

Tracing Politicization in the U.S. Public Sphere, 1980–2024

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Abstract: Although many argue that American society has become overly politicized, social scientists have yet to systematically measure “politicization”—the process by which issues are framed as political through their association with recognizable political divisions in public discourse. This article develops a new measure of politicization using à la carte word embedding models trained on 1.35 million articles from three national newspapers. I trace the historical politicization of 25 issue domains in the United States from 1980 to 2024 by examining the extent to which specific issues are discursively associated with ideological labels (liberal and conservative) and partisan markers (Democrat and Republican). The analysis yields three main findings. First, politicization in the American public sphere has increased substantially over the past four decades, and this increase has extended beyond traditionally political issues into previously less politicized aspects of social life. Second, the discursive locus of political conflict has shifted over time: race and immigration, gender and family, and legal institutions have become more politicized than economic issues, which had been among the most politicized domains in the 1980s. Third, the boundary between the political and the less-political remains consequential, as some important areas of social life such as the home, financial markets, and outer space remain relatively unpoliticized in public discourse today. By studying politicization as a phenomenon in its own right, this research contributes to cultural and political sociology by treating “politics” as a dynamic category whose boundaries are continuously renegotiated, while also reorienting scholars of political division to shift their focus from public opinion and formal institutions toward the “public culture” through which social conflict and cohesion are represented and experienced.

Keywords: politicization; computational text analysis; word embeddings; political sociology; public culture

Reproducibility Package: The code and data to reproduce all results reported in the article are available at https://github.com/TerrenceChen/Politicization_paper. The full text data of the newspapers cannot be uploaded to a public location because the data can only be accessed through institutional access and user registration at ProQuest TDM Studio (<https://tdmstudio.proquest.com>). The README page in the reproduction package details how to gain access to the full text data used in this article.

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IN today’s American society, people across the political spectrum often express concerns that public discussion has become overly “politicized,” a trend they argue hinders effective policymaking and undermines social cohesion. Former Republican governor Chris Christie lamented that “everything is politicized” (Bruni 2024); Democratic governor Katie Hobbs remarked that “immigration has been politicized for far too long” (Cooper 2023); and the *New York Times* warned that “Politicizing Medical Science Will Cost American Lives” (*New York Times* 2020).

However, some scholars and activists argue the opposite—that depoliticization is the problem. Technocratic policymaking, they argue, removes key decisions, such as those involving trade and economic policy, from democratic contestation and public debate (Chorev 2007:11–13; Ferguson 1994; see Flinders and Buller 2006, for a conceptual review). These conflicting claims over politicization—whether there is too much politics or too little—are morally charged because they bear directly on a fundamental disagreement over the proper boundaries of politics (Starr and Immergut 1987).

Despite the prevalence and significance of the concept, social scientists have not sufficiently conceptualized and measured “politicization” as a phenomenon in its own right. How do we know, for example, whether an issue has become more or less politicized over the past 40 years? To be sure, scholars have studied the related but distinct concept of “polarization,” namely the division of policy opinions among the mass public or political elites (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Park 2017). And when social scientists do use the term “politicization,” they often treat it as synonymous with polarization (Hout 1999; McCright and Dunlap 2011; Gauchat 2012).

However, “politicization” is conceptually distinct from “polarization.” Politicization refers to “the act of naming something as political” (Palonen 2003:181–184). Politicization highlights the fact that “politics” is not a fixed essence but a boundary-making process: issues appear political through politicization, when matters once considered private, technical, or ordinary become linked to recognizable political actors and divisions (Starr and Immergut 1987; Boltanski and Esquerre 2025). Defined this way, politicization differs from polarization: while polarization refers to divisions in opinion about issues already recognized as political, politicization concerns how issues come to be framed as political in the first place.

Politicization in public discourse matters for democratic society because it is one of the key pathways through which citizens come to understand and experience political divisions. Most people do not participate directly in political institutions or policy debates. Instead, they encounter politics through public discourse, where issues are politicized (Lippmann 1946; Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). Indeed, research has shown that media depictions of politics can shape public (mis)perceptions of societal conflict (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016b; Han and Yzer 2020), which, in turn, influence political participation, trust in government, and sentiments toward people with different political leanings (Enders and Armaly 2019; Druckman et al. 2022). These consequences suggest that politicization should be studied as a phenomenon in its own right, even in the absence of opinion polarization. For scholars of polarization, however, the concept is also critical because politicization may serve as a precondition and catalyst for downstream opinion polarization. By framing issues as political, public discourse can prime attentive audiences to categorize the social world into political adversaries and allies, which then encourages them to adopt stronger and more consolidated positions on many issues (Malka and Lelkes 2010; Ahler 2014; Simon et al. 2019).¹

To properly understand politicization as a distinct sociological phenomenon, this study uses *à la carte* word embedding models to develop a new measurement of

politicization (Khodak et al. 2018; Rodriguez, Spirling, and Stewart 2023). Drawing on Boltanski and Esquerre's (2025:176–179) insight that politicization entails the mapping of issues onto existing political divisions, I operationalize politicization by measuring the extent to which topics are discursively associated with the ideological labels "liberal" and "conservative," as well as the partisan markers "Democrat" and "Republican." Using this measure, I examine the politicization of 25 issue domains in 1.35 million articles published in three national newspapers between 1980 and 2024.

This article examines three dimensions of politicization in the public sphere. First, has the overall level of politicization increased over time? Second, has the scope of politicization expanded, spreading into previously less political domains of social life? Third, which issues have become the discursive focal points of political conflict, and which have resisted politicization? I find a significant overall increase in politicization in mainstream media discourse over the past 45 years, and this increase has extended to previously less political aspects of social life. However, there are substantial variations across issue domains. Race and immigration, legal institutions, and gender experienced the greatest increases in politicization in public discourse. By contrast, economic issues, which were among the most politicized issues in the 1980s, did not experience a comparable increase over the past four decades. Moreover, some issue domains in American public discourse remain relatively nonpolitical, such as home, financial markets, and outer space. With regard to issues related to popular culture and lifestyle, which are central to the "oil spill" thesis (DellaPosta, Shi, and Macy 2015; DellaPosta 2020; Rawlings and Childress 2024), I find mixed evidence. Although certain topics, such as television entertainment and fashion, have become increasingly politicized, others appear resistant to this trend, including classical music, hockey, wine, and college sports. Overall, my findings suggest that the boundary of politics has expanded and been selectively redrawn: some issues have moved closer to the discursive center of political conflict, while other areas of social life remain comparatively insulated from politicization.

More generally, this article contributes to political sociology by asking a fundamental question: how do different aspects of social life come to be seen as "political"? I reject the essentialist assumption that the boundaries of politics are fixed within certain "political" institutions or issues. Instead, I investigate the historical trajectories through which issues become understood as politically divisive. Sociologists have long examined how major social categories such as "the economy" (Mitchell 1999; Çalışkan and Callon 2009), agentic actors (Meyer and Jepperson 2000), and race/ethnicity (Murji and Solomos 2005; Mora 2014) are historically constructed. This article contributes to that tradition of studying processes of categorization by focusing on the central object of political sociology itself: politics.

This article also contributes to scholarship on political division by shifting attention away from individual beliefs and toward "public culture" (Swidler 1986; Lizardo 2017). Generations of sociologists have shown that people do not form opinions in a vacuum. The public sphere—where information circulates, issues gain visibility, and public debate unfolds—is a key site in the formation of public opinion (Habermas 1962; Cohen and Arato 1992; Emirbayer and Sheller 1998; Adut 2012).

Put differently, in addition to understanding what people believe and the extent to which they are divided on issues, it is important to understand how political divisions are represented in public discourse, through which people make sense of politics and form their own views. This research contributes to that tradition by developing a measure of political division as it is represented in the public sphere.

In what follows, I first theorize politicization as the representation of political divisions and discuss why it is important to study it as a sociological phenomenon. Second, I introduce the *à la carte* word embedding method used to develop a new measure of politicization. I then present the findings by examining the overall historical trend of politicization and how politicization varies across issue domains. Next, I briefly compare trends in discursive politicization with patterns of partisan and ideological sorting in public opinion to examine whether the two processes are historically connected. Finally, I discuss the broader implications of this study for understanding political division in democratic societies.

Politicization as Public Representation of Political Divisions

Social scientists have long been concerned with understanding how political divisions are organized in democratic societies (Lipset 1960; Manza and Brooks 1999). In recent decades, these concerns have increasingly been expressed through the study of political polarization. A large literature has examined whether citizens and political elites have become increasingly divided in their opinions (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Park 2017; DellaPosta 2020), and the extent to which such divisions threaten democratic stability and collective solidarity (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Graham and Svobik 2020; Jost, Baldassarri, and Druckman 2022).

However, political division is not reducible to the distribution of public opinion or the dynamics of formal political institutions. A long tradition of social theory argues that democratic solidarity is produced and maintained through the public sphere—the interstitial field between formal political institutions and private life that includes civic associations, the media, and other sites of public communication (Emirbayer and Sheller 1998; Alexander 2006). The public sphere plays a crucial role in democratic societies by enabling citizens to access societal dialogues on matters of common concern and collectively form public opinion (Habermas 1962; Cohen and Arato 1992; Dahlgren 1995). Similarly, cultural sociologists emphasize the importance of “public culture,” or “culture externalized in the form of public symbols, discourses, and institutions” (Lizardo 2017:93). They argue that people do not form opinions and take actions on their own; rather, their attitudes are activated by the cultural scaffolding provided by broader public representations (Swidler 1986; Zaller 1992; Lizardo 2016). From these perspectives, what matters is not only the level of political disagreements in public opinion, but how these conflicts are represented and imagined in the public sphere to which citizens from distant places are commonly exposed (Anderson 1983).

This article focuses on one key dimension of that representational process: politicization. In everyday usage, describing an issue as “politicized” often signals that it is contested by opposing political camps and is therefore seen as politically

divisive rather than unifying. More formally, Boltanski and Esquerre (2025:176–179) argue that politicization entails the attachment of “political adjectives,” such as “left” and “right,” on issues, which encourages audiences to interpret them through a political lens. In this view, politicization is not simply the expression of a particular viewpoint on an issue. Issues may be discussed in moral, economic, or legal terms without being explicitly connected to political identities or partisan conflict. Rather, politicization refers to the extent to which discussion of an issue is organized around recognizable political cleavages.

Essentially, politicization is the public representation of political divisions. It does not necessarily reflect the actual distribution of opinions in a society, which is the focus of research on polarization. But this representation itself matters because most citizens encounter politics indirectly through public discourse rather than through direct participation in political institutions (Converse 1964; Gitlin 1980; Zaller 1992). As Lippmann (1946:59) argued, “[O]ur opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, and a greater number of things than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine.” As a result, public discourse helps inform how citizens perceive the political landscape around them, including which issues people are fighting about and how sharply divided different groups of political actors appear to be. Indeed, research has shown that representations of conflict in the media shape citizens’ perceptions of partisan divisions (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016b; Han and Yzer 2020).

This conception also distinguishes politicization from the dominant way media scholarship has studied political division. Existing media research has largely focused on media bias or ideological slant, asking whether outlets favor particular parties or ideological perspectives (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010; Arceneaux, Johnson, and Murphy 2012; Levendusky 2013; see Prior 2013 for a review). However, there is another way in which the media are related to political division: they can portray issues as conflictual and polarizing, thereby constructing a sense of what is “political” and shaping “the scope of policy conflict” (Grossman 2022). Even a perfectly “neutral” and unbiased outlet may politicize an issue by repeatedly presenting it as a conflict between liberals and conservatives or Democrats and Republicans. This article takes the second approach: rather than studying media biases, it asks how public discourse draws the boundaries of politics by presenting some issues as objects of partisan and ideological contestation.

