

**MUNI**

**(Social) media and political polarization**

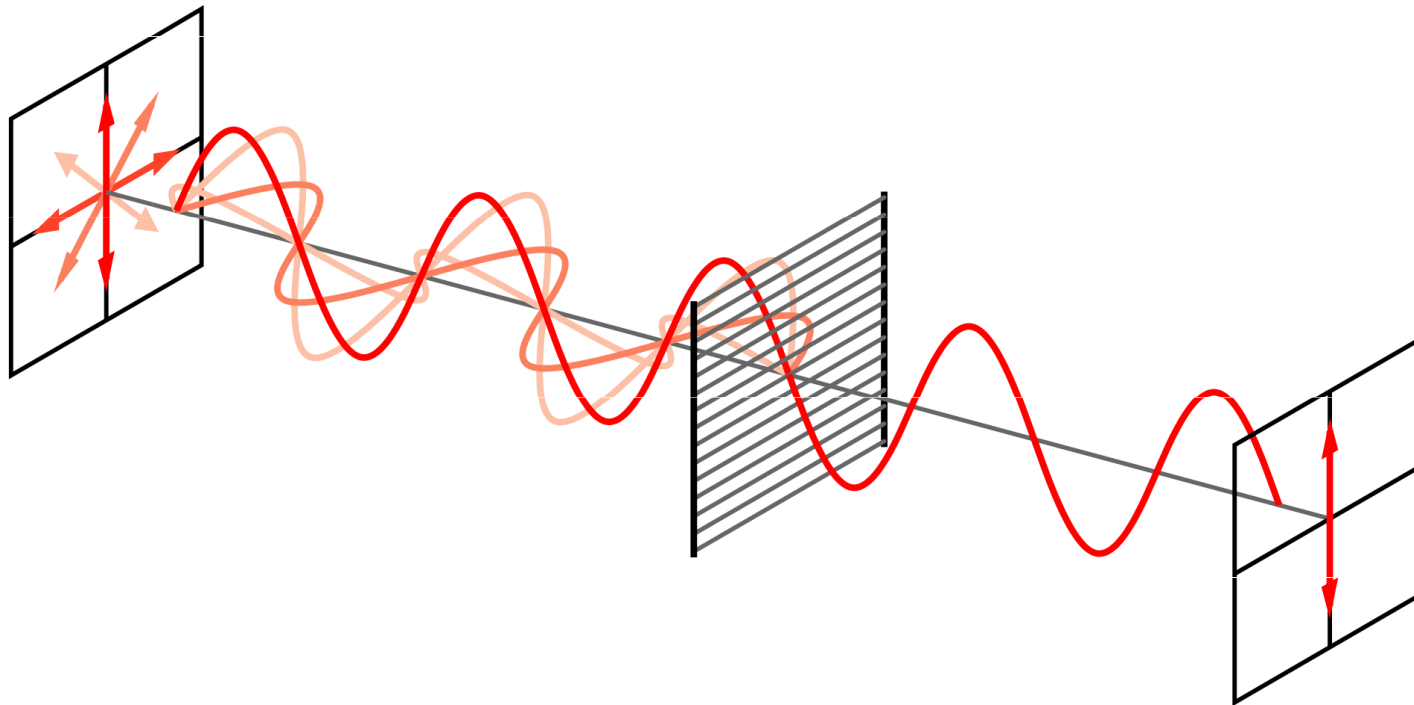
Alena Kluknavská

#MUNI

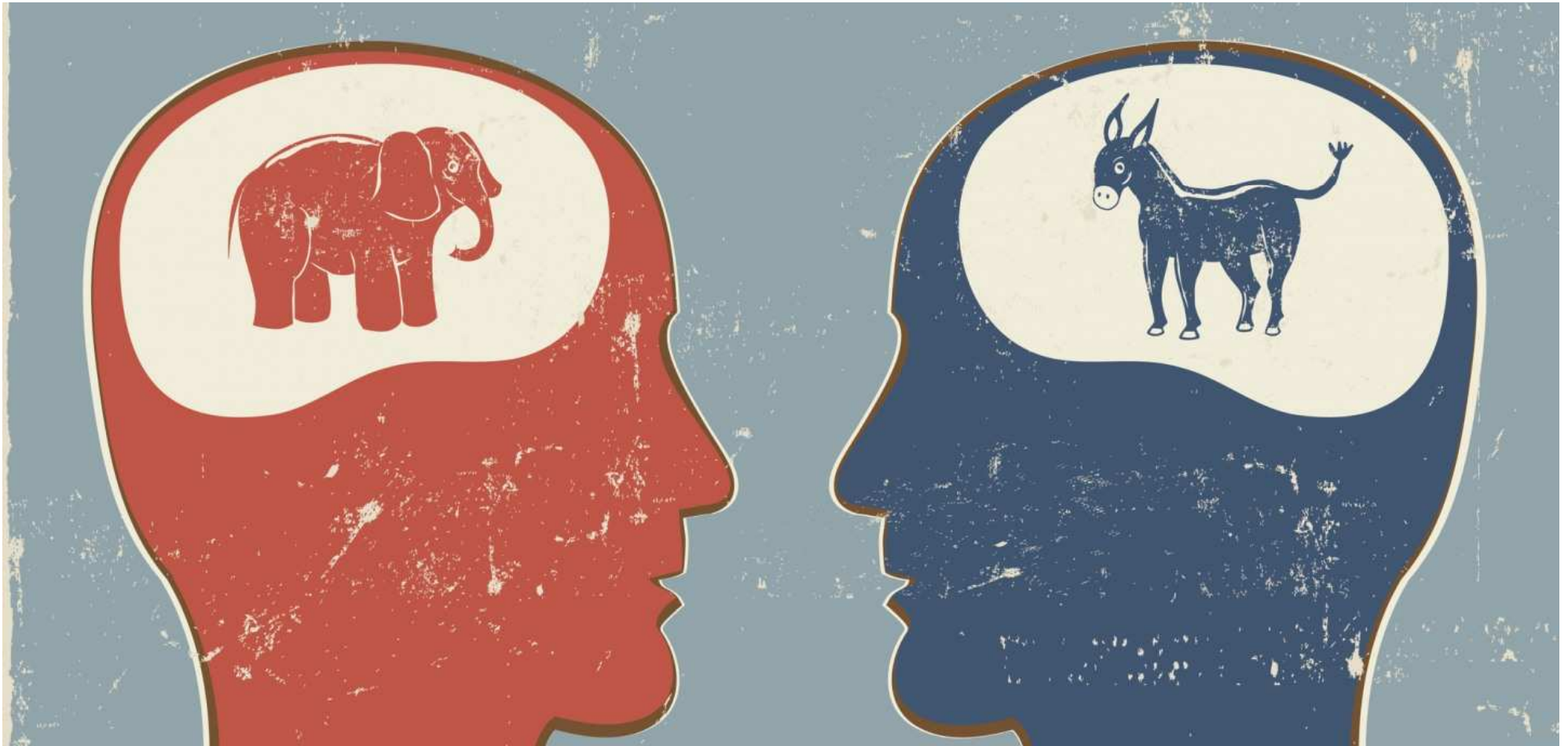
# Overview of the lecture

- What is political polarization
- The role of (social) media in polarization
- Broader context which affects polarization
- The current state of research on the media and political polarization

# Polarization



# Political polarization: How would you define it?



## Political polarization: two distinct forms

Ideological  
polarization

Affective  
polarization

# Ideological polarization

- **Divergence perspective:**

- the divergence of political opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and stances of political adversaries
- division into two sharply contrasting groups or sets of opinions or beliefs
- more politically divided and societal groups ideologically opposed to each other
- these positions become more extreme and entrenched over time

- **Alignment perspective:**

- the degree to which citizens' positions on a given issue are defined by their partisan or ideological identity
- views have become increasingly connected to citizens' political identity
- ideological consistency: the degree to which people consistently align themselves with one side or another
- often leading to a sharp divide along ideological or partisan lines
- people tend to align themselves with one of two opposing positions, such as conservative vs. liberal

