, woman, thought,
council, change, seattle, great, systemic,
minneapolis, city, police, shooting,
department, fire, atlanta, chief, problem,
public

Difference in using Historical Frames



Difference in using Historical Frames

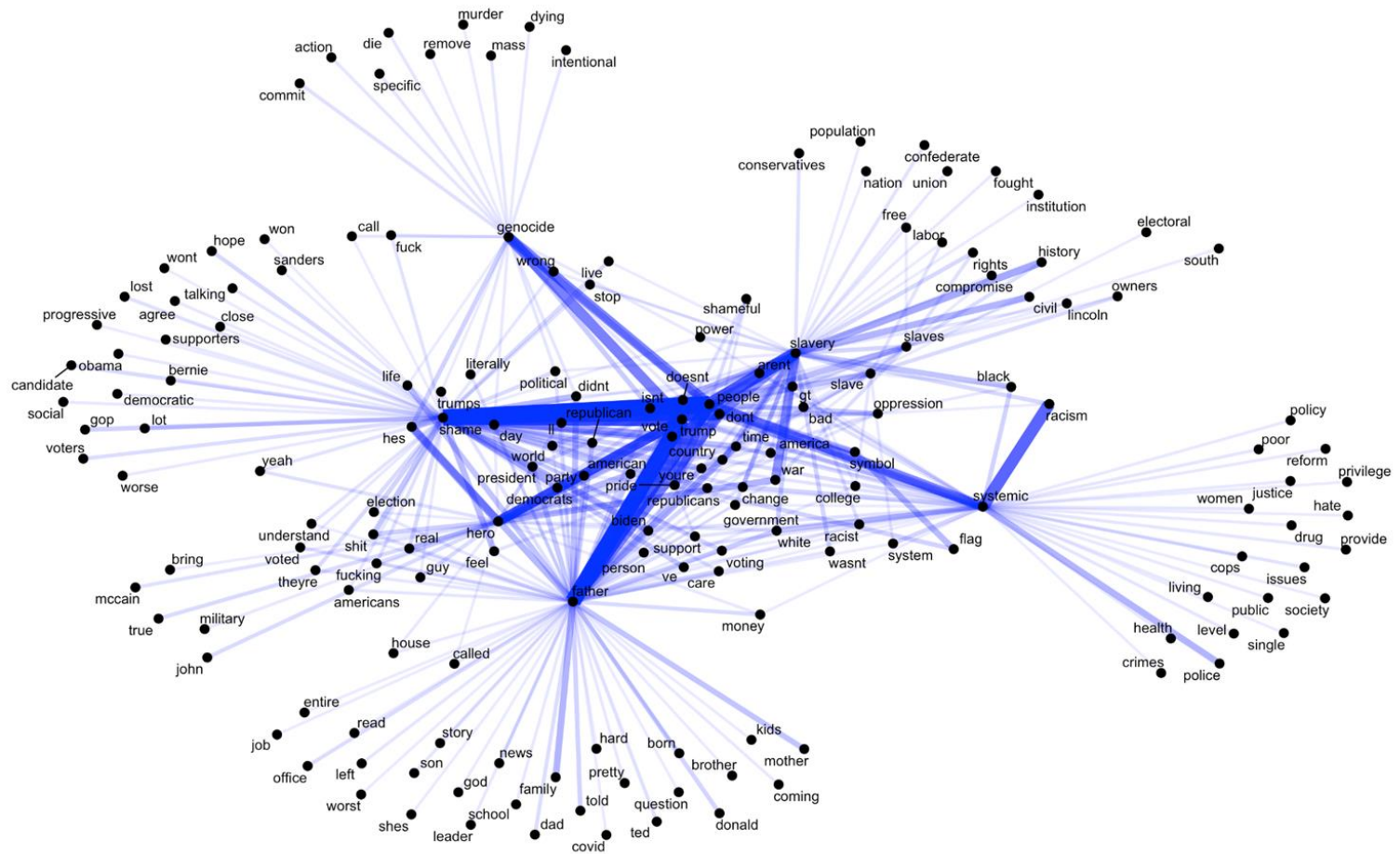


Top 15 Word Embeddings for “Statues”

