

The Politics of Anti-Technology

Thomas Zeitzoff and Jan Zilinsky



Social media is driving teen mental health crisis, surgeon general warns

Advisory calls attention to growing concerns about the link between social media use and depression and anxiety in children and adolescents.



"Nuclear bomb" on teen social life

"Every indicator of mental health and psychological well-being has become more negative among teens and young adults since 2012," Twenge writes in *Generations*. "The trends are stunning in their consistency, breadth and size."

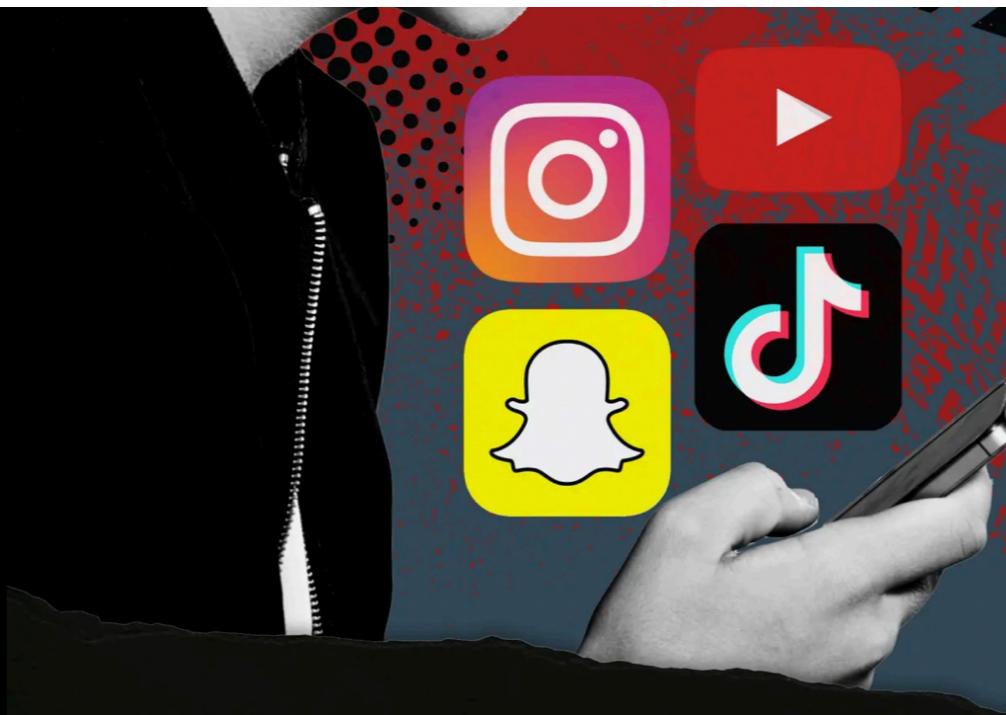


Social media's effects on teen mental health come into focus



The teen mental health crisis: a reckoning for Big Tech

A growing body of evidence links a rise in depression in children to social media use. Will it lead to more regulation?



“Antigone Davis, global head of safety for Meta, has said that attempts to make social media legally liable for the content posted by users could have ramifications for free speech on the internet” (*FT*, 3/26/232)

The U.S. Government Will Ban “Depressing” Content

The heart of the KOSA bill is a “Duty of Care” that the government forces on every website, app, social network, message forum, and video game. (It’s Section 2 in [the bill text](#).) KOSA will compel even the smallest online forums to take action against content that politicians believe will cause minors “anxiety,” “depression,” or encourage substance abuse, among other behaviors.



Press Releases

Rep. Stewart Introduces Social Media Ban for Kids Under the Age of 16

Washington, February 2, 2023



"Our nation's young people are facing an unprecedented mental health crisis," **said Rep. Stewart.** "More than 40 percent of teenagers say that they struggle with feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and **more than half** of parents express concern over their children's mental well-being. There has never been a generation this depressed, anxious, and suicidal – it's our responsibility to protect them from the root cause: social media."

Driving the news: Utah just [passed a law limiting social media](#) for minors and school districts in Seattle and San Mateo County, California, [are suing leading platforms](#), charging they're delivering harmful content to kids.

- It comes just as [Congress ratcheted up pressure for a ban on TikTok](#) for, among other things, the harmful impact it's had on kids.
- The Biden administration's surgeon general, Vivek Murthy, weighed in last month, [telling CNN](#) that age 13 is "too early" for kids to join social media.

RQs

- Do Americans blame social media for specific social problems: nasty politics, loneliness, erosion of privacy, circulation of hate and misinformation?
- Is there a **general anti-technological predisposition**, or are citizens's view multifaceted?
- Who holds anti-tech attitudes, and what are their political consequences? (e.g. policy preferences; acceptance of violence)

Expectations

- Respondents with the following traits will be more likely to hold anti-tech attitudes:
 - Lonely individuals (H1a)
 - Conspiracy thinkers (H1b)
 - People exhibiting a need for chaos (H1c)
 - People with an elevated need for uniqueness (H1d)
- Respondents with stronger anti-technology views will...
 - ... be more likely to support tech regulation (H2)
 - ... be more likely to agree with a letter by an anti-tech terrorist (H3a)
 - ... be more forgiving of a hypothetical violent act targeting a tech CEO (H3b)

4 (potential) clusters

Harm from **social media**

Fear of **AI**

Negative outlook on **modernity**

Criticism of **Western medicine**

Data

- First study: Fielded on Prolific (July 2023, U.S. sample)
- YouGov study (in preparation)

Measurement

Evaluations of social media

- Social media platforms can be a powerful tool for activism and social change
- Social media has mostly been a bad thing for society because it spreads hate and misinformation.
- The reason our politics is so nasty is because of social media.
- Social media apps can hurt children and teenagers.
- Social media has made us lonelier.
- Most of the social media apps are spying on us.
- Social media has made it easier for me to stay connected with my friends and family.
- Social media makes people jealous of others.

Evaluations of AI

- Artificial intelligence has the potential to greatly improve our lives.
- Advances in artificial intelligence and computer technology will result in more people not having jobs.
- I am worried that scientists are designing computer programs that could hurt humans.
- Computers and machines can help us do tasks that are too boring for humans to do.