There are at least three important functions of politicization in democratic societies. First, people draw upon publicly available representations of political categories when forming their own political identities (Schiffer 2000; Huddy 2001:144; Deaux and Martin 2003). Thus, politicization, by representing political groups, can provide a framework through which people come to identify as liberals or conservatives, or as Democrats or Republicans. Experimental research demonstrates that information about what “liberals” and “conservatives” supposedly believe can shape the policy attitudes of self-identified liberals and conservatives themselves (Malka and Lelkes 2010). This can lead to “self-fulfilling misperceptions”: media initially misrepresent differences between political groups, but the public then pick up on these representations and form their opinions accordingly (Ahler 2014).

From this perspective, studying politicization can provide insights into one source of increasing polarization and declining social cohesion in democratic societies (Kozlowski and Murphy 2021).

However, politicization matters even when it does not produce greater opinion polarization. Public discourse can create a cultural environment saturated with representations of political conflict that exceed underlying differences in public opinion. As Hunter (1991:43) notes, “Where the polarizing tendencies in American culture tend to be sharpest is in the organizations and spokespeople who have an interest in promoting a particular position on a social issue.” Similarly, Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2004:30) argue that narratives of “culture wars” often exaggerate societal divisions. Consequently, citizens may inhabit a public culture that appears more divisive than underlying patterns of opinion would warrant, and they may grow apathetic toward politics and government or perceive other political groups as more intolerable than they would otherwise. Indeed, research has shown that such (mis)perceptions of political conflict can shape political participation, trust in government, and sentiments toward people who have different political views (Westfall et al. 2015; Enders and Armaly 2019; Druckman et al. 2022).

At the same time, politicization is not necessarily detrimental to democratic life. Public discourse may also suppress political conflict by failing to politicize important social problems. As Schattschneider (1960) famously argued, “At the root of all politics is the universal language of conflict.” By linking issues to political actors and ideologies, politicization can make competing interests and policy alternatives more explicit and invite more spirited democratic deliberation (Starr and Immergut 1987; Adut 2012). Similar to Alexander’s (2018) concept of “societalization,” politicization “code-switches” the interpretive frames through which issues are understood, subjecting them to public scrutiny and democratic contestation. Politicization can therefore influence policy outcomes and the trajectory of policymaking (Wolfe 2012; De Bruycker 2020). From this perspective, insufficient politicization may inhibit democratic responsiveness and limit the possibility of policy reform.

Taken together, these arguments suggest that politicization should be studied as a phenomenon distinct from opinion polarization. It may follow historical trajectories that do not correspond to underlying patterns of public opinion, yet still carry profound consequences for democratic life. How, then, can researchers identify when an issue becomes politicized? This research will follow Boltanski and Esquerre’s (2025) emphasis on “political adjectives” and study politicization through how issues are associated with two sets of prominent political adjectives in the United States—the ideological labels “liberal” and “conservative” and the partisan labels “Democrat” and “Republican.” Consider the following two descriptions of immigration:

Showing visas obtained with bribes or fraudulent documents, hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants are openly entering the United States each year, posing as tourists, business executives or other visitors and then simply taking up residence in the ethnic neighborhoods of the nation’s big cities. (Crewdson 1981)

The law was more than just a compromise between *pro-immigrant liberals* and *pro-enforcement conservatives*. It embodied the idea that we could wipe the slate clean by legalizing the undocumented already here and preventing future unauthorized entries. (Ngai 2018; Emphasis added)

These two quotes construct different relationships between immigration and politics. The first quote presents immigration through a criminality and law-enforcement frame. Although the passage clearly advances a particular perspective on immigration, it does not explicitly connect that perspective to identifiable political groups or ideological camps. Readers encounter immigration as a legal problem, but not as a political conflict between competing political actors. By contrast, the second quote directly maps positions on immigration onto the ideological divide between liberals and conservatives, transforming the issue into an instance of broader political conflict. In this sense, the second passage is more politicized than the first.

Data and Methods

This concept of politicization has not been well measured empirically in existing research. Some studies that do focus on politicization use hand-coding to analyze textual data, extracting information like the mentions of political actors and legislation around certain issues (Hutter and Grande 2014; Fowler and Gollust 2015; Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2019). However, hand-coding is time-consuming and cannot analyze a large corpus of articles across different issues over time. As an alternative, Chinn, Hart, and Soroka (2020) and Hart, Chinn, and Soroka (2020) use dictionary methods to capture the number of mentions of political actors per article, in climate change and COVID-19 respectively. However, dictionary methods rely on the “bag of words” assumption and neglect the extent to which terms appear near to each other. As a result, they cannot capture the contextual usage of terms—for example, although an article with a sentence like “conservatives are against legalized abortion” suggests a stronger level of ideological politicization than an article where “conservative” and “abortion” are both mentioned but are not used in the same context, dictionary methods would treat both as the same.

To better capture how terms are used in semantic contexts, I employed word embeddings as the method of analysis.² Word embeddings, or word vectorization methods, are based on the distributional semantic assumption that the meanings of words are determined by the contexts in which they are used. Essentially, the method transforms words into vectors of values in a space where terms that are used in similar contexts are close to each other. Researchers can then use cosine similarity measures to identify terms that are closely associated in terms of semantic meanings (Mikolov et al. 2013; Rodriguez and Spirling 2022). Social scientists have used word embeddings to examine the semantic associations of various concepts or issues, including class (Kozłowski, Taddy, and Evans 2019), gender (Boutyline, Arseniev-Koehler, and Cornell 2023), and immigration (Card et al. 2022). This study extends this method to the two most common political categories in the United States: the ideological labels “liberal” and “conservative” and the partisan labels

“Democrat” and “Republican.” In what follows, I will detail the procedures of applying the method to newspaper articles.

Data

Within the public sphere, the media occupy a particularly central role as communicative institutions that both shape and reflect public opinion (Bartels 1993; Alexander 2006; Langer and Gruber 2021). Therefore, I used news articles from 1980 to 2024 from *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*—the three most widely circulated U.S. newspapers that have been in continuous publication in the period under study. I focus on these three outlets for several reasons. First, examining long-term changes over time requires sources that consistently produce influential texts across different historical periods. These newspapers have consistently ranked among the most widely read and influential, making them ideal for tracking shifts in public discourse. Second, despite significant changes in the media landscape in recent decades, these traditional outlets continue to play a crucial role in shaping the public agenda and sustaining issue attention (Langer and Gruber 2021), and agendas across different media systems remain closely connected (Gilardi et al. 2022). Finally, these newspapers have frequently served as data sources for sociologists studying public culture and the public sphere (Jerolmack 2008; Best and Arseniev-Koehler 2023). Using them therefore situates this study within an established tradition of sociological research on public discourse.

I accessed the articles through ProQuest TDM Studio, a content provider and data analysis platform that offers full-text articles for *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* since 1980. The articles come with metadata, including titles, publication dates, locations, abstracts, and article types (e.g., news, commentaries, etc.). I excluded nonsubstantial content such as advertisements, texts with low Optical Character Recognition quality, empty and duplicated entries, and non-U.S. articles (see Appendix A in the online supplement for detailed data cleaning process). Both news articles and opinion content (commentary, editorials, and reviews) are included in the analysis. After these processes, the dataset includes a total of 8,650,356 articles. To ensure that my analysis is not overwhelmingly influenced by *The New York Times*, which has the largest number of articles, I randomly sampled 10,000 articles each year from each newspaper, resulting in a final dataset of 1.35 million articles.

Preprocessing

For preprocessing of texts, I removed punctuation, symbols, numbers, and possessive 's, and all characters were converted to lowercase. Given that certain terms of interest cannot be easily captured by single words, I retain bigrams that frequently appear together. Examples of such terms include “food stamps,” “health care,” and “minimum wage,” among others. Additionally, to exclude the use of “liberal” and “conservative” in nonpolitical senses, I retained a series of bigrams that capture such usages. Examples include “liberal arts,” “liberal use,” “conservative investment,” “conservative lending,” and others. For the detailed procedures for selecting bigrams, see Appendix B in the online supplement.

Constructing Topic-Model-Based Dictionaries

To derive terms relevant to major issues, I inductively constructed dictionaries by applying topic models to a randomly selected sample of 50,000 newspaper articles. Topic models are machine learning tools used to uncover latent themes in large sets of documents by identifying groups of words that tend to co-occur together (DiMaggio, Nag, and Blei 2013). Because I only use topic models to derive vocabularies for public issues rather than employing them for substantial analysis, I opt for the relatively simple Latent Dirichlet Allocation topic models (for details, see Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003), with the number of topics set at 350.³

In topic models, each term is included in every topic, but with varying levels of topic-word association, known as the topic-word density. To find the terms unique to each topic, I first matched each term to the topic with which it was most closely associated. Then, I calculated a uniqueness score for each word by measuring how strongly a word is linked to its primary topic compared to others. Specifically, this uniqueness score is calculated as the ratio of the word's highest topic-density value in its most associated topic to the 98th percentile of its densities across all topics. Using the 98th percentile (instead of the average) gives a better sense of how uniquely the word relates to its main topic, as most words have very low topic-word densities in most topics. The formula for the uniqueness score, U_i , for a given term i is as follows:

$$U_i = \frac{\max(\beta_{i,T_1}, \beta_{i,T_2}, \dots, \beta_{i,T_{350}})}{PR(\beta_{i,T_k}, 0.98)} \quad (1)$$

where β_{i,T_k} is the topic-word density of a given term i in topic T_k , and $PR(\beta_{i,T_k}, 0.98)$ is the 98th percentile of the term's topic-word densities across all topics. After U_i was computed for each term, I filtered out words with scores below 30 and selected the top 50 words with the highest topic-word densities within each topic. Only words that appeared more than 50 times in the sample were included in the dictionaries.

Of the 350 topics, I excluded those that contained fewer than five unique words, were incoherent, or consisted primarily of names of people or places. I also excluded topics directly related to ideology or political parties, because these topics will include the anchor words used to construct the politicization measure. This process resulted in the final dictionary of 131 topics. I then reviewed each topic dictionary and removed terms that were ambiguous or proper nouns that did not appear consistently across historical periods. Finally, I grouped the topics into 25 broader issue domains: Animals, Creative Arts, Crime and Policing, Economic Issues, Education, Environment, Financial Market, Food and Drinks, Foreign Affairs, Gender and Family, Gun, Health, Home, Housing, Infrastructure, Legal Institution, Leisure, Media, Outer Space, Politics, Race and Immigration, Religion, Science, Sports, and Transportation. The terms included in the dictionaries and the issue domains to which they belong can be found in Appendix D in the online supplement.

À la Carte Word Embeddings Models

I used the recently developed à la carte word embedding models to analyze news articles (Khodak et al. 2018; Rodriguez et al. 2023). This method leverages

embeddings pretrained on large corpora, like GloVe, and combines them with the textual data of interest—in this case, articles from three newspapers. Specifically, for each target term in a given context, the model averages the pretrained embeddings of the surrounding words within a specified window and uses a transformation matrix to reduce the impact of overly common, less meaningful words. Researchers can average the embedding vectors of any target term across all contexts for a particular variable, such as year, to create aggregate embeddings. Then, researchers can examine the extent to which two terms share similar contexts by calculating the cosine similarity between them.