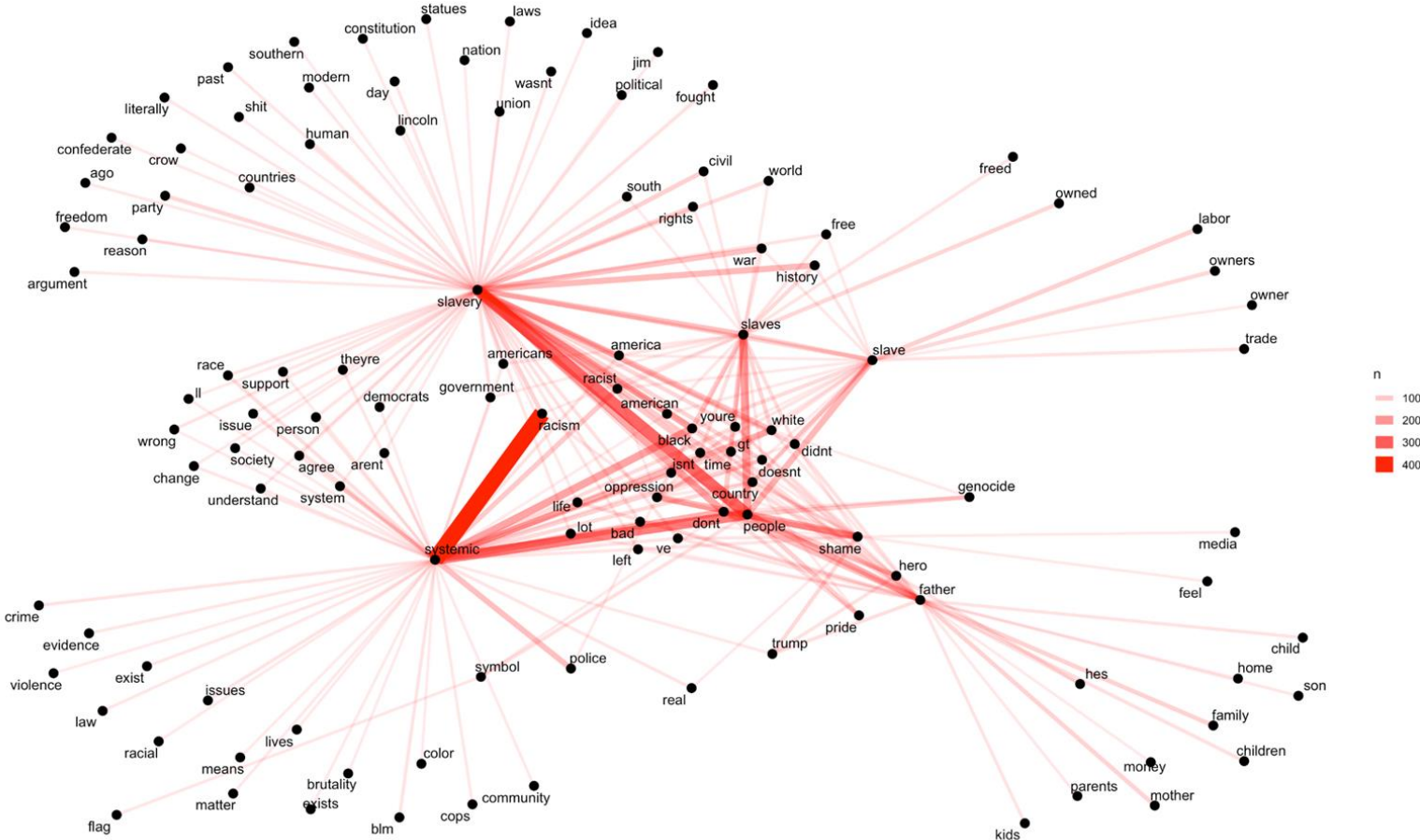
r/Democrats: Posts	
confederate	votinglet
nicest	texters
erecting	inappropriate
dino	stare
obliged	invoke
heartbreaking	jbs
simplicity	higgins

r/Conservative: Posts	
confederate	monument
statue	christ
jesus	tearing
toppling	destruction
monuments	lincoln
historical	churches
topple	shutting

Co-Occurrence: Jefferson Davis in r/Democrats ($n=10$)



Co-Occurrence: Jefferson Davis in r/Conservative (n=300)



Conclusion

- People in r/Conservative and r/Democrats reference historical events differently.
 - Conservatives defend founding fathers and confederacy
 - Democrats reference civil rights leaders
- Increase in polarized language after George Floyd murder and in months of protests.

