

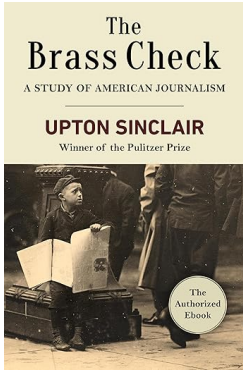
The Business of the Culture War

Shakke Noy (MIT) and Aakaash Rao (Northwestern Kellogg)

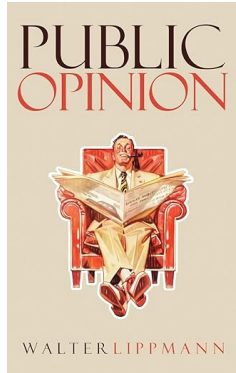
July 2026

A century of popular criticism of news media

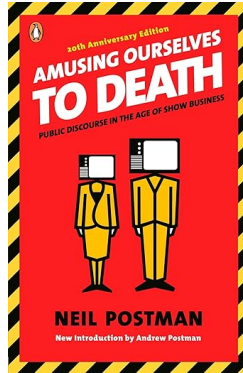
1919



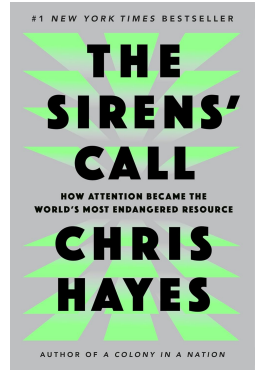
1922



1985



2025



Common thread: incentive to capture attention generates bias toward *entertainment*, focusing public political attention on the issues that are most engaging rather than most important

What interests the public?

"Above all, I am here to uphold and protect the public interest. Now, what do we mean by the public interest?"

*Some say **the public interest** is merely what interests the public. I disagree."*

— FCC Chairman Newton N. Minow,
Television and the Public Interest (1961)

F.C.C. Head Bids TV Men Reform 'Vast Wasteland'

Minow Charges Failure in Public Duty—Threatens to Use License Power

Excerpts from Minow's speech to broadcasters, Page 91.

By VAL ADAMS

Special to The New York Times.

WASHINGTON, May 9 —

Newton N. Minow, the new chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, presented a scorching indictment of contemporary television at the National Association of Broadcasters convention today.

Addressing more than 2,000 broadcasters, Mr. Minow described TV's program output as a "vast wasteland." He excoriated the amount of violence each station operator to view

and mediocrity in shows and his station's programs for one



Associated Press

Newton N. Minow

Two trends since the 1980s

Intensified competition for attention

- “Network era” of 1950s-80s: 3 regulated broadcasters facing captive audience, national news divisions as loss leaders

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Intensified competition for attention

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- Rise of cable in 1980s-90s: expansion of entertainment, **entry of 24-hour news networks**

Two trends since the 1980s

Intensified competition for attention

- “Network era” of 1950s-80s: 3 regulated broadcasters facing captive audience, national news divisions as loss leaders
- Rise of cable in 1980s-90s: expansion of entertainment, **entry of 24-hour news networks**

Rise of the “culture war”

- Republican and Democratic voters increasingly divided by their views on *cultural* rather than *economic* issues
- Existing explanations often feature **politicians** as primary vectors of cultural polarization

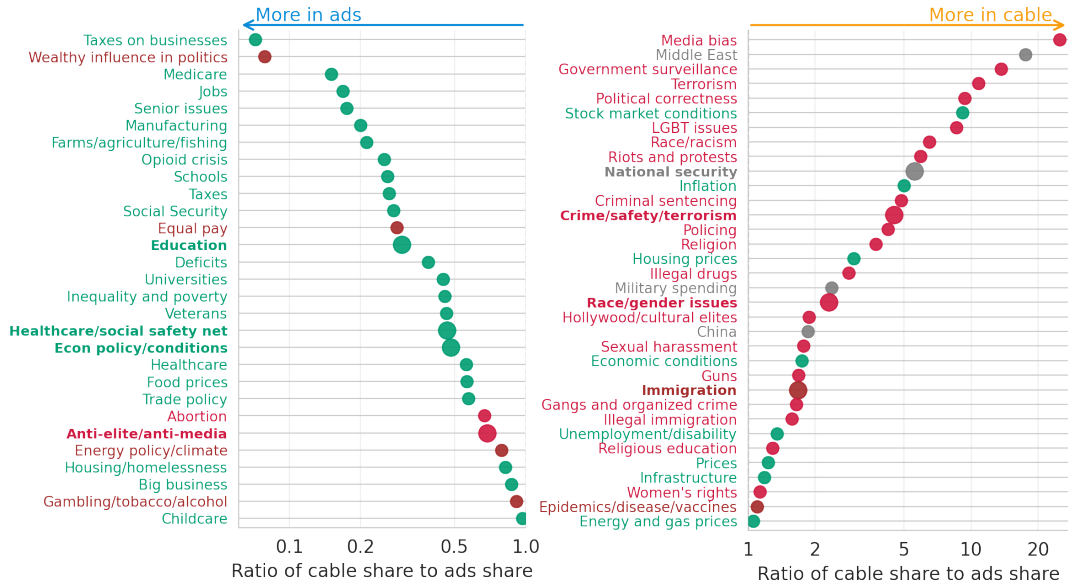
New supply-side data

- Content of **televised political campaign advertisements**, 1960-2022: videos/storyboards for presidential, gubernatorial, and congressional campaigns
- Content of **national broadcast and cable television news**, 1968-2022: video recordings, transcripts, and summaries
- Classify with a hierarchical schema of 88 topics
 - Assign each topic to one or more “economic,” “cultural,” or “other” categories
 - But show all results topic-by-topic and do a data-driven validation of categories

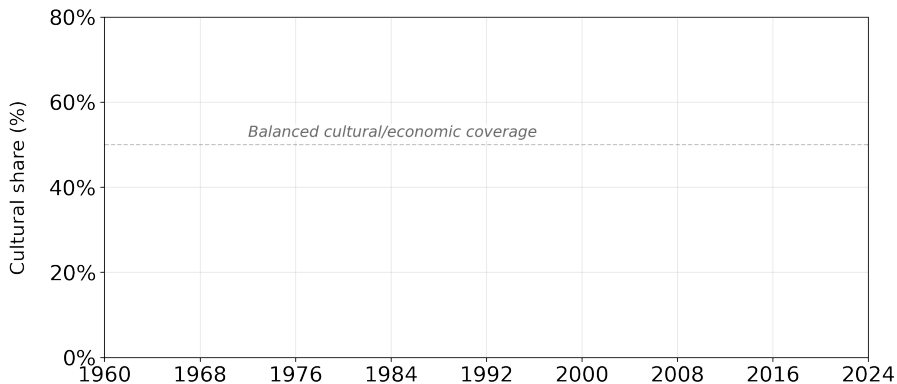
Issue emphasis in campaign ads vs. cable news



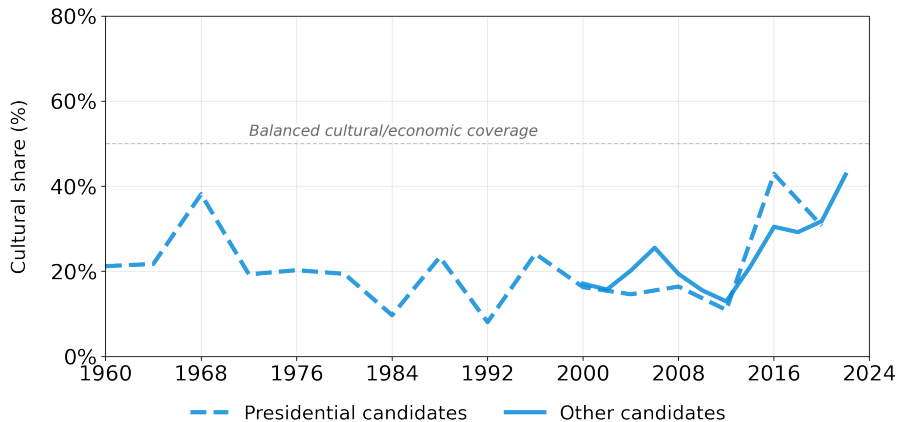
Politicians talk economics, cable talks culture



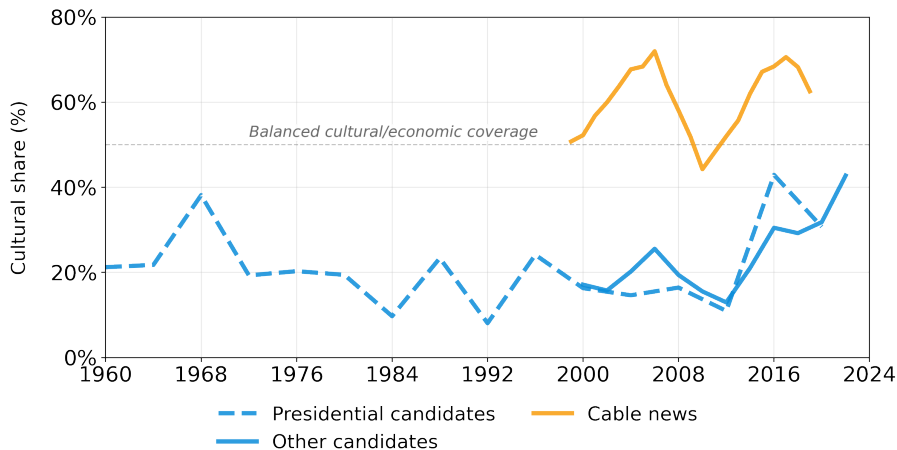
Cultural vs. economic content of politicians, cable, and broadcast



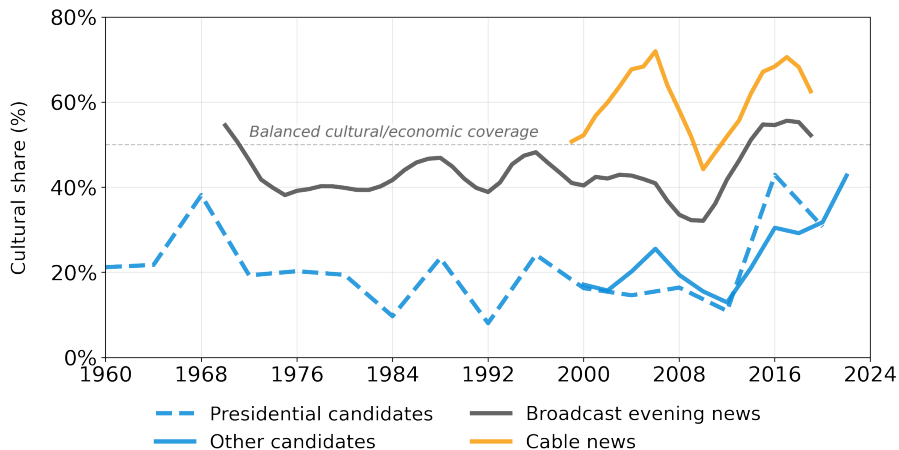
Cultural vs. economic content of politicians, cable, and broadcast



Cultural vs. economic content of politicians, cable, and broadcast



Cultural vs. economic content of politicians, cable, and broadcast



Research questions

1. What explains cable news' distinctive emphasis on the culture war, relative to broadcast news and politicians?
2. Can cable explain the growing importance of cultural issues in politics?

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1. What explains cable news' distinctive emphasis on the culture war, relative to broadcast news and politicians?
 - **Conceptual framework:** parallel tradeoff facing cable, broadcast, and politicians, key difference in incentives
 - **Empirical approach:** use rich household-by-second TV viewership data to map difference in incentives to difference in content
2. Can cable explain the growing importance of cultural issues in politics?

Conceptual framework

Parallel tradeoff facing cable, broadcast, and politicians — choose content best for...