## Affective polarization

- Based on work considering the role of identity in politics and how identity felt towards some groups (e.g., political parties) can worsen animosity towards other groups
- It relates to interparty hostility
- Assesses the extent to which people like (or feel warmth towards) their political allies and dislike (or feel lack of warmth towards) their political opponents
- How warm or cold they feel toward each party



## Implications of political polarization

- Political gridlock (in bipartisan political systems especially)
- Reduced cooperation of political parties
- Negative campaigning
- Media fragmentation
- Social and societal divisions
- Erosion of trust
- Radicalization
- Ineffective policy solutions

# How can we measure political polarization empirically?

# Ideological polarization

- Usually surveys
  - Liberal-conservative scale
  - The extent to which they support/agree or do not support/agree (with) a specific political topic (e.g., climate change)

# Affective polarization

- **Warmth and favorability ratings, sentiments**
- **Examples in empirical studies:**
- Iyengar et al. (2012): “**feeling thermometer**” – warmth/favorability ratings of political allies vs. political opponents (how warm or cold they feel toward each party)
- One’s own positive/negative **emotional valence** before and after seeing a video of a politician
- Content: the positive and negative **sentiment** used in Tweets about political allies and opponents
- **Social distance**: Respondents were asked whether they would be happy or unhappy if their son or daughter married a member of the other party; questions about accepting members of the opposite group as close personal friends, neighbors on the same street, coworkers in the same occupation, citizens in their country, visitors in their country, or whether they would exclude them from their country

# The role of (social) media

- Accelerated and amplified changes in media and political communication in recent years
- Media becoming more fragmented and partisan = people becoming more polarized  
*(ideologically and affectively)*
- Social media can shape perception of political environment
- *Good or bad for democracy?*
- Yet, mixed results: no effect on political polarization; and in certain circumstances, depolarizing effects
- Prior (2013): suggests media may not significantly affect polarization of the person – but no distinction between type of polarization + focus solely on the U.S., and importantly – so

**What do you think has changed in the last 10 years?**

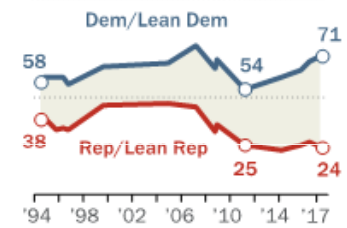
*Political, economic, media environments...*

# What has changed, you ask?

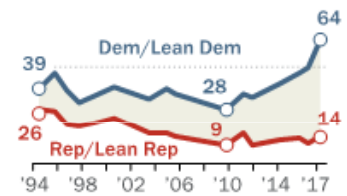
## Growing partisan gaps on govt, race, immigration

% who say ...

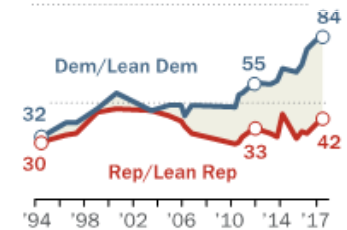
Government should do more to help the needy



Racial discrimination is the main reason why many black people can't get ahead these days