Potential for Further Development

- Validate dictionaries, especially for meaning of left/right context
- Improve sample (e.g. more subreddits)
- Focus analysis on historical memory
- Improve causal argument (theoretically and methodologically)
- Apply additional methods, e.g. embedded regression analysis or sentiment analysis
- Present at conferences! 🐼

Questions



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[The US loses two icons of the civil rights movement in one day | CNN](#)

[New Transcripts Detail Last Moments for George Floyd - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)

[George Floyd told officers 'I can't breathe' more than 20 times, transcripts show | George Floyd | The Guardian](#)

[George Floyd's death was 'murder' and the accused officer 'knew what he was doing,' Minneapolis police chief says | CNN](#)

[Opinion | We Know How George Floyd Died. It Wasn't From Drugs. - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)

[Timeline: Key events in the month since George Floyd's death | Reuters](#)

[Revisiting Portland's "Summer of Rage" | The New Yorker](#)

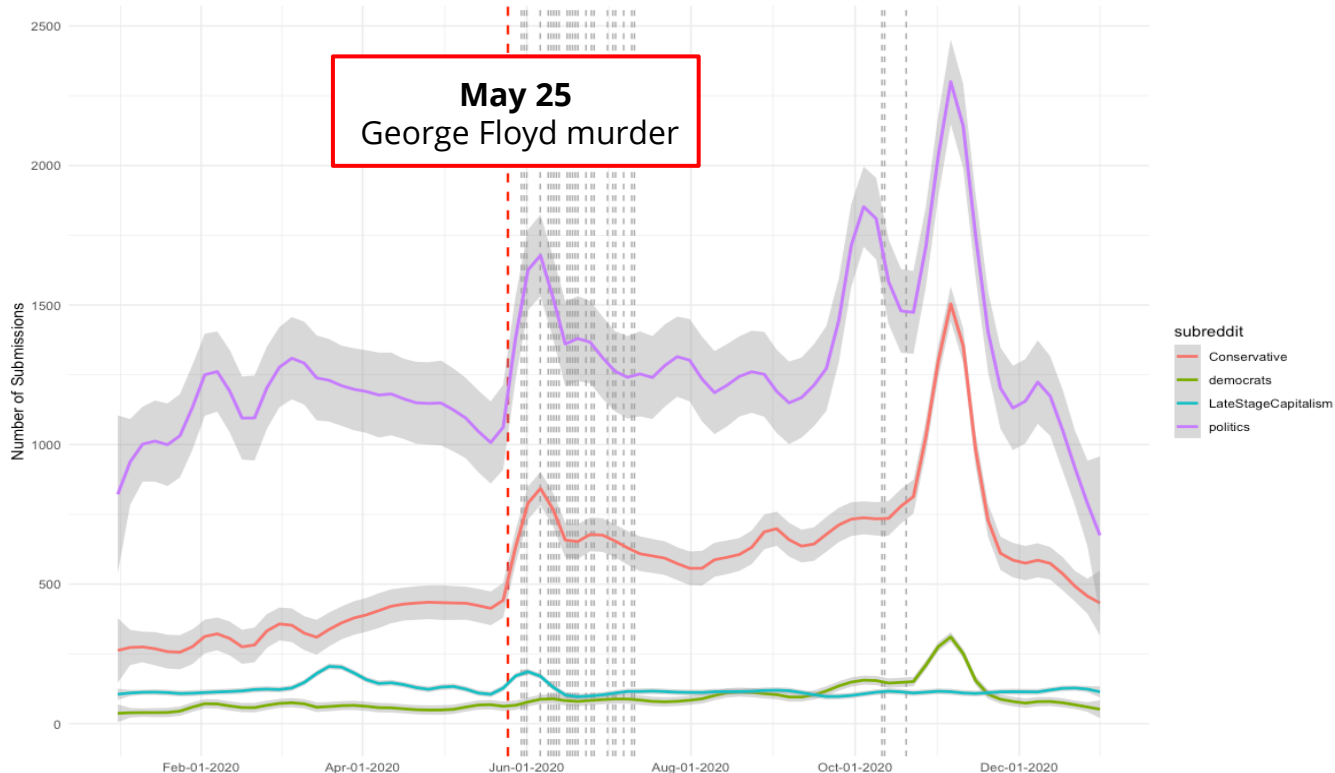
['Emmett Till was my George Floyd': John Lewis makes final rousing call for progress in essay | Civil rights movement | The Guardian](#)