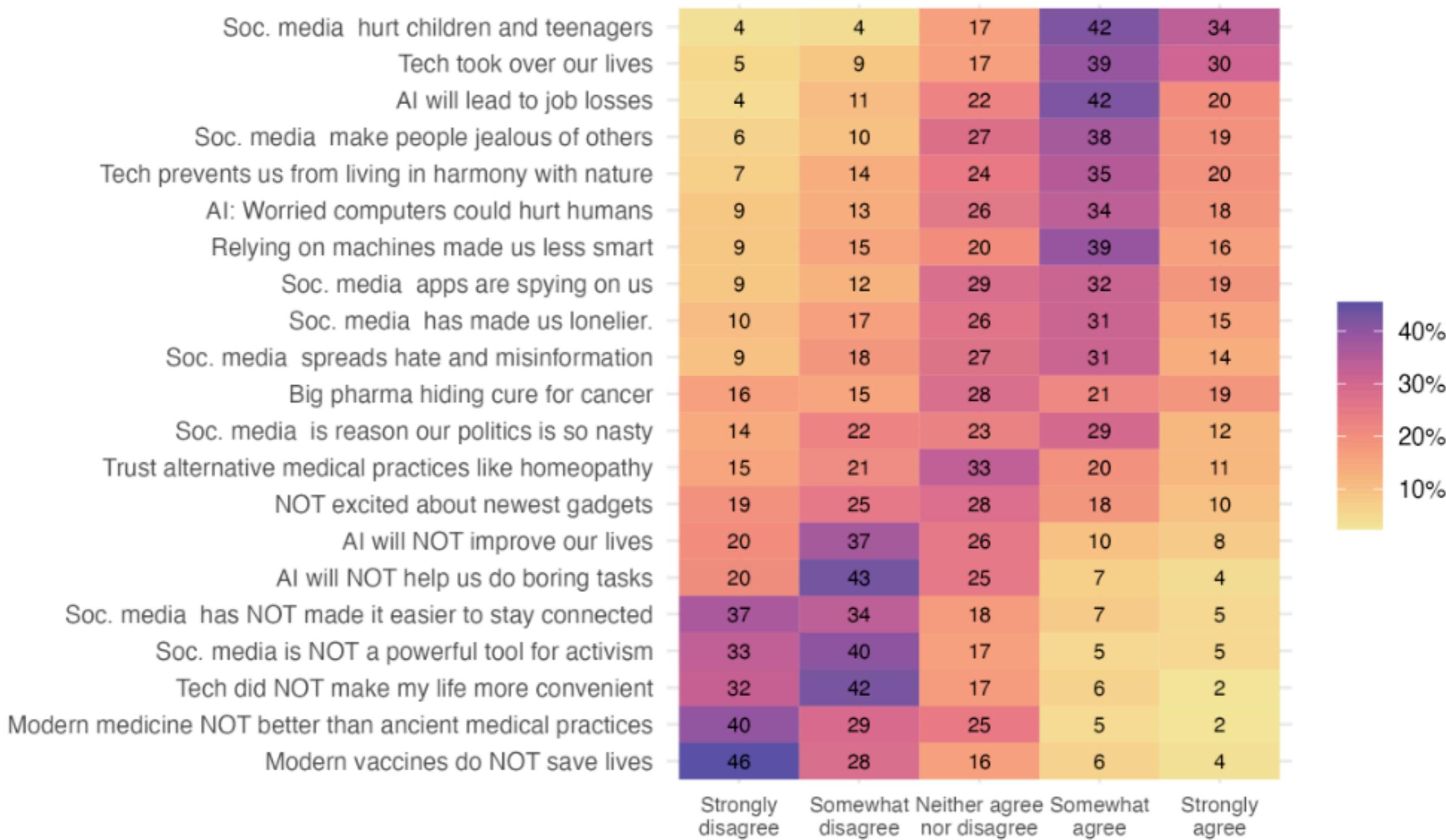
Evaluations of modernity

- Our reliance on machines and technology has made us less smart.
- All this modern technology prevents us from living in harmony with nature.
- We have let modern technology like smartphones take over our lives.
- Modern technology like smartphones have made my life more convenient.
- I get excited when I hear about the newest gadgets.

Evaluations of Western medicine

- Modern Western medicine saves more lives than ancient medical practices.
- Modern vaccines save lives.
- Big pharmaceutical companies are secretly hiding cures for diseases like cancer.
- I trust alternative medical practices like homeopathy, acupuncture, Reiki, and herbal supplements more than modern Western medicine.