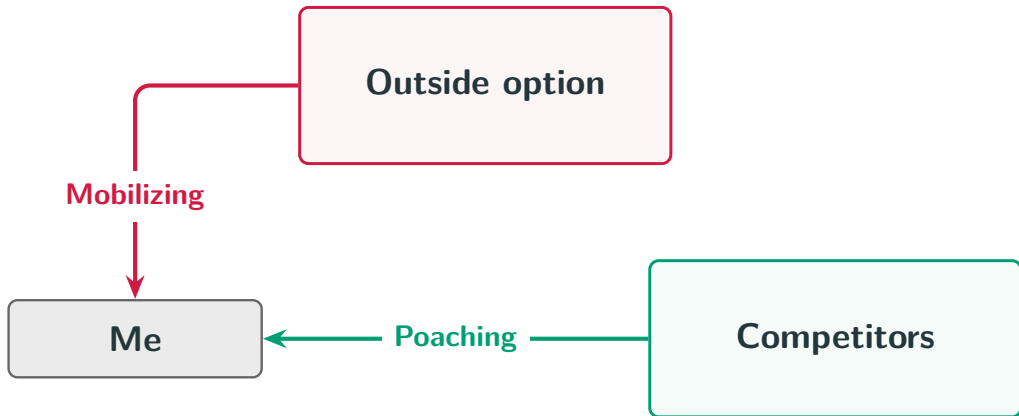
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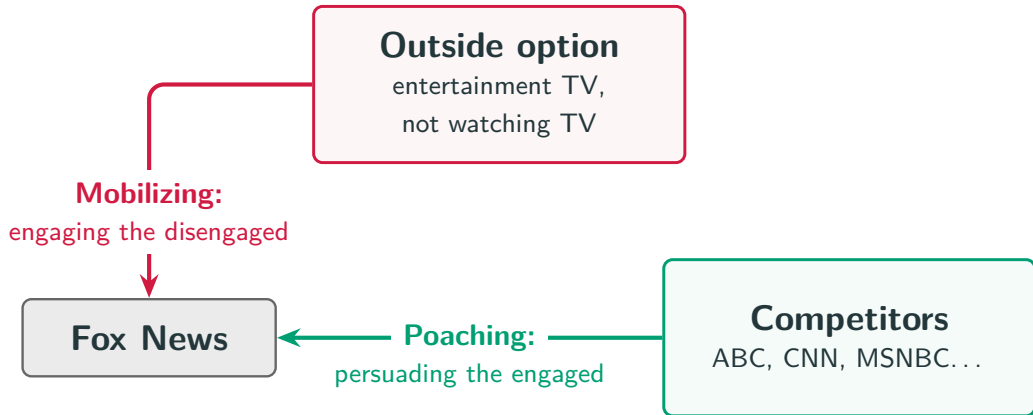
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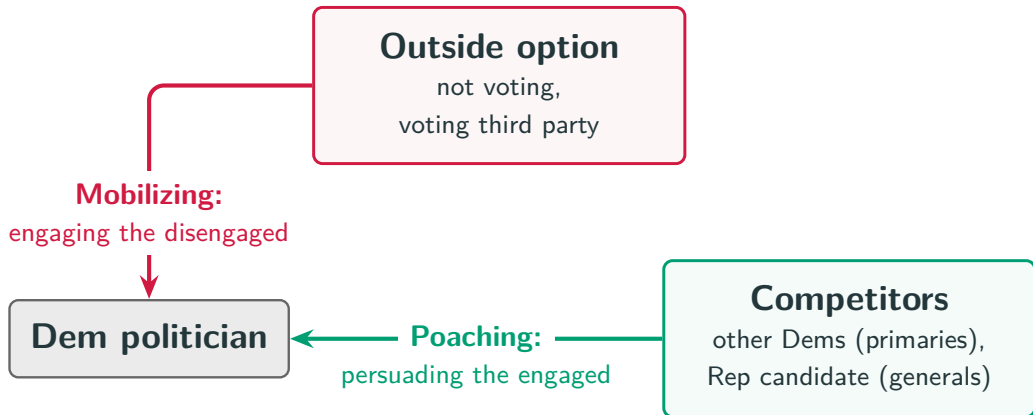
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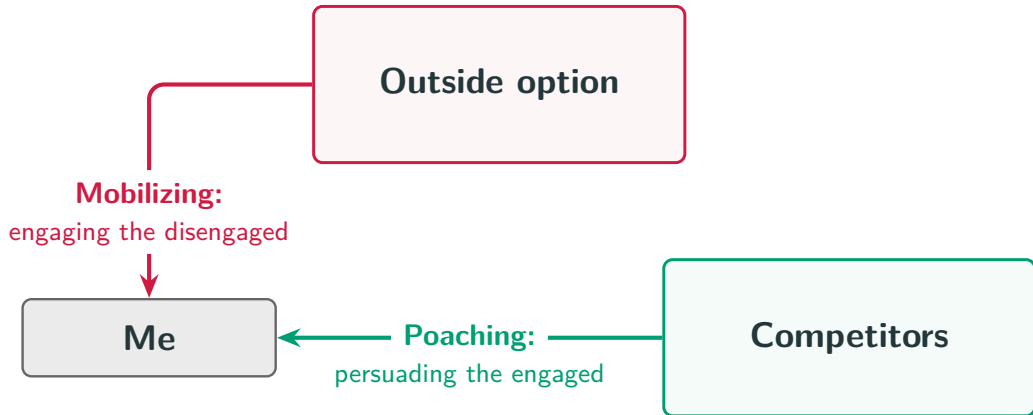
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Why does cable have particularly strong incentives to mobilize?

Optimal emphasis on **poaching** vs. **mobilizing** content depends on...

1. **Number** of **poachable**
vs. **mobilizable** consumers

2. **Value** on each **poached**
vs. **mobilized** consumer

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Cable airs 24 hours of news, broadcast 1–2

- ⇒ competes with entertainment far more than broadcast
- ⇒ cable's marginal consumers are more **mobilizable**, broadcast's more **poachable**

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Cable maximizes viewership, politicians contest elections

- ⇒ cable values audience **size**, politicians value vote **share**
- ⇒ politicians value each **poached** consumer
2× each **mobilized** consumer

What explains cable news' distinctive emphasis on the culture war?

1. Cultural content gains cable outlets viewership
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Effect of cultural content on cable viewership

Do viewers tuning into economics leave faster than viewers tuning into culture?



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- **Concern:** viewers tuning in to economics may have left faster anyway

Effect of cultural content on cable viewership

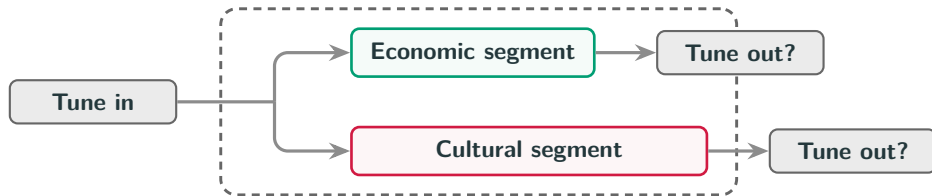
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- **Identification:** simulate random content assignment with high-dimensional controls

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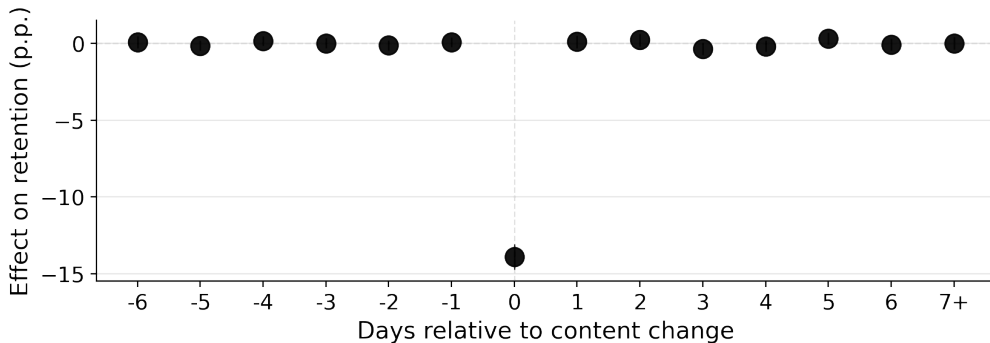
Controlling for average content and viewing length...

- on June 13 (date FE)
- on *Hannity* between 8–8:15pm in June 2019 (show × timeslot × month FE)
- on *Hannity* between 8–8:15pm on Thursdays (show × timeslot × day of week FE)

...will *Hannity* viewers at 8–8:15pm on Thursday, June 13, 2019 stay longer if culture is on?

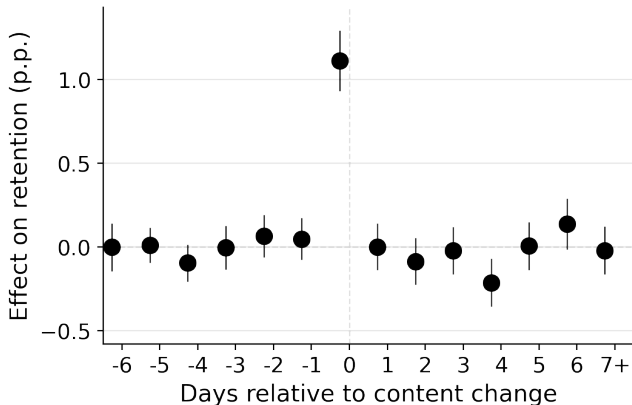
Validation: effect of commercial advertising

$$\underbrace{V_{n,s,t}}_{\text{retention}} = \sum_m \beta_m \underbrace{x_{n,s,t-m}}_{\text{share commercial advertising}} + \underbrace{g'_{n,s,t}}_{\text{controls}} + \varepsilon_{n,s,t}$$



Event study: effect of cultural minus economic content

$$\underbrace{V_{n,s,t}}_{\text{retention}} = \sum_m \beta_m \underbrace{X_{n,s,t-m}}_{\text{culture minus econ share}} + \underbrace{g'_{n,s,t}}_{\text{controls}} + \varepsilon_{n,s,t}$$



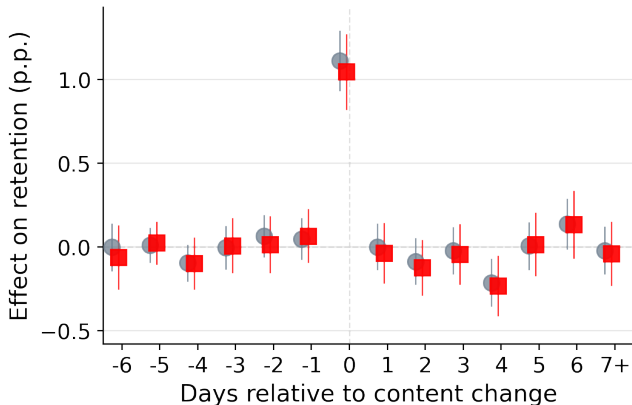
Example: *Hannity*, Thursday,
June 13, 2019, 8–8:15pm

Partially out:

- Fox News, 8–8:15pm
- News, June 13, 2019
- *Hannity*, 8–8:15pm, Thursdays
- *Hannity*, 8–8:15pm, June 2019

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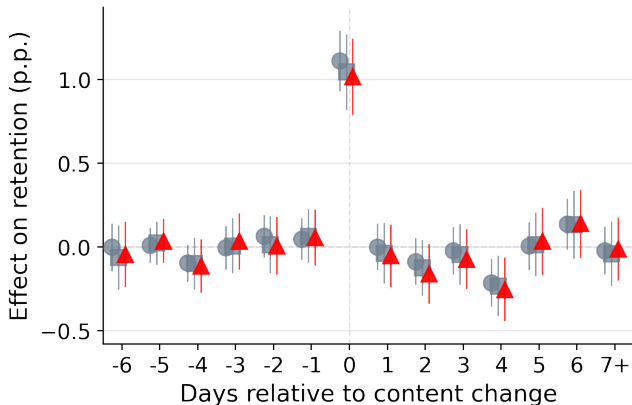
Example: *Hannity*, Thursday,
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Partialling out:

- Fox News, 8–8:15pm
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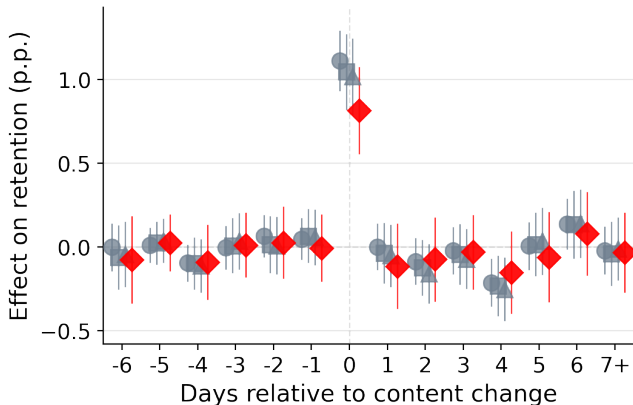
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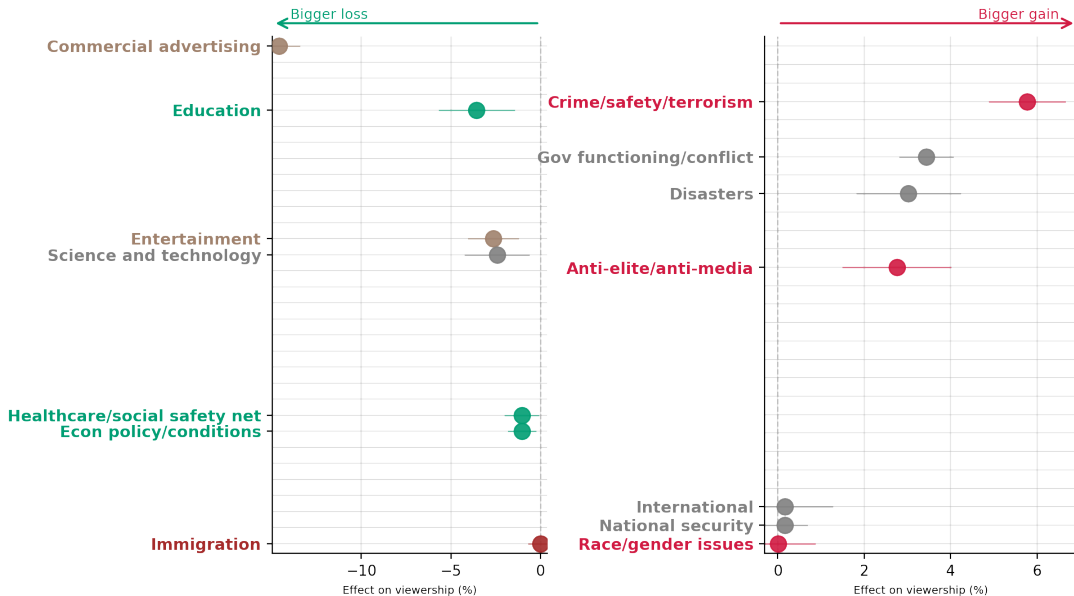