[The US loses two icons of the civil rights movement in one day | CNN](#)

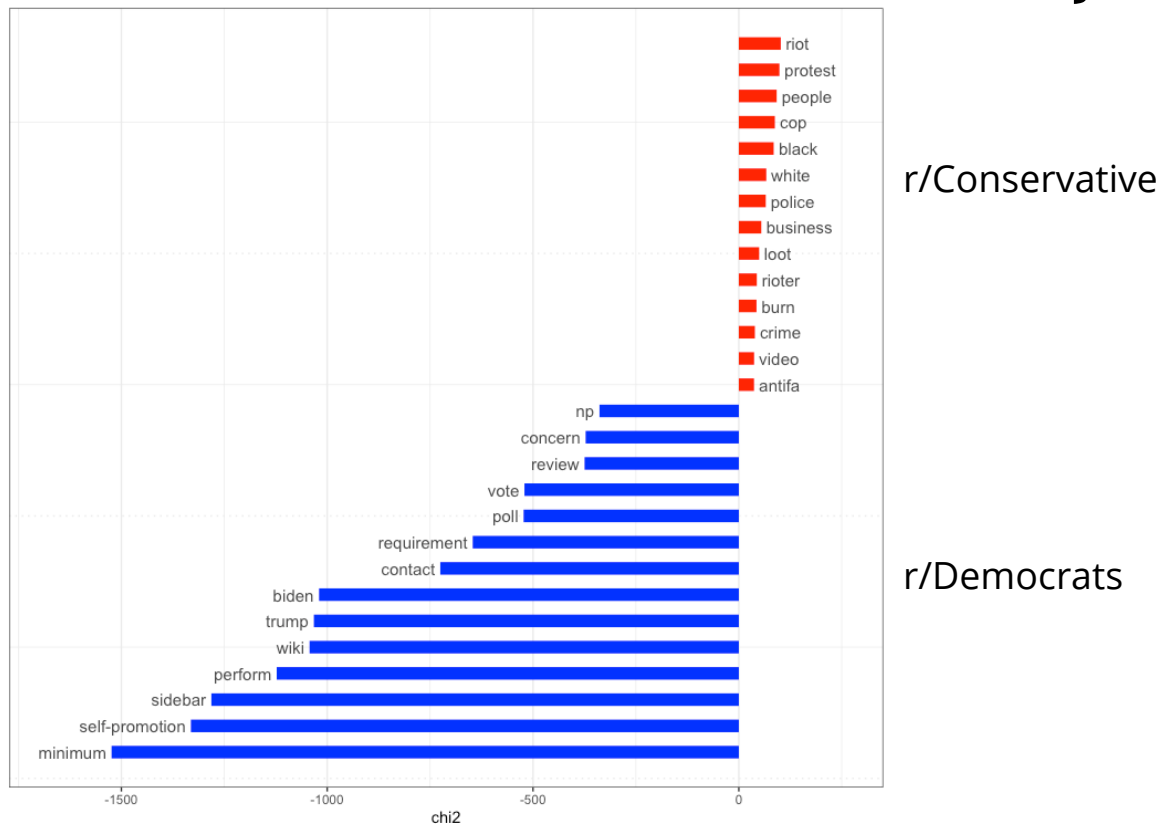
Appendix

Number of Submissions by Political Subreddit

with References to 38 Historical Statues Removed by Protesters in 2020