For example, suppose a researcher is using *à la carte* embeddings to analyze the term “abortion” with a 6-word context window. For the sentence “to this group of passionate conservative abortion opponents, protecting unborn human life was an imperative,” the model would average the pretrained embeddings of the six words before “abortion” (to, this, group, of, passionate, and conservative) and the six words after (opponents, protecting, unborn, human, life, and was) to derive the embedding vector of “abortion” in this context. The model then applies a transformation matrix to down-weight common words like “to” and “this.” To get the embedding vector of “abortion” in 2024, researchers can average the “abortion” vectors from all 12-word contexts containing “abortion” within that year. They can then do the same for the term “conservative” and calculate the cosine similarity between “abortion” and “conservative” in 2024.

This approach offers several advantages over traditional embedding models like word2vec, especially for studies examining semantic changes over time. Unlike models that require retraining on each new time slice—an approach that is computationally intensive and can lead to inconsistencies due to shifting embedding spaces (see Rodman 2020:95–97)—*à la carte* embeddings allow researchers to create context-specific embeddings without retraining a full model for each unique context. This enables analysts to efficiently capture nuanced meanings tied to particular contexts, such as time periods, within the same embedding space. Moreover, because it uses pretrained embeddings, *à la carte* embeddings perform well with limited data, allowing researchers to extract meaningful representations of rare words or phrases (Rodriguez et al. 2023).

Following Rodriguez et al. (2023), I employed GloVe as the pretrained embeddings and used Khodak et al.’s (2018) transformation matrix. In line with standard practices for word embedding models (Rodriguez and Spirling 2022), I set the value of the context window as 6, so for each instance of the focal word, there are 12 words from which to estimate the average embeddings. I also excluded six-word symmetric context windows around “conservative” when “estimate,” “estimates,” “projection,” “projections,” “forecast,” “forecasts,” “investment,” “investments,” “investor,” or “investors” are within the window. The aim of this procedure is to exclude sentences that use “conservative” in a nonpolitical sense but could not be captured by bigrams, such as “revenue estimates tend to be conservative,” from my analysis.⁴

Measurements of Politicization

After fitting word embedding models to my data and calculating cosine similarity measures to capture contextually similar terms, I constructed the embedding-based empirical measurements of ideological and partisan politicization. Ideological politicization refers to the degree to which an issue is associated with either the liberal label or the conservative label, whereas partisan politicization refers to the degree to which an issue is associated with either the Democrat label or the Republican label. Because what matters here is the association with either of the two labels, I averaged the cosine similarity of a given term with the “liberal” label and its cosine similarity with the “conservative” label (similarly for Democrat and Republican). Formally, for a given term t in a given year y , the measurement of ideological politicization score was constructed as follows:

$$POL_{ty} = \frac{\text{Cos}(V_{ty}, V_{liberal,y}) + \text{Cos}(V_{ty}, V_{conservative,y})}{2} \quad (2)$$

where Cos stands for cosine similarity, V_{ty} refers to the embedding vector of a term t in a given year y , $V_{liberal,y}$ is constructed by averaging the embedding vectors of “liberal,” “liberals,” “liberalism,” and “liberal-leaning” in a given year y , and $V_{conservative,y}$ is constructed by averaging the embedding vectors of “conservative,” “conservatives,” “conservatism,” and “conservative-leaning” in a given year y . Then, for each topic, I calculated the issue-level politicization score by averaging the politicization score of all dictionary terms that appear over 10 times in any given year and over 500 times in the full corpus. The same method applies for partisan politicization, with “liberal” and “conservative” replaced by “Democrat(s)” and “Republican(s).”

To ensure the robustness of my findings, I followed the subsampling approach used by Kozlowski et al. (2019:934–935) and partitioned my corpus into 20 random subsamples to construct the 90 percent confidence intervals of the overall politicization scores (see Appendix E in the online supplement for details).

Findings

Face Validity: The Politicization of Vaccine Discourse

Before turning to the main findings, I assess the face validity of the politicization measure by examining trends in the politicization of the term “vaccine,” which is widely believed to have become politically contentious during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 1 shows the politicization score for “vaccine” from 1980 to 2024. The score remained relatively stable throughout most of this period, hovering between 0.1 and 0.25, before rising sharply to approximately 0.426 in 2020 and reaching a historical high of 0.506 in 2021. Consistent with widespread perceptions of growing political conflict over vaccination during the pandemic, these trends provide evidence that the measure captures meaningful shifts in the politicization of public discourse.

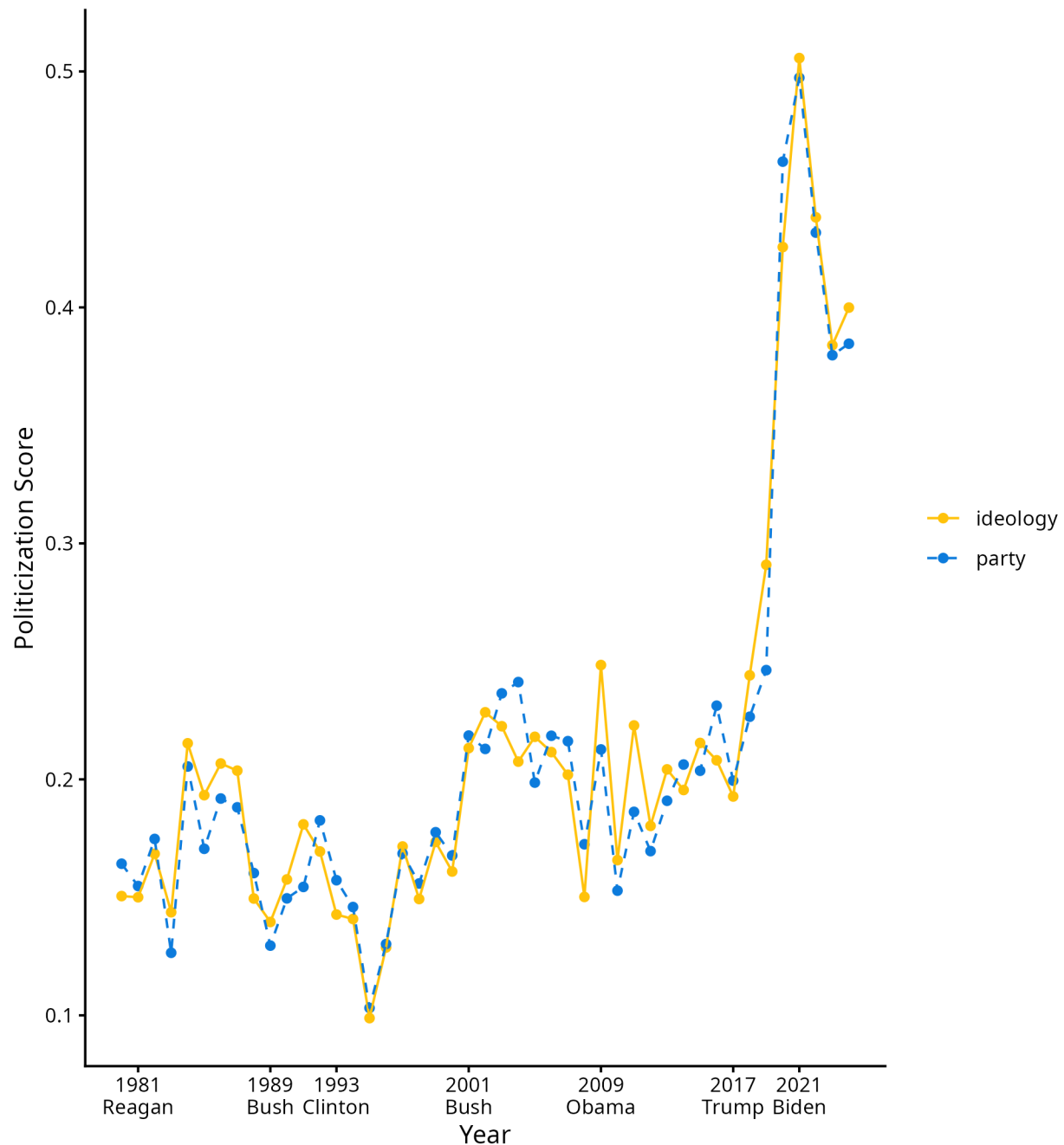


Figure 1: Ideological and partisan politicization of “Vaccine,” 1980–2024; from word embedding models trained on 3 national newspapers.

To show what high and low politicization scores capture in practice, I read vaccine coverage in 1980 and 2021 and selected some illustrative discussion from each year. The most politicized contexts for “vaccine” in 2021 consistently linked vaccine to partisan identities or ideological groups. For example,

"Some conservatives who initially championed the administration's *vaccine* drive are now adopting more skeptical stances." (Diamond, Knowles, and Pager 2021)

"But 13 percent of respondents over all said that they would 'definitely not' get a *vaccine*. Among Republicans and white evangelical Christians, almost 30 percent of each group said that they would 'definitely not' get a shot." (Karni 2021)

By contrast, vaccine coverage in 1980 rarely showed such associations. Typical discussions of vaccine focused instead on scientific research, public health, and medical efficacy. These passages discuss vaccines as technical or medical subjects rather than as markers of political identity. Examples include

"A pneumonia *vaccine* marketed by Merck and an American Cyanamid unit may be less effective for chronically ill patients than expected." (*The Wall Street Journal* 1980)

"Few actual flu cases were reported, but lawyers said that the *vaccine* itself caused widespread side effects, including paralysis and death." (*New York Times* 1980)

How Has Politicization Changed over Time?

I now turn to the first research question of the article: has there been an increase in politicization in the American public sphere over the past 40 years? Figure 2 shows the average politicization score of all terms included in the dictionaries for every year from 1980 to 2024.⁵ It shows that the overall level of politicization in the American mainstream media discourse has indeed increased. But importantly, the graph also shows that there was actually a period of de-politicization from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, which likely reflects an era where bipartisan consensus was somewhat more common and ideological divisions became less salient with the rise of New Democrats (Baer 2000).

To formally test whether the increase is statistically significant, I followed Baldassarri and Gelman's (2008) approach and fitted a multilevel random-effects model, using the average politicization score of a given topic-year as the dependent variable and allowing intercepts and slopes to vary by topic. The model can be formally written as

$$P_{it} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10} * (Year_t - 1980) + u_{0i} + u_{1i} * (Year_t - 1980) + \epsilon_{it} \quad (3)$$

where P_{it} is the average politicization score of a given topic i in year t , γ_{00} is the fixed intercept, γ_{10} is the fixed coefficient of year, u_{0i} is the random intercept that varies by topic, u_{1i} is the random slope that varies by topic, and ϵ_{it} is the error term of each topic-year.