Immigrants strengthen the country with their hard work and talents



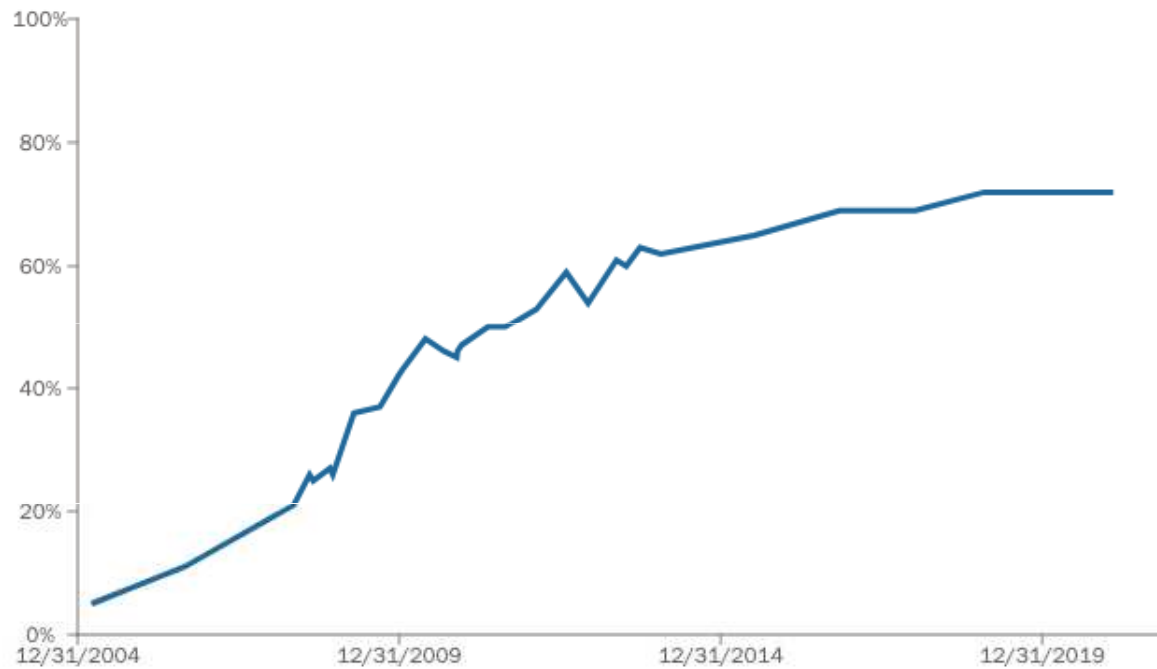
Source: Survey conducted June 8-18 and June 27-July 9, 2017.

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# What has changed, you ask?

## Social media use

% of U.S. adults who say they use at least one social media site



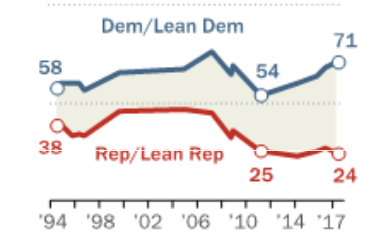
Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.  
Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted 2005-2021.

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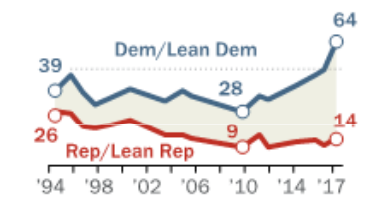
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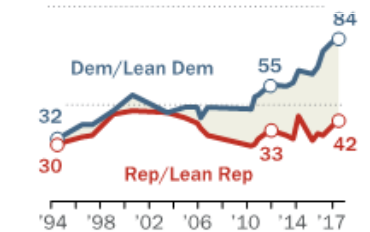
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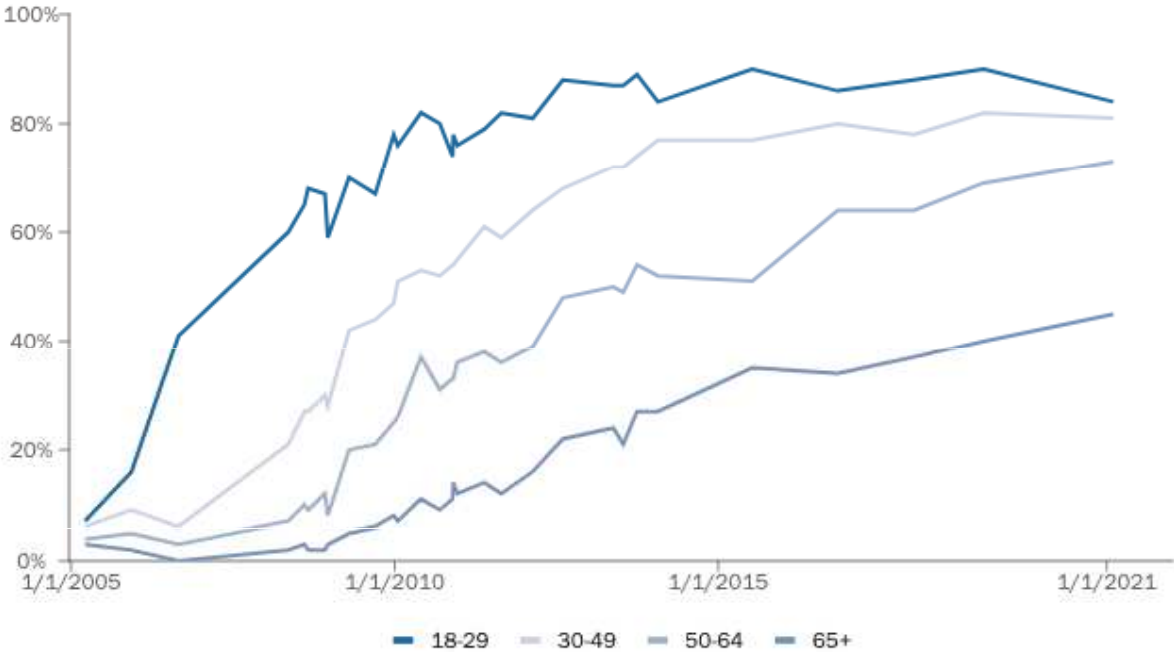
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# What has changed, you ask?