Polarized Words in Week Following George Floyd Killing

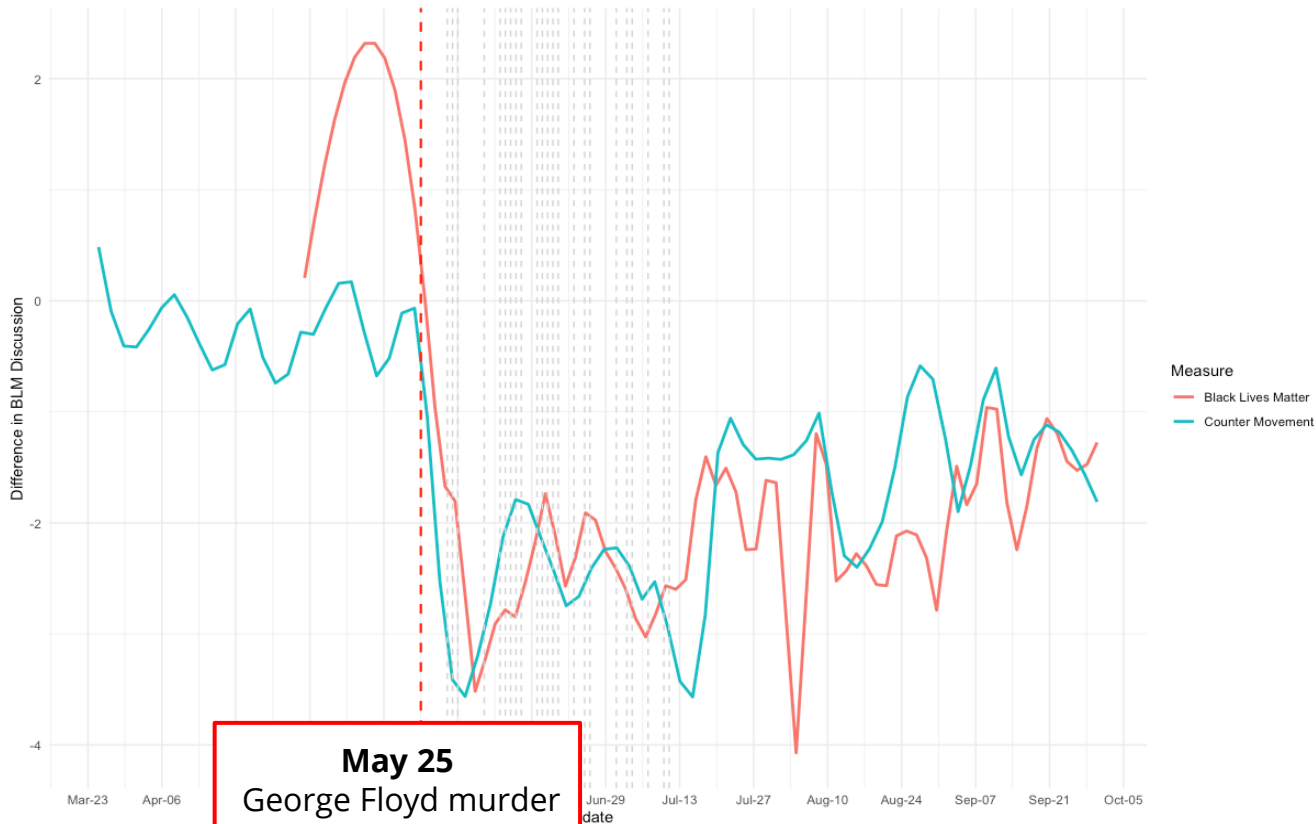


Difference in Using BLM-WLM Terms

More Left

Even

More Right

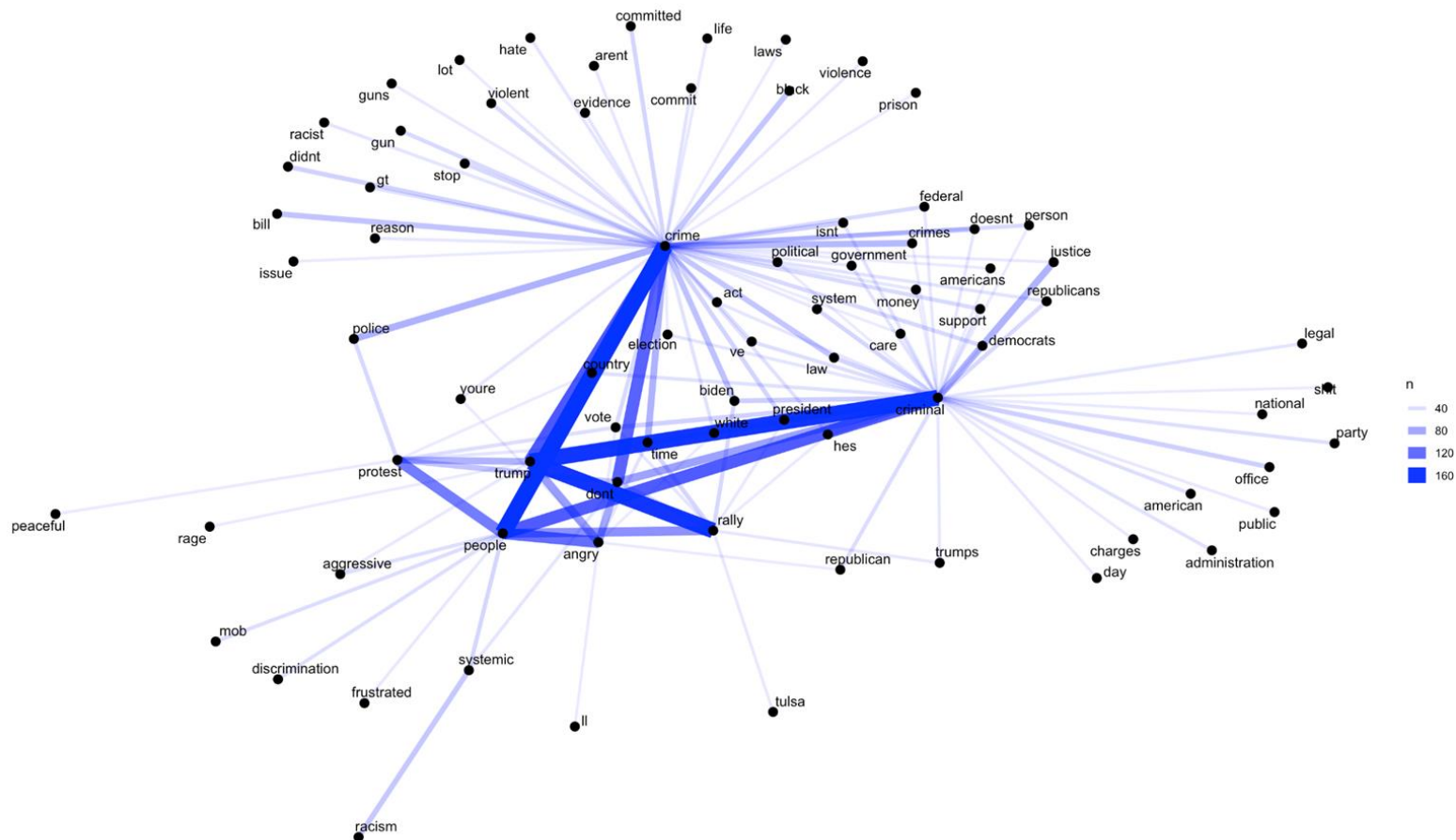


Top 15 word embeddings for “floyd”

r/politics - posts	
george	cops
floyds	wake
protests	minneapolis
death	arrest
riots	police
killing	murder
protest	protesters

r/Conservative - posts	
george	kenosha
following	killing
protests	protest
floyds	riot
soros	soleimani
riots	murder
death	stephanopoulos

Co-occurrence: concept protest (n>=30)