Example: *Hannity*, Thursday,
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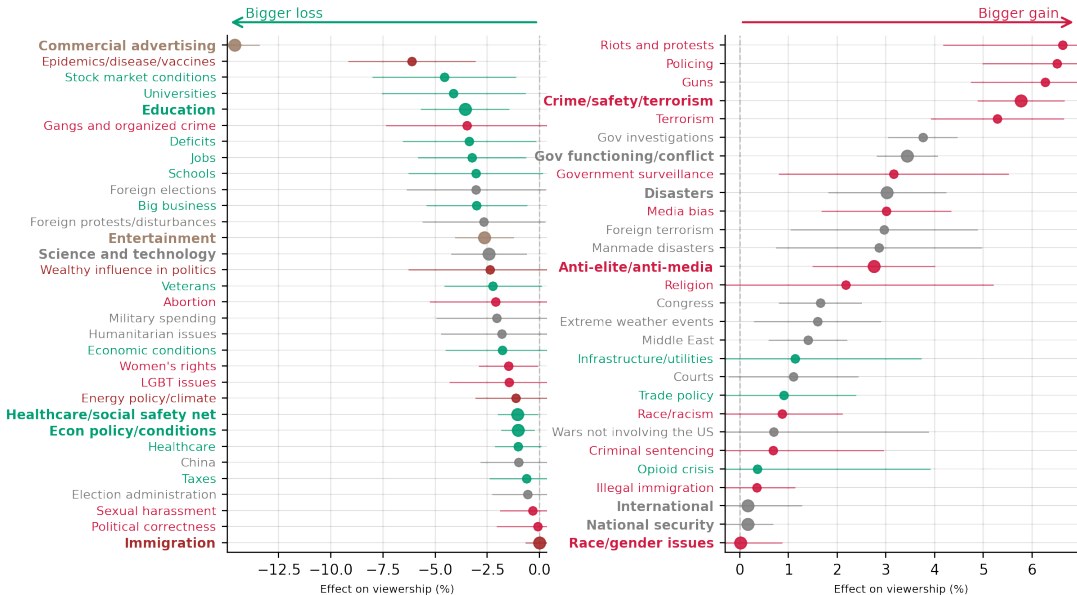
Partialling out:

- *Hannity*, 8–8:15pm,
Thursdays, June 2019
- *Hannity*, 8–9pm, June 13,
2019

Culture outperforms economics in cable news



Culture outperforms economics in cable news



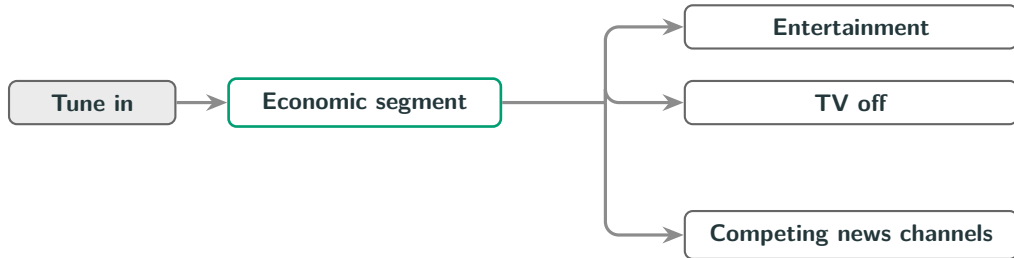
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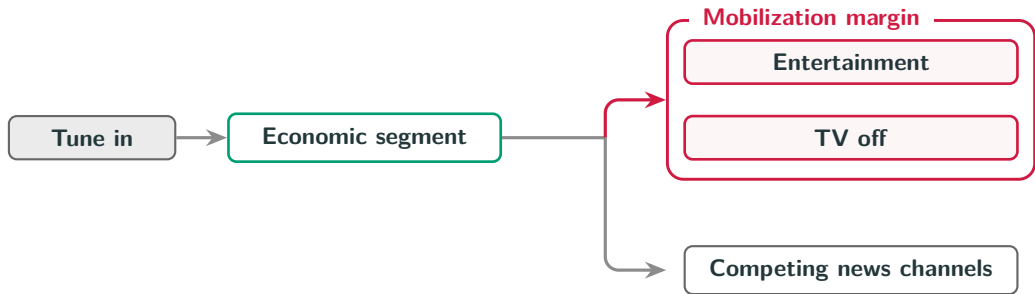
Where are switchers going?



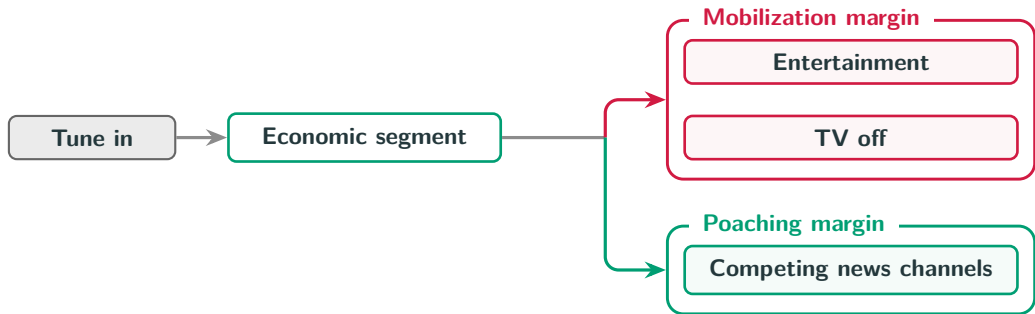
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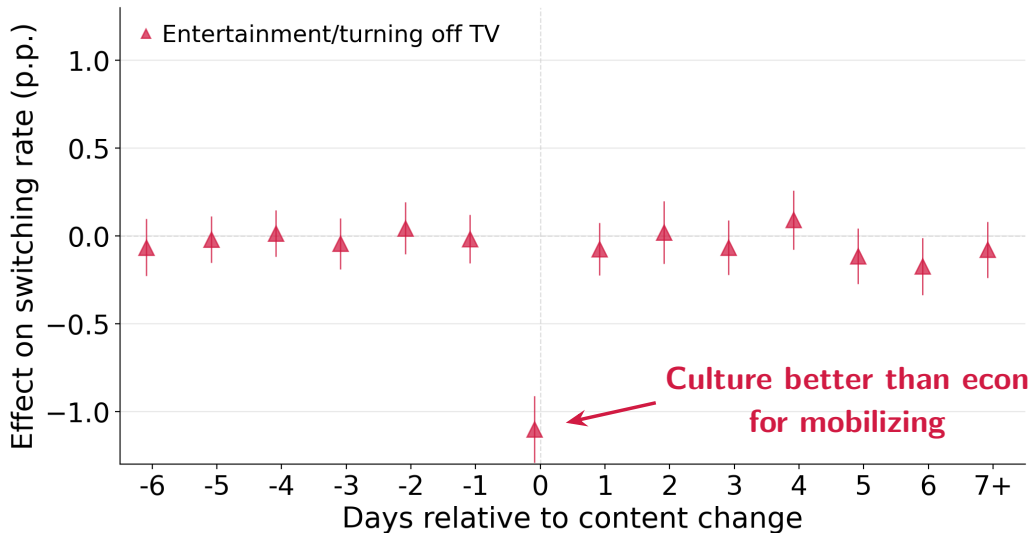
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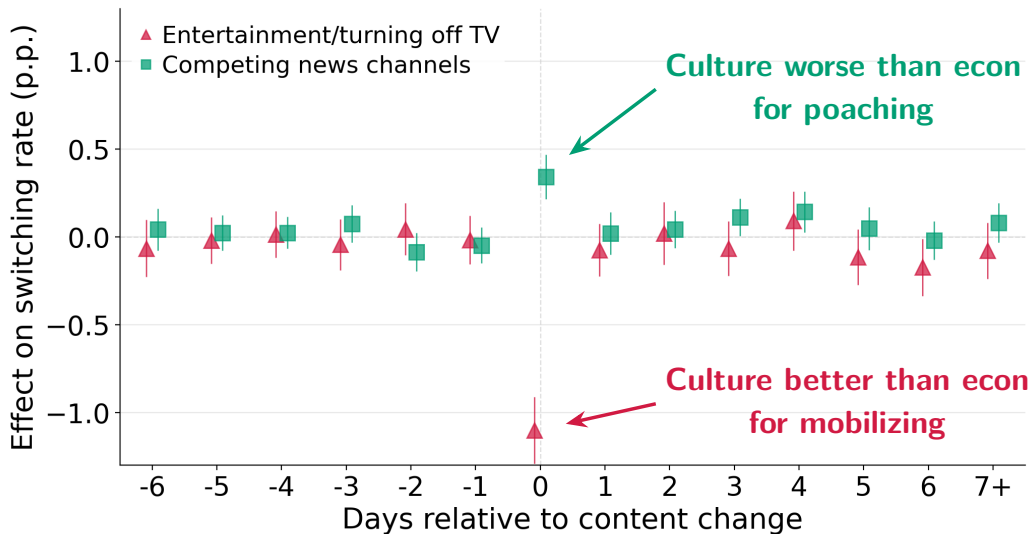
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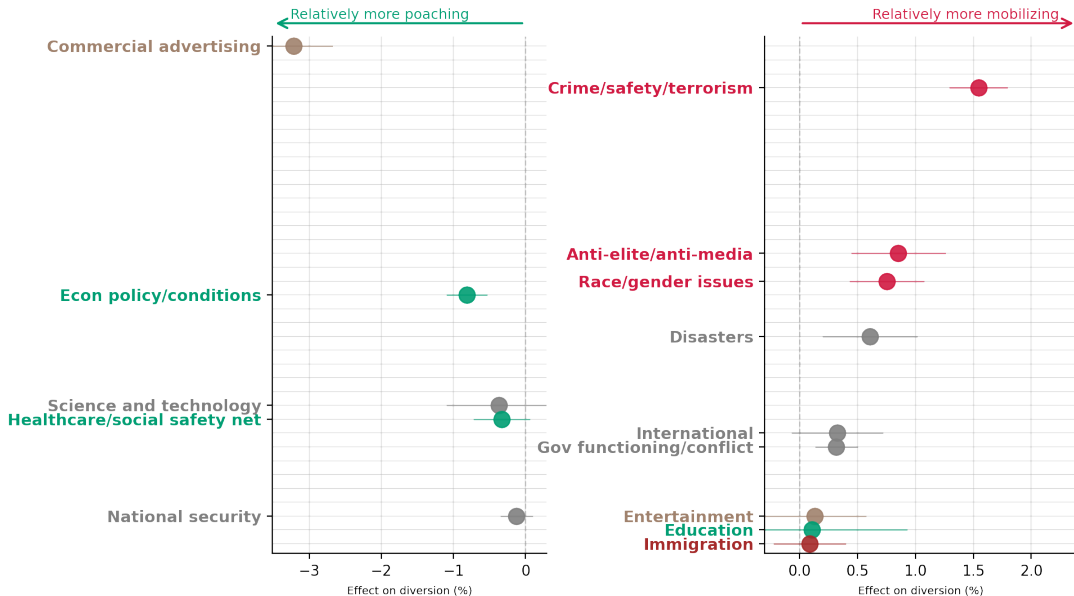
Effect of cultural minus economic content on switching



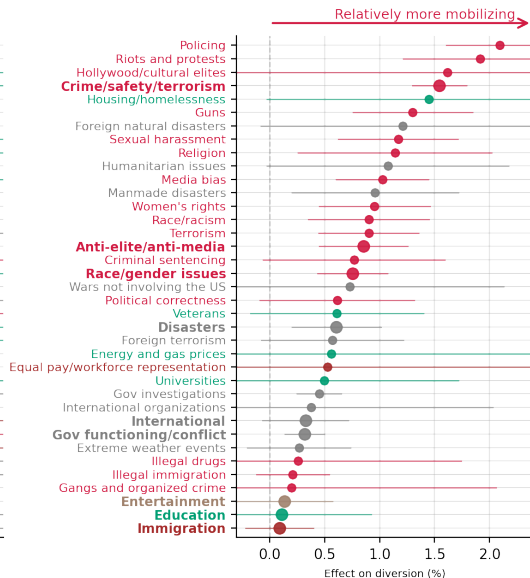
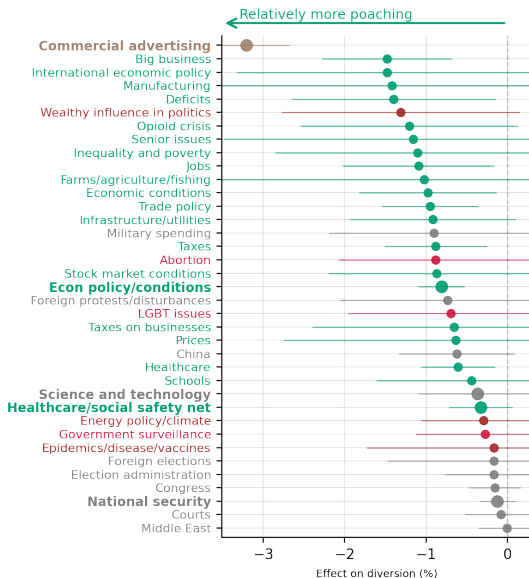
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Culture mobilizes from non-news, econ poaches from other news



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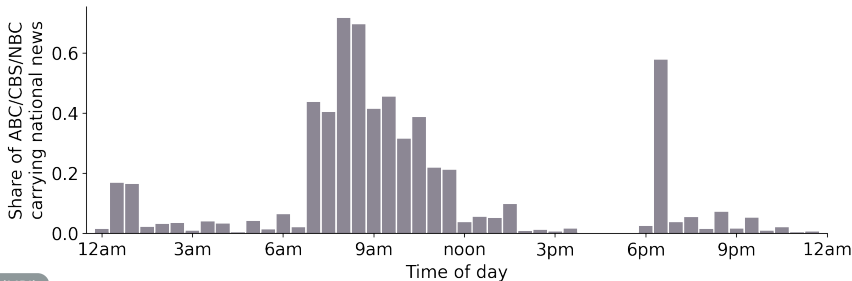
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Why is cable more cultural than broadcast?