## Social media use by age

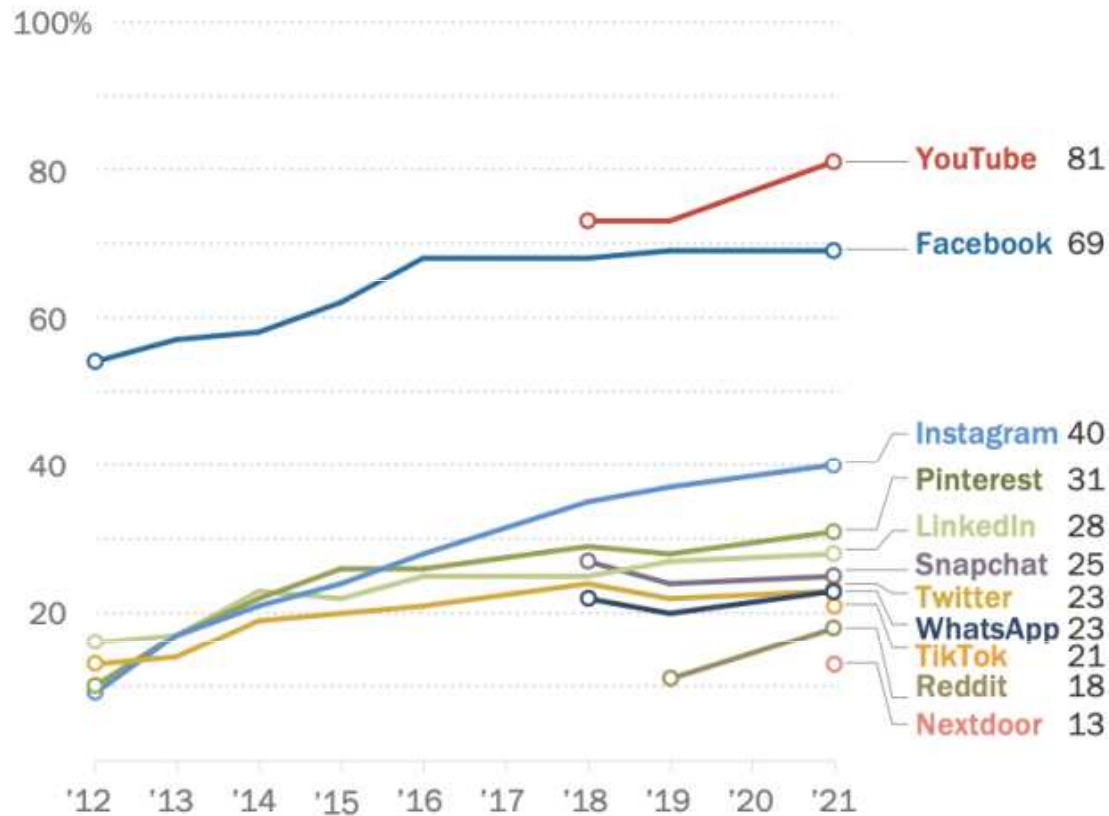
% of U.S. adults who say they use at least one social media site, by age



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.  
Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted 2005-2021.