21 anti-tech attitudes

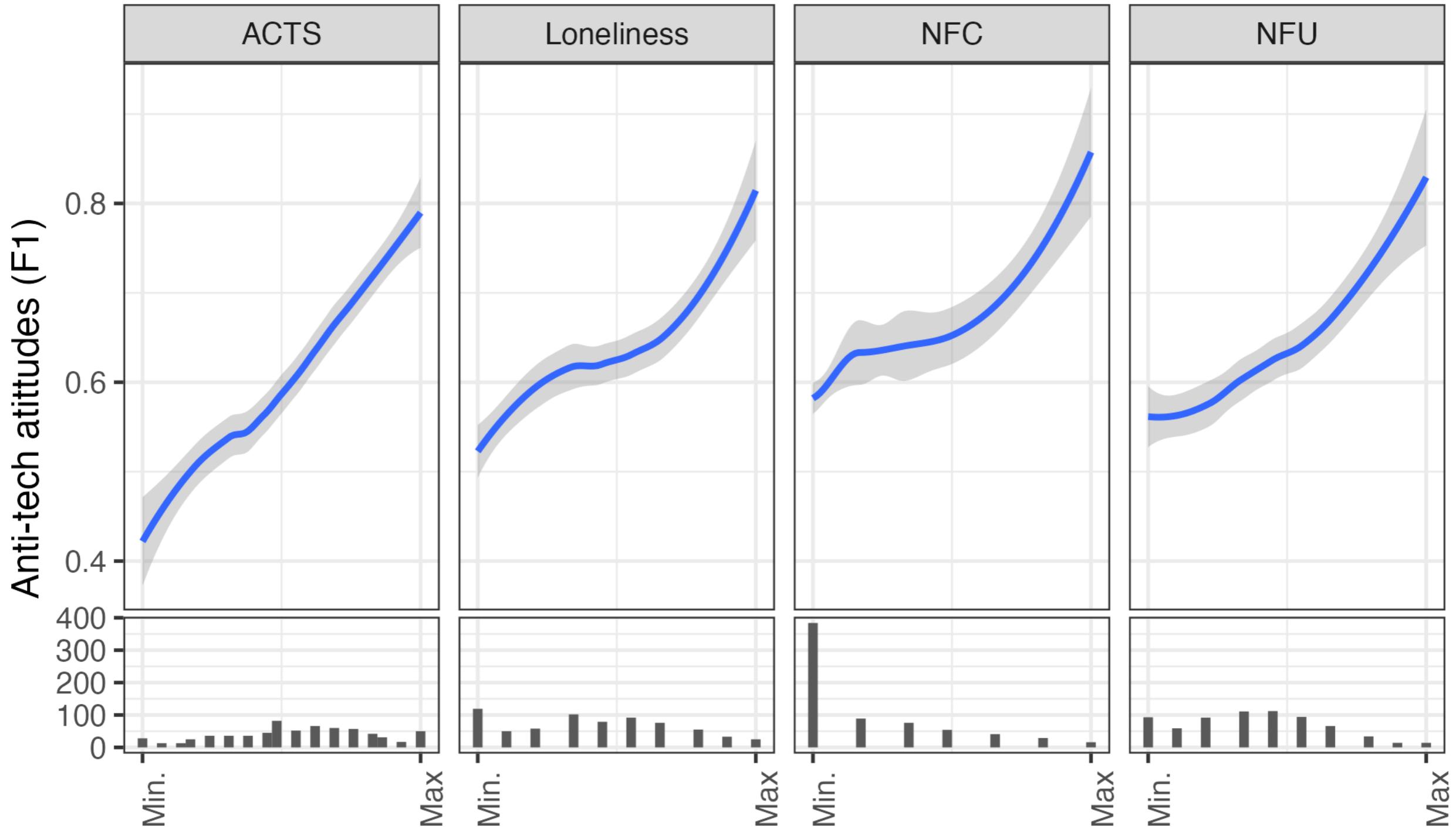


4 (potential) clusters?

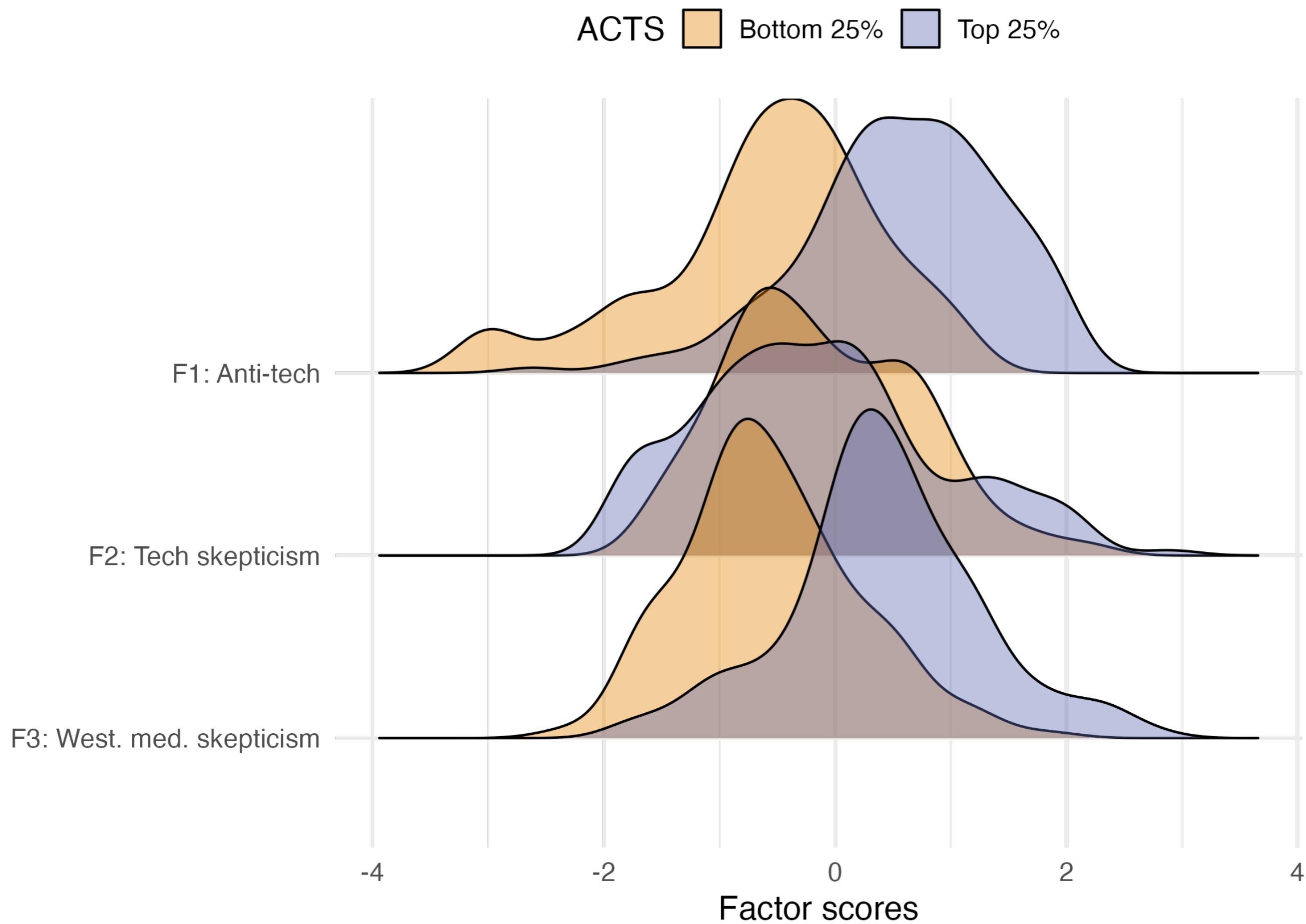
- Negative evaluations of social media, AI, and modernity, and Western medicine do not emerge as separate factors
- 3 conceptual clusters emerge
 - General anti-technology sentiment (F1)
 - Skepticism of tech benefits (F2)
 - Rejection of modern medicine / preference for traditional medicine (F3)