The first column of Table 1 shows the results of ideological politicization: the fixed coefficient for the year variable is 0.0015, suggesting that on average, the politicization score increased by 0.0015 per year across the 131 topics under study. This coefficient is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). The second column, which

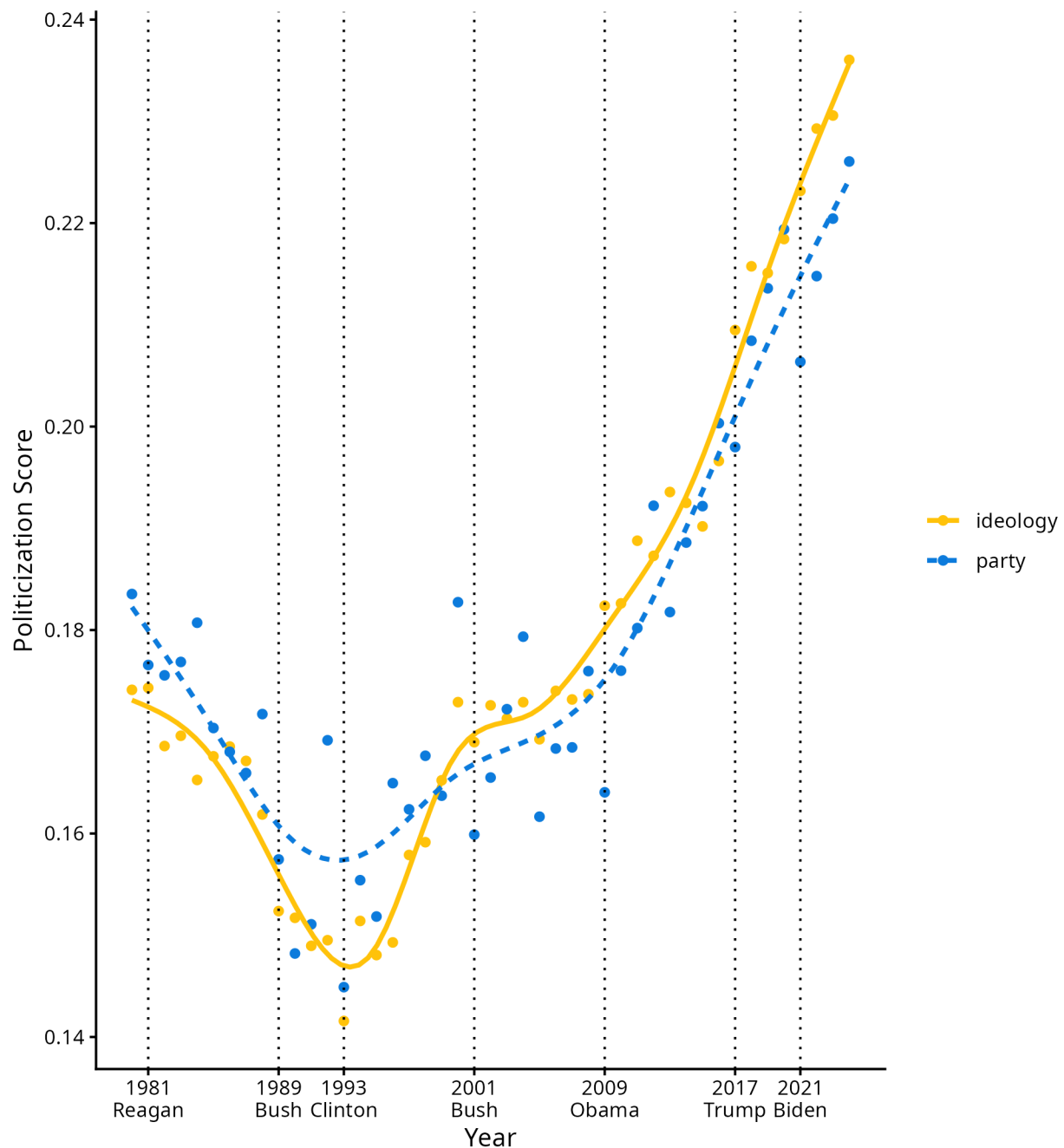


Figure 2: Average ideological and partisan politicization, 1980–2024; from word embedding models trained on 3 national newspapers. *Note:* Trend lines are smoothed with a generalized additive model.

represents the result of partisan politicization, also shows significant but slightly smaller changes over time (coefficient = 0.0011).⁶

The next question is whether rising politicization has been concentrated primarily in issues that were already politically contested in earlier decades, or whether it

Table 1: Multilevel Model Predicting Levels of Politicization by Year.

	Ideology	Party
Fixed effect:		
Intercept	0.1475*** (0.0029)	0.1571*** (0.0038)
Year	0.0015*** (0.0001)	0.0011*** (0.0001)
Random effect:		
Intercept (Var)	0.0011	0.0018
Year (Var)	0.0000	0.0000
Residual (Var)	0.0004	0.0005
AIC	−28322.9402	−27642.6993
BIC	−28282.8490	−27602.6082
Log Likelihood	14167.4701	13827.3497
Num. obs.	5895	5895
Num. groups: topics	131	131

Note: This is a random-intercept and random-slope model. The year variable is zeroed at 1980. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion; Var = variance.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

has expanded into domains that were previously seen as less political. This question speaks to what Palonen (2003:183) describes as the “historical layers of politicization.” Some issues carry sedimented histories of politicization, having become so firmly established as objects of political contestation that their political character appears naturalized. Other issues, by contrast, have historically been treated as outside the realm of politics, making their politicization appear novel. At the same time, previously politicized issues should not be treated as static. If issues become political through historical processes, they can undergo further politicization, or what Palonen describes as the “accentuating” form of politicization.

Figure 3 shows average politicization over time separately for topics that exhibited high (≥ 0.2), medium (0.15–0.2), and low (≤ 0.15) levels of politicization during the 1980s. Although topics that were already highly politicized have become even more politicized throughout the period, topics that had low and medium levels of politicization in the 1980s also experienced substantial increases in politicization over time. These results indicate that politicization has taken two forms simultaneously since the 1980s: the accentuation of politicization within already established political issues and the expansion of politicization into domains that were previously seen as less political. In other words, the outer boundary of politics has expanded, suggesting that the range of social life understood as “nonpolitical” has narrowed over the last four decades. However, the persistent differences among the three groups also indicate that the distinction between more and less politicized domains has not disappeared.

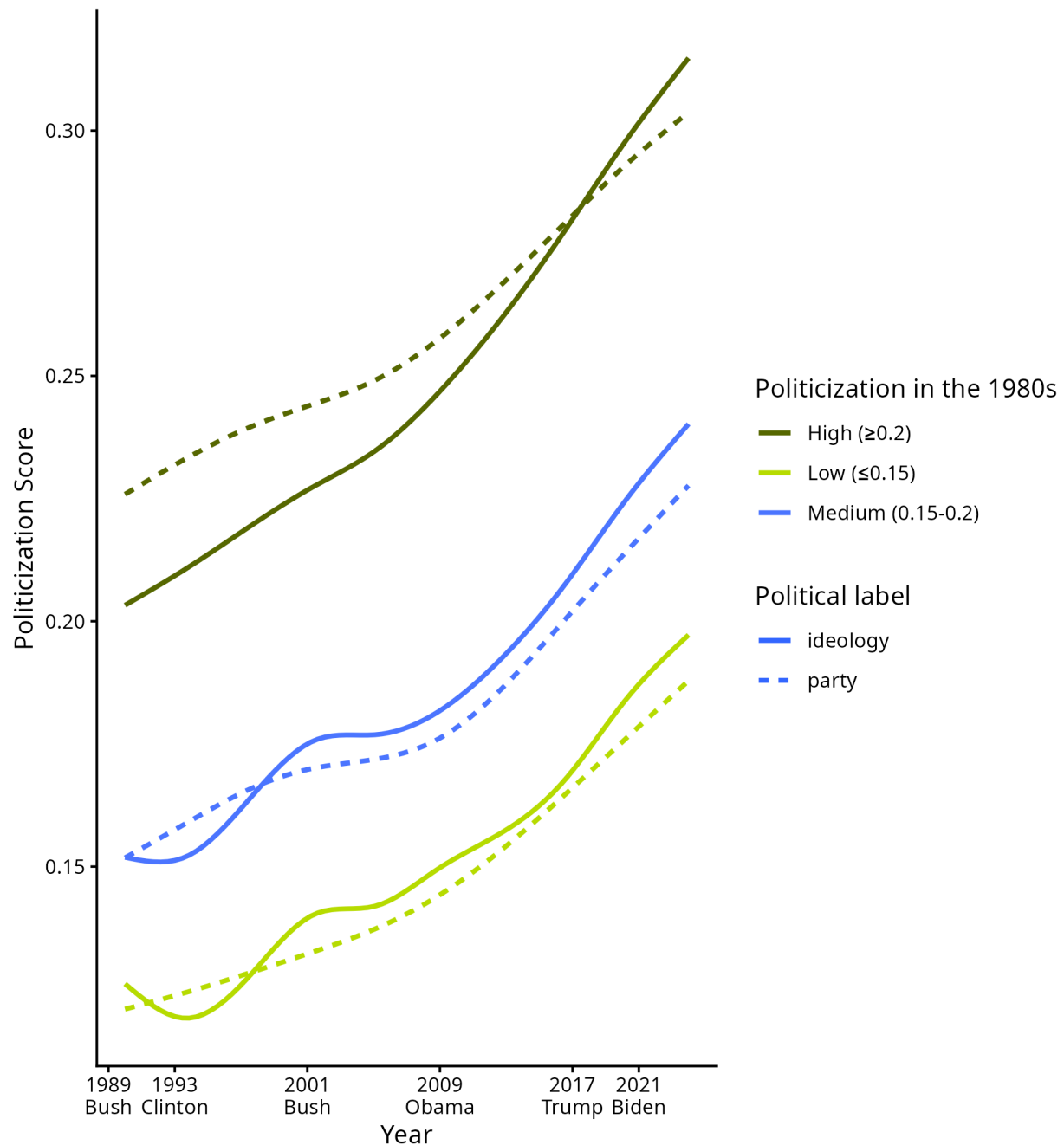


Figure 3: Average ideological and partisan politicization, 1990–2024; separate trends by initial level of politicization from 1980–1989.

Patterns of Politicization by Issue Domains

After examining overall trends in politicization, this section turns to variation across issue domains. The goal is to identify which issues have become focal points of political conflict and which have remained relatively resistant to politicization.

Figure 4 compares the average politicization scores of issue domains between 1980–1989 and 2015–2024, ranked by their levels of ideological politicization in the latter period. The figure also presents 90 percent confidence intervals based on subsampling. Figure 5 shows the same graph for partisan politicization.

Figure 4 shows that, from 2015 to 2024, the most ideologically politicized issue domains (other than politics itself⁷) are race and immigration, gender and family, legal institutions, religion, and education. Notably, these domains have become more ideologically politicized than foreign affairs and economic issues. Some issues that were less politicized in the 1980s, such as gun control, crime and policing, health, and the environment, also saw significant increase in politicization. By contrast, the least politicized domains were home (which includes topics related to household spaces, furniture, and cooking), outer space, financial markets, sports, and infrastructure. Figure 5 shows that the domains most politicized with respect to partisan labels were broadly similar, although economic issues appeared to be more politicized than religion here.

These patterns differed markedly from those observed in the 1980s. The most ideologically politicized issue in the 1980s was economic issues, which exceeded race and immigration as well as gender and family in politicization. Interestingly, home, financial markets, and outer space were also among the least politicized domains during this earlier period, suggesting the relative stability of their nonpolitical character over time.