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% of U.S. adults who say they ever use ...

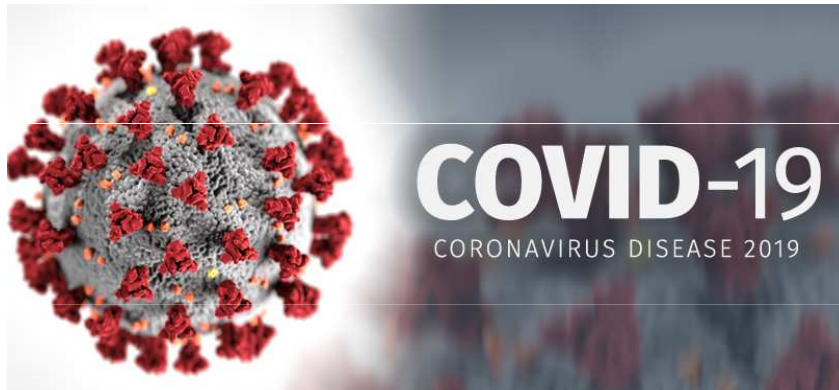


Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown. Pre-2018 telephone poll data is not available for YouTube, Snapchat and WhatsApp; pre-2019 telephone poll data is not available for Reddit. Pre-2021 telephone poll data is not available for TikTok. Trend data is not available for Nextdoor.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 25-Feb. 8, 2021.

"Social Media Use in 2021"

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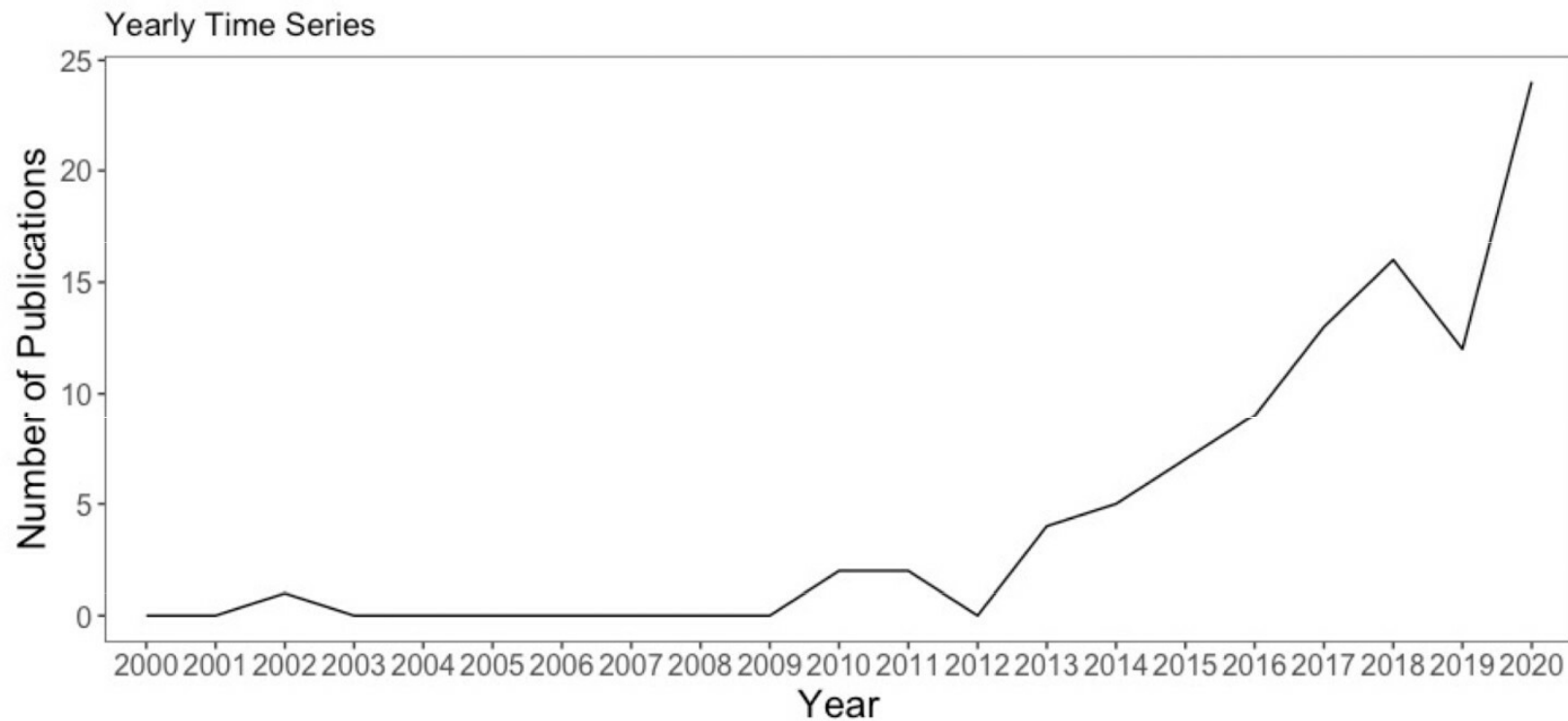