- If culture war is a business strategy to compete with entertainment, returns should be:
 - Highest when marginal viewer is watching more entertainment = more mobilizable
 - Lowest when marginal viewer is watching more news = more poachable

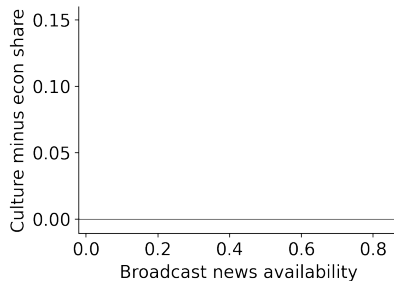
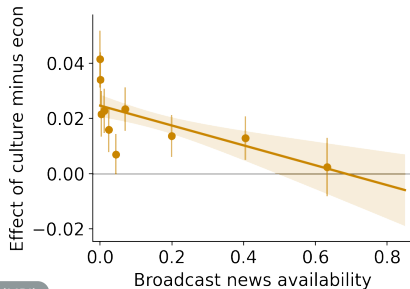
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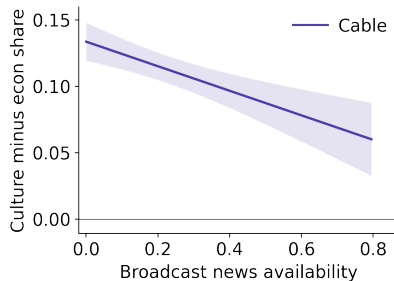
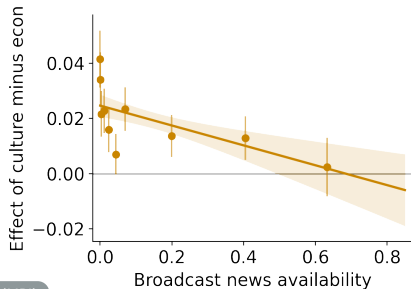
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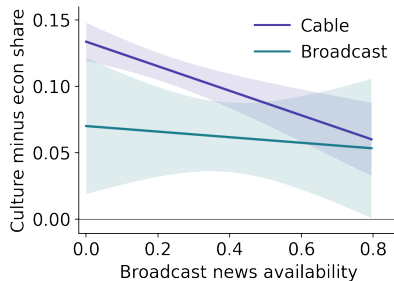
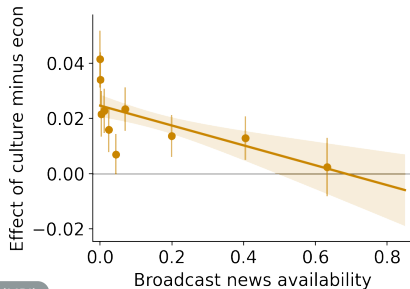
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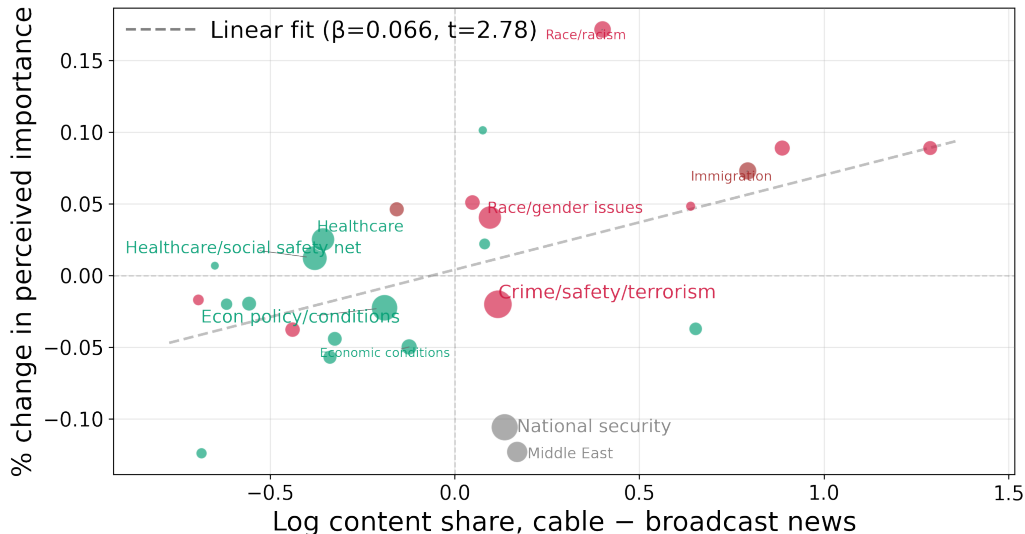
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 - Economic candidates outperform cultural candidates
 - Economics better for poaching, not mobilizing

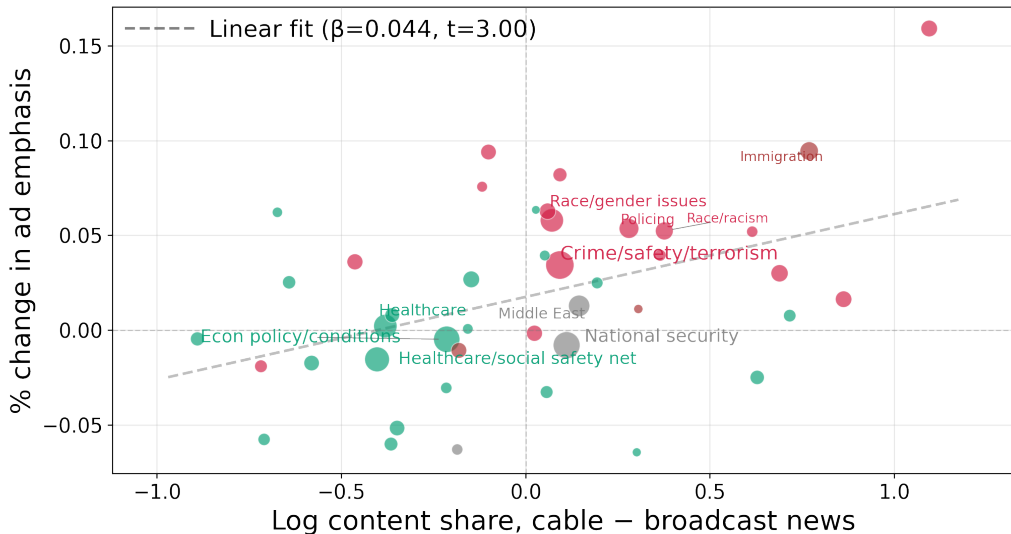
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 - **Conceptual framework:** parallel tradeoff facing cable, broadcast, and politicians, key difference in incentives
 - **Empirical approach:** use rich household-by-second TV viewership data to map difference in incentives to difference in content
2. Can cable explain the growing importance of cultural issues in politics?

“Most Important Problems” become more cultural



Ad content becomes more cultural



Instrumenting for local cable news consumption

Idea (Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017): markets in which Fox News was quasi-randomly assigned a lower channel number watch more Fox News (and similarly for MSNBC)

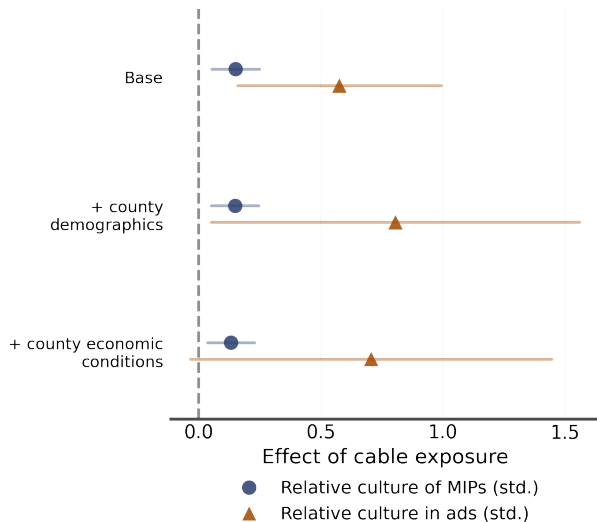
First stage: for individual/candidate i , regress rating of network n in county m at time t on channel numbers:

$$R_{(i)nm t} = \gamma \underbrace{c_{(i)nm t}}_{\text{channel \#}} + \underbrace{g'_{(i)nm t}}_{\text{controls}} \mu + \epsilon_{(i)nm t}$$

Second stage: regress culture minus econ of MIP/ads on fitted ratings:

$$Y_{(i)nm t} = \delta \widehat{R_{(i)nm t}} + h'_{(i)nm t} \pi + \epsilon_{(i)nm t}$$

Effects of cable exposure on voter weights and political ads



Example: Voter's MIP or candidate's ads in Middlesex County in 2002

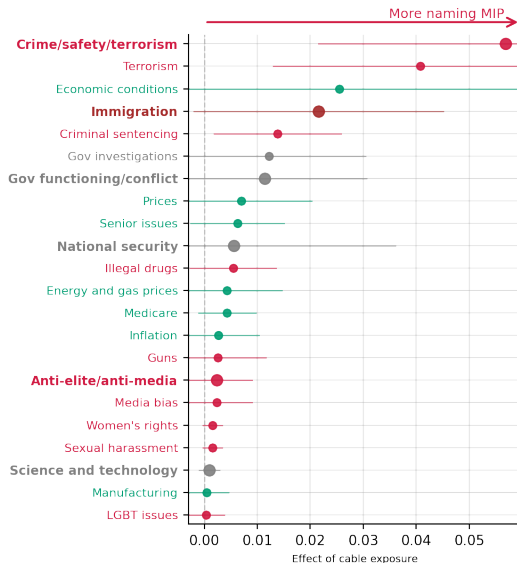
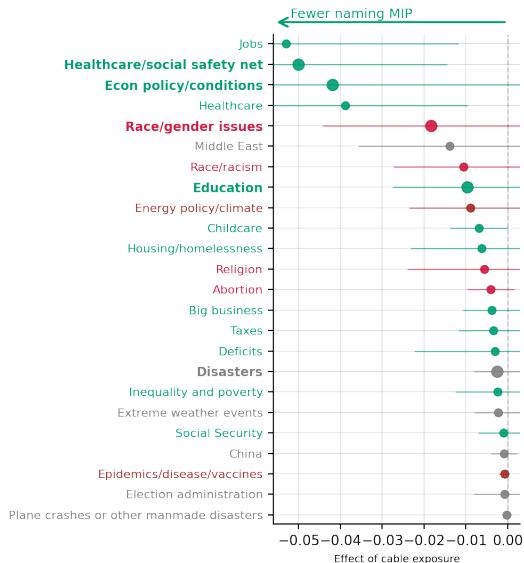
Partialling out:

- Individual demographics
- Incumbency and office-by-party FE
- Year FE
- Shares white, black, Hispanic, college; log population
- Log income per capita, unemployment rate, LFP

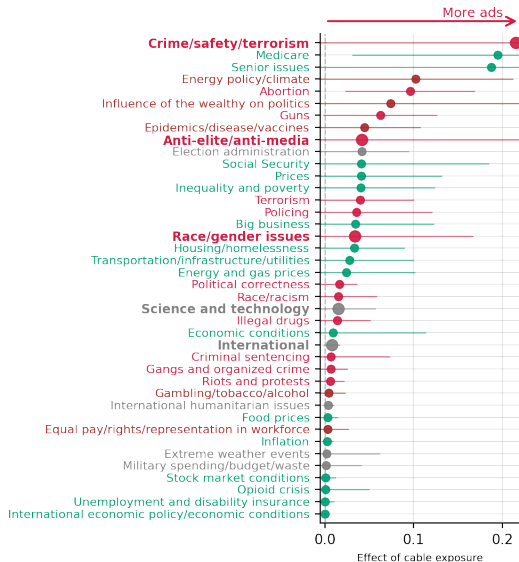
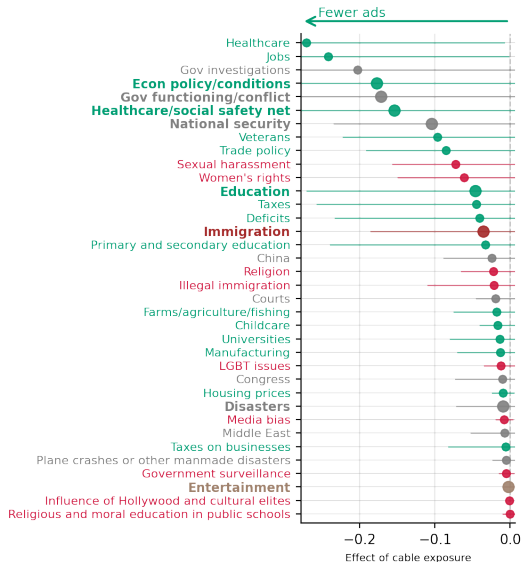
► MIP effects by network

► Ad effects by network

Cable increases voter weights on cultural issues



Cable increases politician emphasis on cultural issues



Conclusion

Summary:

1. Cable news developed a distinctive business strategy centering mobilization through coverage of the “culture war”
2. This business strategy increased the importance of cultural issues among voters and politicians

► International perspective

► “Interest” realignment

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▶ International perspective

▶ “Interest” realignment

Two further observations:

1. News producers are not the only “size-maximizers”
 - Interest groups and nonprofits, pundits, social media personalities, organizers of protest movements

Even when in same political coalition, likely to favor **mobilizing** strategies that diverge from, and may undermine, politicians’ **poaching** focus

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▶ International perspective

▶ “Interest” realignment

Two further observations:

1. News producers are not the only “size-maximizers”
2. Polarization/issue realignment should generally be “led” by size-maximizers, with politicians responding only once voter attributes have shifted

My friends, this election [of 1992] is about more than who gets what. It is about who we are... It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as was the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America.

— Pat Buchanan: successful cable news commentator, failed presidential candidate

Thank you!