Loadings of 3 orthogonal factors

	F1	F2	F3
AI: Worried computers could hurt humans	0.52	0	0.18
AI will NOT improve our lives	0.09	0.6	0.15
AI will NOT help us do boring tasks	-0.13	0.51	0.16
AI will lead to job losses	0.55	0.01	0.11
(SM) Soc. media is NOT a powerful tool for activism	-0.03	0.43	0.03
(SM) Soc. media spreads hate and misinformation	0.58	0.2	-0.11
(SM) Soc. media make people jealous of others	0.65	-0.14	0.04
(SM) Soc. media is reason our politics is so nasty	0.51	0.08	-0.05
(SM) Soc. media hurt children and teenagers	0.61	-0.02	-0.17
(SM) Soc. media has NOT made it easier to stay connected	0.11	0.56	-0.1
(SM) Soc. media has made us lonelier.	0.6	0.06	0.02
(SM) Soc. media apps are spying on us	0.6	0.03	0.12
(MOD) Tech took over our lives	0.69	0.02	0.08
(MOD) Tech prevents us from living in harmony with nature	0.66	-0.02	0.2
(MOD) Tech did NOT make my life more convenient	0.06	0.67	0.1
(MOD) Relying on machines made us less smart	0.66	0.03	0.16
(MOD) NOT excited about newest gadgets	0.1	0.64	-0.17
(MED) Trust alternative medical practices like homeopathy	0.2	-0.22	0.54
(MED) Modern vaccines do NOT save lives	-0.01	0.33	0.58
(MED) Modern medicine NOT better than ancient medical practices	-0.07	0.32	0.59
(MED) Big pharma hiding cure for cancer	0.37	-0.1	0.55