The relatively low politicization of domains such as the home and financial markets reflects the largely routine and nonpolitical character of media discourse within these domains. For example, discussions of the home often consist of real-estate reporting centered on descriptions of home interiors, such as “At the back of this level is an updated kitchen with white cabinetry, quartz countertops, stainless steel appliances, a sunny area large enough to hold a dining table” (Serratore 2023; focus term: “kitchen”). Similarly, discussions of financial markets frequently take the form of technical or investment-oriented reporting rather than ideological debate: “Investors who loaded up on U.S. and Asian stock-index funds might be surprised to learn just what they own now: technology stocks - a lot of them” (Machado and Vaishampayan 2017; focus term: “stock index”). In both cases, the reports were written by journalists specializing in topics institutionally separate from political coverage (the Real Estate desk at the *New York Times* and the Markets and Finance section of *The Wall Street Journal*).

Taken together, these findings reveal three broader patterns. First, the discursive center of political division has shifted. In recent decades, race and immigration, along with issues commonly associated with the “culture war” (Hunter 1991; Smith and Tatalovich 2003)—particularly religion and gender—have grown substantially more politicized and emerged as prominent sites of political conflict. Economic issues, by contrast, did not experience a comparable increase over the past four decades. Second, the terrain of politics has expanded into domains that were comparatively less politicized in the 1980s. Gun control, crime and policing, health, and the environment all became more strongly associated with ideological and partisan divisions. Third, this expansion has remained uneven. Some areas of social life, including the home, financial markets, and outer space, continue to exhibit relatively weak political associations in media discourse. The boundaries of politics,

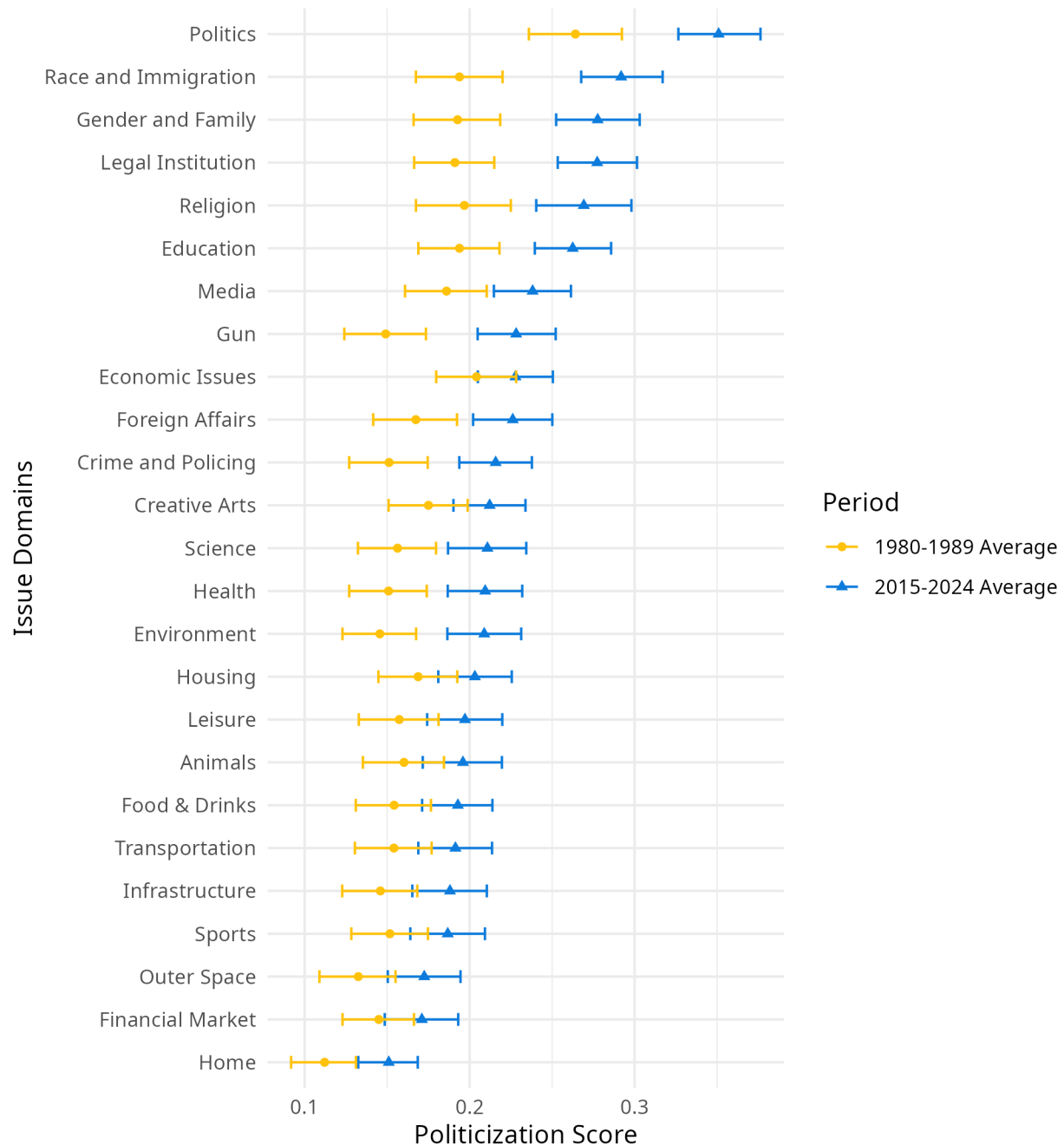


Figure 4: Levels of ideological politicization by issue domains, 1980–1989 average and 2015–2024 average; from word embedding models trained on 3 national newspapers. *Note:* Error bars around each point estimate show the 90 percent confidence interval, calculated by averaging the upper and lower bounds of the 90 percent confidence interval of the issue-year politicization scores within each 10-year period. Issues are sorted by their levels of politicization in 2015–2024.

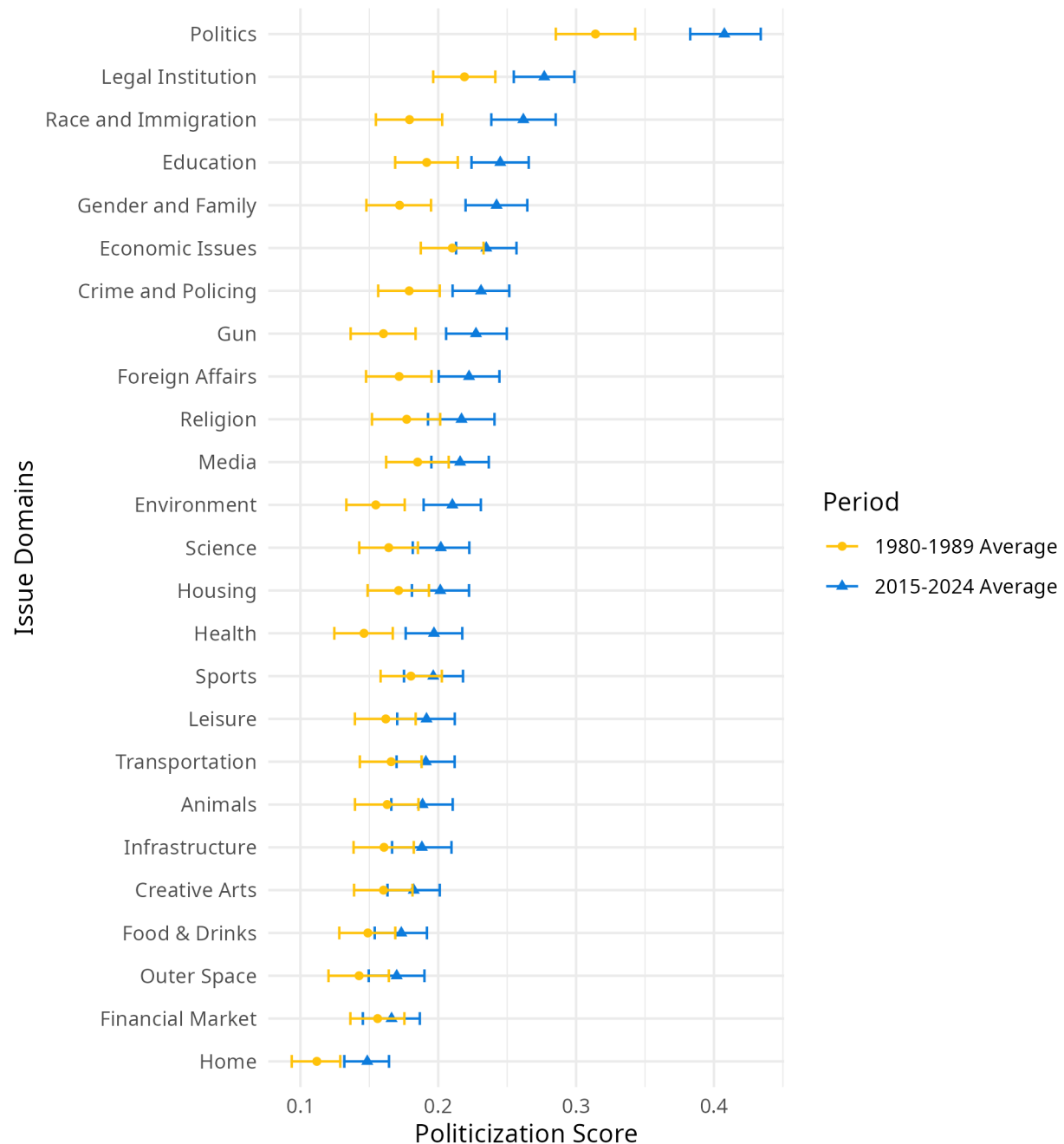


Figure 5: Levels of partisan politicization by issue domains, 1980–1989 average and 2015–2024 average; from word embedding models trained on 3 national newspapers. *Note:* Error bars around each point estimate show the 90 percent confidence interval, calculated by averaging the upper and lower bounds of the 90 percent confidence interval of the issue-year politicization scores within each 10-year period. Issues are sorted by their levels of politicization in 2015–2024.

while shifting outward, have clearly persisted. These patterns are broadly consistent across the ideological and partisan measures, although religion appears somewhat more ideological than partisan in character.

The Politicization of Popular Culture?

Although we have so far only examined the 25 broad issue domains, the method used to measure politicization in this research allows for close examination of trends in the politicization of specific topics, and even individual terms, over time. Here, I engage with the “oil spill” thesis, which suggests that popular culture and lifestyle choices have become increasingly embedded in political divisions (DellaPosta et al. 2015; DellaPosta 2020; Rawlings and Childress 2024). To assess the extent to which this claim holds in public discourse, I focus on four domains: Creative Arts (movie, art, music, etc.), Sports, Media, and Food and Drinks, which encompass a total of 25 topics.

Figure 6 shows levels of ideological politicization for each topic within these four domains, sorted by their increase in politicization between 1980–1989 and 2015–2024. Several topics in media (TV entertainment and television), creative arts (movie and fashion), sports (soccer and baseball), and food and drinks (casual dining and culinary) have experienced significant increases in politicization. However, the majority of topics do not show significant increases. Figure 7 shows results for partisan politicization, where only three topics—TV entertainment, fashion, and culinary—exhibit significant increases. These findings suggest that the “oil spill” of politicization in popular culture is limited to a small subset of topics. Other topics, such as classical music, the National Hockey League (NHL), wine, and college sports, show little to no increase in politicization over this period.