Additional results

Politicians:

- Culture vs. electoral success [▶ Link](#)
- Poaching (vote share) vs. mobilization (turnout) [▶ Link](#)

Cable vs. broadcast:

- Early cable entry: whom did FNC/MSNBC recruit? [▶ Link](#)

Magnitudes:

- Back-of-the-envelope counterfactuals [▶ Link](#)
- IV effects by network [▶ MIP](#) [▶ Ads](#)

Robustness:

- Viewership event study [▶ Link](#)
- Switching destinations [▶ Link](#)

Measurement:

- Issue-level results and k -means validation [▶ Link](#)
- Classification interface [▶ Link](#)

Interpretation and context:

- Why does econ poach and culture mobilize? [▶ Link](#)
- Cultural positions predict voting [▶ Link](#)
- Marginal vs. average effects [▶ Link](#)
- Ad content by party [▶ Link](#)
- International perspective [▶ Link](#)

From the NYT FAQs

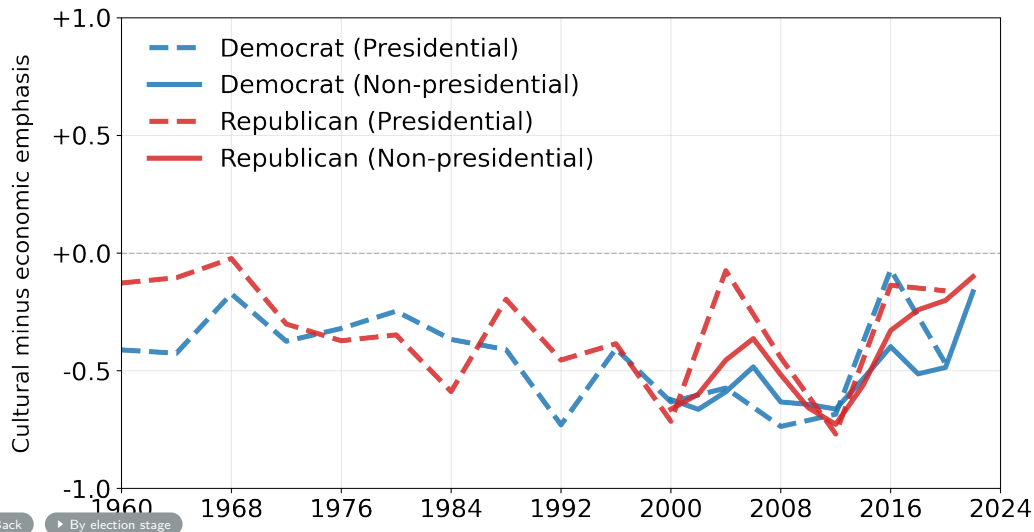
Lessons From Trump's First Term

I'm curious about what lessons Times journalists and the Times newsroom more broadly have learned from the way they covered the first Trump administration. Are there things that have changed on the level of editorial guidance? Are there any hard-won lessons for reporters? — *Morgan Spector, Hillsdale, N.Y.*

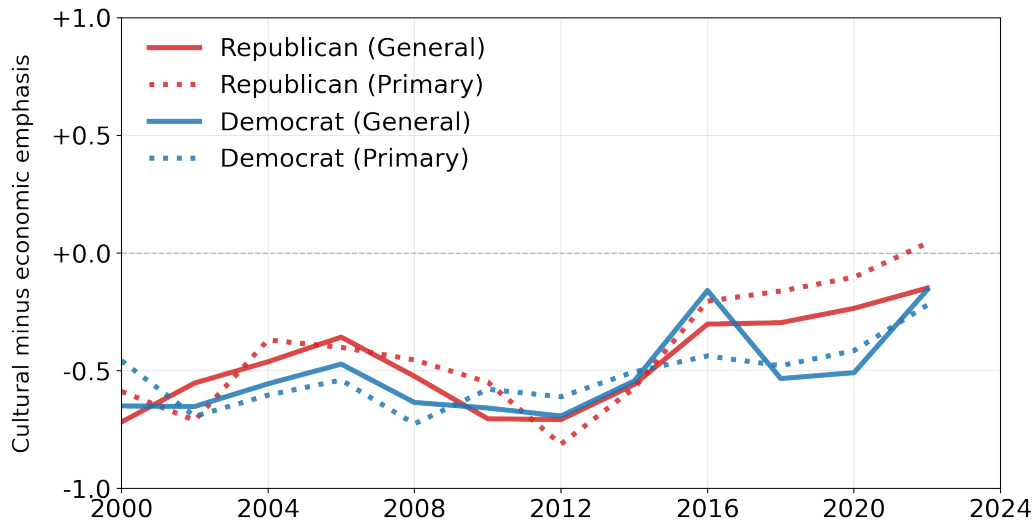
Answered by [Richard W. Stevenson](#), the editor in charge of our reporting operations in Washington:

The main lesson is to try to separate what some would call “The Trump Show” — his ability to command attention, often by making norm-breaking or outrageous statements — from the concrete policy decisions and substantive changes in the direction of the country.

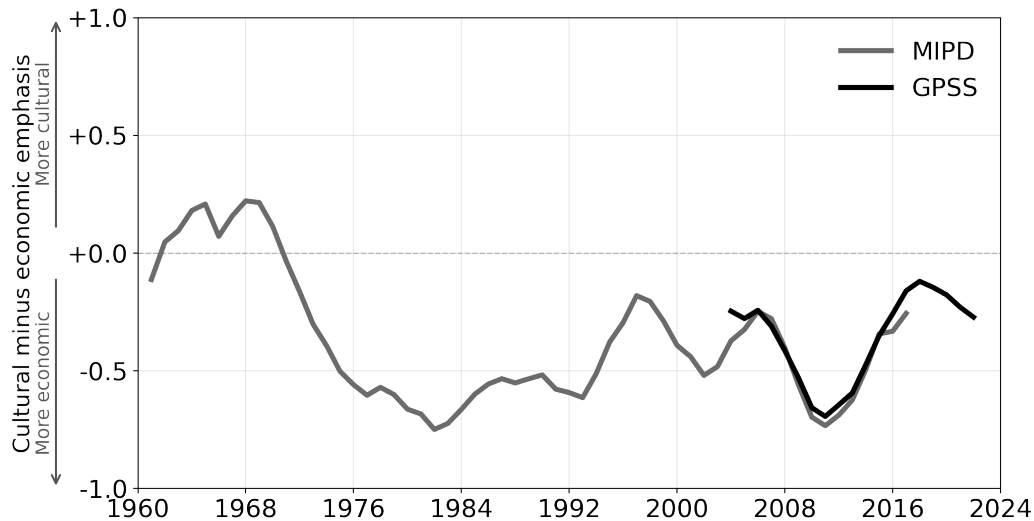
Cultural vs. economic ad content, by party



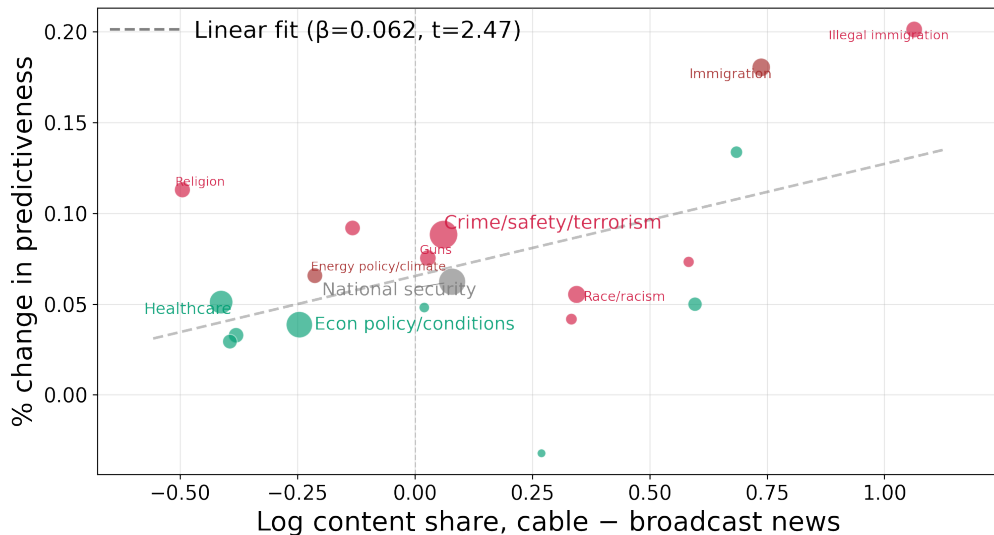
Cultural vs. economic ad content, by party and election stage



MIP: culture minus econ



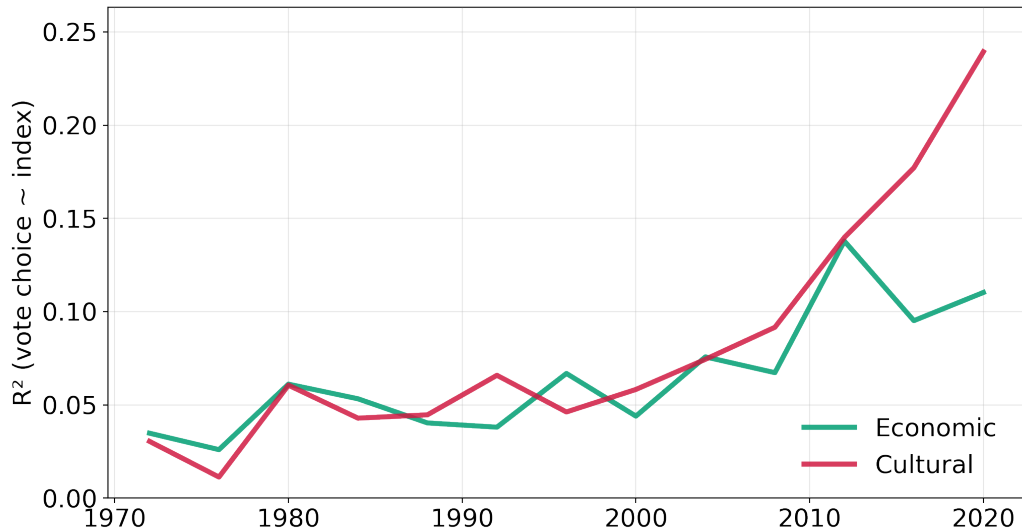
Cultural positions become more predictive of voting



► Back

► Time-series plot

ANES: predictiveness of econ and cultural views for voting



Marginal effects vs. average effects

Denote performance by W :

$$W_i = V_i(\mathbf{x}_i; \xi) - \omega^d \times V_{-i}(\mathbf{x}_i; \xi)$$

What we measure: for topics A and B , measure *marginal* performance: $\frac{\partial}{\partial x^A} W, \frac{\partial}{\partial x^B} W$

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Marginal $\neq$ average if diminishing returns: if $x^A < x^B$, then if $\frac{\partial}{\partial x^A} W(\mathbf{x}_i) > \frac{\partial}{\partial x^B} W(\mathbf{x}_i)$, is this because A performs better at a *given* level of usage or simply because A is used less?

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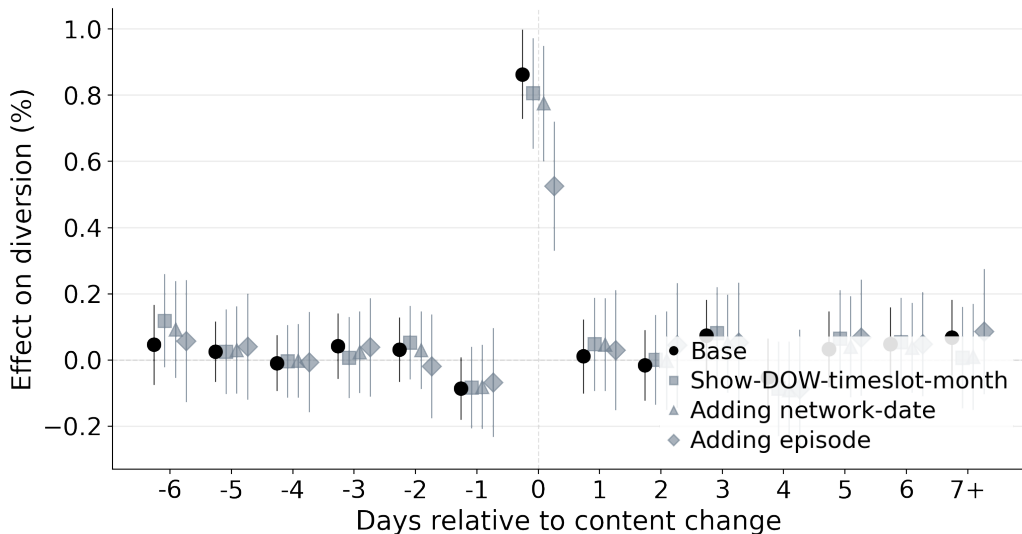
Marginal $\neq$ average if diminishing returns: if $x^A < x^B$, then if $\frac{\partial}{\partial x^A} W(\mathbf{x}_i) > \frac{\partial}{\partial x^B} W(\mathbf{x}_i)$, is this because A performs better at a *given* level of usage or simply because A is used less?