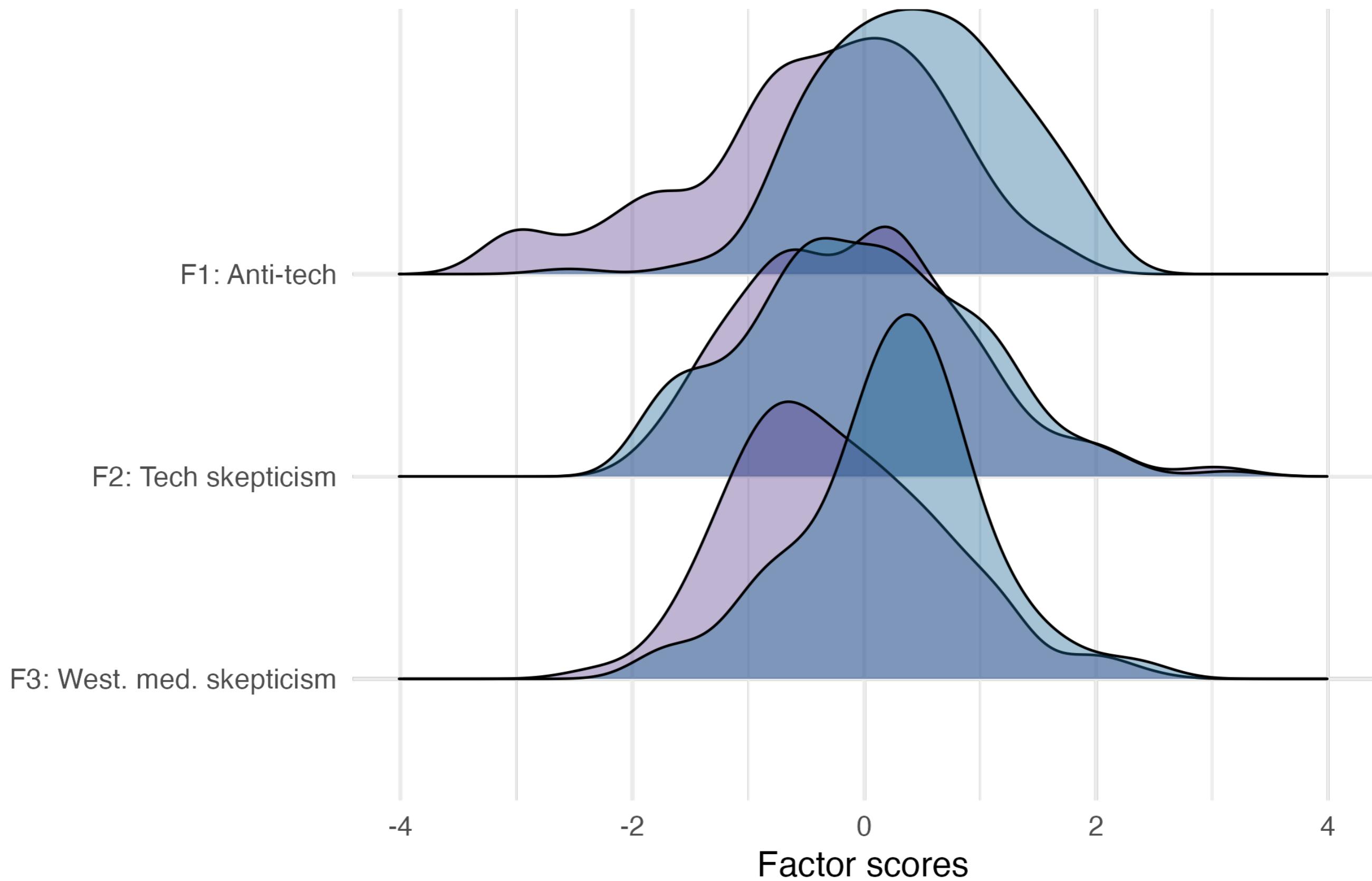


Distribution of factor scores by conspiracy thinking



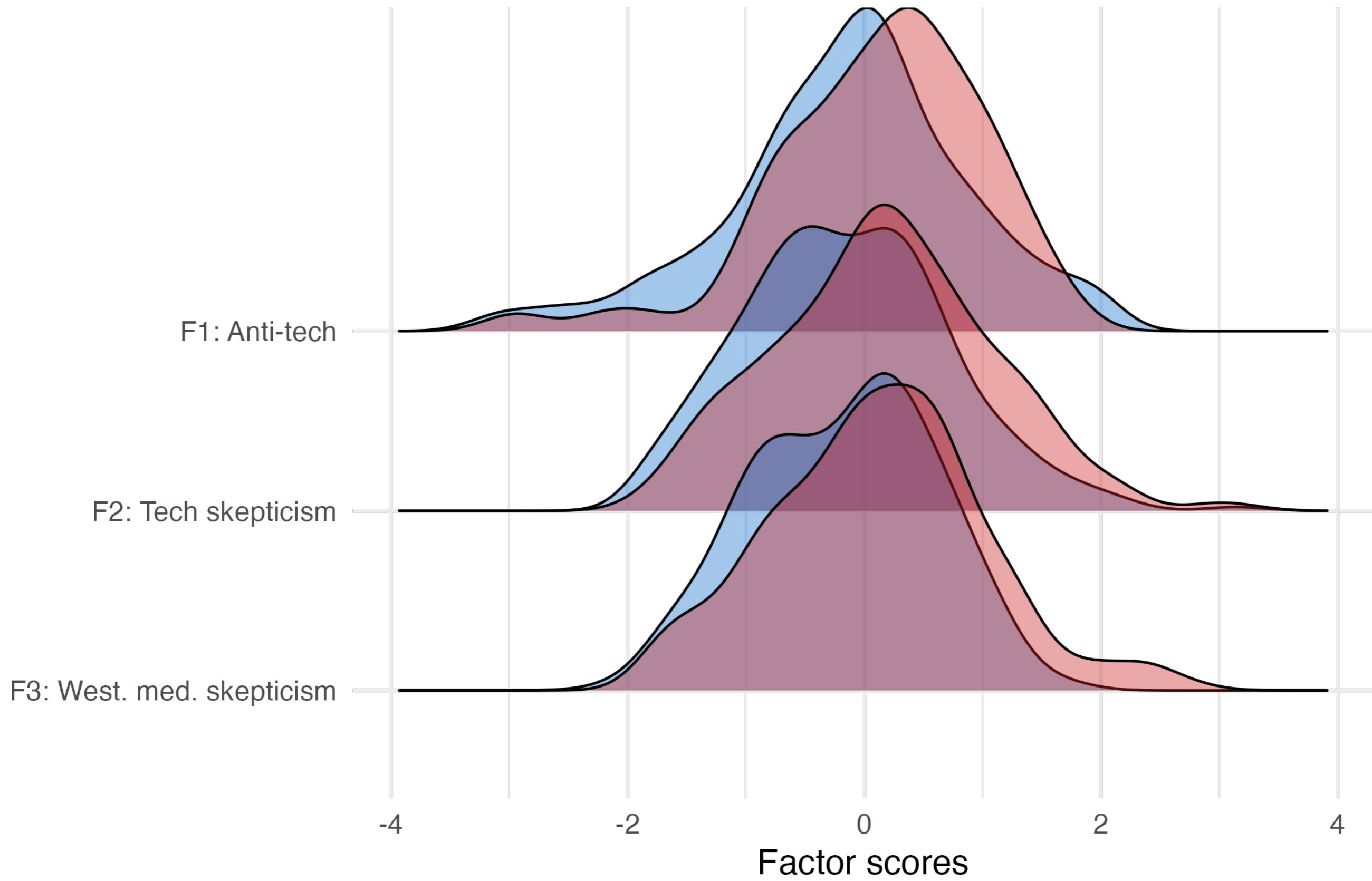
Distribution of factor scores by loneliness