The topics in the previous analysis may still be relatively broad, but the method also allows for examining politicization at the level of specific terms. To further probe variation within topics, I select 20 terms from these topics and trace their politicization trends in Figure 8: CNN (television), late-night (TV entertainment), radio stations (radio), rapper (music), jazz (music), Disney (movie), Hollywood (movie), fine arts (museum), Picasso (arts), designer (fashion), poems (literature), Mozart (classical music), liquors (wine), chicken (culinary), Coca Cola (beverage), fast food (casual dining), NHL (hockey), NBA (National Basketball Association or NBA), NFL (National Football League or NFL), and soccer team (soccer). Of course, one could choose different terms; these are selected simply to illustrate the variety of politicization trajectories across specific cultural items.⁸

Some terms do exhibit significant increases in politicization, including CNN, rapper, Hollywood, Disney, NBA, and NFL, which is broadly consistent with the “oil spill” thesis. It would not be surprising for news readers, for example, to encounter strong ideological associations surrounding Hollywood in contemporary media coverage, such as in the following passage:

Republicans have always been a bit insecure about celebrities. They’ll scorn “*Hollywood liberals*” but then embrace even D-list actors (and, of course, a real estate developer and reality television star) with both arms when they proclaim conservatism. (Bruni et al. 2024)

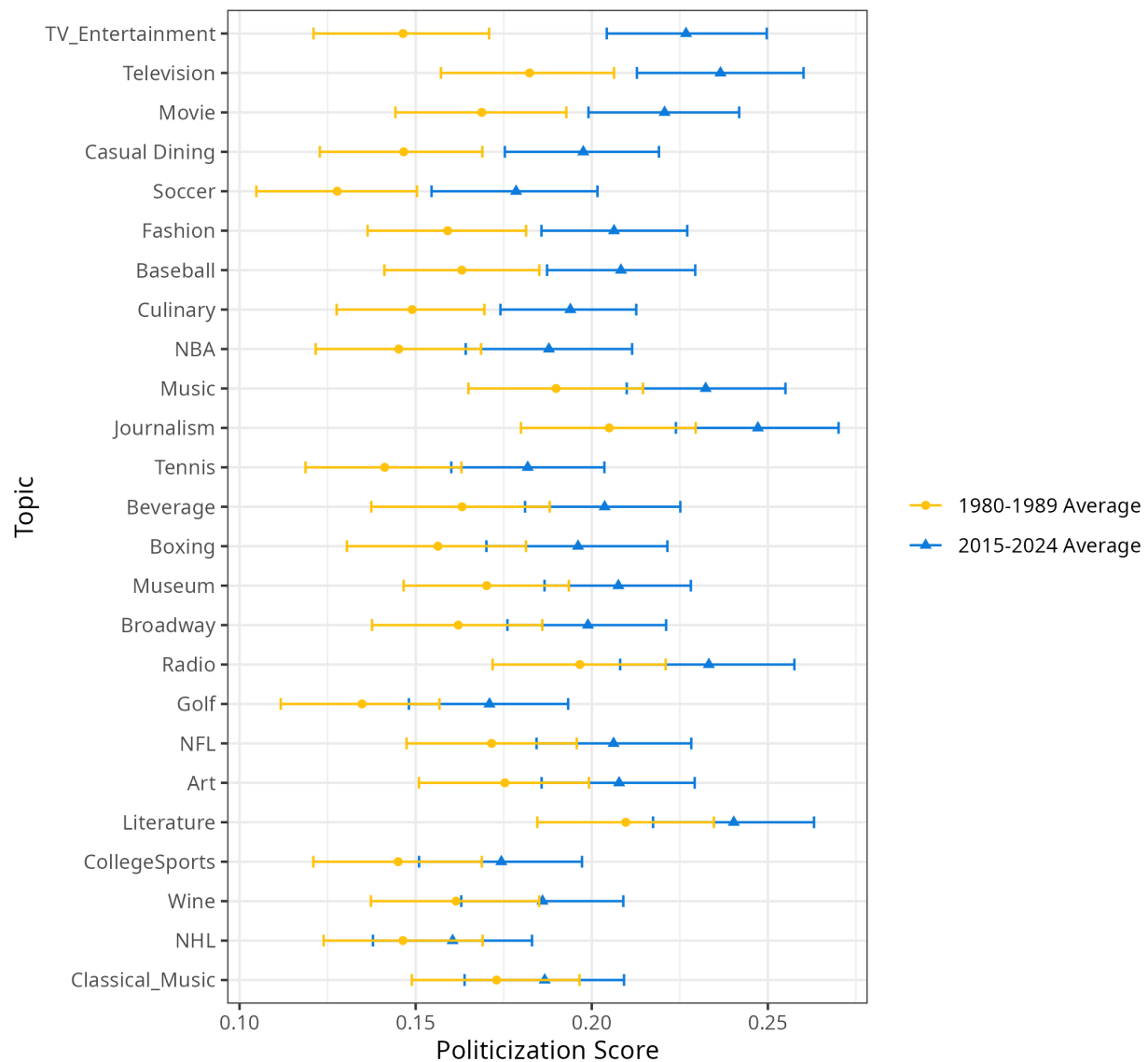


Figure 6: Levels of ideological politicization in popular culture, 1980–1989 average and 2015–2024 average; from word embedding models trained on 3 national newspapers. *Note:* Error bars around each point estimate show the 90 percent confidence interval, calculated by averaging the upper and lower bounds of the 90 percent confidence interval of the topic-year politicization scores within each 10-year period. Topics are sorted by the difference in politicization between 2015–2024 and 1980–1989.

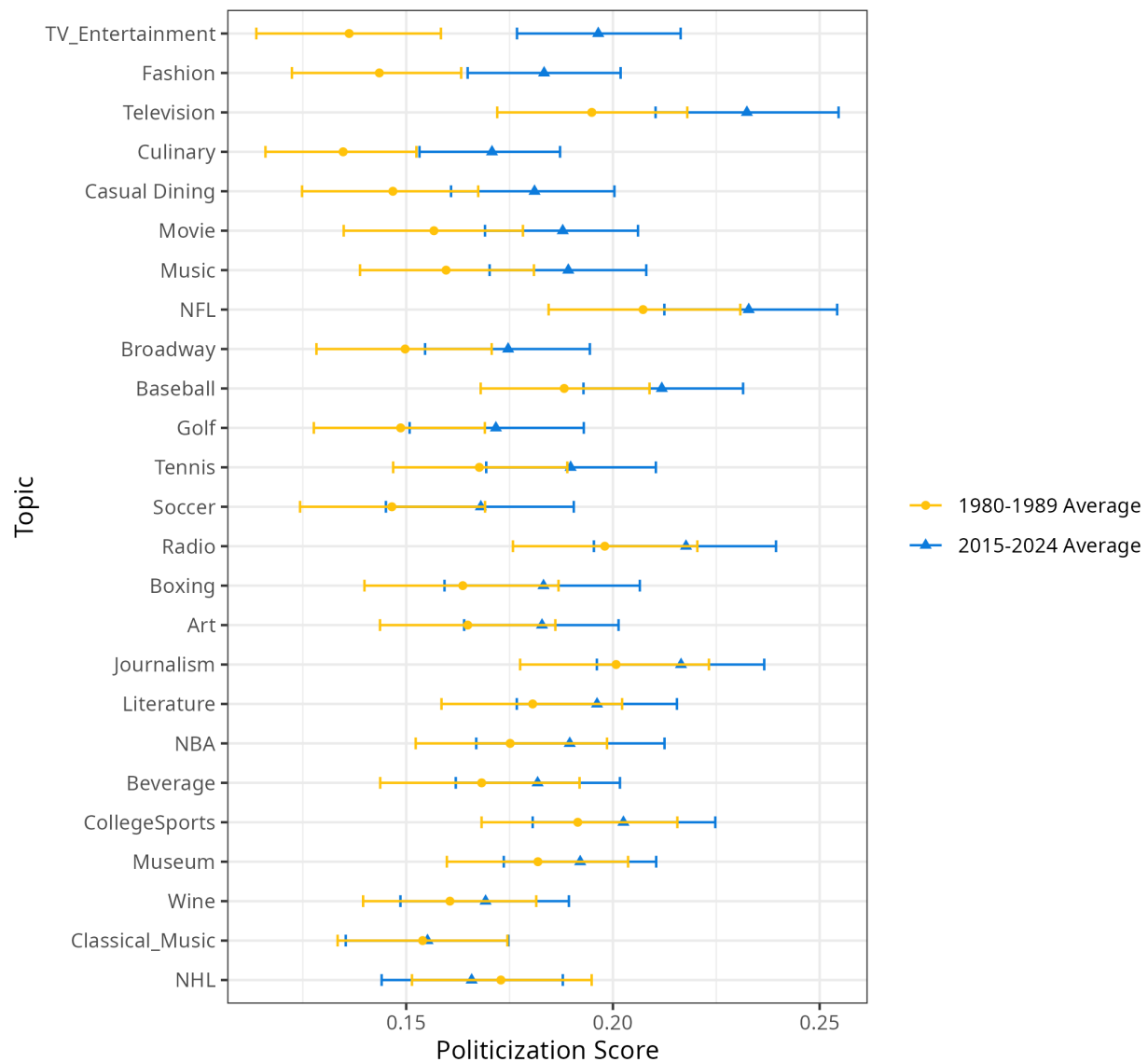


Figure 7: Levels of partisan politicization in popular culture, 1980–1989 average and 2015–2024 average; from word embedding models trained on 3 national newspapers. *Note:* Error bars around each point estimate show the 90 percent confidence interval, calculated by averaging the upper and lower bounds of the 90 percent confidence interval of the topic-year politicization scores within each 10-year period. Topics are sorted by the difference in politicization between 2015–2024 and 1980–1989.