Informative lower bound: if instead $x^A < x^B$ and $\frac{\partial}{\partial x^A} W < \frac{\partial}{\partial x^B} W$, then marginal differences are a lower bound on average differences

Further robustness

1. Representative viewership data from Nielsen AdIntel [▶ Link](#)
2. Alternative panel specifications with different panel units/running variables:
clock time, week, show number [▶ Link](#)
3. 5-minute or 60-minute segment lengths [▶ Link](#)
4. Longer number of pre- and post-periods [▶ Link](#)

Robustness: switching to competitors minus outside option



Back-of-the-envelope quantification

	Observed		Counterfactual		
	2000	2022	2022, removing...		
			Fox	MSNBC	Both
Panel A: MIP	<i>Cultural minus economic MIP</i>				
Level	-0.29	-0.20	-0.28	-0.22	-0.29
2000 → 2022 growth explained	—	—	90%	30%	106%
Panel B: Ads	<i>Cultural % minus economic % of ads</i>				
Level	-0.65	-0.13	-0.49	-0.44	-0.62
2000 → 2022 growth explained	—	—	68%	59%	93%

Six sets of issue-level results

Issue emphasis:

1. News outlets emphasize cultural topics, politicians emphasize economic topics

Issue performance:

2. Cultural topics outperform economic topics on the news
3. Cultural topics mobilize viewers who would otherwise watch entertainment, economic topics poach viewers who would otherwise watch competing news outlets
4. Cultural topics underperform economic topics in politics (suggestive)

Changes in issue importance:

5. Cable news increases stated importance of cultural relative to economic issues
6. Cable news increases cultural relative to economic emphasis of politicians' ads

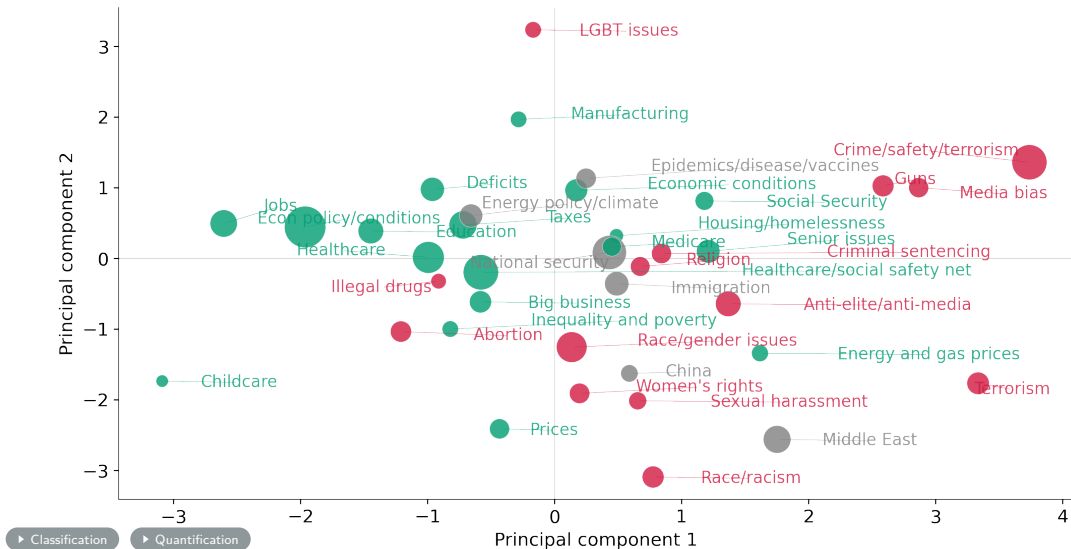
Validation: unstructured discovery

25 topics have valid estimates for all six sets of results. Can we “discover” the economic vs. cultural distinction **without imposing any *a priori* groupings?**

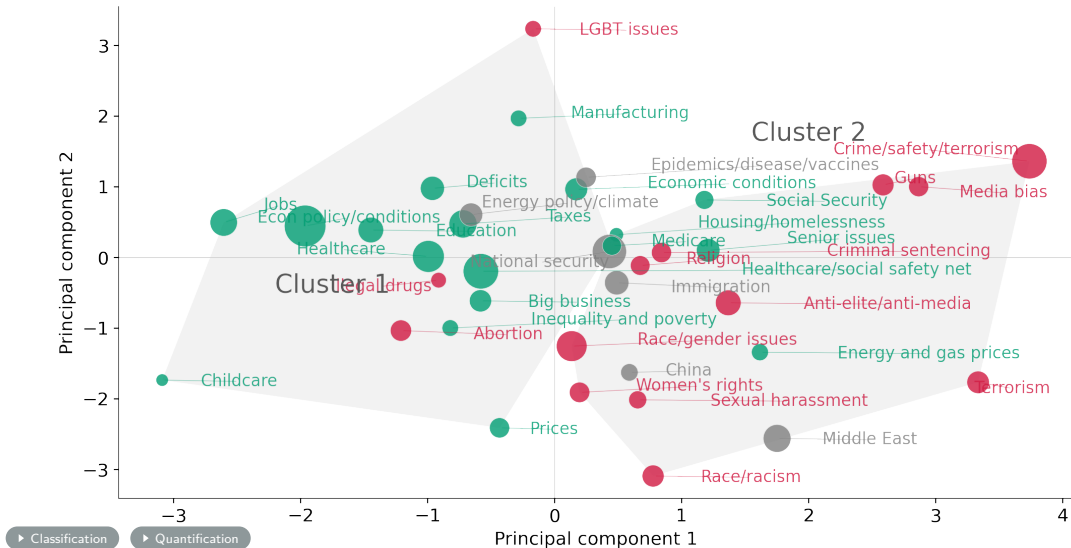
Procedure:

1. Form a 25×6 - dimensional matrix stacking the six coefficients for each topic
2. Run *k*-means with 2 categories: how well do the 2 categories that best cluster the data line up with economic vs. cultural?
3. Visualize by plotting loadings on first 2 principal components

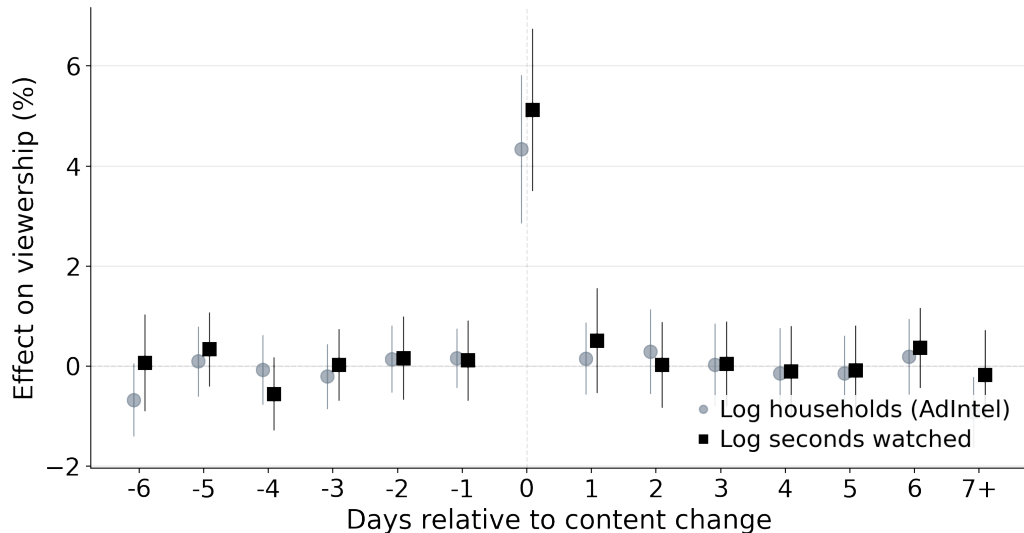
Validation: hand labels line up with k -means



Validation: hand labels line up with k -means



Robustness check: representative sample (AdIntel)



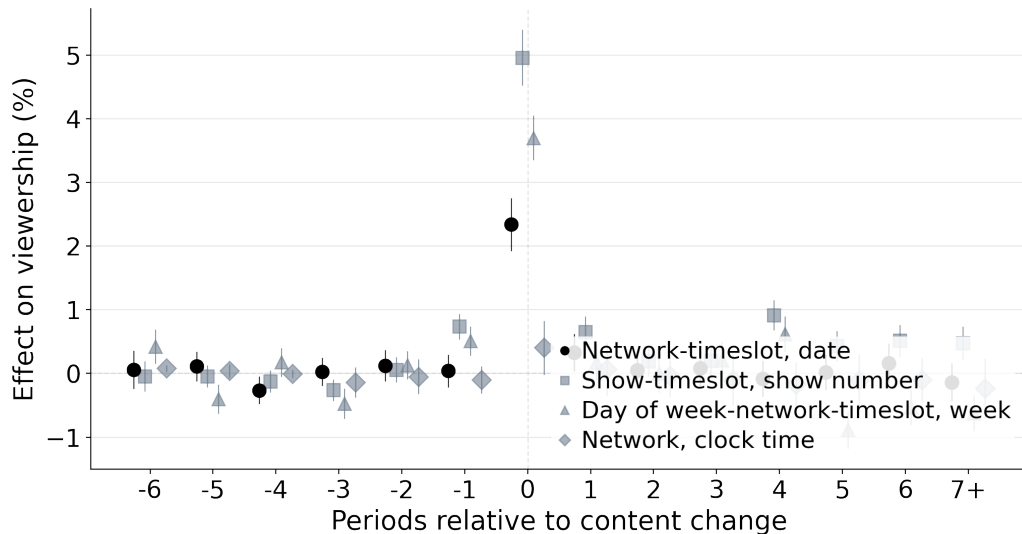
Robustness check: different panel specifications

Base specification: panel unit is a network-timeslot, running variable is date

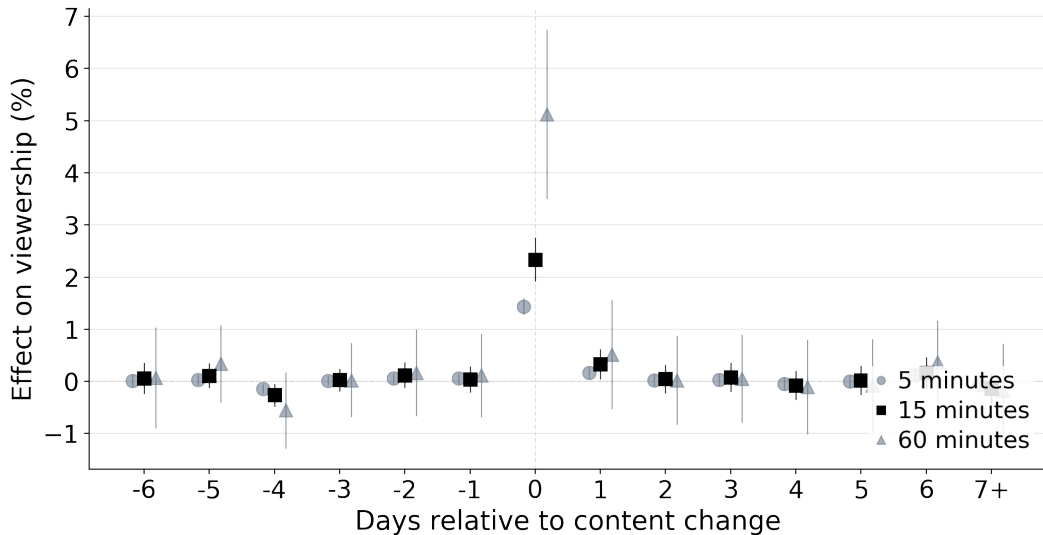
Alternative specifications:

- Panel variable is a network-timeslot-day of week, running variable is week
- Panel variable is a show-timeslot, running variable is episode number

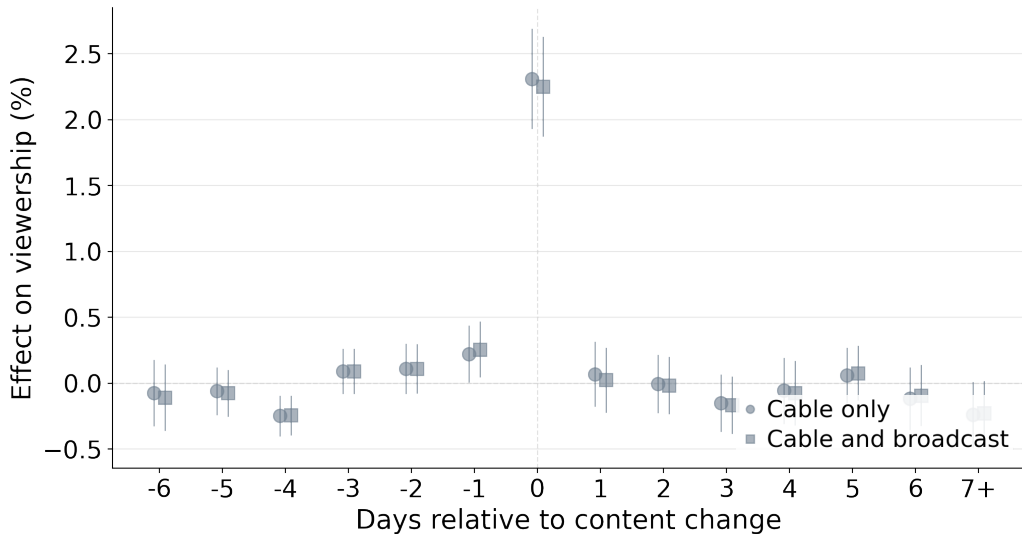
Robustness check: different panel specifications



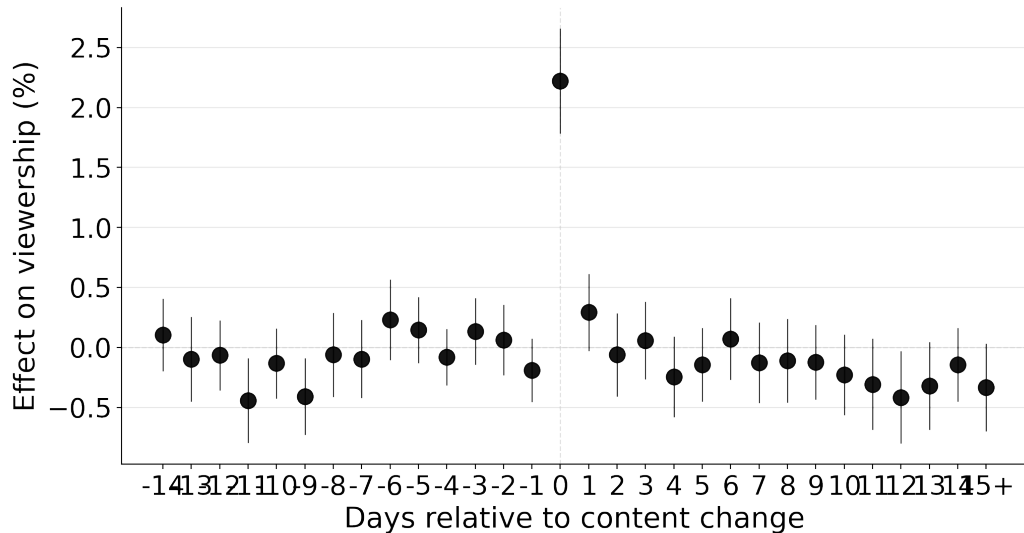
Robustness check: different segment lengths



Robustness check: including vs. dropping broadcast



Robustness check: longer panel



The culture-war business strategy in the early days of cable

When FNC and MSNBC entered, did they mobilize entertainment viewers or poach news viewers?