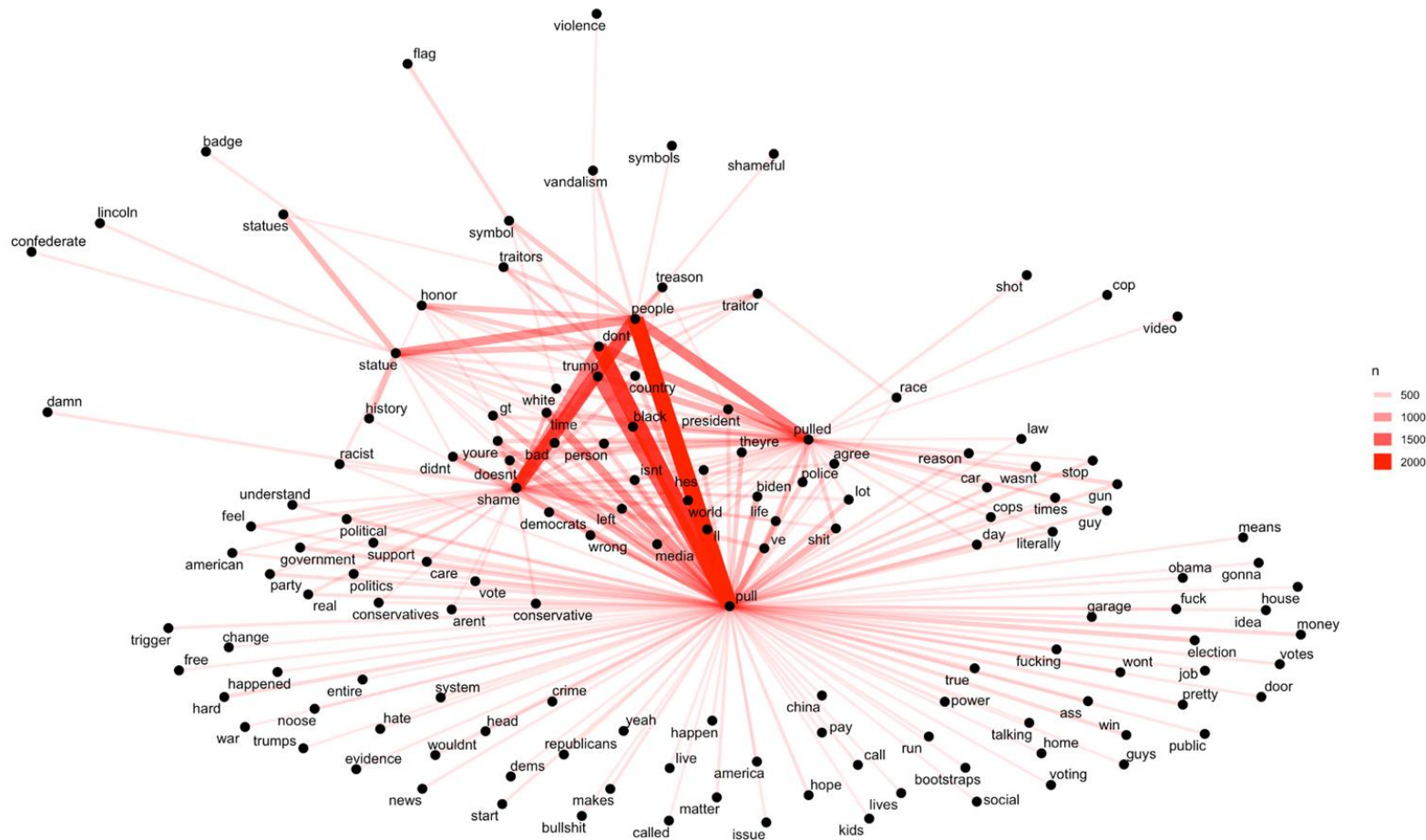


Top 15 word embeddings for “statues”