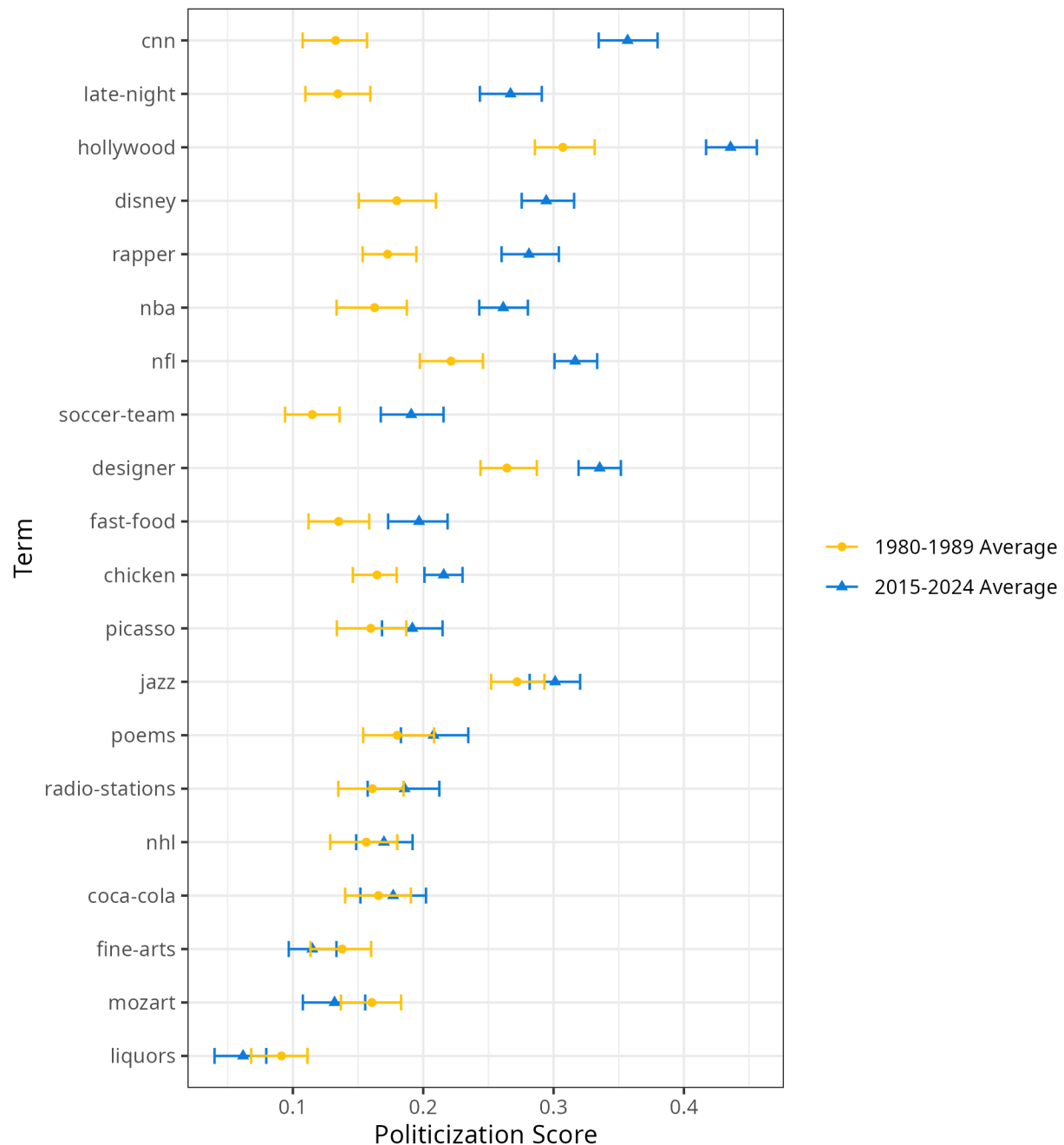


Figure 8: Term-level ideological politicization in popular culture, 1980–1989 average and 2015–2024 average; from word embedding models trained on three national newspapers. *Note:* Error bars around each point estimate show the 90 percent confidence interval, calculated by averaging the upper and lower bounds of the 90 percent confidence intervals of the term-year politicization scores within each 10-year period. Terms are sorted by the difference in politicization between 2015–2024 and 1980–1989.

However, several other items show little or no comparable increase, including Mozart, fine arts, liquors, NHL, or poems. Overall, these patterns suggest that although certain high-visibility cultural and entertainment symbols have become more politicized, much of lifestyle discourse continues to remain relatively insulated from political contestation.

Politicization and Public Opinion

Throughout this article, I have proceeded from the theoretical assumption that politicization is one of the primary ways through which citizens come to understand and experience political divisions, but I also argue that discursive politicization need not correspond to actual public opinion polarization. What exactly is the relationship between patterns of politicization in public discourse and opinion patterns in the general public?

In this section, I explore this question by comparing my measure of discursive politicization with one commonly used measure of polarization: issue partisanship, also referred to as ideological and partisan sorting. Issue partisanship is defined as the correlation between respondents' positions on a given issue and their self-reported ideology or party identification. This measure is particularly appropriate for comparison here because it captures the extent to which issues become associated with the same political labels that underpin my measure of politicization: "liberal" versus "conservative" and "Democrat" versus "Republican." I replicate the issue partisanship measure used by Kozlowski and Murphy (2021) with data from the American National Election Studies (ANES). To ensure comparability, I restrict the analysis to issues that appear in both the ANES and the newspaper corpus. For example, respondents' issue partisanship on questions such as whether gays and lesbians should be allowed to adopt children, serve in the military, or be protected by anti-discrimination laws are matched to the corresponding level of politicization of the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) topic in public discourse (see Appendix I in the online supplement for the full list of issues). Then, both discursive politicization and issue partisanship were standardized across all issues within their respective distribution so that the two trends share the same unit (standard deviations).

Figures 9 and 10 compare the evolution of discursive politicization and opinion sorting for 15 issues. They indicate that for most issues, the two trends show broadly similar rates of change. However, for some issues such as LGBTQ and immigration, discursive politicization increases more than ideological and partisan sorting over the observation period. For example, ideological politicization in public discourse on LGBTQ issues rises by approximately 2.61 standard deviations from its baseline in 1988 to 2024, whereas ideological sorting in public opinion increases by about 1.25 standard deviations over the same period. This pattern suggests that, for certain issues, the representation of political conflict in public discourse has intensified more than the degree to which mass opinion is organized along corresponding ideological or partisan lines. On the other hand, in some domains such as military, healthcare, and the environment, changes in ideological sorting appear to increase more than in discursive politicization.

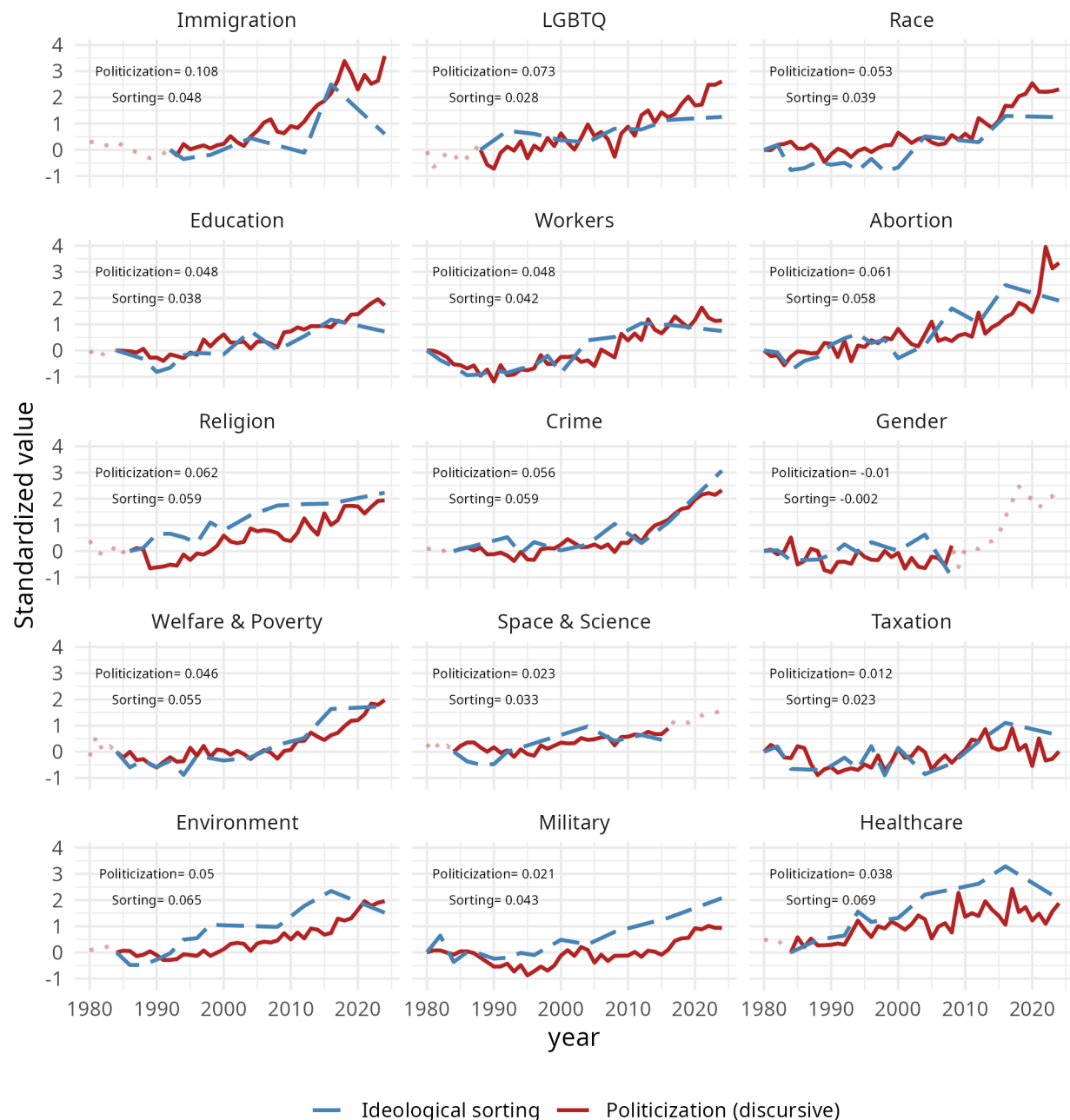


Figure 9: Comparing ideological politicization and ideological sorting at issue level. *Note:* Both trends are first standardized within their respective distributions. For each issue, the trends are then set to zero in the first year for which both series are observed, so values represent changes relative to that baseline in standard deviation units. Dashed lines indicate years that are not jointly observed. Numbers shown in each panel indicate the estimated linear slope over the period in which both series are jointly observed. Sorting data are from the American National Election Studies (ANES).

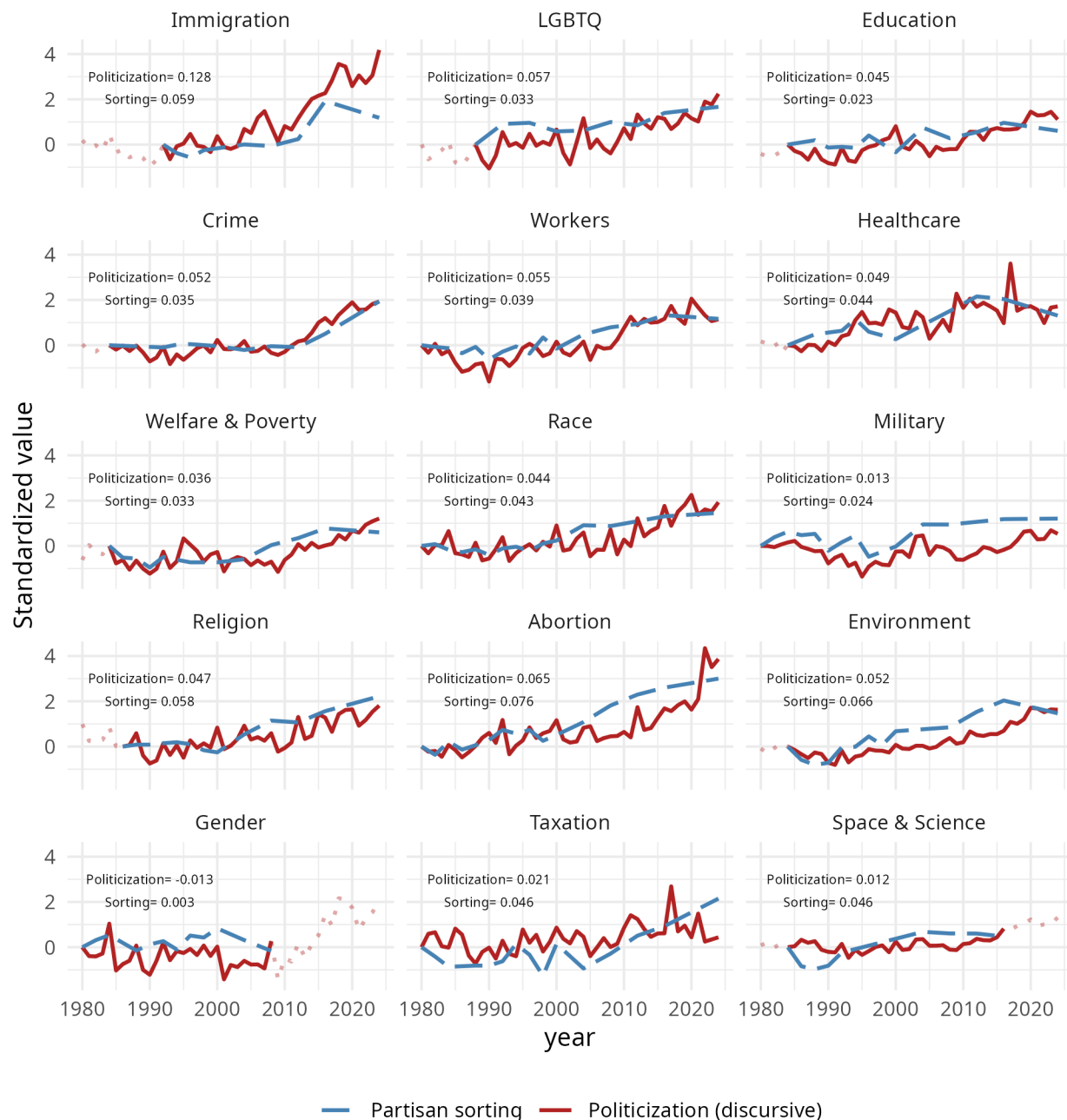


Figure 10: Comparing partisan politicization and partisan sorting at issue level. *Note:* Both trends are first standardized within their respective distributions. For each issue, the trends are then set to zero in the first year for which both series are observed, so values represent changes relative to that baseline in standard deviation units. Dashed lines indicate years that are not jointly observed. Numbers shown in each panel indicate the estimated linear slope over the period in which both series are jointly observed. Sorting data are from the American National Election Studies (ANES).