The culture-war business strategy in the early days of cable

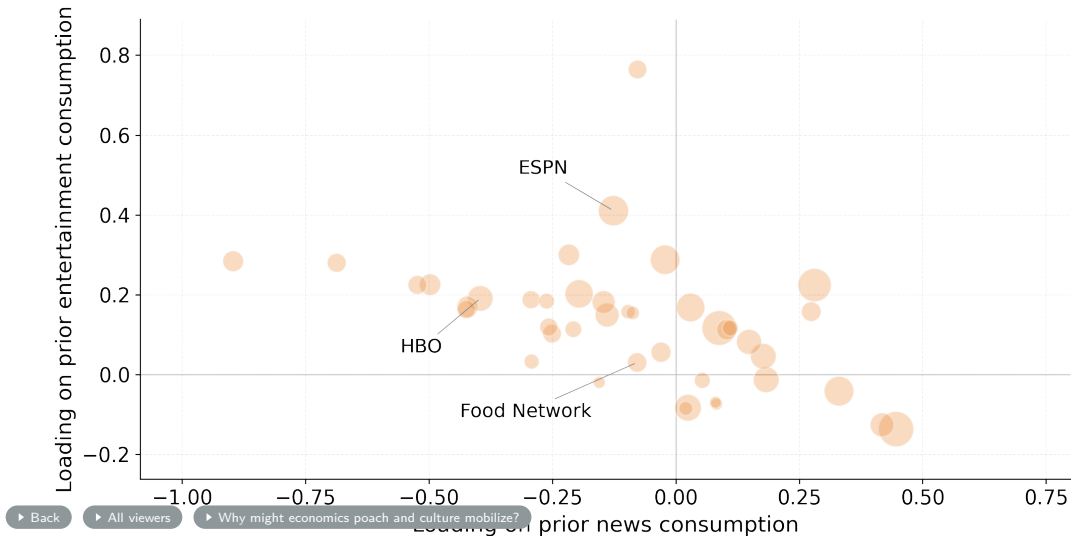
When FNC and MSNBC entered, did they mobilize entertainment viewers or poach news viewers?

MRI Survey of the American Consumer: rich TV viewership data on thousands of shows

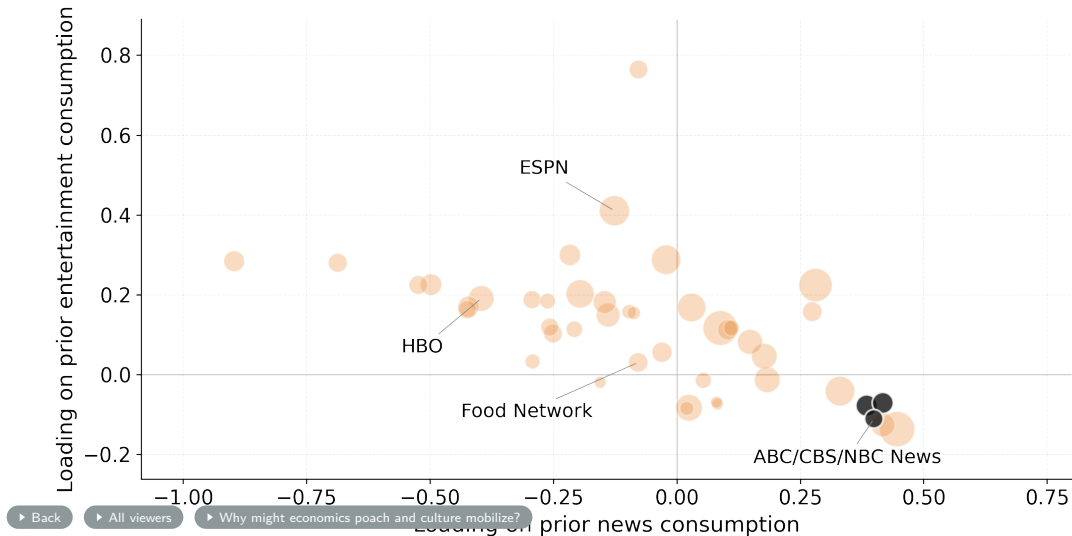
1. Using pre-1996 years, train model to predict total news viewership and total entertainment viewership based on demographics
2. Predict viewership for respondents in post-entry years
3. Is cable news viewership better predicted by a demographic's prior news or prior entertainment viewership?

$$\text{ViewCableNews}_{i, >1996} = \beta_E \widehat{\text{Entertainment}}_{i, <1996} + \beta_N \widehat{\text{News}}_{i, <1996} + \varepsilon_i$$

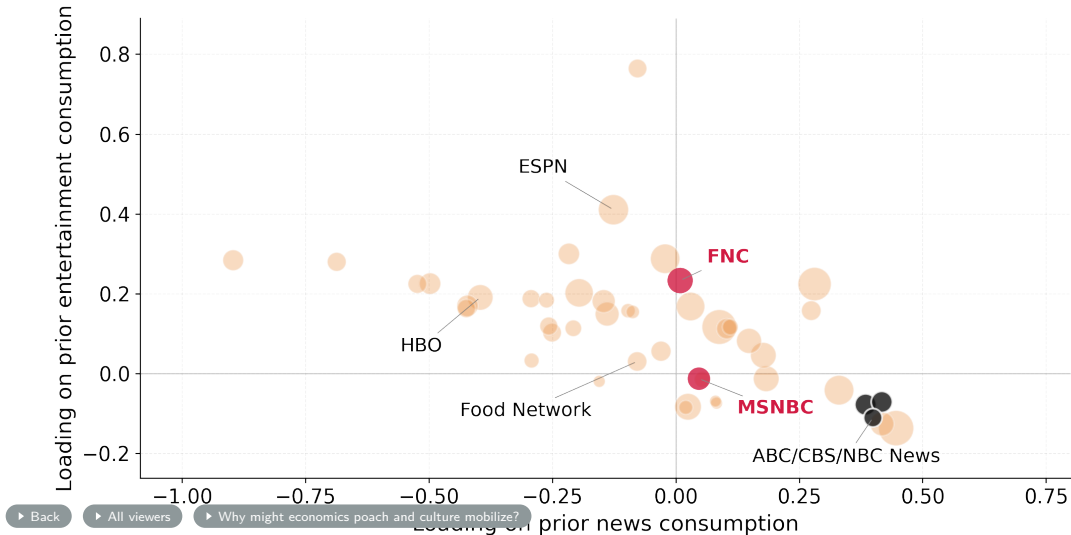
Predicted news vs. entertainment viewership



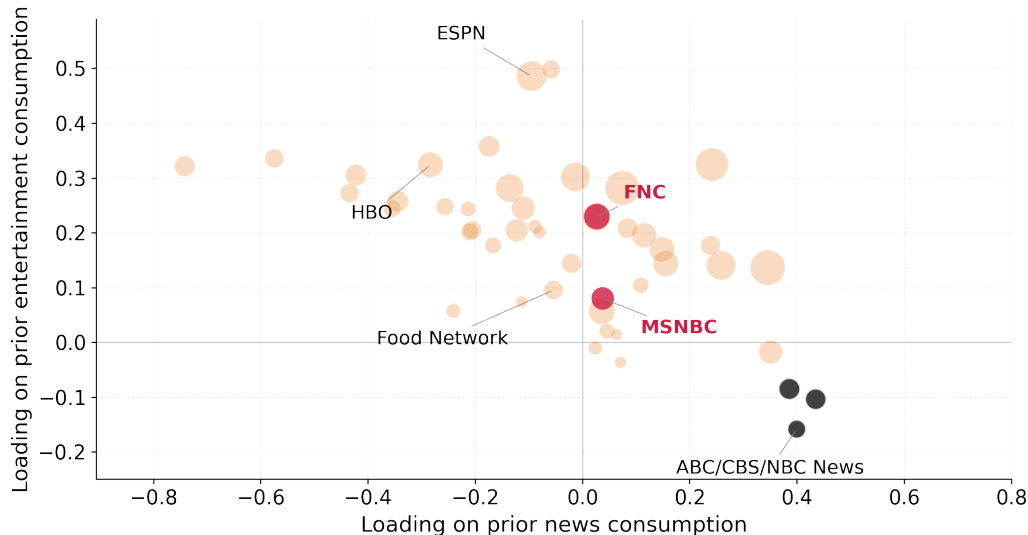
Predicted news vs. entertainment viewership



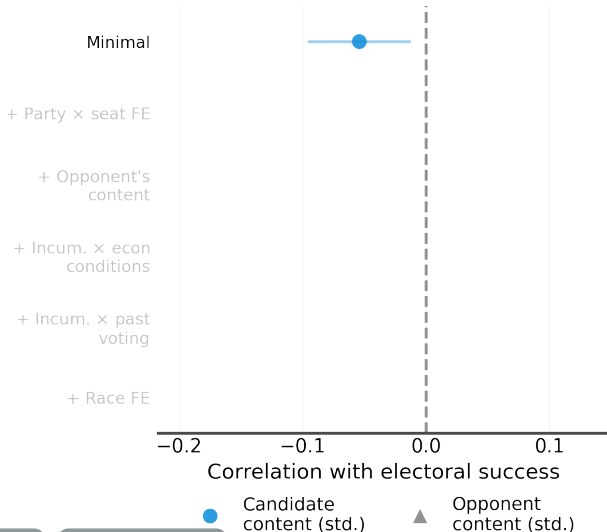
Predicted news vs. entertainment viewership



Predicted news vs. entertainment viewership (all viewers)



Correlation between culture minus econ and electoral success



Example: Democratic House candidate in MA-07 in 2002.

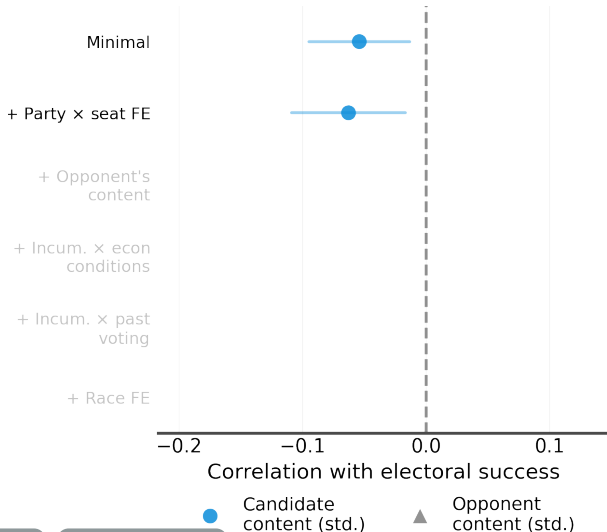
Partialling out average content/success of:

- Democrat House candidates in MA
- Democratic House candidates in 2002

► Back

► Competitive races only

Correlation between culture minus econ and electoral success



Example: Democratic House candidate in MA-07 in 2002.

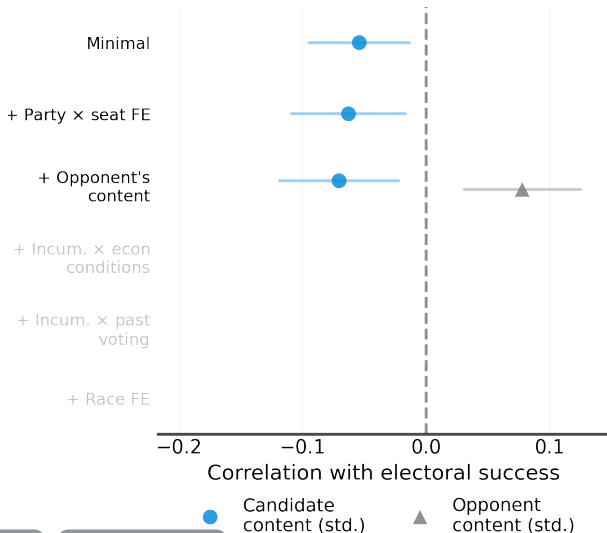
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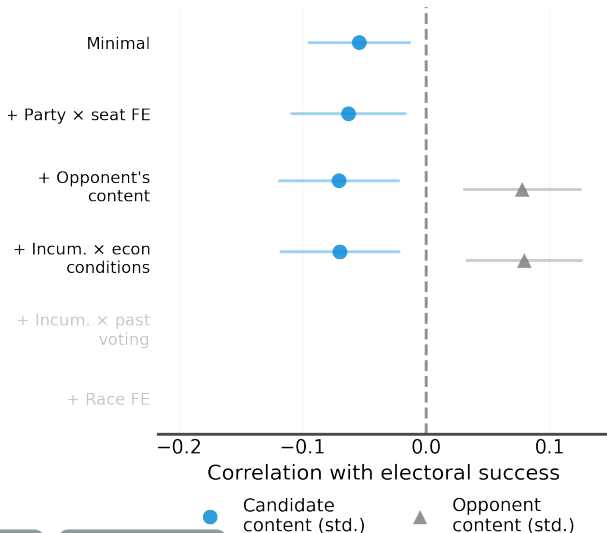


Example: Democratic House candidate in MA-07 in 2002.