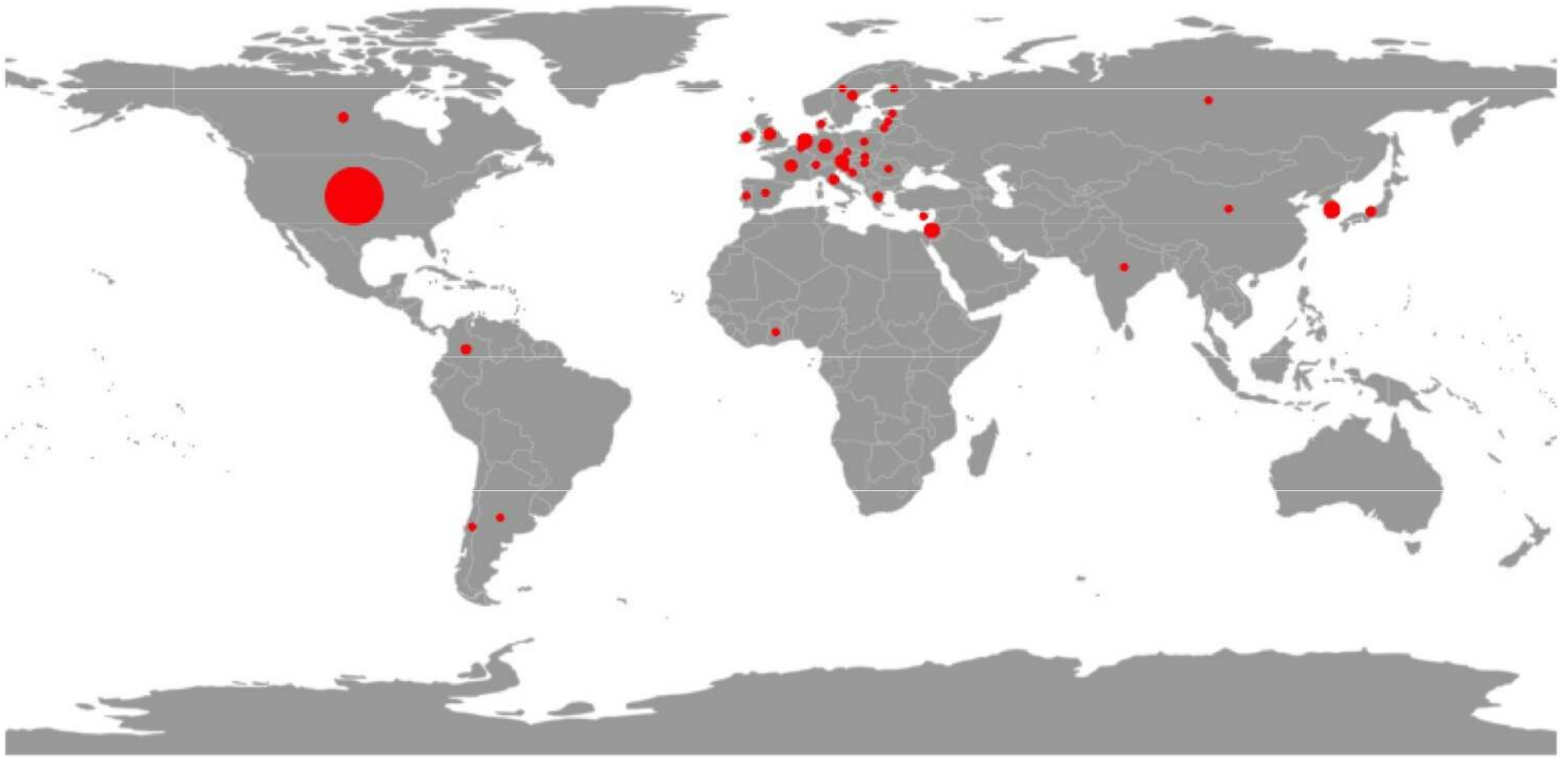


# The current state of research on media and political polarization

# The development of the field 'media and polarization' over time



## The country of samples: 'media and polarization'





**Areas of research: What do we know about the (social)  
media and polarization? (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021)**

## Areas of research

- Media content: polarization of media content
- Media exposure: link between exposure to media and polarization of audiences
- Media effects: link between media (use, content, features) and polarization

## Media exposure: How does exposure to certain media content link to political polarization?

- Effect of exposure to the media source on audiences
- An increased use of traditional media can reduce ideological polarization
- Fake news and disinformation – driving ideological polarization
- **Pre-selective exposure**: decisions made outside of the viewers discretion (e.g., algorithms)
- **Selective exposure**: decisions made by the viewer, selection on pre-existing beliefs
- The effects of selectively consuming certain media content on polarization
  - Tends to increase both ideological and affective polarization
  - Partisan media especially polarizing
  - Like-minded media makes people more ideologically and affectively polarized
  - Less clear whether exposure to counter-attitudinal media increases polarization

## Media content: Has media coverage been increasingly polarized?

- Exploring the content of media sources (different media)
- Conducting content analyses of social media posts and news content
- Focus: the extent to which media content is politically polarized
- Social media (often Twitter) + traditional media
- Evidence of increasingly polarized content
- Empirical study: Tweets by U.S. politicians - Republican politicians used more polarizing language and rhetoric than Democratic counterparts

# Media effects: How do (can certain types of) media affect political polarization?

## – Effects of social media:

- Can further ideologically polarize people - negative Tweets about candidates, uncivil FB comments, counter-attitudinal Twitter posts – make people more ideologically polarized
- Can also affectively polarize people: social media comments that derogate political adversaries increase affective polarization

## – Effects of traditional media:

- Ideological talk shows tend to increase ideological polarization
- Fact-checkers reduce ideological polarization
- Reading a news article about an in-party scandal, being exposed to likeminded news media, incivility on news media from out-party sources (e.g., Fox News for Democrats) – associated with increased affective polarization

**Thank you for participating!**

# Literature

1. Emily Kubin & Christian von Sikorski (2021) The role of (social) media in political polarization: a systematic review, *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 45:3, 188-206, DOI: [10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070](https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070)
2. Pew Research Center. (2017). *The partisan divide on political values grows even wider*. Retrieved from <https://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/>.
3. Pew Research Center. (2019). Social Media Fact Sheet. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>
4. Pew Research Center. (2021). Social Media Use in 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>