UCLA loneliness scale Bottom 25% Top 25%

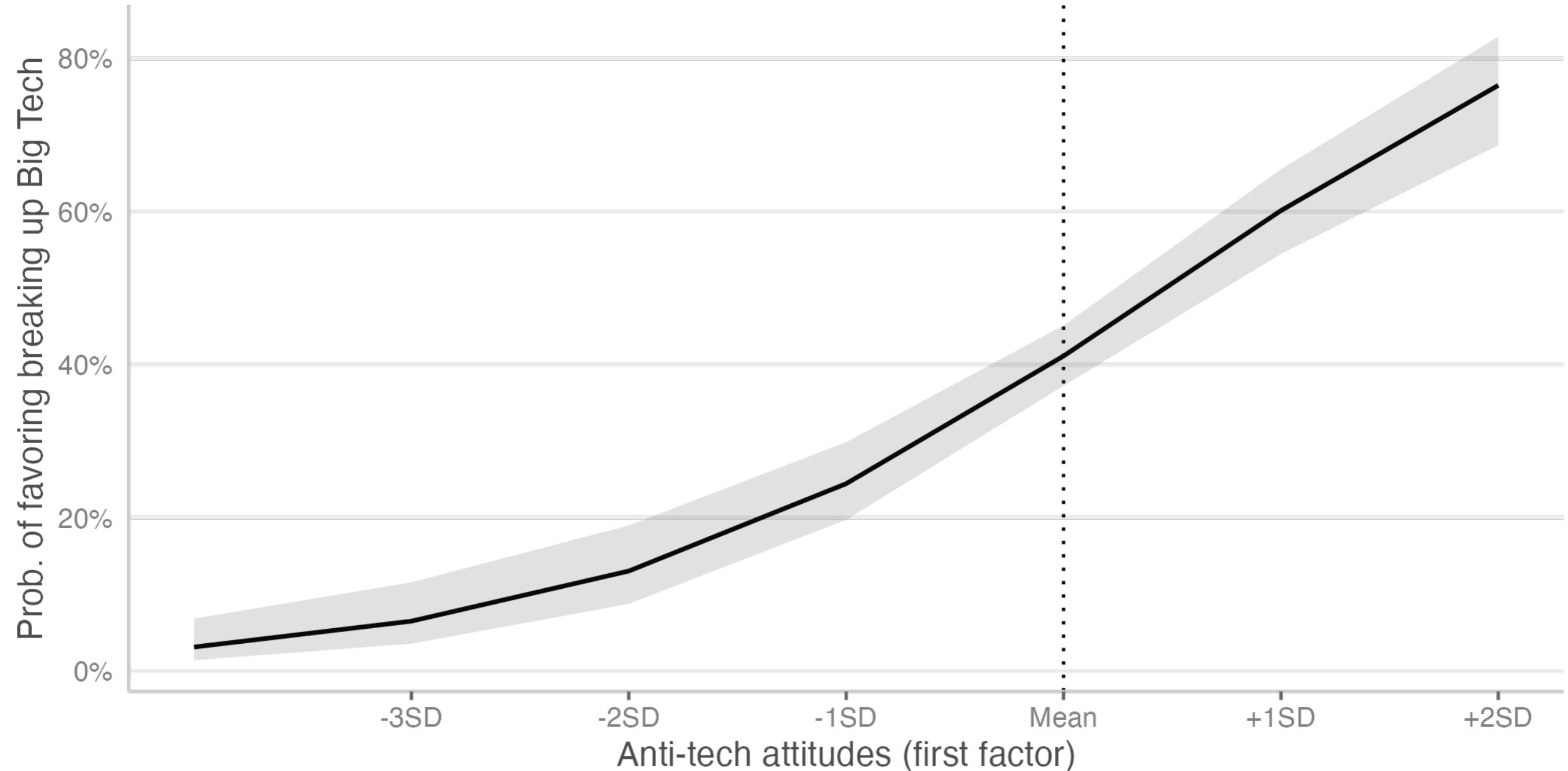


Distribution of factor scores by party ID

PID Democrat Republican

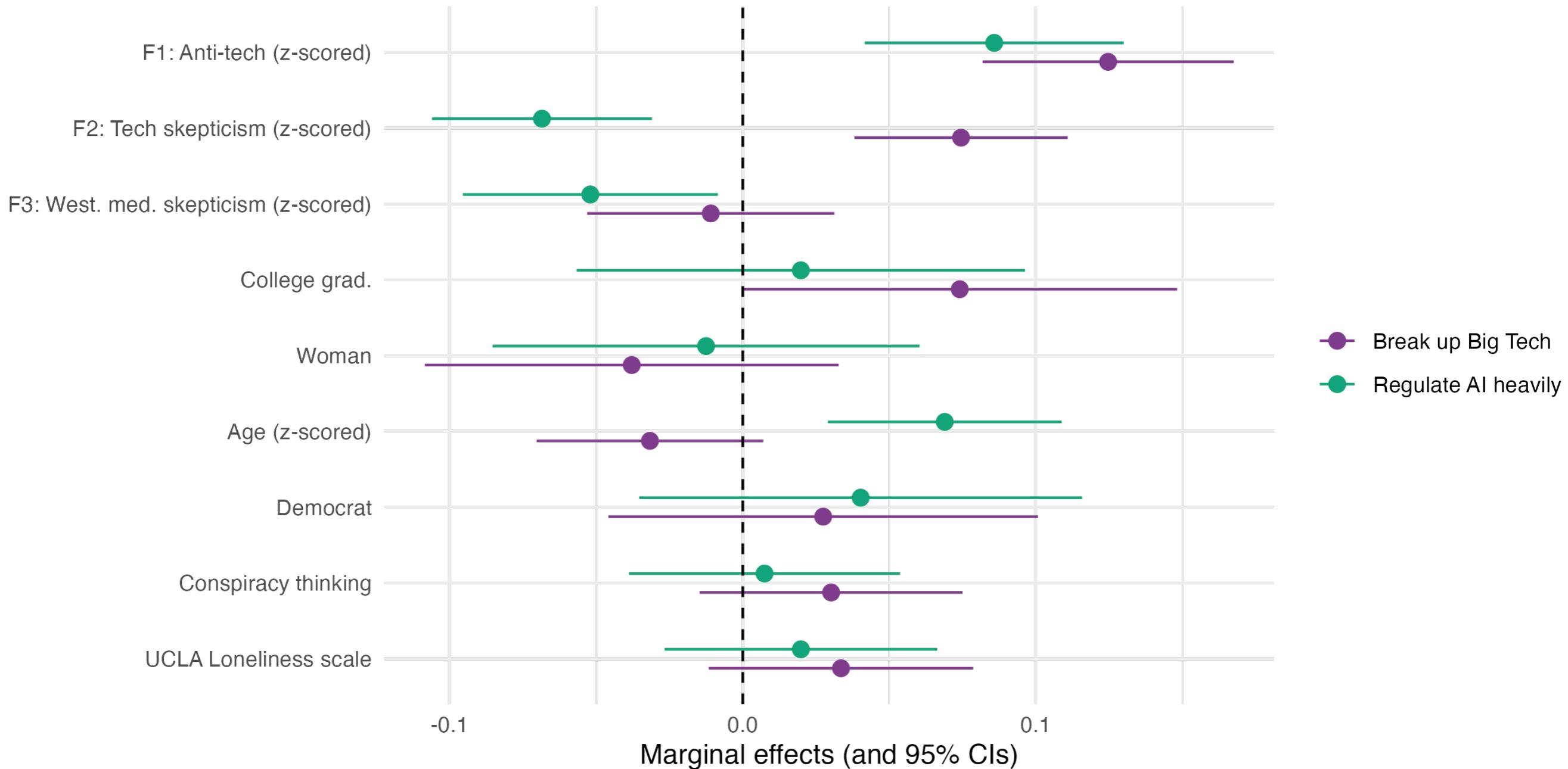


$\text{Pr}(\text{Break up Big Tech})$ conditioning on all facets
of anti-tech orientation & partisanship