Partialling out average content/success of:

- Democrat House candidates in MA-07
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- Opponent's content

Correlation between culture minus econ and electoral success



Example: Democratic House candidate in MA-07 in 2002.

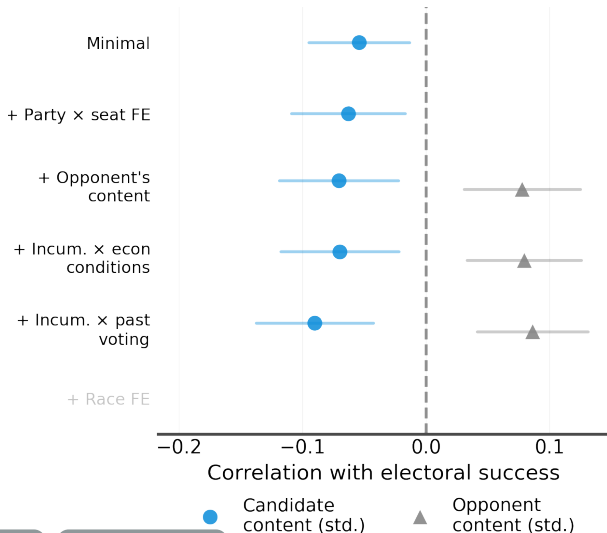
Partialling out average content/success of:

- Democrat House candidates in MA-07
- Democratic House candidates in 2002
- Opponent's content
- Incumbency $\times$ LFP, income, and unemployment rate in MA-07 in 2002

► Back

► Competitive races only

Correlation between culture minus econ and electoral success

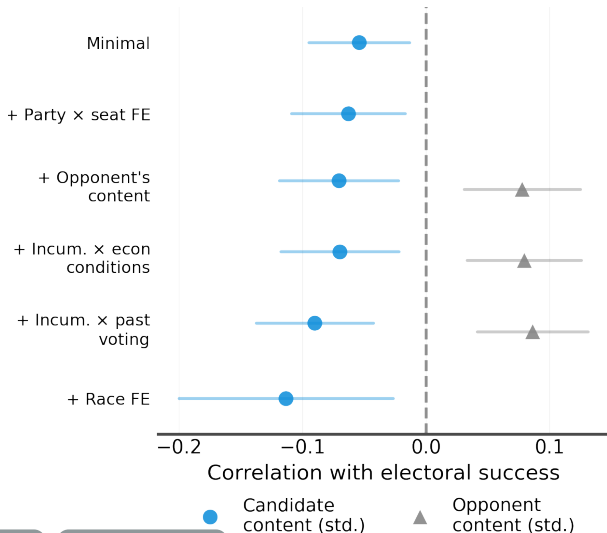


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- Incumbency $\times$ Dem House voteshare in MA-07 in 2000

Correlation between culture minus econ and electoral success

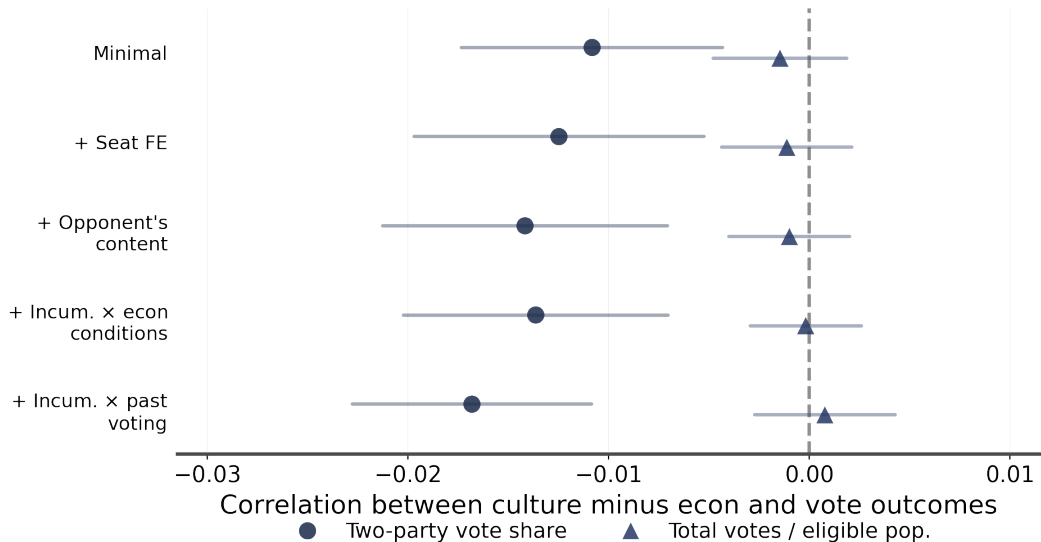


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Partialling out average content/success of:

- Democrat House candidates in MA-07
- Democratic House candidates in 2002
- Opponent's content
- Incumbency $\times$ LFP, income, unemployment rate in MA-07 in 2002
- Incumbency $\times$ Dem House voteshare in MA-07 in 2000
- All other race-level factors

Effects on # votes (mobilization) and 2-party voteshare (poaching)



Robustness check: competitive races only

Minimal



Party $\times$ seat FE



+ Opponent's
content



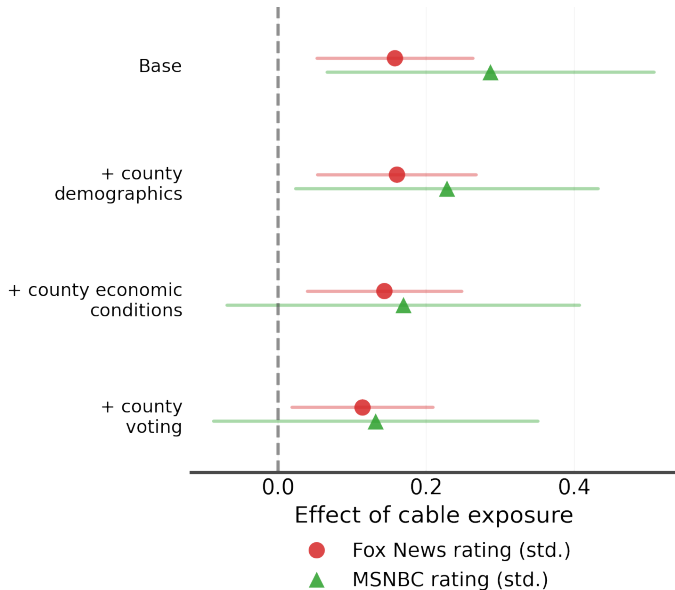
Incum. $\times$ econ
conditions



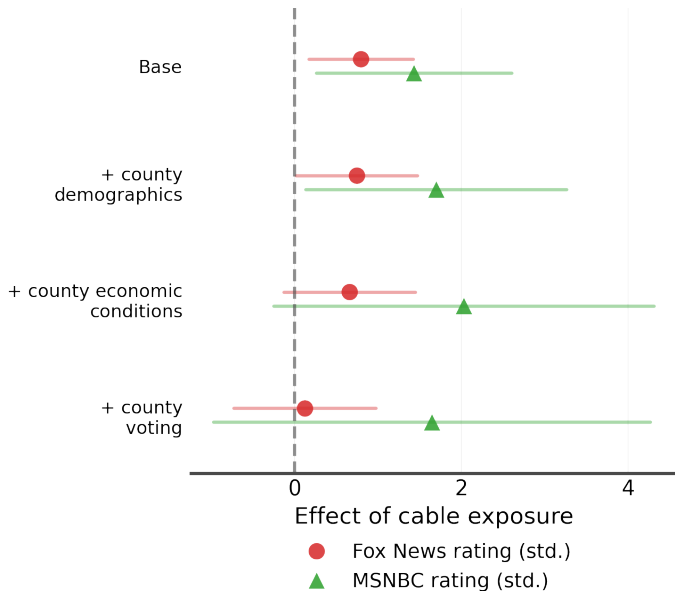
Incum. $\times$ past
voting



Effects on MIP: split by network



Effects on ads: split by network

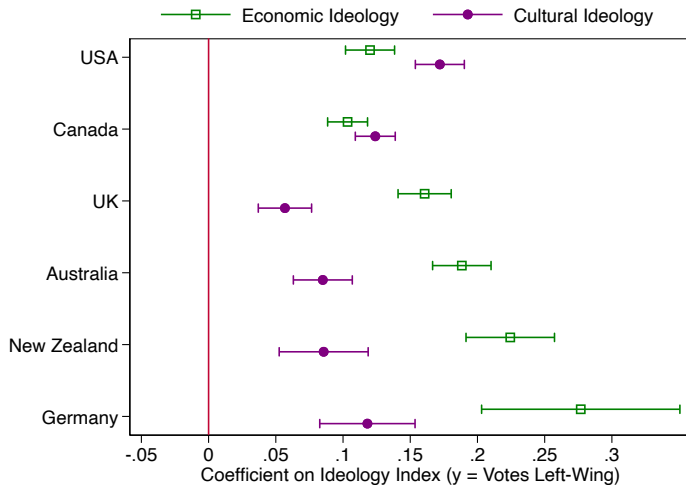


International perspective

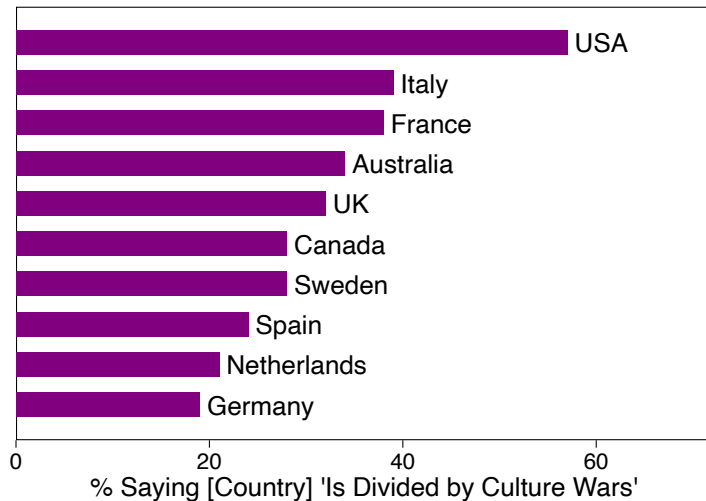
Educational polarization and growing salience of cultural issues not unique to US (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty 2021; Danieli, Gidron, Kikuchi, and Levy 2024)

1. Culture war is earlier and more extreme in the US
 - Greater affective polarization, populist cultural values, urban-rural divide, trust polarization
 - Anecdotal evidence that the US *exports* cultural conflict to other countries: natural spillovers via social and news media, deliberate exporting via political consulting
2. Cross country correlation between growth in affective polarization and number of private news channels (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2024)
3. Same intuitions apply to other media technologies — especially social media

US voters are most culturally polarized (WVS, 2017-2022)



US is most divided by culture wars (Ipsos, 2020-2021)



Non-college and low-propensity voters shift Republican

The New York Times

NEWS ANALYSIS

How Educational Differences Are Widening America's Political Rift

College graduates are now a firmly Democratic bloc, and they are shaping the party's future. Those without degrees, by contrast, have flocked to Republicans.

 **TheUpshot**

If Everyone Voted, Would Biden Benefit? Not Anymore.

Inside the unusual dynamic shaping the 2024 campaign.

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Opinion | How the diploma divide came to dominate American politics

5 min 722

Opinion Data Points

Progressives beware: high turnout now favours the right

A key electoral headwind has changed direction in recent years

JOHN BURN-MURDOCH

+ Add to myFT



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Why might economics poach and culture mobilize?

Within-person interpretation:

- Mobilizing content $\equiv$ fires people up on behalf of their side
 - Poaching content $\equiv$ makes people think about switching to the other side
- Cultural issues are **emotive, touch on immutable preferences**; economic issues are **technocratic, debatable, involve tradeoffs and comparisons**

Across-person interpretation:

- Mobilizing content $\equiv$ appeals to people on participation margin (disengaged or extreme)
 - Poaching content $\equiv$ appeals to engaged people on the you vs. competitor margin
- Cultural issues are **simple, appeal to less-educated, matter to extreme partisans**; economic issues are **complex, matter a lot to high-propensity moderates**

Classifying ad content

Ad Classifier

Open output

Search by ID...

Go

ID: house_az01_rogers_refug...

← Back

Refugees or invaders? They're testing our president and they're testing America. President Trump is securing our borders and cracking down on the illegal alien invasion. But what happens if Tom O'Halloran wins and Democrats take over Congress? Borders opened. Tax cuts repealed. Trump impeached. The economy destroyed. Mob rule replacing the rule of law. Our America gone forever. Control of Congress could come down to one vote. Your vote. It's up to you. I'm Wendy Rogers and I approve this message.

Topics:

Add Topic

Border security/border conditions/illegal immigration

Crime and safety

Politician/candidate voting behavior in office or positions on political issues

Taxes

Policies:

✓ [Taxes] Does O'HALLERAN, TOM generally support increasing taxes?

✗ [Border security/border conditions/illegal immigration] Does O'HALLERAN, TOM support increasing security along the southern US border?

Done with Policy - Add Claims

Search policy questions...

Add New

Show All Topics

9

[Economic policy and economic conditions] Does O'HALLERAN, TOM generally support decreasing government spending?

Support

Oppose

8

[Taxes] Does O'HALLERAN, TOM generally support increasing taxes?

Support

Oppose

4

[Regulation and red tape] Does O'HALLERAN, TOM support increasing regulation on insurance companies?

Support

Oppose