Overall, the results suggest that the relationship between discursive politicization and opinion sorting is heterogeneous across issue domains. These patterns indicate that discursive politicization and opinion polarization are closely related but not reducible to one another. Rather than simply mirroring public opinion, public discourse exhibits its own dynamics in how issues become linked to political identities and divisions.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although the concept of “politicization” is frequently invoked and debated in public discourse, no research has systematically examined how the politicization of different aspects of social life has evolved over time. This study addresses that gap through a computational text analysis of 1.35 million newspaper articles published between 1980 and 2024. I find that, first, the overall level of politicization in American mainstream media discourse has increased significantly since the mid-1990s, following a brief period of depoliticization. This increase in politicization is not limited to issues already politicized in the 1980s but extends to previously less politicized topics, suggesting that the “nonpolitical” spheres of social life are steadily shrinking. Second, the focus of politicization has changed over time. Race and immigration, legal institutions, and gender and family have become substantially more politicized, surpassing economic issues as the most politicized issues within the American public sphere. Third, there remain many issue domains that remain relatively unpoliticized, including home, the financial market, outer space, and various “lifestyle” topics such as classical music, wine, and hockey.

Broadly speaking, this article offers three major theoretical and methodological contributions. First, this study adopts a constructivist view of politics to demonstrate how the boundaries of “the political” evolve over time. The concept of “politicization” emphasizes that what it means to be “political,” or ideological and partisan in particular, is not fixed; rather, it changes over time and is anchored in a specific historical context (Palonen 2003; Boltanski and Esquerre 2025). As such, this framework inherits the sociological tradition of investigating the construction of social categories (Mitchell 1999; Meyer and Jepperson 2000; Mora 2014). This is theoretically analogous to “racialization”—“the processes by which racial meanings are attached to particular issues [...] and the manner in which race appears to be a, or often the, key factor in the ways they are defined and understood” such as the racialization of street crime (Murji and Solomos 2005:3). Although sociologists have long studied race this way, we have not yet systematically examined politics through this lens. This article develops a measurement framework to do exactly that.

The specific findings of this study suggest that the core connotations of “politics” have shifted from emphasizing economic issues to centering racial, gender, and legal struggles. At the same time, certain domains resist politicization, such as the home, the financial market, and outer space. This indicates that the home is still widely imagined in public discourse as a site of intimacy and privacy and a safe haven separated from politics (Rybczynski 1986; Mallett 2004). Similarly, discussions of the financial market remain largely grounded in the specifics of stock

prices and investor behavior, rather than their broader political contexts (Hirsto 2011). When it comes to popular culture and lifestyle topics that have been the focus of recent research (DellaPosta et al. 2015; Rawlings and Childress 2024), I also find that although topics such as television entertainment and fashion show an increase in politicization, the majority of lifestyle topics did not experience a significant rise in politicization. Overall, although the boundaries of politics have expanded, the boundary-making process whereby some aspects of social life are constructed as more political than others remains highly active (Starr and Immergut 1987), even within today's hyper-politicized environment.

Second, this article contributes to a "public culture" understanding of political divisions. The dominant approach on partisan and ideological cleavages among contemporary social scientists focuses on an internalized system of beliefs and attitudes (Jost 2006:653; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Hill and Tausanovitch 2015) or individual's self-identifications (Conover and Feldman 1981; Carney et al. 2008; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Hatemi, Crabtree, and Smith 2019). Both approaches treat political division as a component of "personal culture"—culture manifested within individual minds and behaviors. In contrast, this research focuses on how division is represented in "public culture," or "culture externalized in the form of public symbols, discourses, and institutions" (Lizardo 2017:93). These public representations are important because they can provide cultural scaffolding for individual meaning-making processes (Swidler 1986; Lizardo 2016), and individuals often draw upon these publicly available representations of political categories when forming their own self-identifications (Huddy 2001:144; Schiffer 2000; Deaux and Martin 2003). Put differently, because people do not form opinions in a vacuum but through the discursive environment in which they live, scholars need to go beyond public opinion polarization and better understand how political divisions are culturally constructed in the public sphere.

Methodologically, this article is among the first in sociology to apply *à la carte* embeddings to the study of political discourse. This approach is uniquely valuable for historical sociology and the study of public culture because it captures the precise semantic contexts in which terms are used and provides a computationally efficient means of tracking fine-grained shifts in cultural associations over time. Furthermore, the specific measurements of politicization introduced here offer a versatile tool for scholars investigating the history of specific topics: researchers can select their own targeted terms and deploy this methodology to trace the evolution of politicization across decades. Because newspaper corpora capture an expansive array of issues, this approach affords scholars studying topics that are inconsistently tracked in public opinion surveys an alternative framework for analyzing long-term historical change.

One limitation of this article is that its reliance on three national newspapers means that the politicization trends identified here reflect patterns specifically within elite legacy print media. Future research should examine politicization dynamics in other important media environments, such as cable news, talk radio, and social media. A second limitation is that this analysis is largely descriptive and cannot identify the sources of politicization. Future research could examine whether politicization reflects increasingly divisive discourse among political elites,

or whether the media, as a kind of cultural elite in its own right, constructs an agenda distinct from both public attitudes and the positions of politicians.

To conclude, I consider the potential consequences of politicization for democratic society. Public culture and discourse are where people come to understand how others think about politics, and more generally how they perceive the status of societal division (Mutz 1998). The trends of politicization documented here therefore can serve as a proxy for a generalized feeling of how politically divisive a society is, as well as which issues feel most emblematic of that divide. The expanding scope of politicization would thus help us understand why political conflict feels so pervasive in American society, even if the evidence for actual public opinion polarization is mixed (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008). In other words, politicization of public discourse could be a source of the widespread perceived polarization well documented in the literature (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016a; Enders and Armaly 2019). This also suggests that when Americans today think of some issues such as race, immigration, or gender as especially “political,” they are likely drawing on the high level of politicization of these issues in public discourse, which need not track where public opinion happens to be most divided.

These perceptions are not merely epiphenomenal. They can feed back into how citizens actually engage with politics and with one another, and the increase in politicization can shape different kinds of citizens in different ways. For people who already identify with particular ideologies and partisan groups, politicization may prompt them to entrench their views more closely within existing ideological and partisan identities (Ahler 2014). Experimental research provides evidence consistent with this possibility: Malka and Lelkes (2010:157) shows that “conservative-liberal identity functions as a readiness to adopt beliefs and attitudes about newly politicized issues that one is told are consistent with the socially prescribed meaning of conservatism-liberalism.” For people who are less politically inclined, by contrast, politicization may instead prompt avoidance of politics. As previously less politicized domains become more politicized, individuals may come to feel that “everything is becoming too political” and grow less comfortable engaging with those who hold opposing views and more inclined to withdraw from cross-cutting social relationships (Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009; Lee 2021). Issues that become framed as “political” may become particularly “hot-button” topics that citizens and community leaders are reluctant to address in civic life (Eliasoph 1998; Pacewicz 2015). These two dynamics can reinforce one another: as politically engaged citizens sort further into entrenched camps, less engaged citizens may increasingly opt out of public debates, leaving public discourse itself even more polarized than the public at large.

However, politicization is not necessarily detrimental to democracy. The expansion of “the political” can also generate political interest, discussion, and participation, all of which are essential to a healthy democracy (Fitzgerald 2013). For social movements in particular, politicization is often an explicit objective: movements seek to transform issues treated as matters of routine or private concern into objects of ideological debate and political action. A democratic society cannot allow politics to colonize every domain of people’s lifeworld, but neither can it leave consequential inequalities and collective concerns permanently outside the realm of political contestation. Understanding politicization, therefore, requires

recognizing this tension as an enduring feature of democratic life: the political will continually expand to incorporate new dimensions of social life, but democratic societies will also continually negotiate where that expansion should stop. The history documented in this article suggests that this boundary can never be permanently settled.

Notes

- 1 This article takes as a starting assumption that public discourse is important because it forms part of the cultural environment through which individuals make sense of political reality and orient themselves toward political divisions. This assumption is supported by a broad theoretical and empirical literature, as indicated here, but evaluating the causal effects of discourse on opinion formation lies beyond the scope of the present analysis. The possible downstream consequences of politicization are invoked here primarily to establish the broader sociological significance of the phenomenon, not as empirical claims directly tested in this article.
- 2 One might ask why this analysis does not use large language models (LLMs), for example by prompting an LLM to judge how political a text is. The concern is that such an approach would obscure the underlying discursive mechanisms, because researchers cannot fully observe how the model determines whether a text is political. In contrast, the method used here operationalizes politicization through theoretically specified linguistic associations, making the measurement transparent and interpretable.
- 3 I tested the optimal number of topics using the `ldatuning` package in R for 200, 250, 300, 350, 400 and 500 topics, and the modeling results prefer the 350 topics solution. See Appendix C in the online supplement for the results.
- 4 I didn't apply this procedure to the "liberal" label because after reading a random set of articles, it appears that the nonpolitical use of "liberal" is less frequent and doesn't always come with specific terms. In other words, there are few equivalents to sentences like "revenue estimates tend to be conservative" on the liberal end.
- 5 The analysis here groups all three newspapers together and does not distinguish between editorials and news. For analysis excluding editorials and commentary, see Appendix F in the online supplement. For a separate analysis of the three outlets, see Appendix G in the online supplement.
- 6 I note that the linear model summarizes the net shift over the period rather than the underlying shape of the shift. A quadratic specification (not shown here) confirms that the trend is nonlinear.
- 7 The Politics issue domain contains topics like Campaigns & Donors, Elections, Protest, Public Opinion, and Senate. The level of politicization in the Politics domain can be treated as a benchmark of very high politicization.
- 8 I also conducted a more systematic term selection in Appendix H in the online supplement, where I selected the single most unique term based on the uniqueness metric used in this article for each lifestyle topic.

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