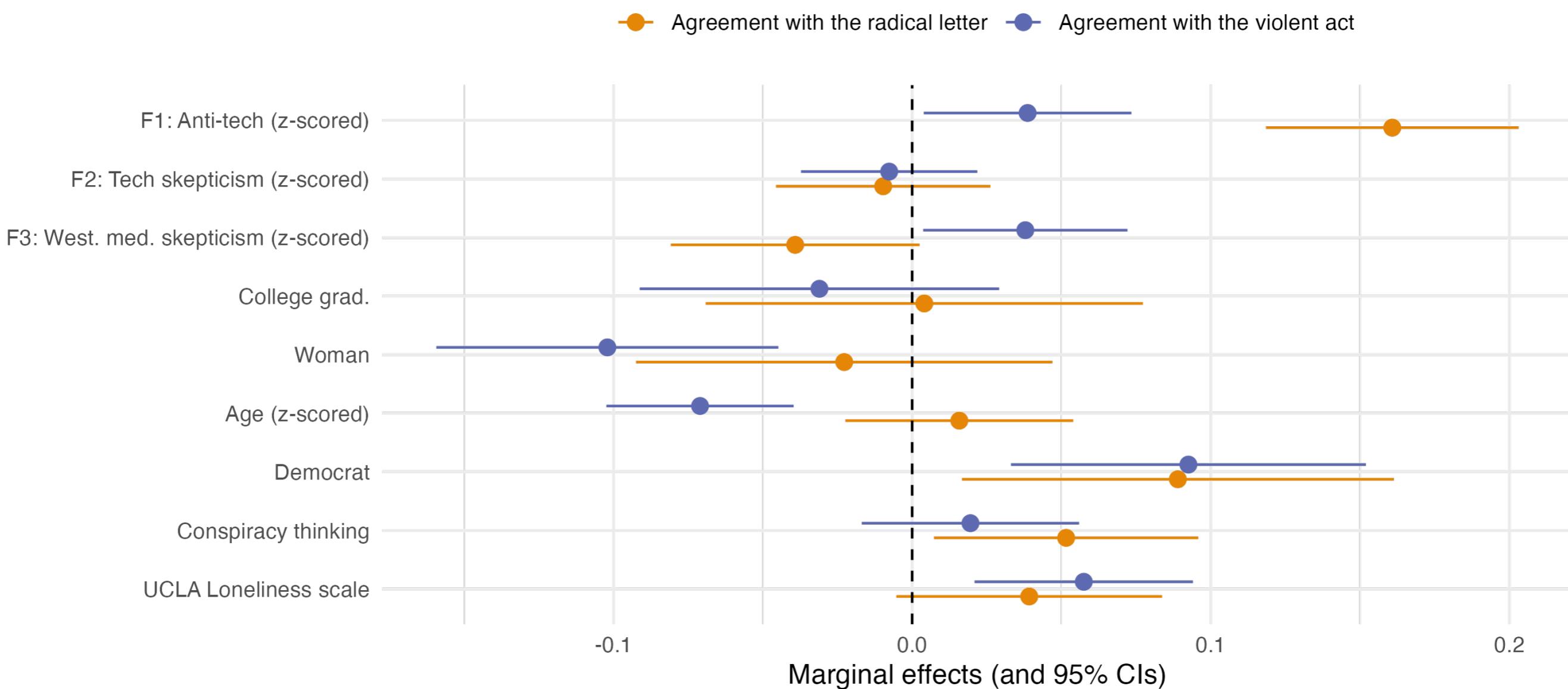
Policy preferences

Conditional associations between anti-tech sentiment, demographics, partisanship, conspiracy thinking, and loneliness



Firebomb scenario

A man threw a firebomb into the empty house of a powerful billionaire CEO of a social media technology company. When asked why he did it, the man said, "Somebody had to do something. These tech CEOs knew that their social media apps divide our country, and hurt our children. They don't care. They just want to make money."



Preliminary conclusions

- Anti-tech attitudes exist
- They are common

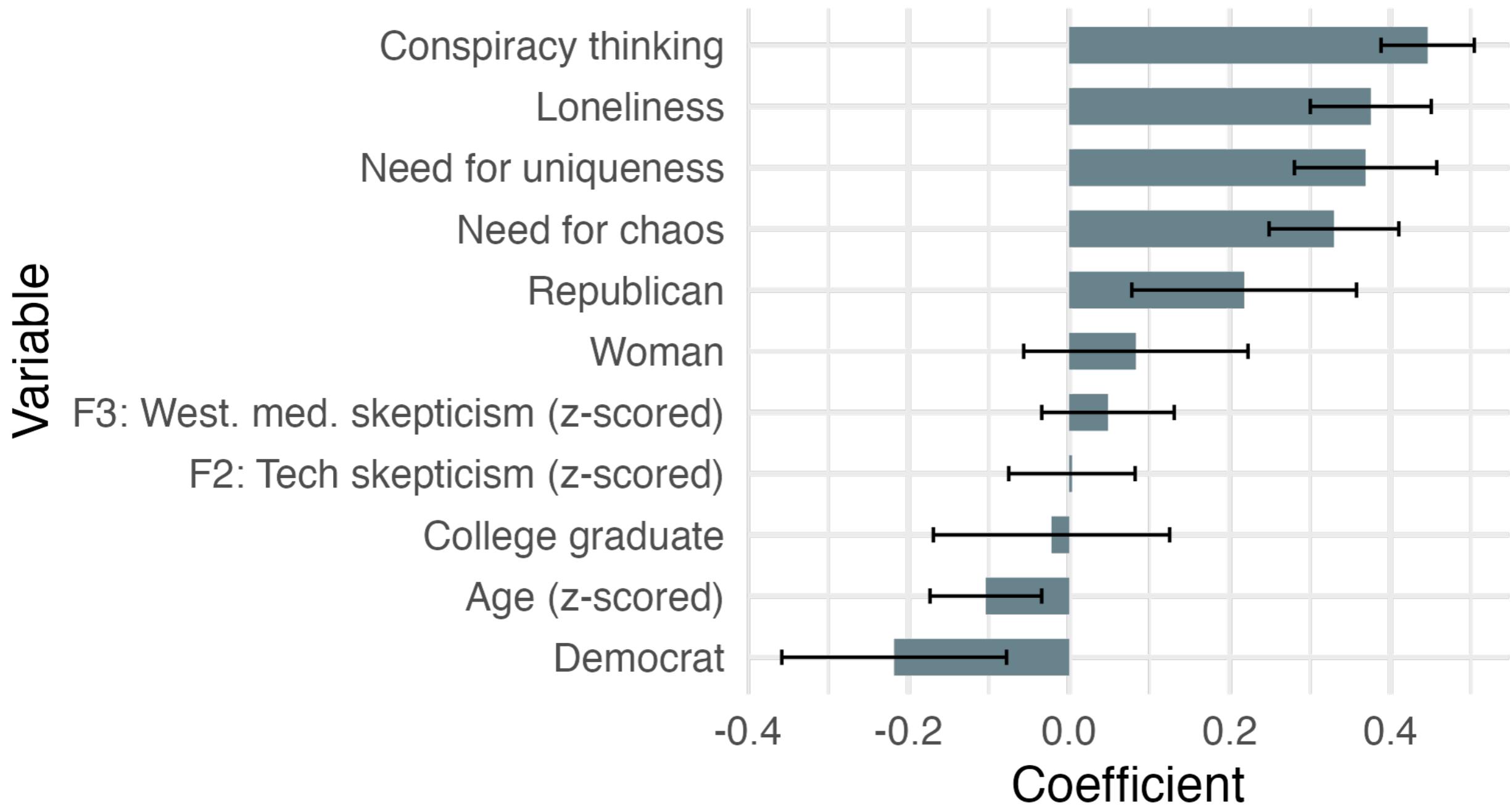
The majority of respondents agrees that “technology has taken over our lives” or that social media harms young users, and fuels envy. Half of respondents fear AI could hurt humans
 - But: skepticism of modern medicine is a **distinct** set of attitudes and they are less common
- Psychological predictors of anti-tech attitudes include: loneliness, conspiracy thinking, need for uniqueness, and need for chaos
- Anti-tech attitudes predict policy preferences and support for political violence