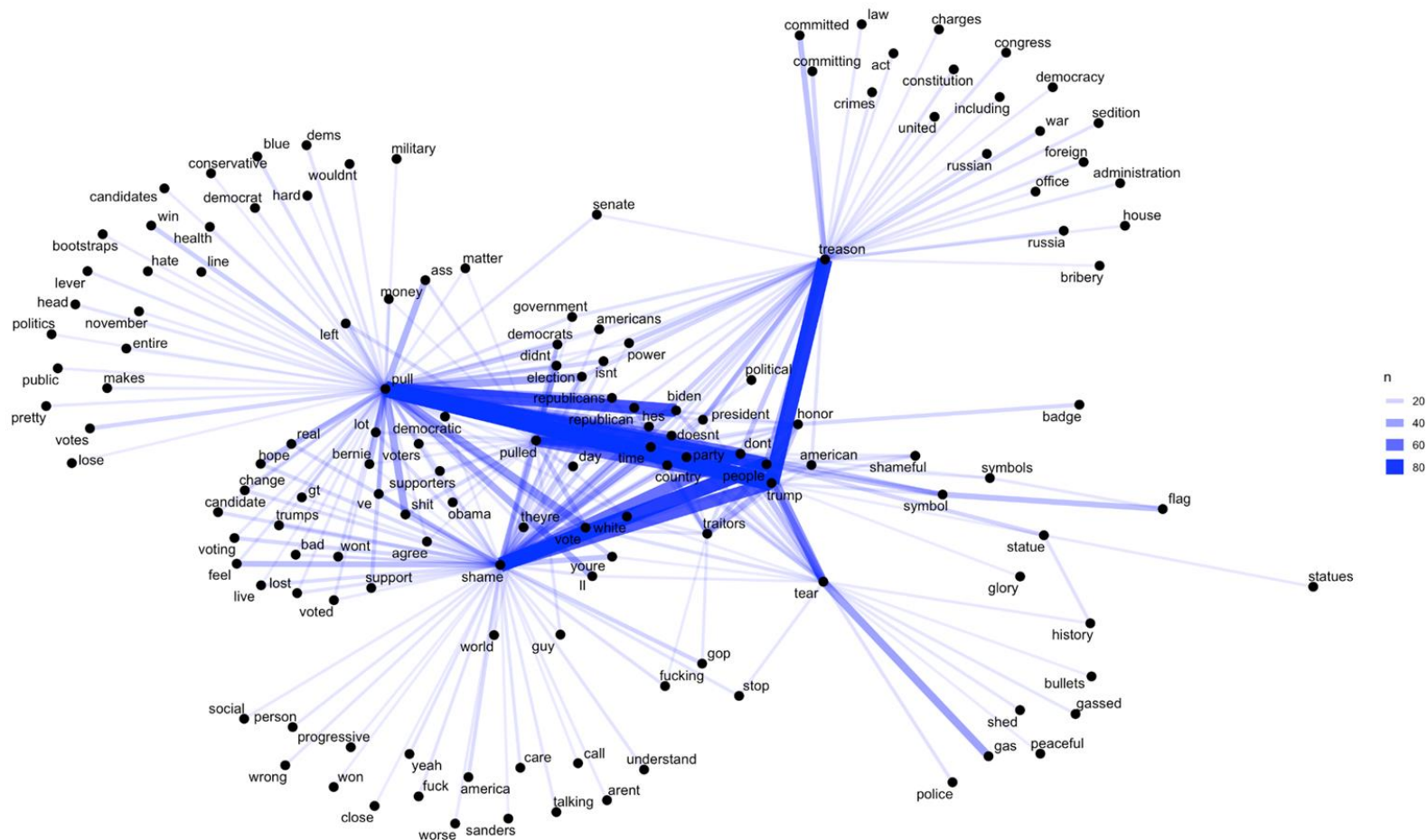
r/Conservative - comments	
monuments	traitors
tearing	confederates
toppling	memorials
statue	torn
confederate	monument
abolitionists	symbol
lincoln	confederacy

r/Democrats - comments	
tearing	burning
confederate	apart
wheels	iz
kinds	stories
flags	unprepared
shutting	laptops
lanyard	dozens

Co-occurrence: concept statue _{(n)≥200}



Co-occurrence: concept statue _(n>=10)



Co-occurrence: Ulysses S. Grant (n>=300)