Faced, apparently, with the possibility that the next century could witness either the extinction of humanity or the establishment of a global utopia, both our hopes and our fears tend to be larger than life.

Political opponents are not just people with whom we disagree. They are people whose **misguided views could destroy the planet**. Do ordinary standards of political competition still apply when your opponents' policies will destroy human civilization?

Supporting deck

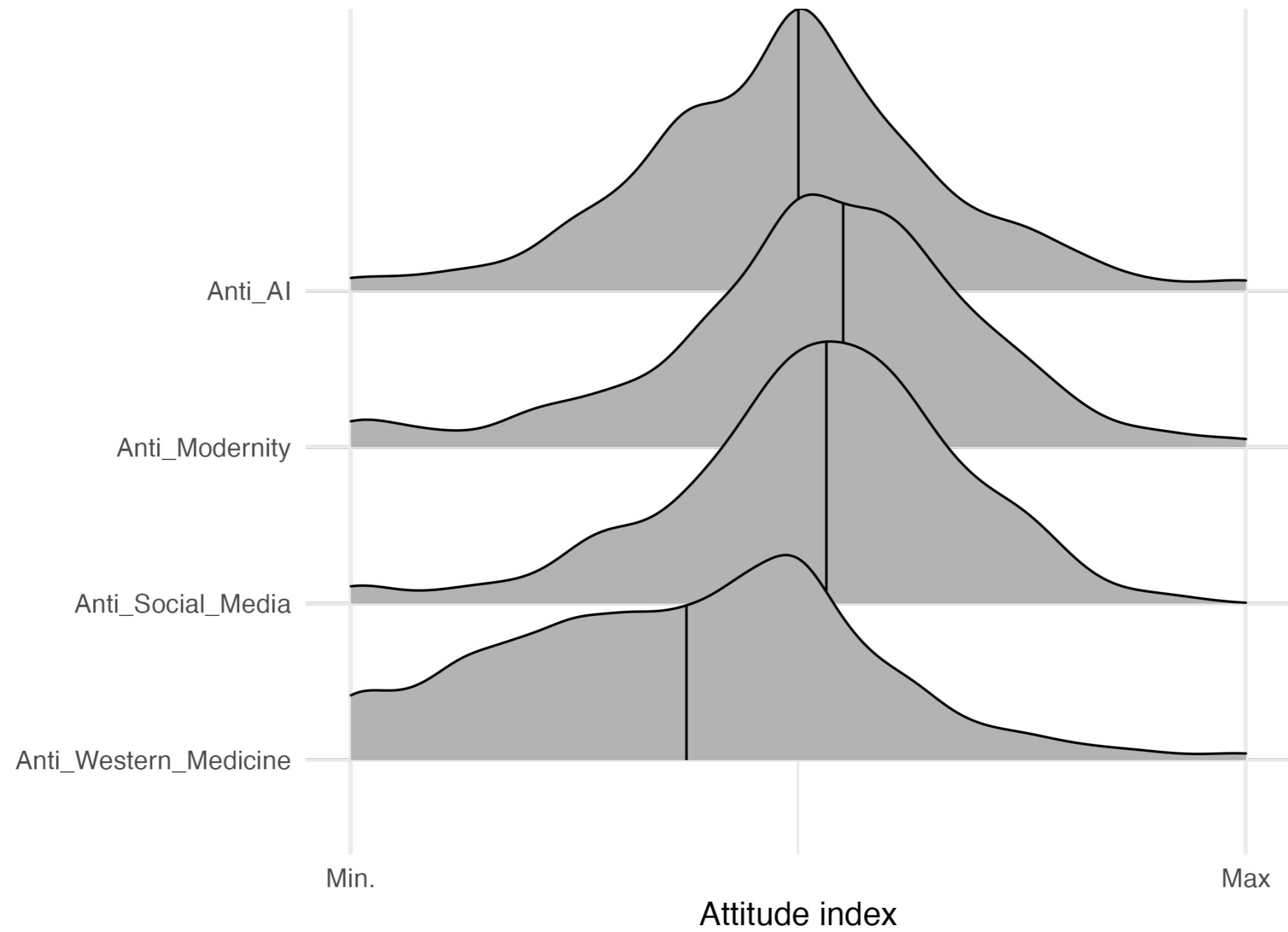
Bivariate Regression Slopes
(Y=first anti-tech factor)



What if we treat each of the 4 components as a separate scale?

Anti_Social_Media	Anti_AI	Anti_Modernity	Anti_Western_Medicine
0.72	0.47	0.64	0.64

Distribution of 4 attitudes



A man threw a firebomb into the empty house of a powerful billionaire CEO of a social media technology company. When asked why he did it, the man said, "Somebody had to do something. These tech CEOs knew that their social media apps divide our country, and hurt our children. They don't care. They just want to make money."

Regardless of whether you agree or disagree with the man's actions, how much do you agree or disagree with what the man said?

